Leaving the Snow Globe

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Overall, living in a small town is like living in a snow globe. Sometimes things get shaken up with new blood and new people, but quickly the flakes settle, and things remain the same. You can see outside the warped plastic of what is going on, but it has little effect on you and your life. Despite county lines being imaginary, your corner of the world remains the same. Businesses on Main Street are the same. Members of the Ag society are the same. Teachers at the school are the same. Families in the area are the same. Despite the monotony, sometimes it's nice, and everything glitters. People trust each other and are straightforward with their intentions. But other times, county lines can induce claustrophobia. People who desire to do more often try to run through the plastic orb only to bounce back in the middle of the community. Just like a Christmas village, the members of the community stay the same year after year. Sons become their fathers, and daughters become their mothers. Land and beliefs are inherited.

The community I grew up in was small. So much so that the phrase "everyone's famous in a small town" rings true. For example, I know what most kids in the grades above and below me are doing now without having spoken to them for years. In some instances, my Mom saw their Mom at the grocery store; their sister is still in high school with my brother; their Grandma goes to church with my neighbour, etc. Everyone knowing everyone's business is just a simple fact about small-town life. However, this phenomenon is amplified by some families having been connected for generations, particularly the Métis families. This is unsurprising as a vital tenet of the Métis Nation is kinship. Families with long histories don't only know about your family's current situation, but they know about your family's past situations. At community events, you can frequently hear, "oh yeah, I knew your dad," "I went to school with your Grandpa," "Your aunt once tried to light my hair on fire in an assembly." Family affiliations can also dictate the relationships you have with people you don't know well. It's kinda like, "If my great-great-great-great-grandfather fought in the resistance alongside your great-great-great grand uncle, we are automatically cool." Additionally, my old boss Lisa jokes that in the 80's you had to wait for the blood test to come back before you did anything rated higher than PG-13 with your boyfriend.

I grew up in a largely Métis and Ukrainian family. Both my Dad and uncle married Ukrainian women, so many of my cousins also grew up being both Slavic and Métis. Since I grew up in Lac Ste Anne County, where you could see my picture in the yearbook amongst Letendres, Dumonts, Bellroses, Lamberts, Cardinal's, etc., I always felt a closer connection to the Métis culture and

community. However, both cultures heavily emphasize the importance of family. As a result, my family, like many Ukrainian and Métis families, is incredibly tight-knit. When something happens to one family member, what I call the "church phone tree effect" happens. The "church phone tree effect" occurs when one of the women in the family finds out something noteworthy and calls three other women in the family. They then tell maybe three other women in the family until all branches of the family know. Unsurprisingly, most of the gossip spread throughout the family is deemed uninteresting by the men in the family. A recent example of the "church phone tree effect" is one of my Dad's cousins' kids is having his first kid. My (Great) Auntie (sister) Audrey called my Grandma with the good news, claiming that my (Great) Auntie Eva told her. My Grandma then told me, her daughter, my Mom, and her daughter-in-law. Within less than 2 hours, everyone in our branch of the family knew. As you can imagine, not all of the news that goes through the phone tree is positive. I would never want my whole family to think less of me or pity me, so sometimes it is easier to keep some of the trials and tribulations of my life to myself.

By the time I reached High school, like a punk-rock cliche, I had begun to want more for myself than just living and dying in the same place. I did not want to replace my mother in the Christmas village. Instead, I wanted new and novel experiences. I wanted to learn what it was like to be Rylee rather than being so and so's daughter, granddaughter, niece, cousin, etc. I wanted a clean slate and a fresh start. University was supposed to be that for me.

When I started University, I was excited. I marvelled at the size of the campus. *"It's a whole city on its own here!"* I had remarked to my Dad. It was new, exciting, and daunting. Finally, I would stand on my own two feet and be known solely for my merits. The opportunity to make new friends from diverse backgrounds titillated me. However, by the time the first day rolled around, it seemed like friend groups had already been established. Some people had gone to high school together. Others from out of town had met in the dorms. I knew one person from high school in a different faculty and had elected not to stay in the dorms, favouring living with my grandparents. My family and I decided I would live with my grandparents for two main reasons. First, living in an on-campus dorm was wildly expensive. Second, my parents were afraid of the "big city." Every time we turned on the news, there were stories about murders, break-ins, assaults, muggings. Until that point, the biggest crime committed in the county I grew up in was people stealing recycling, underage drinking, and pot smoking. Before I left, my Dad gifted me a new pocketknife. He told me to keep it in my purse or jacket pocket *"just in case."* The kids I grew up with all always had knives on them, not to defend themselves but for utility. Slowly my worldview began to change.

Growing up, hard workers surrounded me. People who would be on tractors from sunup to sundown. People who would be away from their families for weeks, sometimes months at a time in the patch. People who would destroy their backs and their knees standing on concrete floors all day. I was prideful that I grew up around people who were not afraid to get a little dirt on their hands and get things done. Even when I knew I was not going into the family business of concrete or construction; I took pride in the money I made working in those fields throughout my adolescence. It had never occurred to me not to feel anything but pride for my family and my community's blue-collared roots. I had never thought of my family members as less capable because of their field of work. Being from Alberta, a prairie province built off oil, and agriculture the thought that blue-collar workers are just stupid, and poor seemed ludacris to me. However, some experiences at University had me questioning the pride I had felt being in a blue-collar family and community.

