

THE PUBERTY CEREMONY

by Judith Fraser

This is a chapter from a novel that I've written that will be published in the future. This information, knowledge of this ceremony is important to young people and all the people who come in contact with them.

Fiona Lonestar MacLean, "*Dreams Should Not Be Broken*," is a coming-of-age story that follows Fiona, from age 12 to 14, as she faces the challenges of a troubled alcoholic family, illness, and loss. Fiona wants to be a dancer, but money is scarce and Father is gambling again. There's trouble in the house and she can't even depend on her friends. Despite her father's disapproval, her Grandmother educates Fiona about their mutual Native American customs. The spiritual richness of Fiona's dreams lift her out of her real-life struggles. She reconnects her family to their mixed heritage and becomes free to embrace all that she is through her own life dance. The Puberty Ceremony is the last chapter in this young adult book.

THE PUBERTY CEREMONY

Momma called Johnny Whitefeather. He came over with a small forest in his truck. "Your Gramma would've wanted you to have this," he said as he set about making my *wikiup*. Johnny was Gramma's best friend. He was with her just before she died.

Momma and I held hands as we sat side by side on the back porch and watched.

Johnny sang as he bent some of the larger branches to form an oval hut, then filled in the open spaces with leaves to enclose the sides. The top was left open.

Sean found an old red rug for the door. Brucie dug some army blankets out of the garage for the floor. Father poked his head out every now and then, but didn't say anything.

When it was all finished, Johnny sprinkled blue corn around the *wikiup*. "To help you on your journey," he said.

It was amazing! By the evening our backyard had been transformed into a sacred space. It would've been better to have my ceremony near Gramma's Stone Circle, but having a ceremony at all was the most important thing. It meant that the part of me I'd been having to hide could finally come out into the open.

"Great Spirit," Aunt Dawn said lifting her arms toward the sky as Momma, Aunt Dawn, Aunt Raven, Ann Marie, Violet and I sat in a circle inside the *wikiup*. "Mystery of all life. Be with us now as we welcome Fiona Lonestar MacLean into womanhood." Aunt Dawn's voice sailed out through the open roof and up towards the stars. "*Kokumthena*, you who sit nearest to the Great Spirit, we ask you to look down and bless this ceremony. Guide us with your wisdom and knowledge. Circle us with your divine light. Be with us now, as we honor this special life passage of Moontime. Ho." The pungent smell of *kin.ni.kin.nick* mixed with the crisp scent of the leaves and other outdoor smells in the damp night air.

Aunt Dawn nodded towards Momma, Aunt Raven, Violet and Ann Marie. "We welcome you into womanhood. We welcome you into womanhood," they chanted seven times as we sat shoulder to shoulder in a tight circle on top of the army blankets. *Seven, the number of the beginning - middle - and end*, I thought.

The power of their words along with Aunt Dawn's prayer made me light headed. It was hard to believe what was happening was really happening and not just a dream. My ceremony was to last until the following morning. Not as long as Gramma's ancestors, but at least it was a start.

As we sat in the hut, a strong yellowish beam from the lantern flared out between us. It whispered over our bodies and onto the white leather bundle Aunt Dawn laid out in front of her. She untied the string holding it together. It opened, revealing several objects. She picked one up. It was a ball of red clay, about the size of a baby's fist. Her dark eyes fixed on mine. "Our ancestors were formed from the richness of the Earth. Part of your passage is to acknowledge them." She cradled the ball of clay next to her heart then set it back down on top of the white leather.

Aunt Dawn then picked up a few small corn kernels. "Life's possibilities lie protected within your body like these seeds. You must guard these future children with strength and courage. When you are ready,

you may give birth through love and conscious action." She closed her hands over the seeds, brought them to her heart, and like before, set them back down.

It was a powerful feeling to know that I had a choice about bringing a child into the world. I wasn't ready yet. But, one day I would be.

