BAD INDIANS
A Tribal Memoir
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Heyday, Berkeley, California
2013
Dear Vicenta,

I'm sorry, because I don't know what to tell you. I could try to be funny and say, “Hey, guess that priest gave up celibacy for Lent, huh?” Or I could go for the crude wink, “I know what you gave up, honey!” That's how I've learned to deal with it. That's how I talk about what happened to me as a kid. I mean, it happens all the time, right? It's not just that we're women; we're Indian women... poor Indian women. The statistics on that are predictable. Thirty-four percent of us raped; one in three! And ninety percent of the rapists are non-Indian.

Well, I shouldn't complain. Those are stats from my day and age. For you, it's probably more like 100 percent. I've read the testimonies, the astold-to-stories. Funny thing, that. No one believes what you say. Or cares. Until over a century has passed and the damn guy is dead and buried and safe in his cozy little mission graveyard.

Now it's all legitimate research, figuring out how women survived the missions, how many rapes, how many self-induced abortions, how many infanticides, the Native medicines for birth control, the ravages of syphilis that caused sterility, and worse. Scholars write dissertations, sexual violence against colonized women is a real field of study, and what happened in the dark confessional or between the pews is suddenly outrageous, a weapon of colonization, not a shameful wound.

That Chumash guy, Fernando Librado—the one famous for providing J. P. Harrington with all that old-time information, even how to build a tomol from nothing? You can find those directions on the Internet now. On websites for children, fourth graders studying the missions, looking for Indian words, how to grind acorns. He's a hero. He saved a culture from annihilation. That's what they tell the kids.

Fernando remembered a whole lot more than recipes, though. Even when no one else listened to him, Harrington wrote it down. The old Indios used to say, “That man would write down the Indian directions for scratching your ass,” and it was true! Vicenta, here's what Fernando told:

The priest had an appointed hour to go there. When he got to the nun's room [monja] all were in bed in the big dormitory. The priest would pass by the bed of the superior [maestra] and tap her on the shoulder, and she would commence singing. All of the girls would join in... when the singing was going on, the priest would have time...
to select the girl he wanted, carry out his desires... in this way the priest had sex with all of them, from the superior all the way down the line... the priest's will was law. Indians would lie right down if the priest said so.

Guess we won't be teaching that to the fourth graders any time soon. (It happened to me way before fourth grade.)

Vicenta, I keep thinking of how you ran home, telling everyone what had happened. I have to tell you, girl, that was brave. I didn't tell for years and years.

And the priests were gods then, even though by the time that padre came to Carmel, they'd been dumped first by Spain, and then by Mexico. They still had the power. Even if you told, and you did, who would believe you? Who would care? Who would give you justice?

Nobody. Carmel was a ragtag bunch of mixed-blood Indians trying to survive, fighting over food, the very young and the very old the only ones left who hadn't died or gone off to celebrate their "emancipation" by working as maids or vaqueros at the ranchos. What could they do? The priests had all the power. They always did. It seemed as if they always would.

Isabel didn't forget you, though. One hundred years after the padre raped you in the church, Isabel told your story to Harrington. She told it like it happened yesterday. And she was mad. She used Spanish and a brutal English to make sure Harrington understood. Vicenta, she used the priest's name. "Padre Real."

And she used your name. She made certain we knew which family you belonged to, connected you with your brother.

Isabel told that story like it happened to her, or to her daughter. She told that story like she could bring down the wrath of God just by finding the right words.

Maybe she did, Vicenta. By not following the rules, the rules that said we don't talk about this stuff, we don't name names, we don't tell outsiders. Maybe she figured, "What's left to lose?" Everyone was telling her that extinction was right around the corner, and it sure as hell felt like it. So why not tell the whole story? Why just tell the stuff they can analyze in a monograph, simplify for their children when they learn about the exotic animals that used to live here?

"If we're going out," she might've thought, "we're going out with some guts!"

Isabel says Padre Real was gone the next morning. Maybe even gone back to Spain. That was wishful thinking. He left Carmel, all right, but he didn't go very far. Right around that time, historical records say, Father Real moved his home base from Carmel Mission to the chapel in Monterey, and from there to Mission Santa Cruz, where he tried to sell the church's land illegally as the Americans came flooding into the country. And then—he just vanishes from the record. Poof. Nothing.

Erasure is a bitch, isn't it?

