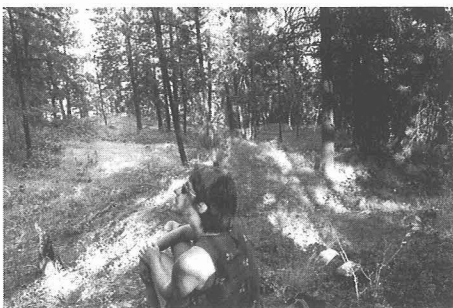
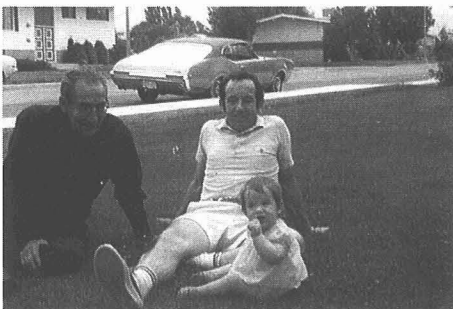


# There Are Stories...

JENNIFER LAFONTAINE



*When your dad was almost 80 years old, he began to tell a story he kept quiet your whole life. Joseph LaFontaine was Métis, and you were part of a culture, a history, an identity, that you never really understood.*

These are the opening words of my digital story, a four-minute video that includes music, images, and most importantly, *my* voice telling *my* story. These words are the essence of a story that I have been creating for years: a memory of my grandfather, father and me. Like my father, I did not grow up with Métis culture, history, or identity. It was not a part of my life, except that I grew up with the part of the story where my father learned he is Métis.

On a family trip to Saskatchewan after my grandmother's death, I demanded that we go out of our way to visit Duck Lake, my grandfather's hometown. I needed to be in the place where my grandfather grew up to see what I could find. We visited Batoche, a historic site that commemorates the late-1800's Métis rebellions and Louis Riel's last stand in 1885. We found a cemetery filled with LaFontaines who had lived in Duck Lake and fought in those rebellions. Here, Gabriel Dumont was no longer a historic figure—Riel's general and commander of forces—but my great-uncle, who lived and fought on the ground upon which I was walking. This is the moment when my father's story of learning his identity finally made sense, and when I started creating art about it.

My father's "finding out" story has opened up many strong desires in me. I want to know this culture, identity, and history, and my connection to it. I want to know why we choose *not* to tell stories, and understand the hardships that force these silences. I want to reclaim these stories, honour them, and pass them on. I want to know what right I have to reclaim them when it feels so far removed from my day-to-day life. I want to know who I am, and what parts my grandfather and father play in my stories. These questions feel like they have no answers. As an artist, they are also the questions that push me to create.

*"Reclaiming our voices through digital storytelling is not just about telling our stories, it is about reclaiming our dignity, our communities and our histories."*

—Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Third World Majority, October 2004

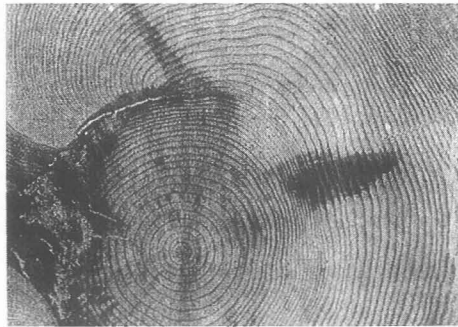
I first discovered digital storytelling a couple of years ago while collaborating with media artist Camille Turner and working with a group of women on a community art project called *The Story Project*. We told our stories in sharing circles and created media to share those stories: black-and-white photography, digital video, sound, and web. I found this an exciting mix of media; it created a multilayered approach to the telling of our stories. It wasn't a linear experience, but a circular, sensory experience of stories.

Turner and I share a similar belief in the power of media to engage communities. As she explains:

I use technology as a tool for art-making for a variety of reasons. Communication technology is becoming seamlessly integrated into the fabric of our daily lives. It is seductive and infiltrates our public spaces, our homes and workplaces. It shapes who we are and what we *think* we know about each other. It's interesting to see who is represented by this media, by whom and for what purpose. I'm really interested in harnessing its power and at the same time, critiquing it. My mission is to tell my story using digital media and to empower others to be able to tell their stories.

Turner and I were committed to continue our work together, and although the organic process of our last project excited us, we found ourselves searching for a methodology we could follow. Then we found the Center for Digital Storytelling. We were inspired by the combination of personal narrative and media, and thought it could be a strong fit with our vision and skills. I originally took a digital storytelling course in order to continue our community media projects; I gained not only a new teaching methodology, but a new way to look at my own story.

*Fire scars tell the stories of the forest. If we look closely, we can recover those stories from the tree-rings. However, in the wake of a massive forest fire, everything is lost.*



I came to the digital storytelling course with a book that I had made called *Fire Scars*. It was a collection of photo-lithographs and stories from my father about my grandfather. More broadly, it explored the idea of how we tell and don't tell stories, and how sometimes we can find them and sometimes we cannot. I connected this concept metaphorically to a massive forest fire in Kelowna, British Columbia, where I grew up. I was interested in how people, like trees, hold on to stories.

Up until this point, my story was protected by metaphors and images that can be interpreted in many different ways. My art-making allowed me to explore this personal story with a more removed style. I was the artist telling my grandfather's story. The story became more and more sparse as I continued to create new art pieces. I selected single images from my book and small phrases that would hint at the story, to raise questions and leave room for the viewer's own interpretations.

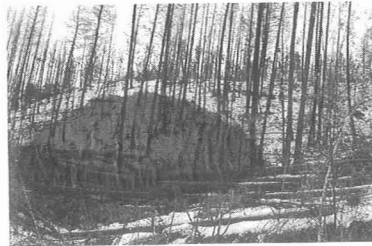
*I call you from Toronto, prying long distance stories from you, wanting more than you can give. I feel anger at the injustices that silenced my grandfather, and pride in the resistance of our ancestors.*

When I began writing for the digital story, I realized how different it was to share a personal narrative. Digital storytelling has a particular formula: tell your story, but make it quick because you only have three to five minutes. Once you find the essence of your story, your audience will feel your emotion and connect to it. How then, would I take my years of art-making and distill them into one three-minute video? Using new media to create my digital story meant I needed to find a new slant.

That new slant was difficult because it meant that I needed to bring *myself* into the story. It was *my* voice telling *my* story, and that was a vulnerable place. It held an emotional rawness once the layers were stripped away. Digital storytelling forced me to understand that I am the main character in my own story. I am able to share my life through the stories of my father and grandfather.

*There are stories that we can search for and find. There are stories that are gone forever. There are stories that we rebuild with the fragments.*

*Dad took 4 episodes from fifty years.*



*It came back for him then.*

Part of understanding my own identity is to carry on the stories of my father and grandfather, and make them a part of me. I am the one in my family who asks questions. I am the one in my family who is the storyteller. My digital story is a tool for my storytelling to continue, as I share the video with my father, my family, and my friends. I also know that others will connect with its emotion and themes. As I share my digital story at screenings, on the Internet, and in publications, I know that others are searching for their own stories, too.

When I think about all the questions that drive my current art practice, digital storytelling plays an important role in its evolution. It has enabled me to bring my story to a core feeling that has been there all along. This part of my identity is only one aspect of who I am, but this process has enabled me to deepen the exploration. I am starting to broaden the scope, bring in more aspects of my own identity, and ask more questions. I am ready to tell more stories.