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I work as a hostess at a “Native-inspired” restaurant called [NAME]. During my training, I was given a manual that included a brief history of the [TRIBE] that lived on the land the restaurant was built on, as well as the Pocahontas-like story of [NAME], the daughter of the chief and namesake of the restaurant. Right outside the restaurant, there’s a gorgeous statue of [NAME] that has a ring of fire around it at night. Right next to her is a statue of a Spanish conquistador whose face was modeled after the owner, who is also Hispanic. Ironically, it was the Spanish who caused the [TRIBE] to die out. Inside, affluent tourists order dishes like crab mac and cheese and seafood risotto that have little to no resemblance to actual Native cuisine. Some of the ingredients, like seafood, corn, and squash, make a gesture toward authenticity, but in no way embody it. I judge the restaurant like this because I’m a registered member of the [Nation].

On more than one occasion, I’ve considered pointing out to management that displaying sports memorabilia on the second floor is a little tone-deaf, and that the food is wildly inaccurate. For example, the “native chili” includes ingredients like alligator and bison, things the [TRIBE] never would have eaten. However, I don’t feel Native enough to speak for Native Americans. The only thing that makes me feel Native is my Certificate Degree of Indian Blood. Because I am white-passing, I feel like one of those people who say they’re 1% of a certain ethnicity as if it’s a novelty.

When I was in middle school, I was always so excited to tell people that I’m Native American, but I always got an amused look and a “yeah, right.” I felt like the jalapeno cornbread muffin at [RESTAURANT]. There was some authenticity there, but it wasn’t easily identifiable. Both my siblings are easily identifiable as Native. Whenever I show people the picture of them on my phone’s lock screen, I get quizzical looks and occasionally a blunt “are you adopted?”

They look Native and have both received hateful comments about their appearance. I never have, which exacerbates my inner conflict both because my family suffers without me, and also because it reinforces my fear that I am not Native enough. Part of my hesitation in confronting the inaccuracies at [RESTAURANT] is because I’ve never been bullied for my Native identity. I feel like I haven’t earned the right to speak on behalf of the tribe or even receive benefits. My most recent clothing grant card is still sitting in its envelope on my desk.

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However, parents, siblings, and I are all alike in that we've all gone to religious schools. My parents were raised religious, so homosexuality was a taboo topic both at school and at home. I turned to "Am I Gay?" BuzzFeed quizzes when I was in fifth grade and very alone in my confusion. Once I came out as a lesbian to my close friends and family, threats appeared from many directions. I was filled with panic when a teacher told a girl in my religion class that she was going to hell for being a lesbian. I recently got a phone call from an unknown number and stupidly picked it up. The caller said, "This is the fag, right?" These things are terrible to go through, but they have no bearing on my identity. With or without these awful incidents, I am queer. Furthermore, I would never want someone else to feel vulnerable and isolated like I did just to prove their identity. The expectation of suffering in order to earn a label is obviously flawed, but it took some time for me to apply this logic to myself.

In my Native identity, I've been holding myself to a standard that I would never expect others to adhere to. After realizing that being bullied had no role in 'legitimizing' me as queer, I started to rethink why I believed I needed to "earn" the right to label myself as Native American. I originally felt that I needed to suffer to earn the [NATION] grants, but now I want to find positive ways to affirm my Native identity. For example, my family and I really enjoyed the National Museum of the American Indian when we went to DC, and we try to visit the [NATION] headquarters every time we travel to see family. This is not to say I don't feel conflicted about working at [RESTAURANT]. My job there and the ambivalence I have about the restaurant is a microcosm of my own Native heritage. We are both striving for authenticity, but I hope I can succeed where [RESTAURANT] falls short. Part of succeeding is addressing my misguided beliefs and overturning the idea that suffering is a prerequisite for being legitimized. One thing I will do now is research the [TRIBE] and share my findings with my co-workers so that we can honor Native heritage with sincerity.