"This is from a mountain." Aunt Dawn said as she picked up a small oval shaped stone and held it in the middle of her hand. It was my birthday stone. I wondered how she found it. "This stone belongs to something larger and more powerful than itself." She continued. "Part of your ceremony is to understand that you too are connected to something beyond what you are aware of right now." She enclosed the hand holding my birthday stone with the other, brought it to her heart, then, set it down on the leather as she had the others.

I brushed the hair out of my eyes and stared out at the ball of clay, kernels of corn, and the birthday stone. Powerful symbols to help me in my ceremony. I swallowed hard and pulled down on the bottom of my long white dress. Aunt Raven made it for the ceremony. The sleeves flared out at the elbows and the neckline gathered together with a ribbon. It made me feel very special.

"The knowledge of the ages lives through your mind, body and spirit." Aunt Dawn said. "There are spiritual forces within that emerge when you pray. Have an intention. Let the knowledge flow through you. Answers will come. We all have an intuition, a wisdom. It is a gift from the Great Spirit, God. As a child we know this connection. As we grow, it fades. We must give it attention, treat it as a friend, for it to return."

"What if I ask and nothing happens?" I broke in.

Aunt Dawn touched her finger to her lips. "Then ask again. And again. Until it does. This knowledge is so powerful that it is beyond words." She clapped three times and nodded again to the others.

Momma reached her hands towards me. "I'm very proud of you, Fiona Lonestar MacLean." Tears sprang up in her eyes. A warm, tingly feeling shot through me as our hands touched.

Aunt Dawn pushed on the red rug over the doorway, stepped outside, held it open for everybody else to crawl out, then closed it again.

That was it. Whatever was going to happen next in my Puberty Ceremony was going to be up to me. I wanted to turn to Gramma. She always had the right words to help me. But she was gone.

I spread out full length on top of the blankets and looked up. Tiny pieces of dust twisted and turned in the yellow lantern beam. They looked like miniature people.

I picked up the round piece of clay, held it close, then switched off the light. "God, Jesus, Great Spirit, *Kokumthena*, help me tap into that knowledge of the ages that lives in me. Help me acknowledge my ancestors," I prayed softly.

Nothing came. I prayed again. Then, after some time, I began to feel as if I was inching my way inside a huge cave. I couldn't see anything. But I could touch the cold surface and smell the dampness.

I continued to move forward but nothing changed. It was still dark. I needed some light. A flicker or a beam of some kind to reveal where I was. I pushed my backside into the wall and slid to the ground. There was no way to see inside the cave.

I opened my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. "I can't see," I cried out. A sense of failure fell heavily across my chest.

It was still dark outside, but not as dark as in my dream. I held tight to the clay ball, crawled over to the door, pushed the flap back and stepped out. A cool breeze brushed across my body.

The dream was scary. It made it seem like I couldn't ever find my way through whatever the cave was. Aunt Dawn said if I didn't get an answer at first, to ask until I did.

The smell of the air was wildly fresh. I looked up at the sky. The Milky Way was overhead. *It's where the souls of children wait to be reborn*, Gramma said a long time ago. *Maybe one day, one of them would be mind*, I thought.

I walked over to the *wikiup*, pulled back the red flap and crawled into the center. I picked up the round piece of red clay and held it in my lap. As the stars shined brightly overhead, I closed my eyes and prayed again. "God, Jesus, Great Spirit, *Kokumthena*, help me tap into that knowledge of the ages that lives in me. Help me acknowledge my ancestors." I waited a few minutes. When it didn't answer, I asked again. And again. Dogs barked in the distance. Cars honked. Still I sat.

Imagine starlight moving gracefully over the outside of your body, then filling every cell inside as you pray, a voice whispered softly inside my head.

This time I imagined starlight flowing down from the sky, over my head and neck, along my shoulders and arms, across my spine and down my legs, then up the front of my body. About the seventh time of imagining the circuit, the me I knew disappeared. Thoughts faded. Something beyond words took over.

