

Northern Wildflower

a memoir

CATHERINE LAFFERTY



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HALIFAX & WINNIPEG

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To My Grandma

EXCERPT

Acknowledgements

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To everyone in my life that has taught me to be strong, without life's tough lessons I wouldn't be the person I am today. Thank you for adding another layer of depth to my life and bringing out the bravery in me.

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I'd like to thank my grandparents for giving me everything I ever needed. They gave me just the right amounts of love, discipline, freedom and lifelong values and beliefs that I will forever stand for. I look forward to seeing you again.

MAHSI CHO!

*This book was written in hopes of inspiring,
encouraging and giving hope to
the Indigenous Peoples of Canada that are in the struggle.
Together we can break the cycle of intergenerational trauma
and echo our voices loud and clear, in unity and solidarity,
so that every person will understand the
detrimental effects that colonialism has had
on our livelihood throughout Canada's history.*

Foreword

BY LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON

I FIRST MET CATHERINE AT Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning — a Dene Bush University in Denedeh. Catherine was at one of our on-the-land gatherings as a councillor from the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. At the time, our programming was operating in the Akaitcho region of Denendeh on Chief DryGeese Territory — Catherine's homeland. Catherine was there as a community leader, with her two gorgeous children, who immediately connected with my own kids. The group of them had a wonderful time over the next few days fishing nets, swimming, making dry fish and just being Indigenous kids. Together. At the time, I didn't know Catherine was also a writer.

A few years later, Catherine emailed me to ask for help with a book-length memoir project she was working on. It has been rare in my life that young writers approach me with fully completed manuscripts, particularly Indigenous writers that have completed such enormous projects in relative isolation, with little support and encouragement from a writing community or any community for that matter. This has, however, been the beautiful struggle of generations of Indigenous writers, particularly Indigenous women. Catherine's work

immediately reminded me of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Lee Maracle's *I am Woman* and the poetry of Joanne Arnott. Even more importantly, it reminded me of Dene storytellers and the act of telling one's own story as a practice of affirming our experiences, connecting to the ones that have come before us and our homelands and speaking our own truths on our own terms. *Northern Wildflower* also serves as a counterpoint to the academic work of Dene scholar Glen Coulthard because it represents a very personal, intimate exploration of the themes of dispossession, violence, disconnection and resistance from the perspective of a young Dene woman.

Often, in teaching in the North, I find it difficult to find relevant readings for my Dene students. I am excited to share Catherine's book with them, because I know they will, perhaps for the first time, see their lives and their experiences in print. This was reinforced for me this year at Yellowknife's writers' festival, NorthWords. Catherine read an excerpt of her book to a packed room in the basement of the Yellowknife Centre on a panel with myself, Paul Andrew, Tracey Lindberg and Rosanna Deerchild — a pretty intimidating panel for an emerging Indigenous writer. Catherine read after Elder Paul Andrew spoke of his residential school experience and the strength and resilience of the Shuhtoatine or Mountain Dene. Her reading was powerful and moving, holding the audience in silence as she told her story. Her community connected with the work and that was wonderful to witness.

Memoir is not an easy genre, particularly for Indigenous women. We rarely get the opportunity to tell our stories, and when we do, we are often met with racism, patriarchy and judgement. I can't think of any other young Dene women who have written memoirs, and that makes this story all the more important. From an artistic standpoint, it can be difficult to tell the story of our lives to audiences that may not

fully understand the colonial context that is responsible for the violence in our lives. I think Catherine does an excellent job of truth telling while not succumbing to a victim narrative.

Northern Wildflower is a beautiful story of Dene resistance. It is a call for a just world, and it will inspire a new generation of young Dene writers and storytellers to speak up, to write and to live their very best lives.

— *Leanne Betasamosake Simpson*

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

EVERYONE HAS A UNIQUE STORY TO TELL. This is mine. Memories strung together like beads, sewn onto smoked moose hide in the shape of a northern wildflower drawn by my grandmother.

My journey began on Easter Sunday in the early eighties. My parents were at a drive-through theatre in a small northern Alberta oil town when I made my debut into this world.

