

Grey
Skies

Sheena
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Heiltsuk Nation

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Char jumped off the bus at the Patricia Hotel, her worn Chuck Taylors narrowly missing a puddle of vomit. She checked the rest of the sidewalk in front of her. Satisfied that all the gum she saw was old and long ago flattened onto the pavement, she did a quick scan of who was around her, as her mom had taught her to do whenever she was in this neighbourhood. Her dad liked to say that "every day is Halloween in the Downtown Eastside," in hopes that he'd deter Char from visiting as often. Sure, there were lots of people shuffling around here in the DTES, but nobody jumped out at her as extra suspicious.

It was late afternoon in early April, and the sun was trying to break through the marbled clouds before it sank behind the skyscrapers in downtown Vancouver. Several of the Patricia's bar patrons hovered outside the doors to the hotel's pub, smoking. A hunched over woman went up to each of them, asking to buy a cigarette for a quarter. A guy in muddy jeans and work boots gave her a couple of them and was instantly bombarded by other passersby for more. Char chuckled to herself and turned down Dunlevy Street towards Oppenheimer Park.

A woman in a velour, purple tracksuit swayed against the brick wall of the building to the right, eyes closed and mouth open. Her purse lay gaping at her feet, and one hand grasped at the air while the other was balled up in a fist at her side. An older man sat against the same wall a few feet down, his head bobbing in rhythm with the woman but his shoeless feet moving wildly in different directions. Char recognized the signs of a heroin trip and steered wide of them as she passed, but they didn't notice her anyway. As she rounded the corner to her mom's apartment building, she held her breath, then released it noisily when she saw the entrance way clear of people. The buzzer still wasn't working, so she hollered, "Mom!" and waited a few moments before yelling, "Louise!"

The curtains in the window moved, then her mom's pale face peered

down at her, frowning at first, then grinning when she recognized her daughter. She motioned to Char to wait, and a few minutes later she appeared at the door, cigarette dangling from her lips and hands fumbling to tie a sweater around her waist. She blew a puff of smoke at Char unintentionally as she opened the lobby door and ushered her inside. Her pupils were large and her fingers were dyed orange from rolling cheap tobacco.

"Hi baby," Louise said gruffly. She cleared her throat, then reached in for a hug. "Come upstairs." She tousled Char's hair, which was cut quite short and dyed black with purple streaks. "How did you get that raven black hair when I'm so blonde, anyways?"

Char followed her mom to the stairs. "The elevator is *still* broken?"

Her mom threw her hands up as she started up the stairs. "You don't even know. It's been like this for months. The sink and the tub are both leaking nonstop too. And the roaches!" She looked back at Char. "I mean, the halls. They don't clean them. It's disgusting. I'm sorry."

When they arrived on the fifth floor, Char was glad she didn't have to use the bathroom. Her mom shared one with the whole floor, and it was only cleaned once a day, usually in the morning. By now it had been used by many different people for many different reasons, the least of them being to pee, most likely.

They entered the small cubicle that was supposed to be a bachelor suite, the room her mom had called home for the past six months. Louise went to the table and cleared it quickly, throwing things into a plastic bag and shoving it in a corner. Char made a point not to look at what her mom was putting away. She didn't want to know.

She sat on the edge of the single bed, slinging her backpack onto the floor. Her mom took the only chair.

"Sorry it's such a mess," she said, waving her hand around absently. It wasn't actually messy, though, because her mom didn't have enough belongings to clutter anything up. Everything was just sort of old and run down. There was a small sink, a heating element, a very small counter, four cupboards, a mini fridge, and a small desk with Louise's beloved computer on it. There was no closet, only a small set of drawers and a garbage bag full of clothes next to it. There was a throw rug under Char's feet. The only thing Louise had brought from their home was a dreamcatcher that she'd bought on a road trip to Alberta long ago, which

hung in the window. That was it. They both lit smokes.

"How's your dad?" Louise asked after a few silent minutes.

"He's good, I guess. He thinks I'm at work right now though."

"I didn't know you found a job!" said Louise, her face lighting up.

"That's great, Char!"

Char looked down at her hands. "I didn't actually, yet," she stammered. "I just told him that to get him out of my hair." She had told him that, actually, so he wouldn't think she was coming to see her mom all the time. Greg had found Louise partying again in their living room with a group of people he didn't know when he had come home from work early one day, and he had kicked them out. Louise never came back that time. He had forbidden Char to visit her when she'd landed this place in the heart of the DTES. Sometimes it was as if he'd forgotten that he used to party too.

"Oh, Charlotte." Her mom's mood changed instantly. She wasn't mad, but she was disappointed, which was worse. "You're not going to make money taking photos or writing poems, girl. Smarten up."

Char had just been about to reach into her backpack to show her mom her latest scrapbook, which featured black and white photos of the various Indigenous residents she had encountered in the DTES. Something about them made her feel closer to her culture, even though they were from all different nations. These people each had a story, something they were running from, or to. She had interviewed some of them and written poems about her favourites. Char was raised away from the reserve her dad had grown up on and had missed out on living off the land and learning her language. She had no Elders to talk to or learn from growing up, and some of the old Natives from the park had started to fill that gap lately.