I was inside some kind of energy, like a light droplet that's part of a star. It was oval and radiated a gold glow. The light wasn't stagnant. It was in a constant state of change. Narrow circles of it whirled around me. As it whirled, the circles got bigger and reached out farther. It felt wonderful and safe. Shivers ran up my spine. I found the missing light.

"Help me acknowledge my ancestors," I asked again. This time the words felt heavy, like anchors docking a ship. It took all my strength to lift them out. All I wanted to do was sink inside the gold glow. As I stayed with my intention and allowed the relaxation to be there at the same time, visions came.

I flew up into the sky. Weightless, I did cartwheels and flips. "I can fly," I sighed. "Like an eagle"

The higher I flew, the smaller I felt. My body was tiny. A piece of dust. The Earth became a giant ball in the distance. Blue oceans cradled rich green pieces of land. A brilliant light flashed all around me and circled the Earth. This time I saw lines of people making their way towards my wikiup. They came over the hills in thousands, down valleys, across oceans on boats, through deserts, past forests, and around lakes. Nothing seemed to stop them in their move. And, there were so many. I'd never thought of family beyond my parents and grandparents. But now, I saw that my bloodline was endless.

I'd also never thought beyond being part Scots and Native American. After I'd seen how many people I had descended from, the light energy moved me even closer. Black, yellow, red and white; tall and short; blonde, brunette and redheaded. Every size and color imaginable moved towards my hut. They couldn't see me as I floated along, in and out of some of the groups. No one looked up or showed any kind of awareness about what was happening. They just kept walking.

Nobody needed to tell me they were my relatives. I could feel their magnetic connection move through my veins. It was an Intuition. A wisdom. Something beyond words. I, Fiona Lonestar MacLean was connected to so much more than I ever thought possible.

I opened my eyes. *Strong, courageous warriors live in your blood*, Gramma said a long time ago. I didn't understand what she was talking about then. It was almost unbelievable. How could I tell my friends they came from every color there ever was? Or that they were surrounded by a protective light like a part of the sun?

Ceremonies are experiences that don't translate into words, Gramma said. How many other things did she say to me that I didn't, couldn't understand before now?

I set the ball of clay back down on the leather. Stretched out on top of the blankets. Brought my knees up to my chest. Twisted one way, then the other. It felt good to stretch. It felt good just to be me. I rolled the tip of my tongue across my lips. They were dry. After having such an amazing journey, I was thirsty.

Something shiny, over by the door flap, caught my eye. I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn't seeing another vision. It was an orange metal cup. I sat up, reached over and picked it up. It was filled with water. I took a sip. Coolness flowed down my throat and into my stomach. Someone must've been looking out for me. Was it Father? Earlier on, I thought I heard heavy footsteps walk past my *wikiup* and latch the back gate.

I reached for the corn seeds and held them loosely in my right hand. Johnny Whitefeather had spread blue corn on the outside of the *wikiup*. *To help you on your journey*, he said. Gramma's ancestors always carried corn because it stayed fresh. It was a sacred plant.

I sat up and crossed my legs. "God, Jesus, Great Spirit, *Kokumthena*, help me to understand how to guard the seeds in me," I asked. I was beginning to trust those forces Aunt Dawn said would be present for me.

Soon, I was drifting along inside the cozy protection of my light again. This time it took me to a garden. Lush green grass spread out all around me. Purple, lavender, white, and scarlet flowers in every size and shape imaginable lined the edges. Some were in trees, others on bushes, and yet more stood alone. Birds, butterflies and bees flew in and out of their petals and leaves carrying pollen and seeds from one tree, bush or flower to the next. Their wings fluttered gracefully as they glided from plant to plant, bush to bush, tree to tree in never ending movements.

Fox, deer, rabbits and other four legged cousins came forward to eat, play and multiply. Bluebirds, Robins, Ravens, and other feathered relatives flew overhead and nested in the trees. Soon, every animal I'd ever seen filled the meadow in a never ending dance of birth and rebirth.

Suddenly it dawned on me. Some parts of the Earth don't have choices about creating new life. But I do. I'm the part of the Earth that can walk, think about consequences and make choices. An incredible sense of power pulsed through my veins. Deep inside me, hidden from view, were seeds that I would guard with my life.