I proved to be fiery from the start. I had light red hair and eyebrows that would turn bright red when I cried; I was born with a passion that I couldn't hide. I get my auburn traits from my dad, a freckle-faced redhead from the east coast. I get my brazen personality from my mother, a black-haired beauty one generation away from being born in a teepee.

I cried nights on end while they walked the floors with me in their small apartment. My mom often reminds me that no one ever wanted to babysit me because I cried too much. I was colicky and inconsolable.

My mom would rock me in my homemade Dene swing made from a sheet, some rope and two sticks, which hung from one corner of the ceiling above her bed to the other. A Dene invention was the only thing that would help me fall asleep — no wonder I like hammocks so much.

It's safe to say that I was a restless child from my entrance

into this world, and I've carried this feeling of yearning in my heart throughout my life.

I have a constant irritation with the status quo and am rarely satisfied. I always want more. Not in the sense of material things but in the sense of wanting a better world, a just world, especially for those who grew up like me, knowing what it's like to live as an outsider on your own territory. Knowing what it feels like to grow up in a system that doesn't accept you, the same system that forced you to be dependent on it.

I want there to be a better world for Indigenous people who have felt what it's like to live in a society that has already developed a preconceived notion that we are failures, that we have a meek future, that we will end up drunk like the parents that couldn't raise us, that we will end up abusing the system with our countless needs of taxpayer dollars, that we are not worthy to eat at the big table, that we should be thankful and consider ourselves lucky enough to live off the crumbs they give us. There has got to be something better for those who know what it's like to feel hopeless and disingenuously pitied by those who watch us fall through the cracks because they believe there's no hope for us. We aren't even considered human, after all. The worst part is that some Indigenous people also have this perception of themselves and where they come from because they have lost their cultural identities through social conditioning efforts.

I want justice. I want to take back our stolen identities. Our pride has been ripped and torn to shreds from the years of deliberate trauma that was served to us in the form of righteous, all-knowing authority. The wicked rules that have been written in a heavy ink are made to look like they can't be erased, but those rules can be broken, those policies can be amended, those laws can be overturned and those words that hold us down can be burned.

I want our men to be warriors again and our women to be safe and respected. I want our land back, our homes back, our families back, our health back. We were forced to detach from everything we knew right down to the very core of who we are. I want things back to the way they once were. The Dene once lived in harmony without interruption and influence, and that worked well for us. I won't be fully satisfied until I see the day that we are no longer told to do things any other way but the way we know, our way.

I won't be content until the day that I feel like I belong on my own soil. Until the day that I don't have to work twice as hard to get that management job even though I have a higher education. Until the day that I don't walk past the post office and see my relatives on the street being ridiculed and stereotyped for being intoxicated and homeless. Until the day I never hear another Indian joke. Until the day that I don't have to worry that my son will end up in jail because he was profiled and discriminated against. Until the day that I don't have to worry that my daughter will be abused because she's considered worthless in the eyes of those who feel they are superior to her. Until the day I don't have to argue with someone when I hear them say, "Why can't you just get over it?" Until the day that everyone understands why we won't get over it.

Until then, I will not rest. I will keep fighting the good fight to make sure I see a change in this world, until the silenced voices can speak again. Until we can make our own rules and until we can be sure that no one takes advantage of us anymore. I didn't know these injustices existed when I was brought into this world, but I could feel them through my mother's womb and as time went on I inevitably encountered them in my everyday life.

My family grew up constantly struggling on our own land when we should have been treated like royalty, with the respect

and dignity we deserved. Instead, we were forced to assimilate, often violently. Our minds, bodies and self-determination were not and are still not respected to this day. Our vision of our treaty is continually erased, and we are always having to stand up for our rights even in the most mundane circumstances. It's tiring.

I don't think our people ever realized the full extent of how the future for them would unravel. No one except the Elders could have predicted the impacts that would send a generational ripple of devastation throughout Canada. The Elders always talk about how money encroached upon their livelihood. The few Elders that are still alive today witnessed first-hand how our people slowly started to become more and more reliant on it. Money eventually became too powerful of a force to stop. "Money doesn't grow on trees," my mom would say, and I would say, "Yes it does, it's made of paper." It took me a long time to realize that money was earned through working for other people and not for ourselves.