Vicenta, I don't know if the fact that your story survives, that Isabel's angry words fight for your dignity and honor, really brings any kind of justice to you. Not the kind of hands-on justice I'd like, anyway. When the Indians at Mission Santa Cruz killed their priest—a man known for his use of metal-tipped whips and thumbscrews—they made sure to rip off his testicles, too.

Now, those were some Indians who listened to the "eye for an eye" part of the Bible pretty good.

But the scribblings of an obsessed white man trying to record the memories of an aging Indian woman attempting to tell the story of an Indian girl's rape one hundred years before—can this change the world?

Maybe nothing can bring you justice after all this time, Vicenta. That's probably too much to ask. I hope for the basics: I hope someone was there for you when you ran home. Someone to hold you. Someone to help you clean yourself up. Someone who comforted you after the nightmares. I hope nobody told you it was your fault. I hope some old lady cussed out Father Real in front of the gossip.

And if no one did any of that for you, I hold onto this: Isabel remembered your story, and she told it to Harrington, and he told it to me, and I'm telling it to everyone I can find.

You told first.

Maybe that's why Isabel felt, of all the stories she knew about violation and invasion and loss, your story was the one to tell Harrington. She was proud of you. She respected you for refusing to shut up. She liked that you weren't a good Mission Indian. Maybe she even thought future Indian women could learn from you.
That 34 percent hasn't gone away since I started this letter. 
Vicenta. If that was your name, the padre should have been more 
careful about giving it to you. Even in Spanish, it means “conquers.” 
Not conquered.
Nimasianexelpasalek.
Genealogy of Violence, Part II

My little brother loses a tooth during a rough wrestling session with our forty-five-year-old bear of a father. Blood spills out of Little Al’s round mouth, a lower tooth hangs, comes out in his hand when he reaches up. He is frightened by the sudden hole in his gums, the bright warning color of his spit, the sudden jolt that reverberates from lower jaw through his small body.

Parents love their children extremely. They seek every kind of way to feed them. They would rather suffer want themselves than to see their children in need.—Mission San Diego

Our father scoffs, pushes his small four-year-old son, says, “Aw, it’s just a damn tooth, come on, no crying.” I’m sitting at the kitchen table, trying to finish a report on Pearl Harbor for my eighth grade social studies class. I’m totally absorbed in proving the stunning (to me) fact that Franklin Roosevelt knew about and in fact encouraged American vulnerability to Japanese “sneak” attacks, but something in the tone of my brother’s voice snakes into my gut and wakes me out of my academic fog. Our father’s voice is harsher now, making fun of the tears. “Ay, little baby, only babies cry! Are you a baby?”

When it concerns the children...their parents love them to such an extent that we might say they are their little idols.

—Mission San Gabriel

There is a chasm between these two male Mirandas, a chasm that shouldn’t be there—both so brown, so Indian, so dear to me. I rise from the kitchen table where I am working, rise so fast that my chair, with its torn plastic covering and raw metal feet, tips over behind me, crashes to the linoleum floor of our trailer. “No, Daddy, no!” Little Al sobs, “I sorry, I sorry,” and there is the horrifying sound of a belt buckle being flipped open, the clinks of metal on metal, the dull ziiiiip! of a leather belt being pulled angrily through the hard denim loops of my father’s Levis.
Toward their children they show an extravagant love whom they do not chastise. Nor have they ever chastised them but allow them to do whatever they please. We know now, however, that some are beginning to chastise and educate them due to the instructions they are receiving. —Mission San Miguel

"You want something to cry about? You want the belt?" our father yells, embarrassed by his cowardly son, this son he waited half a lifetime to have, this son who carries on the family name as none of his seven sisters can, this son whose tears break every rule my father ever learned about surviving in this world. Before I can take the ten steps from kitchen to living room, my father has seized my little brother by his plump arm, swung him around across the lap that should be comfort, should be home, should be refuge, and is swinging the doubled belt with such force that the air protests; the arc of my father's arm is following a trajectory I know too well, the arc of leather, sharp edges of cured hide, instrument of punishment coming from two hundred years out of the past in a movement so ancient, so much a part of our family history that it has touched every single one of us in an unbroken chain from the first padre or the first soldado at the mission to the bared back of the first Indian neophyte, heathen, pagan, savage, who displeased or offended the Spanish Crown's representatives.