My eyes opened. Guarding my future children was a gift. Guarding myself and my treasures was also a gift. Gifts that somehow had been passed on to me by the great mystery of creation. It was something I would never take for granted.

I stood up and stretched my arms towards the sky. The tips of my fingers reached through the opening in the top of my hut. I'd been sitting inside a small space, yet the visions had taken me outside where space seemed endless. It was like living in two worlds.

I sat down, put the seeds back down on top of the leather and picked up my birthday stone. *This is from a mountain, Aunt Dawn had said. It belongs to something mightier than itself. Part of your ceremony is to understand that you too are connected to something beyond what you are aware of right now.*

I closed my eyes and prayed just like I had before. Having had two different visions, I let go of what this one might be.

A warmth moved down my throat as my breath made its way into my chest and stomach. I imagined the rays of light flowing down from the sky just like before. Soon the feeling of being inside the light energy came back. I sank deeper and deeper into its gentle rays. "God, Jesus, Great Spirit, *Kokumthena*, help me to understand that I am connected to something beyond what I am aware of right now," I asked.

The stone was part of a mountain, I thought. Since I was holding the stone, did that mean it was now a part of me? Or was I a part of it? Does something carry me along like I carry the stone?

Questions pushed against the top of my head like wild seeds looking for fertile soil. "Calm down," I said. "Calm down." I was trying to think my way into the message from the stone rather than just letting go and allowing visions come like they had before. *When answers don't come, ask again and again, Aunt Dawn had said. I took a deep breath and imagined the light rays once more. "God, Jesus, Great Spirit, Kokumthena, help me to understand that I am connected to something beyond what I am aware of right now," I asked.*

After a while, I heard a voice. *"See the lights in the sunrise, they are all a part of you."* It was Gramma's voice. *"You'll see them one day."*

A hand came out of nowhere, reached through a fuzzy thin wall, and pulled me through. "Don't be afraid," she said. The voice was that of a young woman. Light, cheerful.

"I'm not," I answered. I tried to see what the woman looked like but as soon as I was through the wall we entered a dark tunnel. It was peaceful this time. Quiet. Our feet edged forward in silence.

At the end of the tunnel, we stepped out onto something hard. I looked around. We were at the top of a high mountain. A soft misty glow stretched out for miles all around us. The moon hung overhead. Colors shot up in a zigzagged pattern out of the stone.

"Beautiful isn't it?" The woman said. Her voice a soft whisper. The fringe on the sleeves of her white buckskin dress swayed with her movements.

I turned to face her head on. Now that we were out of the tunnel, I could see a little. Not as clearly as daylight, but enough. She was just a few inches taller than I was. And not too old. Maybe Momma's age, thirty-ish. Thin lines broke out around the edge of her dark eyes. Her coffee-cream colored cheeks widened. An aura of confidence and peace radiated around her like a thin veil.

"Come." She brushed some black wisps of hair away from her face and tucked them behind her ears. A path led from where we were towards the center of the mountain. We followed it.

We walked together, side by side, hand in hand, as if we were old friends. Something about her made me feel at ease. It was hard to say what that was. Maybe just the soft way she spoke, or the movement of her body. The colors continued to dance all around us. When a big flare occurred, I stopped to watch. Awestruck each time. My new friend waited patiently. It felt good not to be rushed.

Ho ya ne ho ya ne ho. Ho ya ne a. Ho ya ne ho ya ne ho. Chanting sounds rang out in the distance. I looked over at my friend. She nodded and smiled. A mischievous look in her eyes.

As we got closer I could see that the singing was coming from a group of eleven women circled around a small fire. They were dressed in white buckskin, just like my new friend. Some were young, about my age. Most seemed older, maybe forty. The woman at the far end had white hair, so she was probably sixty or so.

"E'ne. In the Star World we get to be any age we want. Sometimes we even change shape."

She read my mind! E'ne was a word Gramma used. "Do I know you?"

