

Journey's Home

Inspiring Stories Plus Tips Strategies to Find Your Family History

The **JOURNEYS HOME: Inspiring Stories, Plus Tips & Strategies to Find Your Family History** featuring Andrew McCarthy, Joyce Maynard, Pico Iyer, Diane Johnson & The National Geographic Travel Team book excerpt is published with permission. This excerpt is written by Luxe Beat Magazine contributor, Tiffany Thornton.

Secrets and Spirits Caught between two strong women with a mysterious past by Tiffany Thornton

My grandmother was the love of my life. She was my confidant and my stability in a rather tumultuous childhood. My mother and I were at odds, not seeing eye to eye on much. My grandparents were my safe haven. I spent years on and off as a young girl and teenager living with my grandparents in Toronto.

My father left when I was a baby and got engaged to another woman while married to my mom. The deception created a deep heartache for my mother, yet she did her best as a single mom to provide for me, making sure we always somehow celebrated nature. Picnics in the park, hikes in the nearby ravine. She really tried to stretch the little money we had.

My mom eventually met someone else, a cultured bohemian of sorts who loved to drink a little too much. When my sister came along, the heavy drinking escalated. I came home from school to police in the house and punched holes in the walls several times during those years. I begged Mom to leave so we could be happy, not fully cognizant of how afraid she must have felt to embark on yet another journey as a single mom with two young children. I could only feel my fear.

I always had a small bag packed so I could run away when the next blowout ensued. And I did, over and over again to Gram's house, which was quite the walk for a girl of ten or so.

Growing up, I knew only threads of my grandmother's story: She was a Native American, raised in a one-room shack on an Indian reserve where she went to the well for water. Her mother was a heavy drinker, with a temper she described as "being able

to send steam up the chimney." All Gram ever knew about her father was that he was white and thought to be German; his affair with her mother was brief. My great-grandmother then married a Native American and had four more children. She was a woman I knew only from a few faded black-and-white photographs reflecting her tan dark skin and large round features, with a look of determination etched into her face.

Beyond that, my grandmother was aloof when it came to discussing her past. She would delve into it fleetingly, at times sharing brief excerpts of her life as a Mohawk Indian on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Canada. Early on, I was curious about the part of my lineage that I was never really exposed to. I wanted to know more about our family's mysterious, and mystical, past.

On some level I was always aware of little things that Gram had around the house that were Indian. Paintings of girls and loons in the water by an Ojibwa artist lined the walls. The shelves displayed a coyote sculpture, a clay teepee, and dream catchers. Braided sweetgrass, considered the sacred hair of Mother Earth, filled each room; it was braided into three strands representing honesty, love, and kindness. Sometimes Gram would burn the tip and the sweet smell would waft through the house. Indians believe sweetgrass cleanses all negativity and attracts the good spirit.

Gram's sister managed the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto, and Gram worked in the gift shop part-time. On

the odd occasion when Gram was terse with us, she always muttered a verse loudly in Mohawk, meaning we were being naughty. At times when the strong veneer would ebb away, I would catch a glimpse of her in her bedroom rocking one of the younger grandchildren on her knee and singing an old Mohawk tune. It was the same song she sang to me.

I grew up my whole life wanting to visit the reserve. Close family still lived there on their own land. My mother and her siblings spent several summers there as kids, wading in the Grand River. Everyone there except my mother, it seemed, all had dark hair, completely different from my fair-haired mother. Everyone, that is, except for a boy who was blond and described only as a "family friend."

Mom had always wondered about this boy. Whispers of family secrets would filter through the air over the years, with tongue-and-cheek inferences of some sort of deception that were quickly brushed aside. My mother always grappled with the notion that something was awry and sought out the truth, her suspicion at times creating a fury in her spirit that never subsided.

All the mystery surrounding the reserve I had never seen fueled my curiosity about it, and about my heritage. How must it have felt for Gram growing up there as an Elizabeth Taylor look-alike, with her deep blue eyes and soft dark curls that framed her perfectly proportioned features? Gram was the white girl with the Mohawk blood—a bastard, born in the 1930s. It was a sore subject and definite point of contention when

discussed. Her face would contort into an angry grimace. "Why do we have to talk about this when there is nothing to say?" she would lament. I was fearful to keep persisting as I knew her temper could flare up when pushed.

Still, sometimes late into the evening when she was relaxing with a cold beer, Gram would soften and tell me little tales about life on the reserve. I relished the memories. She eventually went to live with her grandparents on a farm off the reservation and then finally to the big city of Toronto. The rest of her family stayed behind.

When I was in my late 20s and after much persisting to see the land where my beloved Gram grew up, we finally went to visit. My great aunt and great uncle owned thousands of acres of land on the reserve that had been in his family for centuries.

When we arrived, a powwow was going on. Native dancers were dressed in vibrant costumes and adorned with intricate beading and headdresses covered with cascading feathers. The tribal drums echoed in the distance, and I felt a resonance with the land; I wanted to know my people. I was introduced to all these new faces so different from my own. Great-aunts and uncles and cousins, wearing turquoise jewelry filled with beautiful stones, embraced me lovingly as Gram introduced me as "her best friend." Stories were exchanged and corn bread was broken. For a brief moment these people were truly a part of me.