They likewise love their children; in fact, it can be said that this love is so excessive that it is a vice, for the majority lack the courage to punish their children's wrongdoing and knavery. —Mission San Antonio

Flogging, Whipping, Belt. Whatever you call it, this beating, this punishment, is as much a part of our inheritance, our legacy, our culture, as any bowl of acorn mush, any wild salmon fillet, pililis fried and dipped in cinnamon and sugar, cactus fruit in a basket. More than anything else we brought with us out of the missions, we carry the violence we were given along with baptism, confession, last rites. More than our black hair, brown eyes, various hues of brown skin flecked with black beauty marks, our short stubby fingers, our wide feet and palms, our sweet voices and tendency to sing, to dance, to make music and tell stories.

In this trailer in the woods, just outside a small town called Kent in Washington State, hundreds of miles from California, where the three of us were each born, my father's arm rises and falls in an old, savage rhythm learned from strangers who came with whips and attack dogs, taught us how to raise our children.

Some parents who are a little better instructed punish their children as they deserve while others denounce them to the missionary fathers or to the alcaldes. —Mission San Antonio
the center of this struggle to reunite a fragmented tribe, a tribe in which my father is a direct link to one of the first Esselen families taken into the Carmel mission.

It is his blood that gives our bid for federal recognition real teeth, authority that the government can't deny. It is our father who remembers family names, stories, clues we are desperate to record.

It is our father whose body is the source of the most precious part of our identity and the most distant legacies of our history.

* * *

To survive my father, you had to become brutal, self-centered, savvy about blame and vulnerability and surprise attacks.

You had to know cruelty or punishment intimately, all the different ways they could be used as weapons. You had to cultivate deviousness in order to be prepared, you had to have an exit strategy, an escape route, a comeback, a diversion. You had to be ready to give up the most cherished thing in the world in order to be free; you had to be ready to sacrifice the innocent.

You had to want to survive more than you wanted to be good.

As we sat there in sudden silence by the fire, our faces hot, Louise's clapperstick mute in her lap, I felt as if I'd put together all the pieces of a mirror that had been broken into thousands of shards: This is how our ancestors survived the missions.

All those passages I'd read, researching conditions in the missions, how the soldiers and padres treated the Indian neophytes: a mirror image. Imprisonment. Whippings. Betrayal. Rape.

That was the first time I wondered if, in order to survive, we had become destroyers, like them. That was the first time I asked the question I had never dared face: Was there no way out of this self-perpetuating cycle of cruelty?

That was the first time I really understood, in my bones, the unimaginable, savage splintering that my ancestors—and my father, my sisters, my brother, my self—had endured.

I saw my father as a seven- or eight-year-old boy, still round-faced and eager, helping his grandfather bottle homemade beer in the attic. I saw him stacking those bottles neatly in his small wagon, hauling it around the neighborhood and making his deliveries. I saw his grandfather paying him in beer, laughing when the little boy got drunk, then sleepy, then passed out.

I saw a boy who worshipped his father being taught the missionary's code: give love with one hand, punishment with the other.

I saw a boy full of music, sensitive to subtle shades of color, tender-hearted toward animals, savvy with plants, hiding all that tenderness, ruthlessly burying it to keep from being flayed alive. I saw the loneliness in that boy's face as he was sent away from the family every night to sleep in his grandfather's house down the block, made to wash the old man's feet, help him to bed, keep watch. Just a little boy.

Born into a hard world, he never learned to transform that hardness, only to endure it by taking that loss into himself, spitting anger back into all whose lives he touched. Is there a way to reconcile this broken, innocent child with the violent, mean-spirited man he became?

To gaze at my father required a kind of split vision. He was a talented, creative Dr. Jekyll one minute, Mr. Hyde the next ("a meaniac," Little Al confided to me once, when he still confided). I can't get a clear image of my father; his figure seems to divide as if each of my eyes is focused on one of two radically different men, and my brain cannot bring the two divergent images together into one person. Only it's not my eyes that are split. It's my heart.

I love my father. I hate my father.

He died alone, in a hospice facility. Not one of his daughters went to say goodbye. Separated from his third wife, who accused him of beating her and having driven everyone else away, at the end our father had only his son Al Jr. went by as often as job and life permitted; sometimes fulfilling his daily last wishes, sometimes listening to him cry with pain and misery, listening to his father beg him, his nurses, anyone, to kill him, end this suffering. But at the very end, our father was alone. Al Jr. hadn't been able to visit that day.

