

Shelby Settles Harper
Pow Wow Girls

SHELBY SETTLES HARPER holds a juris doctor from the University of Colorado, is a candidate for a master of arts in writing from Johns Hopkins University, and is a citizen of the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma. Her fiction can be found in *Outside In Literary and Travel Magazine* (March 2013), *Bethesda Magazine* (July/August 2013), *So to Speak: a Feminist Journal of Language and Art* (November 2013), and *Gargoyle Magazine* #61 (forthcoming). Shelby lives with her husband and three children in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, where she writes for the parenting blog *Red Tricycle* about family-friendly adventures in the nation's capital.

Some of us were princesses, with beaded crowns and tribal sashes. We talked of saving our competition money for college at the University of New Mexico or Oklahoma or even Dartmouth, if we were really hot stuff. Some of us were the anti-princesses, with tight jeans and tank tops, sneaking beers at the 49, the infamous pow wow after-parties, when all the dances were over and the grown-ups were gathered around the fire pit talking and laughing and drinking.

Some of us were tall and skinny, with long black hair. One of us tried to hide the small gap between the front teeth by smiling with closed lips. Others had thick, curly hair ironed flat at night. All of us hated our acne and wanted to be taller or shorter or skinnier or have more shape—anything to be different, better, than how we were.

Our favorite pow wow was the week-long celebration that our tribe hosted every August. Indians came from across the country to our small Oklahoma town, filling our motels and campgrounds, bringing stories from reservations so far away they might as well have been other countries. We'd never been west of Amarillo or north of Wichita Falls, so we were proud that our tribe's pow wow brought the world to us.

We met up with our friends at the opening day parade on Monday, entering through the south gate, where they let the Indians in for free. For the next five days and nights, we rode carnival rides and danced, laughed, snuck cigarettes, and pretended to be the grown-ups we couldn't wait to become.

We loved the teen dance in the old barn held late at night, where we danced to Chubby Checker, the Temptations, and the Four Tops. We blushed and laughed when the boys we danced with sang along to "Let's Spend the Night Together" by the Stones. One or two of us did spend the night, in the backs of trucks and on top of Pendleton blankets, the muted sounds of carnival rides and drunks mixed in with the quick panting of the boy on top of us.

After the teen dance, some of us sat with boys on the backs of trucks, eating Indian tacos and drinking Pepsis. We liked the frybread piled high with tomatoes and cheese and ground beef, or sometimes smothered in powdered sugar and honey. Three frybread stands, but only one with a long line, the one run by the auntie we called "Superdude," and we'd play rock-paper-scissors to see which Indian had to take the money collected from our pockets and buy for all.

Some of us fell in love with faraway boys and had to pay our brothers or sisters to keep their mouths shut. *Date the whites*, our mothers ordered. *Those Indian boys won't amount to anything*. We found this confusing, because we were mixed-bloods and often reminded by teachers and store clerks that we were not white. But we just rolled our eyes and leaned in close to the boy from Nisqually, captivated by his stories of fishing in the Puget Sound.

We had favorite parts of pow wow week. Some of us liked the wrestling mud men at the opening day parade. *Look at those crazy Indians, covered head to toe in mud, only their eyeballs clear!* Some of us liked the 49, where the grown-ups smoked and drank and told stories until they either hooked up or passed out. We all loved the vendors, who sold baskets and pottery and turquoise earrings that made us feel beautiful.

Some of us liked to walk around the campgrounds on the outer edges of the pow wow. Rows of teepees and tents, lined up in a U-shape, filled with Indians of all shapes and sizes telling stories of South Dakota ranches, Pueblo pottery, and fishing in the Pacific Northwest. We especially loved

talking to the visitors from what seemed like real reservations, unlike our small Oklahoma town.

Some of us liked to watch the fancydancers. When the good ones danced it was effortless and loose and we were mesmerized by the dancer's head-dress, a kaleidoscope of reds, yellows, and blues, as he bobbed his head, spun and leaped, his moccasins keeping time with the drumbeat. Watching the fancydancers, we too felt the beat of the drum in our hearts.

Some of us thought the fancydancers were real show-offs. *Look at those peacocks.* We preferred the grassdancers. We saw them as the cheetahs of the pow wow: powerful, smart, and strong. We liked the long, flowing fringe and the idea of losing oneself in the music, in the drum, to become grass blowing in the wind. We weren't the ones for flash and dazzle.

