

CLIFF CLIFFINGTON



Cliff Clifflington is a Montréal-based writer. After spending most of his life in Janesfield, he now lives in the big city. He is currently compiling a selection of stories titled "An Exercise in Name Dropping." Many years ago, he ran a ragged outfit called Rebel Rebel Press. He put out chapbooks, poetry, and whatever else reeked of trouble. Head trips for the literary elite.



HALF OF NOTHING

BY CLIFF CLIFFINGTON

I saw Buffy Sainte-Marie for the first time on Sesame Street. I think it was around 1981, but I might be wrong. I was six, and memory's a messy bastard. She was singing to a kid in a rocking chair—singing in a language I didn't know, but which sounded familiar in that way a dream does after you forget it.

My mother was folding laundry behind me. She said, offhand, "She's Indian. Like us." She never repeated it, she didn't have to. I felt it in my bones.

Years passed. While I was in high school, my English teacher took an interest in me. Saw me as a poor kid with brains and fought for a scholarship to one of the local colleges. But even at this age, it felt like a grift. Life had already taught me that everything comes at a price.

I coasted through college. I majored in Communications because it didn't require a mathematics prerequisite. I spent most of my time drinking with my two roommates, one dropped out and the other was known due to an overdose scare. I eventually graduated.

After graduation, I became a freelance writer, which is basically lying professionally, but with slightly better e-mail etiquette. Dated an artist who made dreamcatchers out of bicycle spokes. She once asked me, "Are you Native?" I said, "There's some way back." She told me she could see it in my eyes.

The first time I said it out loud, it just slipped out.

My name's not important. Call me Jake. Call me Sam. Call me half of something and a quarter of something else.

I was born in Regina, raised mostly by television and an aunt who spent more time with Judge Judy than she ever did with me. Mom died before I hit middle school, and Dad ran a garage that did more drug deals than oil changes. That's all to say, I didn't come from much. But I always knew how to read a room. A useful skill when you're stealing from it.

I never planned on being Native. At least that's what I told the first few people. "It's just what I heard growing up." There was a decaying picture of a long-dead woman in the attic, she was wearing two

braids and had a haunted look. "That's your great, great grandmother. She was Cree or maybe Ojibwa," my uncle Earl once told me, but he was often wrong and usually drunk. Still, it stuck. I liked the sound of it. Gave a kind of nobility to the otherwise uneventful blur of my bloodline.

By the time I told the first lie, it was already halfway true.

I didn't see it in a genealogical sense. No, that came later. After the seminars, the keynote invited the women with silver jewelry and nose rings who said things like "thank you for holding space." But in the deeper sense, the lie was already in my bones.

I was at a writer's workshop in Vancouver. I was broke, over-caffeinated, and half-drunk on the sound of my own voice. The others were talking about their backgrounds, ancestral trauma, that type of thing. One woman cried about boarding schools. Another guy talked about being Anishinaabemowin, queer, and raised by a Mennonite family that had adopted him. I had nothing. Just a broken down Camry, a self-published novel with no real plot, and two short stories that read like inferior Charles Willeford.

So I said it.

"I think I'm part Native. My great-grandmother or something. Cree, maybe."

That was it. No thunderclap, no blood sacrifice. Just a nod from the room, a few murmurs of "that makes sense." And boy, did it ever.

By the next year, I had a full suite of phrases locked and loaded. Blood memory. Colonial trauma. Reconnecting. I learned just enough Cree vocabulary to pepper into panels. I dropped the term "settler" with a smirk at academic events and got called "so brave" for naming it.

I was invited to read poems to mainly white audiences and got paid more telling "my truth" than I ever had writing fiction.

No one asked for the documents to go with "my truth." Hell, the minute they did, I'd have said that I have nothing to prove.

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Somewhere along the line, I started believing it. Not in my bones, but in my bones' reaction to the sudden praise.

The first person to call me out was a Métis writer from Winnipeg. Tough broad. Sharp tongue. She'd seen something in my bio she didn't like. Some vague phrasing about "non-status" and "reclaiming my heritage." She cornered me after a panel in Halifax. Real polite, at first.

She asked, "What community are you from?"

I smiled. I told her I grew up in Regina.

Her eyes narrowed. "Who's your family?"

I shrugged. "It's complicated. My grandmother was taken in the scoop. I'm still piecing things together."

That shut her up for a second. I watched her fight between instinct and politics. If she pressed, she was an oppressor. If she backed off, she was complicit. She backed off, but I knew then I was on borrowed time.

