"We dance the same"

By Ryan Dueck
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They’re sitting there in our church parking lot, staring out at the rain from inside their rundown green Chevy Astro van. They showed up after church. Martin was looking for conversation, for help, for gas money to Calgary for a medical procedure, the usual. He’s aboriginal, around 55, dark glasses, long black hair, cowboy boots. The conversation meanders here, there, everywhere. “Am I late for the service?” he says. “I wanted to get here for the service.” It’s 12:10 pm.

I’m tired. It's been a long Sunday morning already, and I don’t have the energy for this. “Can I meet you tomorrow morning?” I ask him. “We can talk more, then. Besides, I don’t even have my wallet with me today.” “Yeah, yeah, sure,” he says. “We’ll be here at 9.” He asks for my cell phone number. I pause before giving it to him. I don’t know why I do this.

As I drive down the highway the next morning I find myself secretly hoping that they don’t show up, that they’ve moved on, that they don’t have the patience for me. I’ve done a bit of sniffing around based on a few of the stories Martin told me yesterday and so far nothing really checks out. Just another guy trying to take me for a ride, I assume. I turn the corner into the church parking lot and there it is, the beat up green Astro van. There they are, with all of their complicated need.

My heart sinks. I hate these moments, these conversations, these decisions. I hate being the one to pronounce upon how or if help will be given. I hate being the white guy with a bag full of guilt dealing with the “Indian in need.” I swallow and open my door. Martin smiles broadly and introduces me to his girlfriend, Yolanda. She looks shy, bored, sad. She won’t really look at me. I look back at him and say, “Well, do you want to head over to the gas station? Why don’t we fill up your tank?”

While we’re filling the tank Martin begins to tell me more of his story. The contours are tragically familiar—absent parents, addiction, violence, relational dysfunction, and pain. So much pain. He tells me that he’s been sober since 2007. He’s even done some training to help his people deal with the alcohol he says. “I got

certificates," he says. "In the van. I can show them to you if you don't believe me." I look through the window. Yolanda is staring straight ahead, absently. "No, I believe you," I say.

The tank is full. Martin looks at me and smiles. "Hey, do you think we could get a coffee, too?" We trudge over to the coffee shop across the street. They order breakfast and we sit by a window, looking out at the gray, drizzly day. I ask them to tell me more about their stories. They're Blackfoot, from a reserve about 40 minutes west of town, in the shadow of the Rockies. Both have parents who went to the Sacred Heart Residential School. Both speak of the pain of growing up in the care of people who didn't know how to care for them. Both speak of watching people all around them struggle with addictions, suffer, and die.

Martin speaks of eight months or so spent with a Mennonite foster family in the area. "They were pretty good people, for the most part. They didn't do anything bad to me. . . . But I don't know, my friend who stayed there with me, he said that the old man hit him with a 2-by-4 once. . . . I never saw nothing, but that's what he said." I stare blankly at Martin, not knowing what to say. Yolanda speaks of having seven kids, but only one currently lives with her. Her oldest boy is still on the reserve with his grandparents, she says. He's 19. He's going to graduate soon. First one in her family. "I'm real proud of him," she says, her voice trailing off.

"I got a son," Martin says. "But he was adopted by white folks. He's 37. Lives in Montreal. I think he speaks five languages. Real smart kid." "Do you have a relationship with him?" I ask. "Do you ever see him?" "I only seen him once," he says. "It was a long time ago. I was only a kid when I had him, and I never knew him." He smiles. "I got a daughter, too. She lives in Calgary. . . . You know, when I was younger I really hated white people. I thought they were the ones who made us natives the way we are, they were the reason why we have so many problems with alcohol and abuse. Now my daughter, well she married this white guy, he was rich and smart. They had six kids, but now he left her. And I got these white grandkids." He laughs. "I tell people that God is punishing me for thinking so bad about white people."

They ask if I have kids. I tell them the story of our family, that we have nearly 13-year-old Ojibway twins. They both smile widely. I talk about the challenges of being a white dad of native kids, especially given the screwed up history that Martin and Yolanda know so much better than I do. Yolanda wants to see pictures. I load up a

few on my phone to show her. She smiles as she looks at them. She spends a bit of extra time looking at my daughter. “You’re doing a good thing,” she says. “We just need to remember that we’re all the same, we’re all human beings. None of us are better than the other.”

Martin’s busy reloading his coffee, three sugars, two creams. “You know,” he says, “I knew this Ojibway in Edmonton once. He was a good man. The Ojibway are good people. They use the feathers, sing the songs like us Blackfoot. We dance the same.”

Martin and Yolanda finish their breakfast, we shake hands head back out to the parking lot, to the green Astro van. “So, hey we’ll see you in church next Sunday morning,” Martin says. I swallow, force a half-hearted smile. “Yeah, that would be great, Martin. We’d love to have you.”

They drove off and I stood there in the parking lot for a few minutes, trying to sort out what I was feeling. It was a mixture of anger and gratitude, I suppose. I hate it that our interactions are tainted by this wretched history, these painful stereotypes, these inflexible categories that determine so much of our lives together. I hate it that I filter everything they said through the lens of my privilege and their need. I hate it that I don’t expect that I will ever see them in church on Sunday, that my first instinct is to suspect that they probably just said that because they thought it was what I wanted to hear. I hate it that in so many ways, we don’t dance the same at all.

But I am also grateful for this hour or so with Martin and Yolanda. I’m grateful for whatever human connection we were able to have, however tinged it might have been by all these ugly categories and realities that we struggle and strain to navigate and extricate ourselves from. I’m grateful that they trusted me with their painful stories. I’m glad that we could laugh together. I’m glad that even though we don’t dance the same, we can take small steps—however awkward and halting, however tainted by this wretched history that affects us in such profoundly different ways—toward each other.

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