"He said he wanted to be cremated, have us scatter his ashes on the Tuolumne River, where he was born," my brother told us. "He wanted Louise to do a ceremony for him, like she did for his dad. He said, 'Don't leave me in a box in the closet like his dad.'" Poor Thomas Anthony had been cremated but never interred; finally, Louise put together a
Tom’s Stories

I inherited a bagful of cassette tapes featuring my paternal grandfather, Tom Miranda (1903–1988), a twentieth-century descendant of the Carmel Mission Indians born just sixty-nine years after the missions were secularized (although it took another ten to fifteen years for the missions to completely close down), and just one generation removed from legal slavery. Tom traveled all over the West Coast from the age of fourteen, curious and observant. He was born in the Monterey/Carmel area, close to the Carmel Mission, but these tapes tell of journeys as far north as Seattle and back down into Mexico, even into the Midwest. He also traveled extensively through the infinite varieties of California terrain in search of work, good times, relatives, and often, I think, something he could not name.

His life story is not just about being Californian, but being California Indian after a great holocaust: out of an estimated one million Indigenous inhabitants, only twenty thousand survived the missionization era. Even though his parents were Esselen (with Indigenous Mexican from his dad’s side), Tom defies stereotypes of “Indian” in many ways: working as a lumberjack, cowboy, pipelayer, truck driver, racetrack money runner—doing any kind of labor to feed himself and his growing family. At other times (as in the following stories “Davy Jacks” and “Grandfathers”) he clearly has a deep attachment to the lands of his childhood, and he feels the loss of those lands sharply. He talks, especially, about his love/hate interactions with technology, which sometimes literally swept him off his feet (“He Told Me”) and yet fascinated him no end.

I never met my grandfather Tom, except as a baby. He came to my baptism in 1961 showing up, typically of him, at my parents’ apartment early in the morning while my mom and dad were still in bed. My father told the story in a tone of astonishment; apparently Tom had not come to any of his other grandchildren’s baptisms, but he was there with bells on for mine, and my parents scrambled to “get decent” and answer his loud knocking. But by the time I was three, my father was in prison and my parents had divorced; by the age of five, I had moved out of state, and I never saw Tom again, though a thread of contact remained through a complex chain of relatives and, eventually, my father.

Tom died when I was fourteen or so; some of the tapes are at least thirty years old, others older. I feel as though they are his legacy to many—not just me, but California Indians as a community—and also that his voice and his stories are gifts that bring him back to me. Listening, I am awed that he survived; I’m amazed by how hard he works, how multitalented he is, how naive he is, how he masks his tenderness and affection for loved ones, the history he lives through, his perceptions about the US government and, as he calls them, “Americans.” (Warning: Tom also used racial designations common to his time and place: “Dago,” “Jap,” and so on. I did not edit these out.) His stories about his parents and their parents before them remind me with painful but enlightening clarity how it is that California Indians lost so much culture, language, land, identity—and yet still have an identity and community, albeit often fragmented and/or reinvented. Tom’s stories also help me understand another California Indian who has remained mostly a mystery to me, despite much more intimate contact: my father, Alfred Miranda. If Tom was no saint (as “When I Woke Up” hints), Al in his heyday was still more contentious, prone to violence and heavy drinking and hurtful relationships. It has helped me to know what he came out of, how he was raised, and the world that shaped him as a child and young adult. Along with an inheritance of loss and damage, my father also passes on to me his creative urge, love of rich colors, the restorative power of language, a talent for construction (whether it be with wood or paper), and a love of and visceral need for close proximity to forest and water. Recent work by Eduardo and Bonnie Duran (Native American Postcolonial Psychology) suggests that the survivors of genocide manifest symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder many generations past the original violence. This seems so useful in understanding the dynamics and dysfunctions of my own family.