The moment I got back to Regina, I looked her up.

Her name was Nadine Cardinal. She wasn't famous-famous, but she was the kind of writer who gets read in MFA programs. She published two books—one hybrid memoir about her kokum and the other was a book of poetry and poetic prose titled *My Heart Is Not a Metaphor*. I stayed up until 3 a.m. reading every interview she'd ever done, every op-ed, every panel discussion posted on YouTube. I watched her call out a university professor for using "First Nations" as a catch-all. I listened to her paraphrase Maria Campbell and smirked when the moderator didn't catch it.

She was dangerous in the way certain women are dangerous to men like me—not because she was mean, but because she saw things. She'd survived too much to be polite. She had that chipped-flint gaze, like she was always two seconds from saying something that would make the room uncomfortable, probably for the right reasons. I began studying her. For what purpose, I couldn't really tell. Maybe to preempt the next time she'd cross my path, maybe to be better prepared. The truth is, I was obsessed. She was what I pretended to be. And worse, she wrote like the truth hurt her, yet she still couldn't stop telling it.

There was this essay she'd written in *Briarpatch* called "Ghost Census." It was about how her family used to count all the people who weren't in the photos. Everyone they'd lost to addiction, adoption, violence, or just disappearance. She wrote, "In every family photo, there's someone who should be there, but isn't. If you're Indigenous, it's one of the inheritances we can guarantee." I read that line ten, twenty times. Said it out loud, like I was trying to wear it.

The thing is, it fits. That was the problem. She wrote something meant to cut people like me out of the frame, but I kept finding myself in the picture. For a week I tried to write something, some kind of response to her piece. Something respectful, a dialogue. I never messaged her, never tagged her, never reached out. I wasn't that stupid. But I followed her on every platform and turned on notifications like some lonely uncle creeping exes on Facebook.

I saw that she was reading her latest piece in the Pacific Northwest. She posted a photo of her cat with a caption about grant fatigue. I liked her post too quickly. Then quickly unliked it.

I started quoting her at events. Subtly. Not in the way that would get me caught, but enough that people started saying things like, "You and Cardinal, you're on the same wavelength."

Yeah. Sure. Except she was a signal, and I was the static. Still, I couldn't help myself. I wanted to be near her voice.

Around this time, I really started leaning into my identity. Started talking on podcasts. Said "resilience" a lot. Made up an older cousin in Milwaukee who died from addiction and used it as a metaphor for intergenerational grief. Hell, I even got a tattoo.

Then came the awards. The fellowships. The diversity panels. I was in the door, and no one knew the hinges were greased with bullshit. But you can only dance on a person's grave for so long before the corpse hears the thumping.

They say lies rot from the inside. They're wrong. They rot from the outside. It starts at the edges—posts you forget to delete, bios that don't match the story, stories that go missing from Google, but that can be found on Wayback Machine.

It turns out that Cardinal didn't forget me either. It also turns out that she was the kind of person that believed in facts. She had started digging.

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Quietly. Politely at first, like they always are. Then she started e-mailing people. Tribal councils. Archives. A genealogist sent her a tidy little reply: “No record of this individual or his claimed ancestors exists.”

She sent me a simple message, “We need to talk.”
I ignored it, so she went public.

It started as a post. Five paragraphs long, calm and methodical, like a coroner’s report. This man is not who he claims to be. Here are the receipts. Here’s the history. Here’s the lie. It got shared and eventually was re-shared by NoMoreRedFace. A few heavyweights in the lit scene picked it up. People started quoting me, tearing apart old interviews, and lining up the inconsistencies.

I could feel it coming like a cold draft on a hot summer evening.

A festival in Minneapolis was the first to cancel me. Then the grant committee. Then my publisher, after a “review of concerns.” A week later I got a call from a woman I once slept with at a retreat in St. John’s. She was crying and said she felt “betrayed.” I told her, “You fetishized me” and she hung up.

I could’ve ended it there. Could’ve apologized, disappeared, flipped burgers in Sudbury until the heat died down. But no, I doubled down.

I posted my own statement, calling it “a complicated journey of identity reclamation.” Said the erasure of records was a form of colonial violence. Claimed I was being “gate kept by elitist pan-Indigenous academics.”

Some of the older activists went for it. That’s the thing about guilt, it fogs good judgement. But most didn’t buy it. Especially not her. She kept going. Found an old census that listed my mother as German-Irish, born in Moosehead. Found my birth certificate. Anglo all the way down. No sixties scoop. No trauma but the kind you make yourself.