In the olden days, when our people worked they worked with their hands on the land because it was the only way to survive. They worked hard for their food and shelter and they enjoyed it. There was no such thing as being idle. Then, something happened when money crept into the North. Our people did not fit into the new working world because they had little to no formal education, and they weren't readily accepted into the mould that was determined fitting enough to obtain the jobs that were created when the government and the mining industries welcomed themselves in. The North became a rewarding scene for southerners seeking adventure, new beginnings and prosperity. This left little room for the Dene, who did not require those things to be happy, and almost overnight the Dene way of living almost disappeared through the exclusiveness of those who celebrate money.

As a child, I couldn't grasp the concept or the importance of money and how it was something that people strived to obtain all their lives. As an adult, I still don't understand why most of us spend our lives racing to get to the top, breaking our backs in the process and struggling to make ends meet only to end up counting down until retirement.

There has got to be more to life. I want a deeper fulfillment. I want my soul to be full of purpose and substance. I don't want to drag myself out of bed every morning cringing at the thought of the work week ahead of me. I want to jump up out of bed every morning knowing that I am doing what I love without restriction, without worrying about money.

Unfortunately, until that day comes, money makes the world go around and enriches our lives with a false sense of happiness, materialism and security. Maybe I have come to think that it shouldn't have to be this way because of my humble beginnings.

My first memories are of my parents throwing small parties in our tiny concrete basement suite just outside of Toronto, a skip and a hop away from the busiest highway in North America. I could see them from the crack in my bedroom door, laughing and dancing in the middle of the night and listening to country music long after I had been sent to bed. But I was a night owl and tried to stay up just as late as they did. I could barely see them with my vision a blur, so I would squint hard just to see the outline of their figures — I had bad eyes, but my mom didn't know I needed glasses yet.

During the day, my dad would go to work building houses while my mom and I curled up on the couch together and watched game shows as I ruffled her hair. I've always been fascinated with hair and used to pretend I was a hairdresser. My best friend Sarah lived across the street from me and she would come over to play. Sarah and I decided to play hairdresser one



*Catherine with a juice stained mouth
and pearl hoop earrings
(photo credit Norine Lafferty)*

day before class pictures. I was the hairdresser and she was the client. My grandma happened to be visiting us and I snatched her sewing scissors from the kitchen table. Sarah and I hid in the bathroom until my mom noticed that we were too quiet. “Catherine, you open this door right now!” She banged her fist on the locked bathroom door, insisting that I open it. I reassured her that I would just be a few more minutes, but I knew I was in trouble.

When Sarah came out of the bathroom, her once-beautiful, long, strawberry-blonde hair was snipped short and stuck flat to her head with a few spikes sticking up here and there. I still have her school picture tucked away somewhere, reminding me that hairdressing is not my calling.

In those days, I used to play with two brothers, Robby and Billy. Our moms were best friends, so they would often come over to visit us. One day Robby accidentally ripped one of the little golden hoop pearl earrings right out of my ear while he was wrestling with me, and I screamed in pain. I had worn those earrings ever since I was a baby. My mom had brought me to get my pointy elf ears pierced for my baby pictures when I was just learning how to sit up by myself. She had seen a little girl from India who had her ears pierced and thought it looked cultural.

I wonder how my mother felt moving to such a big city

after living in a small northern town her entire life. I know she lived in fear of losing me when we were out in public, so she would part my hair down the middle and braid both sides, then tie a little bell at the bottom of each braid so she could hear me running around the grocery store if I wandered too far. So, it's safe to say she almost suffered a heart attack when I didn't listen after she told me to hold onto her pant leg while she was in line at a food truck vendor at an outdoor country music concert with over one hundred thousand people. My parents searched for almost an hour and had people join the search, yelling out my name on the lookout for a little Dene girl with ornamental braids, until my dad found me crying at the front of the stage near the fenced-off area. I remember looking up to see his shadow hovering over me, half angry and half relieved.

My parents were very young when they had me. They weren't ready for a baby. My dad was a carpenter by trade, and he grew up in a large family. His dad, who was also a carpenter, died in a work accident when my dad was just a baby. My dad was left to help his mother look after the family and he worked hard his whole life, from a young age.