She became aware of the silence that had fallen upon the tiny room when there was a quick, quiet knock on the door. Louise jumped up and opened the door, but not enough for Char to see who it was. She heard them talking lowly and watched her mom reach out of her back pocket and pull out a rolled up ten dollar bill and hand it to whoever was in the hall. As she closed the door, she mumbled something about her neighbour asking to borrow money until tomorrow, but Char had seen her slip something in her front pocket. "Hey, mom, do you want to have a game of crib?" Louise had taught it to Char long ago, and it was

their favourite way to pass the time. At least it used to be. Her mom had become more and more reclusive lately, and the time they spent together was limited to this tiny room.

"You know what, honey, I'm really not feeling that great. I think I need a nap or something. Maybe you could come back tomorrow?" she said. She looked out the window as some crows suddenly started cawing nonstop. *Craw! Craw!* Her forehead creased. "It's getting dark, anyway, and I don't want you down here after dark."

It wasn't, but Char took the hint. She sighed. "Alright, mom. See you later. Maybe we can go for a walk tomorrow if you're feeling better." She grabbed her backpack and leaned in for a hug, but Louise had turned to rummage through the plastic bag she'd tossed in the corner.

Char had told her dad she was working at a restaurant as a dishwasher and would be home late, so she had quite a bit of time to kill. The crows were still cawing loudly and fluttering around frantically as she walked out of her mom's apartment. She looked down to see a baby crow crouching low to the ground. She bent down to see if it was injured, then saw that its beak was missing—in its place a screaming red hole. She quickly recoiled her hand and ducked as a crow, maybe one of its parents, aggressively dive bombed her.

Reaching into her backpack, Char fumbled for her camera. She shrieked as one of the crows swooped down at her again, actually grabbing some of her hair in its claws this time. Working quickly, she snapped a few shots of the young corvid, its eyes closed, shoulders hunched against the pain of this harsh world. Char wanted to help the poor thing, but she didn't know how.

She remembered back when she had been a young girl, and her dad had rescued an abandoned baby crow from the park. He had excitedly called her out to the shed where he had set up her old rabbit's cage for it with a blanket, a bowl of water, and some bird seed. He wasn't working at the time, and this was an exciting project for him. Looking back now, Char had to laugh at how they'd wondered why it didn't want the birdseed. It wasn't a chickadee. Her mom had laughed at him, saying he didn't deserve to be part of the Raven clan after that. He didn't find it funny.

Craw! Craw! Char looked up to the crows, now perched on the telephone wire above her. They were looking up though, and her gaze

followed theirs into the granite sky. Hundreds of crows were flying southeast above them, making their way to their nightly meeting at Grandview Park. Every evening, like clockwork, crows from all over the Lower Mainland gathered at this one tree in Burnaby to have a meeting. Char watched as one of the crows looked down at its broken child, cawed at its partner, and flew up to join its contemporaries.

Char slowly stood up and thought about how her dad had withdrawn after the baby crow had died. For weeks, he lay in bed with the curtains drawn and the small TV on his dresser blasting sports games and highlights twenty-four hours a day. Louise had slept on the couch, gratefully it seemed in retrospect, and sneaked out to party a lot of the nights. Char ate toast and cereal until the cupboards were bare and her dad had finally emerged and gone to get groceries. The next day she heard him on the phone talking to his aunt, crying about something that had happened long ago.

A few days later Char sat in her room working on her scrapbook. As she sifted through the black and white portraits, she thought about the stories each picture told her. Every one of them had a reason for ending up in Vancouver's poorest area. They may have looked rough to a lot of people, but that was because nobody bothered to know their stories, Char thought to herself.

There was a knock on her bedroom door and her dad popped his head in. "Hey kiddo, no work tonight?"

Char tried to cover the photos with the scrapbook. "Uh, no, not tonight."

Her dad smiled and sauntered over to her desk. "Homework, then?" he said, but his smile fell when he saw the corner of a photo of Max, her favourite Elder down at the park. "Char, this guy lives in the slums. Those people can't be trusted!" He folded his arms against his chest. "It's not safe for you to be running around down there with all the druggies and drunks and mentally insane people. Including your mom."

"They're people, just like me. And you. They're just lost."

"They're not like me."

"Could have been."

His throat pulsated with words he couldn't seem to muster, then he turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Char stared out the window to their backyard. A single tear rolled

down her cheek. She blinked and tried to focus on anything but this moment. She wished she'd known the rest of her family but her dad wouldn't talk about them. Suddenly a raven flew into the yard and landed on the fence. They didn't usually come into the city like this. *Croak! Croak!* It seemed to be looking right at her. The raven called out a couple more times, then flapped its wings and took off down the darkening alley. Fat raindrops began to fall. Char sighed and put her head down on her arms and closed her eyes against the night.

Art by Leanna Raven Paul

