Tanaya Winder

WHEN I WAS A little girl, Granny sang to me about leaves in the fall, colors changing from yellow to orange or red; the beautiful process of letting go embodied in each leaf slowly turning away from green. I can't recall all the details exactly, but I remember the wind. Every time Granny sang I pictured leaves dancing in concert as the wind twirled one after the other, carrying them from one destination to the next. Granny said something about silver, so maybe the song was really about the winter; I think I'd prefer it that way because I was born in December, and I came out screaming like most babies do as they take their first breath of air. In that way, I like to think I've been singing since birth, a life song our people have held in their hearts and spirits for generations, songs to always help us find our way back home.

Granny was my maternal great-grandmother. She was Pyramid Lake Paiute, and she lived on that reservation in northern Nevada. The Pyramid Lake Paiute reservation is also where my mother grew up. Each winter, Granny would come visit my mother, older sister, and me on the Southern Ute reservation in southwestern Colorado, my father's reservation and home where I would grow up and spend my school years. Each summer, my sister and I would go visit Granny and my maternal grandparents in Nevada. This time of year was always my favorite, because it meant we got to swim in Pyramid Lake.

We grew up hearing different stories of how the lake was created by the Stone Mother. Long ago, there was a mother who had four daughters: North, East, South, and West. The mother raised them alone, their entire lives spent in the desert and the extremes of its environment. In each grain of sand, the daughters felt a rooted connection to the land, but still, each wanted to travel in her own direction—inevitably, leaving her mother behind. When they finally grew up,

their curiosity about the world beyond the desert, along with all the wonders this other realm held, took hold and they ventured out on separate paths. The mother, both saddened by their loss and willingness to leave her and their home, cried so intensely the skies envied her ability to create such moisture. She carried on this way for days, which turned to months and years. Finally, her tears gathered in salty pools so strong they gravitated toward one another's weight. The mother created a lake out of tears, but the bitterness she would not let go of turned her into stone. She is called the Stone Mother, and to this day, she sits watching over the lake—waiting. I imagine her singing through the lake in waves: *Come back to me, my children Come back to me*.

As a child, I feared different things, but I was never afraid of drowning. Floating on my back, I trusted the water to carry me. I could be vulnerable with the lake. I could let go. I loved nothing more than swimming with my family, reenacting favorite scenes from musicals like *Funny Girl*, singing "Don't Rain on My Parade" at the top of my lungs. The water was my stage, and the sandy beach was my make-believe audience. My entire life I've always felt different, like a Fanny Brice outcast because I didn't exactly fit the mold of beauty standards in American culture; I was never the best at sports in my high school or anything like that, but I was smart. I got good grades and could lose myself for hours in a good book. Sometimes I even felt like an outsider with my friends, and occasionally with my family, but the lake always made me feel at home and like I belonged. To this day, I've never known freedom like swimming in a lake, treading water, diving, and imagining everything I could be. Swimming in the same lake my ancestors swam in made it all the more magic.

Grandma, my mom's mother, is another person who always made me feel like I belonged. In her own way, she was water too—adapting to any situation and circumstance she found herself in. Grandma always found a way; she too was magic. Each summer, when we weren't swimming or watching musicals or movies, Grandma would have us help in the garden, or she'd teach us how to bake and knit and embroider. With Grandma, I learned how to put things back together. From her laugh to her hugs and the food she made, Grandma was and is all the best things about love.

When I was a little girl, Grandma would sing, "'Ain't got no home, no place to roam,' ooo-OOO-ooo," to make me laugh. She did the twist-and-shout move, swinging her arms back and forth, spinning me during all the *ooo-OOO-ooo*'s. She made it so silly I thought she made up the song. It wouldn't be until I was in my early thirties that I'd hear that song on the fifties XM radio station and I'd realize Grandma wasn't lying; it was a real song. By then, the song would hold such a different meaning because I knew more about the world; I could never look at anything the same.

As a young girl, I didn't understand how complicated living in America was and is as an indigenous person. The idea of citizenship and belonging to a sovereign nation while also being a US citizen didn't really cross my mind. I knew we lived on my father's reservation during the school year and visited my mother's reservation during the summers. I knew I was enrolled in a different tribe, Duckwater Shoshone, my maternal grandma's tribe. But, I had no idea there were 562 federally recognized tribes at the time. In the history books my school used, Native Americans were erased, relegated to the past, and portrayed as uncivilized savages. I remember having to memorize the beginning of the Declaration of Independence, but they didn't let us get to (or left out) the part where the text called us "merciless Indian savages." Imagine growing up in a country whose founding documents don't recognize you or your people as human. There was so much truth I did not know. But I did know who I was, where I came from, and where I belonged.