My parents met at a bonfire party in northern Alberta. They were both there for the oil boom. My mom moved from her small hometown of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, as soon as she was old enough to get out on her own and move in with her older sister Clara. My mom said she saw my dad from across the fire and thought he was cute, so she got his attention by throwing rocks at him; that must be where I get my terrible flirting skills from.

They only lasted a few years together after I came into the picture. One day, without any warning, my mom packed up what belongings we had in our little basement apartment and left my dad with nothing but a broken heart. I still remember



*Catherine and her Dad playing cards
(photo credit Norine Lafferty)*

the image of my dad the day we left and the broken look in his eyes when we said our goodbyes. When I look back now, I can see him sitting in our dark and empty basement suite crying with his head in his hands. I hugged him one last time while my mom waited for me at the top of the stairs, the same stairs where he taught me how to tie my

shoes and figure out my left foot from my right, essential skills I needed to know for my first day of kindergarten.

I sometimes wonder where I would be today if we had stayed, but I can't think that way because I can't go back to that time and change it. Even if I could change the past, I'm not sure that I would. The journey I have travelled may have led me down dark paths a time or two, but I believe I am where I'm supposed to be. Life is an intricate, winding road that leads us through good times and bad. We never know what might happen from one minute to the next, but I believe that if we have faith our paths will eventually lead us to where we are supposed to be.

I didn't think I would ever see my dad again. We had completely lost contact. Our nightly routine of "I love you more than the whole wide world" and "I love you more than the universe" would never be spoken again, but those are the keepsakes that I store away in my memory of the father I knew once upon a time.



MY MOM, HER NEW BOYFRIEND and I travelled across Canada in his beat-up camper van. Little did I know then that the stranger I just met would be in my life more than my own father.

The highway was so foreign and magical to me. I enjoyed the scenery in between sleeping, gassing up at truck stops along the way and prying open red pistachios until my fingers were stained blood red.

We set up camp in southern Alberta, which is where we would live for the next few years of our lives until my mother and stepdad would go their separate ways (only to reconcile a few years later).

My memories of living in Calgary were pleasant, for the most part. I would bike up and down the hill behind my house that had a perfect view of the Saddledome. I was always out biking. I could bike with no hands, showing off to myself for hours. Sure, I crashed on my bike all the time and would come home bruised and scraped, but I loved it. Cruising down hills at full speed gave me a sense of invincibility and freedom. Freedom was something that ranked high on my priority list from an early age. I somehow knew that, without freedom, I would not be able to live — I wouldn't be able to be me.

I loved cruising on the smooth black pavement in the middle of the road with the wind in my hair and my hands stretched out as if I was hugging the air, not worrying about what was in front of me. I was fearless and naïve, a deadly combination.

The worst crash I can remember was when I was biking home from the corner store with a plastic bag full of junk food hanging from my handle bars. It got caught in the spokes and I flew off the bike head first, doing a flip in the air. I had

landed on the curb of the sidewalk and was giving myself some time to check my wounds when a man pulled up beside me in an old car. He rolled down the window and said, "Hi, do you need some help?"

I quickly jumped back on my bike and said, "No thanks, I'm fine," and kept my head down as I peddled home as fast as I could. "It's okay, I know your mom, I know where you live," he said as he stepped on the gas to keep up with my momentum. All I could imagine was him throwing me in the trunk of his car and speeding away, leaving only my bike as a small clue as to what happened if I went missing. When I got home he was at my house and it turns out he was, in fact, a friend of my mom's. I could tell she was pleased with me, though, that I knew better than to get into a car with a total stranger by the look she gave me out of the corner of her eye.

We weren't in Calgary long enough for me to make any lasting friends. I invited some of the girls in my class to my birthday party and only one friend showed up. I tried to act like I didn't care, but deep down I felt like no one liked me. I desperately wanted to make friends and not feel like an outsider, but I wasn't in one place long enough to feel like I had a place I could call home. My sense of home was where we set up camp until we migrated again. Since I had been a baby I had been shuffled around and, eventually, certain places had less and less significance for me. Home became wherever I lay my head to rest.