They cross-checked everything. Zero Indigenous ancestry. None. Just a Euro-mutt with bad intentions and a rumour from their childhood.

It was around that time that I began getting death threats. So, I went underground. Not literally, but close enough. Moved back into my dad’s old house—he’d died in ‘09, left the place to me, probably by accident.

I drank. Wrote some blog posts that no one read. Slept with a knife beside my bed, even though I knew no one was coming. Not for me.

Then without warning, Cardinal showed up. She knocked on my door. She was wearing a coat with beadwork on the shoulders. Real beadwork, the kind passed down, not the kind bought on Etsy.

I answered, to this day I don’t know why.

She stood there holding a folder and said, “It’s time to tell the world the truth.”

“I didn’t lie,” I said, though we both knew I had. “I was just confused. I —”

“You sold our blood for applause,” she said. “You need to be held accountable.”

I laughed. Because what else do you do when the grift falls apart?

“Look, sweetheart,” I said. “This isn’t justice. You don’t own trauma.” I was searching for something that would hurt her, something she couldn’t deny. “Your father was a university professor... What do you know about poverty?”

She stared at me. No rage. Just pity. And maybe that was worse.

“That’s not an excuse,” she said, her voice even but sharp enough to draw blood. She paused just long enough to let the silence bruise.

She stepped closer. “This isn’t just about you. It’s about the festivals, the publishers, the academics. You didn’t ask for land back, you asked for a grant.”

I laughed bitterly. “I was just trying to build something. I just wanted —”

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Nadine interrupted, “You think just because you came from dust, you get to claim our ashes.”

“I really didn’t mean to hurt anyone. It started with a half truth,” I said sincerely.

She snorted. “Half true doesn’t mean half yours.”

I knew it was over a while back, but I didn’t know how to move forward. I asked, “What do you want from me now? An apology? A public shaming? Do you want me to hang a sign around my neck?”

She shook her head slowly. “No. I want you to understand that your theft wasn’t just symbolic—you took space.”

I couldn’t say anything. There was nothing left. Just the creak of old floorboards and the sound of something breaking in my chest. She handed me a folder with screenshots, and dates that didn’t match my myth. A thick packet of everything I’d tried to bury. On top was a formal warning from a tribal council.

She turned to leave, but then stopped. “You aren’t a villain nor a victim... You’re just a symptom.”

I stood there, barefoot in the hallway trying to remember who I was. I couldn’t. All my lies blurred into each other. Layered like sediment.

Later that night, my body felt like it couldn’t contain itself. Regret, rage, shame—each one pressing against the inside of my skin like they were trying to claw their way out. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing her face or hearing her voice.

I needed to escape, so I decided to take a drive. I grabbed my keys and stumbled out to my old Toyota Camry. The night was sharp and cold, which seemed to help. I didn’t have a specific destination in mind, I just wanted to travel to a place where no one would recognize me. I wanted the sound of the engine to drown out the noise of my thoughts. My unraveling.

Driving towards the outskirts of town, I turned on the radio. As the city lights fell behind me and the black ribbon of the highway stretched forward, a late-night DJ announced Johnny Cash’s “God’s Gonna Cut You Down.” That old boot-stomp rhythm sounded less like music and more like Judgement Day.

The time for redemption and sympathy was over. There was not going to be a complicated journey of identity reclamation this time. Nothing was left but the promise that every lie eventually runs out of road.

I turned it up. The song hit hard, and I began to cry. Not the kind of crying you can control—just a raw, leaking grief that came from the place I spent years trying to build a wall around.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move at the edge of the headlights. For half a second, I tried to name it. But by that point, its body had already come through the windshield.

As I awoke, I could feel blood running down my forehead. Everything was buzzing and red around the edges. I thought of my mother. Of the lies. Of Buffy Sainte-Marie singing lullabies.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the world as I lay dying. Or maybe I just thought about it. Either way, like everything else, it was purely performative. Crossing over, I didn’t want to have to deal with the consequences of my actions. I was trying to save face before the Creator came to take my spirit.

And it hit me. I was nothing but a grifter, a trickster, a performer. And for a while, I had a good ride. The trouble was I had too much skin in the game.

The obit read “aspiring writer who never quite figured out who he was.” Obituaries never say anything negative. But the truth is, I never quite discovered myself. I only ever found new ways to pretend.

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