Gram showed me what remained of the shack where she grew up. Only the foundation was still standing. Up into the field we walked, trekking

through grass that reached above my knees until we finally came to an unmarked stone. It was my great-grandmother's grave site. We stood side by side as the sun beat down. I was finally standing on the land where Gram was born and raised, sharing her history. I remember not wanting the day to end as we drove away with the sun setting behind us.

Before I knew it, things resumed the way they always had. The subject of Gram's past was not something you wanted to stir up. It was fine to wear Indian jewelry, ask about a word in Mohawk, or wear moccasins. But beyond that it could get uncomfortable. My grandmother feigned disinterest when my mother started learning Native drumming on her own. She did the same when my mother began digging around for old photos of her family, wanting to learn more about her family as part of a study she was doing with a Native group in town. My mother had always had an affinity with that side of herself: the Mohawk blood that she would boast about to her friends.

Yet my mom did not have the support or encouragement to foster that part of herself. A palpable tension always lingered between her and Gram, my mother yearning to find her place in the past and connect to it.

I felt split between the two pivotal people in my life, my Gram whom I adored and my mother the truth seeker who always drew me in with her passion. They were yin and yang, and I was smack dab in the middle, left questioning my loyalty.

When mom was diagnosed with cancer in her early 50s, we all knew she was not going anywhere. She had too much fight in her. She wanted to map out her destiny and have a chance to work through her anger, much of which came from the fact that she felt she never fit in with her family.

But a second round of cancer proved to be more furious than even her tenacious spirit. Though never taking away her beauty, it began to ravage her body. During this time my mom yearned for her mother to comfort her. But Gram was not one to be overly demonstrative. Mom's illness stirred a painful internal process within Gram, not good for someone who had been diagnosed with heart problems years before.

During this time, my mother befriended a Native cousin of hers. Together they burned white sage, a Native tradition known as "smudging," meant to purify the mind, body, and spirit and purge bad energy. My mother embraced her knowledge of medicinal plants and the healing ways of the Great Spirit, grasping onto her tribal past.

As her body weakened and just a few months before she died, her cousin casually asked her how she felt about having a brother she had never really gotten to know. When Gram was a teenager, she had a son—her firstborn—with a city boy, she told my mother. Gram was sent away to give birth, and soon after gave the baby up to her aunt to raise on the reserve. The child, who had non-Native features of fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, was never to know the truth about who his parents were, nor was my mother. This was the mysterious "family friend" of her childhood—her half brother. He died of cancer when he was in his late 50s.

My mother loved my grandfather, who she had been told was her father. But my mom began to wonder: Was her biological father actually that city boy with whom Gram had been enamored long ago? (He drowned in 1954 during Hurricane Hazel.) This, she believed, was the secret and source of all the family deception she had always known.

My mother wanted me to confront Gram with her revelation. She wanted me to confront Gram with what she believed were all the lies and deceptions, almost as if it were some sort of redemption.

I was again caught in the middle, as I loved them both. My family wanted me to be angry, to right the wrongs before it was too late, and to honor my mother's dying wish. Yet even among the anxieties and expectations that had somehow fallen on my shoulders, I found I could not do it. I felt deep empathy for my mother and the brother she never knew. But I also loved my grandmother, who made me warm when the world appeared cold.

Neither I nor anyone else mentioned our discovery to Gram. My mother passed away, and a deep ache settled in my grandmother. Her stoic eyes began to lose the shine that they had once emitted. As I had feared, her heart was heavy with the burden. Five months later she suffered a massive heart attack. In the hospital Gram was calm and collected, even when faced with the certainty that this was the final hour. She chatted away with family and even chuckled a bit.

Finally, she asked to be

alone and if I could bring her some sweetgrass. I raced back to her place, gathered up a braid, and wrapped a silver and turquoise necklace around it. She was asleep when I brought it to her. A nurse later told me that Gram had woken up briefly in the wee hours of the morning before her heart finally gave out and had seen the sweetgrass. She said to the nurse, "Do you know what this is? It's sweetgrass. It helps you get to the other side." She clutched it tightly. The white girl with the Mohawk spirit had finally returned home.

I felt a sense of calm in my grief and a strange, almost unidentifiable empowerment. I walked back from the hospital, about a mile and a half, to Gram and Gramp's house as tears stung my eyes. When I arrived, I knew what I needed to find. There in Gram's room on her dresser was her favorite pair of silver, native earrings. I put them on without any trepidation; it was as though I was being guided. I

stared at

my reflection in the mirror, with the intricate feather earrings dangling. They felt like mine now.

Nova Scotia-based journalist and freelance writer Tiffany Thornton loves watching the written word evolve. She covers music, travel, and theater for a number of publications. Her website: spinthemap.com.

Connections

As a child, I remember the braided sweetgrass that filled each room of my grandmother's house in Toronto. Native Americans consider it the sacred hair of Mother Earth. They believe it cleanses all negativity and attracts the good spirit.

Now, I always keep some in my house too. And like Gram, I sometimes burn the tip and let the sweet smoke envelop me. It helps to connect me to the native roots that I am still uncovering.

Tiffany Thornton