On the first day of English 101, we were playing icebreakers. First, we were supposed to introduce ourselves to the person on our left. Then, after giving our names, we were supposed to talk about what high schools we were coming from and our faculty. The girl to my left told me what high school she was from and made sure to emphasize that she had taken all IBs in high school. Like it had mattered. I told her that my small school did not even offer those types of classes. She squinted her eyes and tilted her head, looking at me perplexed. I further explained that only a few options were available at my high school. She replied, "*Yeah, uh-huh."* The way she looked at me made feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment blossom in my chest.

On a different occasion in my first year, I was chatting with a fellow faculty member; she had asked me what University my parents had attended. I shrugged and said, *"Oh, they didn't go."* She looked at me again, confused. I thought nothing of it and remarked further, *"Oh yeah, my dad didn't even finish tenth grade."* Again, she was confused. She asked what they did for a living. I told her with pride. My parents worked very hard for their money, but I believed they were some of the most capable people I had ever met. My Dad and Grandpa could build a house on their own, and my Mom could make a dollar out of a dime. Again she seemed confused. I think she was surprised that I never came off as "poor" or anything like that in some of our casual conversations. My family wasn't poor. They were blue-collared.

Nearly once a semester, without fail, I either overhear people talking down on blue-collar workers or have the same conversation about what my parents' backgrounds are. Every time they simultaneously make me feel small and angry. Through these encounters, the image I had painted of the University of Alberta before attending it, as a place of free thinking and facts before judgement, began to crumble.

As I stated previously, I viewed University as an opportunity to be "Rylee." However, some of my first-year classes had over four hundred students, more than the number of students who attended my grade 8-12 school. While I was not so-and-so's kid, grandkid or niece anymore, I was not Rylee. I was just another number. I could have skipped class for three weeks in a row, and no one would have batted an eye. I went from an environment where everyone knew me and cared about me to an environment where no one knew me or cared about me. I craved a community and a sense of belonging like Gabriel Dumont craved sovereignty. When I received an email from the First People's House (FPH) about a stew and bannock lunch they hosted I decided to go. I sat at the round table and was welcomed. Students of all different faculties mingled with each other and FPH employees, invested in each other's thoughts, opinions, and stories. After that, I frequently visited the FPH, sometimes for a place to study, a place where I could print notes for free, and a place I could bead. The FPH staff asked for my name and where my family was from, and they remembered it. I asked for their names and where they were from, and I remembered it. Out of all the people I met at University over the years, I only know the people from the FPH by first and last name. Through the FPH, I started to feel seen again.

Initially, when I started University, I wanted friends from diverse backgrounds. I had never travelled outside of Western Canada and had only travelled with family to see family. From one snow globe to another. I wanted to meet people who were different from me, people who grew up in places I could only dream of visiting. Like sugar plum fairies, imaginary friends with accents and obscure style danced in my head. I did not strive to make friends from similar backgrounds with similar experiences. However, anytime I had to work with my peers as a part of a course, layered interactions put me off. Some would be saccharine sweet, engaging in small talk only to then ask about grades on past assignments, trying to gauge where I would be on the bell curve. Others made no time for niceties and were strictly business. However, it made me feel as if I was in a cut-throat competition, for the best jobs, for the best opportunities, for the best future. I felt as if some students wished failure onto others. The thing about being a part of the Métis nation is that everyone wants to see Métis and other Indigenous people do well. The cards have been and remain stacked against Indigenous people throughout Canadian history. Their success strengthens their causes. For example, the more Métis doctors, lawyers, teachers, entrepreneurs, and landowners, the more political power the Métis Nation can exert. So naturally, when I conversed with other students at FPH, the interactions were straightforward.

We wanted to see each other do well. Need someone to check over your essay? You got it. Need help finding a tutor? You got it. Need someone to

reassure you that you belong? You got it. The FPH became a haven for me. Everyone, students and administrators alike, just wanted to help me in whatever way they could. For example, sometime in my second year, I had lost my Onecard and could not get on the bus without change. When I went back to the FPH to see if I had left it there Kayla, the receptionist, asked me what I was looking for and helped me look. I did not have any cash on me and had left my debit card at home—questions of what I would do if I could not find it circled through my mind inducing panic. When the search proved futile, Kayla gave me the fare. No questions asked.

Before becoming a regular at the FPH, I was surprised by the air of elitism perforating the University and the casual racism. Many times, I overheard peers mocking the land acknowledgements. Many times, I heard about the student council being dismissive of the Aboriginal student council. Many times, I heard stories from other First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI). students about comments made about "affirmative action." Many times, in Canadian history classes, Indigenous history was barely acknowledged at best, or completely ignored. Each instance was like a brick stacked up inside me until it eventually created a wall between non-indigenous students and administrators at the University, and myself. However, through the FPH, I met people going through the same things. It was also nice not having to explain family dynamics and clarify how many aunties, uncles, and cousins I had. Every time I met new people, one of the first things we would talk about was where our families were from (not what they did). Sometimes we would share kinship ties. It was there I felt like I belonged. Unfortunately, meeting and conversing with more FNMI students meant I was exposed further to stories about discrimination, performative activism, and anti-indigenous sentiments at the University of Alberta. The bricks kept on stacking.

With years at the University of Alberta under my belt, and a belly full of bricks, I prefer the known. While things never change within a snow globe, you know what to expect. Instead of false promises and a shiny veneer, there is always glitter.