She stepped in front of me. Her dark eyes held me in their gaze. Endless waves of love poured out. A scent of lavender and sage drifted through the air.

My heart thumped loudly in my ears. The women's chants reverberated down my spine. I swallowed hard and blinked. Maybe I was making all this up. Maybe I have too much imagination, like Momma says. When I stopped blinking, my new friend was still there. She just kept right on holding me with her eyes. Tears rolled down my cheeks. A soft wind buzzed in my ears. Suddenly I knew who the woman standing with me was.

I staggered forward and wrapped her in my arms, careful not to let go of my stone. "Gramma. Oh! Gramma. It really is you. You're so young. I didn't recognize you."

"This is my little piece of Heaven, Paradise. I've been waiting for you to visit."

"I've missed you so much, Gramma. So much." Joy fuzzed up inside of me. It flew into the air and caught on the current like dandelion seeds. "And I wanted you to be at my Puberty Ceremony." I studied her face for a sign of recognition. "Did you know I'm having one? Just like you said your grandmother did." I twisted from side to side. "Of course it's not exactly the same. It's in my back yard, not down by the river. It's one night not four, and ..."

Gramma pinched her mouth together and shook her head. "I know Lonestar. From time to time I visit your world. Ceremonies, rituals, are not about where they are, or how long they last, but about creating a sacred space inside of you. You did that, Lonestar. Now, we're going to celebrate."

"What about the last part. The stone is from a mountain. I have to understand I'm connected to something beyond what I'm aware of right now?"

Gramma laughed. "Each vision has moved you closer to where you are right now. This is the mountain. And you brought the stone with you?"

"Yes, I did." I opened my hand. The stone had been snuggled safely inside.

Gramma brought the tips of her fingers to her lips and nodded. "That is good, Lonestar. The stone will be happy here." She led me inside the circle.

The women stood, brought their hands together at their chests and bowed.

"Who are these women," I asked.

"Everyone on Earth has a connection to a group of some kind. These women are my group. We call ourselves 'The Circle of Light.'" Gramma tilted her head from side to side. Her long dark hair moved from shoulder to shoulder. "This is no ordinary group of women, Lonestar. Each is powerful in her own way. We send you visions and dreams to help you on your Earthwalk."

"We?" I squeezed the stone tightly in my hand and touched it against my lips a few times. "But, you are my teacher. You're the one who always understood me. The one I always turned to."

"E'ne. And my voice will live on, in your thoughts, and your heart. But, sometimes you will need more than I can give."

I nodded slowly as if I understood, but I couldn't imagine others more powerful than Gramma.

She reached for my hand again. We walked clockwise around the circle. No one looked surprised to see me. Each put one hand on her heart and one on mine as a way of greeting. No one spoke. The only sounds were those coming from our shifting feet on the ground, our skirts swaying, and a song that played inside my head.

The melody and words were faint at first. Each touch tweaked the volume a little bit higher. After the last woman put one hand on her heart and one on mine, the full verse erupted deep inside me. "Ho ya ne ho ya ne ho. Ho ya ne a. Ho ya ne ho ya ne ho." It was the song I'd heard earlier in the distance, now it was a live thing, singing in my bones.

Gramma led me to the fire. She pulled out a tiny box, opened it, and dropped some of her special Kin.ni.kin.nick into the flames. I took a pinch of tobacco out of the pouch I wore around my neck and dropped it in as well. The burning leaves sizzled, then reached their fingers upwards. The sweet pungent smell I knew so well filled my lungs. Gramma smiled.

I unclenched my small stone, held it above the fire, and dropped it in as well. The ground under our feet began to shake. I jumped back. Gramma laughed. "Our mountain is saying 'I gwi yen.'"

My light energy started to expand. I could feel it reach out. A growth spurt of another kind. Colors leapt out of my body. Red, yellow, orange, and purple flames shot up. It's lights joined with those in the fireworks all around me. Everything swirled and turned along with everything else. "I am the fire," I cried. "I am the light."