Many of us danced, too. We strutted our poise and elegance in the Women's Southern Traditional competition, bending our knees in time with the beat of the drum. Some of us danced in a jingle dress made of tobacco can lids. We proudly showed off our footwork, beadwork, and beautiful plumes.

Artists abounded in our families. We knew potters, painters, weavers, and beaders. Some of us were artists too, and all of us had dreams. We didn't know why art ran through our blood but thought maybe it had something to do with being Native people and that the Creator gifted our hands for the creation of beauty, even when the art was sad and dark.

Years later, some of us would go to college and marry white men. When our Southern-born fathers-in-law refused to attend our weddings to their sons, we pretended it wasn't because we were Indian and that they would come to love us once they got to know us.

Some of us would birth blue-eyed, blond children who still met the blood requirement for membership in our tribe. We would move to other Oklahoma towns, join Junior League, and forget that we were Indian until we looked in the mirror. We didn't realize it was written on our cheeks, lips, and eyes.

Some of us would go against our mothers and marry Indians. If we were lucky, these men worked for the tribe in the cultural preservation department or ran for council and grew bellies big with age. They didn't drink,

saying they felt like everyone expected them to be falling-down drunks and even though white men could behave in such a way, they had to be better.

Some of us married beautiful Indian men who wasted away from drinking rather than painting. When we moved back in with our mothers, our children carrying their few possessions, our mothers would mutter through pursed lips, *What did I tell you?*

Always we felt compassion for our mothers, though, because we knew they had been forced to attend the Indian boarding schools, where they'd learned to hate a part of themselves. In the boarding schools, our mothers had been taught to sew and cook and keep house like white women. Our languages were forbidden, so they learned to speak only in English and to pray to one white God. Five decades later, when our children, many of them light-skinned, returned and asked about the peyote ceremonies, something we had no clue about, a light would flicker in our grandparents' brown eyes. *The prayers in the teepee worked; what skipped two generations is still alive.*

Our mothers wouldn't be able to name the official United States policies of assimilation and relocation, but these experiments would shape their lives. After boarding schools, they were sent to faraway places like Los Angeles and Chicago and Denver, sent to work as maids for white women, expected to blend into white culture.

Some of our mothers would miss home and return to the reservations or to their small Indian towns. They'd feel confused and unhappy, misunderstood by their parents, who didn't speak English and didn't recognize their children after years in the white world. Others would stay in the big cities, where they would either assimilate and survive or fade into the shadows.

All of us were born decades before Congress outlawed the adoption of Indian children by non-Native families, and many of us were taken from our homes and adopted into white homes in other parts of the country. Some of us adopted children grew up with white brothers and sisters, attending Ivy League schools alongside them. We would make our way to the other Indians on campus, and later call home and ask our blue-eyed adoptive mothers: *What is all this stuff about sovereignty?*

Some of us had parents who taught us what being Indian was really about. They taught us the language and the stories and about respecting

our elders. Some of us had parents who thought they knew what being an Indian was all about, and taught us those things, until we became just as hopeless and lost as they were.

Some of our sisters, girlfriends, and aunts left their babies in trucks while they drank in bars, their children growing up with the same neglect as the stray dogs wandering the streets. We had brothers, uncles, and cousins whose lives would be ravaged by alcohol. They couldn't keep a job and went on drinking binges once or twice a month, leaving our aunts, cousins, or sisters home alone with four kids and having to turn to family for help or for money. *Sister, can you spot me some money for rent? He's run off to colored town again, drinking.*

We watched as the Vietnam War claimed our brothers and boys from the neighborhood and we held our mothers tightly as they cried and said goodbye to their sons. Then we filled our cemeteries with their bodies when their remains were sent back home to us. Every Memorial Day weekend, our mothers placed flowers at the grave sites of lost sons and relatives, and now that our mothers have passed, we continue the tradition.

Diabetes took many of our elders, and some of us said goodbye to loved ones one limb at a time. We vowed to eat healthier, starting Monday, and some of us published articles in *Indian Country Today*, proclaiming *Wake up, Native people! Frybread is NOT traditional food!* But still, we loved the sizzle of the dough frying in the pan and wanted nothing more than to enjoy a big meal with our relations.

No matter how far we strayed, the pow wows tied us to our communities and the ceremonies kept our songs alive. They reminded us of the ones the elders once sang, in languages we no longer spoke, the memories of their beautiful voices warm and comforting.

We are pow wow girls and these are our songs.