The tapes I inherited were made in the midst of life: dinners, family gatherings, odd moments when someone would think to turn on the recorder and ask Tom questions. Sometimes I hear my father’s voice prompting Tom; other times, it is his late wife’s daughter, or one of my sisters; even my little brother’s voice is sometimes present, along with the panting, barks, and occasional scuffles of Tom’s beloved dogs. It was during one of these storytelling sessions that a picture of three generations of Miranda males was taken.
I want Tom’s voice to come through, his stories to chronicle and give Indian testimonio to part of California’s past that has been erased or subsumed under that catchall “assimilation.” I offer them with all the pleasure of sharing good family stories with those I love.
Ponciano was squatting on Sargent's land—even though Ponciano had received a patent to that property! In all, Sargent purchased or bullied his way into twenty thousand acres, including Estefana Reals El Potrero. Isabel Diaz, cousin to Isabel Meadows, had the nerve to challenge Sargent, demanding, "Why do you want more land? You really don't need this small piece. We are not bothering anything here, and as long as we live, we will not bother anything." Regarding a third instance, Isabel Meadows adds, "Aleonso moved away from the ranch just from the thought that Sarchen [Sargent] did not want them there. Sarchen didn't own the entire river shore. He only put the Chilean to make it look like there was a Chilean buyer there. So he [Sargent] grabbed The Pinón Ranch where Aleonso and Laura lived. He grabbed like a squatter. That was not his land there. Despite articulate resistance, the justice system ignored these and other thefts of property from Native people, even when they had acquired the property legally, through that same justice system.

Although Bradley Sargent used his fortune to create a still larger fortune, becoming a tremendously influential state senator, he lived only eighteen years on his gigantic estate in Monterey. He died unexpectedly in 1892, at the age of sixty-five. According to his obituary in the Salinas Weekly, "The malady to which he succumbed was a combination of la grippe and pneumonia brought on by getting wet and cold while driving cattle across the Carmel river to his San Francisco ranch a few days before." Is it ironic, or poetic, that the Carmel River, whose Indigenous people he personally drove from its banks, had the final word? Or perhaps the best word is maldición ("the curse"). Isabel doesn't repeat the curse itself, but she says, "Pero la maldición de la Ularia cayó en la familia de los Sarchen"—"But the curse of Ularia fell upon the Sargent family. Ularia, an elderly Indian woman, turned to her own medicine when all else failed. And who knows? Perhaps it worked. It's a good story.

Later, Isabel tells the longer story of losing El Potrero, and her beautiful words tell us much about her work with Harrington—the work of making story out of disaster, a story that preserves Indigenous history, heartbreak, and hope.

[The padre...he gave him the ranch, that piece of land that they call now El Potrero on the Sarchen ranch. And from there, when the Americans came, they chased them away. The padre gave it to them with written papers, but no, those signatures were no good, [the Americans] said; when the Americans came, Sarchen chased them away when he bought there. And they had to leave, and from there they crowded, camping by the river, and from there all the Indian people dispersed.

The government never helped these people from Carmelo, they didn't help them with anything, they said that the signatures were no good, and they had to go away wherever they could, in this way they were thrown out among other people, their lives to look like no more than the most poor, and they were exposed to all kinds of vices and drinking.

Instead of taking care of them the way they took care of the Indians in other areas, it seemed that the American government didn't even realize that these Carmelinos existed. Some died of sadness and others went away, they dispersed all over, some ended up living in Sacramento or in Santa Barbara, all this is why there were Carmelinos, hiding well the fact that they knew their language. And many ended up with smallpox, too, with measles, they didn't know how to take care of themselves, and years were ended with drunkenness.

Before, in Monterey, it seemed that every other house had a cantina, and these poor people drank themselves to death, and some drank from sadness at having been kicked out. The history of Carmelo and Monterey includes many accidents and fights and fistfights, and strangling and all that happened between the Indians when they were drinking, and many deaths were the result of drinking whiskey and wine, so that the people began dying out faster with the drinking and the pain of being kicked out of there...now there are hardly any people of pure descent from Carmelo, nor language, since they have suffered being kicked out by force by the Mexicans and then the gringos.

Hopefully one of the rich folks from Carmelo will buy them a good piece of land to live on, to put their rancheria like before, to revive their language and to make story again in the world.

The loss of land is a kind of soul-wound that the Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation still feels; a wound which we negotiate every day of our lives. In her talks with Harrington, Isabel tells many other ugly stories; Indian-on-Indian violence, husband against wife as well as wife against husband; children abandoned, killed in accidents of neglect, dead of disease or abuse; terrible betrayals by European, Mexican, and American government officials, by trusted priests and employers. The loss of land clearly presaged intergenerational trauma with the accompanying loss of self-respect and self-esteem.