I was raised to honor all parts of me. As a little girl, my family encouraged me to honor my voice through singing. My mother has been taking us to ceremonies since I was a baby, and as soon as I was able to, I contributed by singing along with everyone else. One of our neighbors even started a drum group for the kids in our neighborhood; the boys would drum, and we as girls would stand behind them, singing the tales of each song. I still carry those songs with me, and I thank my mother for that; she always made sure we were grounded in our culture, traditions, and ceremony. Today, my mom cruises while listening to ceremony songs so loudly in her car every time she picks me up from the airport I can hear the drum beats before I even open the door. It's a sound that reminds me I am home. Most days, my mom will slip into a song, humming different melodies or

songs from ceremony, pausing to say, "Sing songs until they become a part of you"—because of her, I know they are. Those songs let me know that I am never alone; my ancestors are always with me. Just being around my mom gives me that feeling of safety and protection—all the things that should come with what "home" means. It is hard to imagine what growing up without that looks like.

My grandma is a survivor of industrial schools, also known as boarding schools. These "schools" were created by the US government with the intent and purpose of assimilating and "civilizing" indigenous people under the praxis "Kill the Indian, save the man." I didn't learn about boarding schools until I became an adult. I did not learn this history in my US education. I did not know that Native children were forcibly taken from their homes, land, and families. In some industrial schools they cut off children's long hair, beat them for speaking their Native language or singing their medicine songs. Some children had to shine shoes or had needles stabbed through their tongues or soap put in their mouths just for speaking and singing the only language they'd ever known. The government wanted us to feel cultural shame, forcibly training Native people to be ashamed of being Native because it wasn't safe for us to be who we always were, who we have always been.

My grandma did not experience this in her boarding school; at least she doesn't talk about those things. Once, I asked my grandma, "Why didn't you run away? Why didn't you go home . . . ?" She told me, "I didn't have a home to go home to." She talks about boarding school as having food and a warm place to sleep. The memory she likes to tell from her boarding school experience is about her winning the talent show by singing "Blue Moon." When she shares this story she sings: "'Blue moon, now I'm no longer alone, without a dream in my heart, without a love of my own . . .'" and I can tell she's happy each time she tells this story to me because Grandma did find love with my grandpa and the family she made with him. For me, the best part is: my grandma never stopped singing. She stills sings to us to this day in her Native language.

It is a miracle that my grandma survived and is still here. It is a miracle that any of us indigenous people are still here; to me, this speaks to our strength as a people. My mom reminds me of this each and every day as she tells me to pray and give thanks for everything I've been blessed with. I include all my family in

my daily prayers; I am especially thankful for my granny, my grandma, my mom, and my sister—without them, I wouldn't be here today. They survived in a world that tried to kill our people. They and our people continued singing our songs even when it was still illegal to do so up until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed in 1978, just seven years before I was born. I will always be grateful that I was born in a time where I am able to sing ceremony songs, belt out ballads, write and perform poetry using the breath and air I am thankful to hold in my lungs, and none of it is illegal. I am grateful that I get to sing, and it is all because my grandma and all my ancestors never abandoned who they were. I can sing Clarence "Frogman" Henry's song that I'll always consider my grandma's "Ain't Got No Home" song, but I can give the words "I've got a voice. I love to sing . . ." new meaning. I get to sing and not have to be ashamed of who I am or the cultures I come from.

There's another version of the Stone Mother story. One of our elders tells it like this: She is our mother of all mothers. She had children who all got along when they were little, but as the kids got older, they misbehaved, argued, and fought. So the mother had to separate them. She sent a boy and a girl to the south and a boy and a girl to the north. She told them to build a fire each night so she'd know they were okay. She saw the fire from the kids she sent to the south, but she never saw a fire from the kids who went to the north. So she cried and cried; her tears formed the lake. Her heart turned so cold she turned into stone.

In this version of the story, the Stone Mother teaches us the importance of lighting one's fire. We need to show each other and our ancestors that we are okay; we do this by lighting our fire—sharing our gifts, living our purpose, and not being afraid. The Stone Mother gives us the greatest gift a mother could give. She gives us a way to heal. We can swim in a lake created out of tears, which means we can learn how to navigate any hurt or trauma that comes our way, we can fight and swim and tread water and learn how to balance.

I think stories and songs come to us at different points in our lives. I believe they are told and sung in different ways to reflect the mirror we need to look into. I carry many stories and songs. Some have been passed down for generations through tradition or ceremony—as blood memory. And some have

yet to be written. But I am always one song away from my next destination. I light my fire to show respect for the journey. I am an indigenous woman who heals not just my heart but also all those whose blood I carry inside me. Each time I write and sing I am lighting my fire; I am honoring my ancestors, because singing makes me feel alive and my ancestors live through me.