"Yes," Gramma laughed. "Now you know."

My breath caught in my chest. I opened my eyes. It was dark outside. My vision had been so filled with light that it took me a minute to be able to focus. I was back inside my wikiup. The cool air brushed across my cheeks and down my body, but I wasn't cold. The fire burning inside of me was warm, soothing. I touched the ground. I had gone from this world to another and come back. Happiness raced through every cell inside my body. "I found my Gramma," I muttered over and over again. I leaned back and clicked my heels.

The sense of being the fire and the light was intoxicating. No worries. No fears. Only peace.

A soft "pa dum, pa dum, pa dum," vibrated through the air. The magical sounds of a drum. I pulled back the red flap, stepped into my slippers and looked around. Candles lit up the edges of the back porch steps and the back of the house. Four figures sat around a large drum below the kitchen window.

Their hands beat out a slow rhythm. The candlelight flickered over the shoulders of Sean, Brucie, Johnny Whitefeather and ... Father. My breath caught in my throat. Father was wearing his kilts. He looked up and grinned. "*Bas no beatha, Tsula,*" I said knowing all of our connections.

Momma, Aunt Dawn, Violet, Ann Marie and Aunt Raven opened the back door, stepped onto the back porch and walked down the stairs. They each carried a shawl of a different color. Shawls like Gramma used to wear. The fringe whispered gently as they walked. *The Earth is my ma-a-ther.* They sang. *The Sky is my fa-a-ther.*

Momma had on a blue shawl. Her favorite color. It matched her middle name, "Blue eyes." As she moved closer to where I was standing on the lawn I could see that she had another one in her hands. It was maroon. My stomach tightened. Gramma's shawl! As she put it around my shoulders the smell of sage and lavender once again drifted into my nose. I picked up the corner of the shawl and rubbed it over my cheek.

We circled the *wikiup* in a dance. One that Gramma had taught us a long time ago. *Toe-heel, toe-heel, step turn.* I threw myself into the sounds coming from the drum. An umbrella of stars flickered over our heads like a twin world hoping to be noticed, wanting to join the party. Momma laughed as we turned toward each other, then away in the ritual movements. Our long skirts swept the ground. Everyone seemed so happy. Aunt Dawn's prophecy had come true in a way that I hadn't thought about. We were all dancers – connected to the rhythms of the Universe.

A faint early morning light changed the dark into a deep blue. The stars faded. Faces began to appear beyond our circle. They moved through the gate in a long endless procession and joined us in our dance. My stomach tightened. They were the lines of people I'd seen in my vision. And they were actually here. I wasn't sure if anybody else could see them. But, I could.

The yard expanded with each new arrival. Some brought musical instruments. Fiddles, bagpipes, flutes, banjos, tambourines, sticks, and some things I didn't recognize joined the "pa dum" of the drum. The sounds, different than a regular orchestra, brought a rich harmony to our celebration.

Gramma stepped forward with my ... grandfather. They joined hands with Momma and me. Then Father walked across the damp grass with his mom, dad and Dancing Feet. Just when I thought everyone who could possibly arrive was with me, I saw a speck in the distance. As it got closer, I could see it was a young girl ... with dark braids she smiled and waved at me as if we were best friends. It was Donna. Even though she wasn't a relative, somehow she'd gotten through to join in on the party. It was a miracle. The crack I felt in my heart before came back. This time it was a chasm. I forced myself to breathe deeply over and over again.

We all danced together as if those who had left the Earth plane had never been gone. The sun came up over the edge of the houses. I watched the colors do their famous light show: deep blue turned to lavender, orange, pink, and finally a softer blue. I turned to look at Gramma. I wanted to share the awesome arrival of the sun with her. Something she always looked forward to. But, she was gone. My hands were empty. The crowds of ancestors began to fade as well. The bagpipes, fiddles, and other instruments got softer and softer. Only the sounds of the drum stayed the same as we continued to dance.

I looked up at the sky. Hidden worlds lived and breathed behind the morning light. Sometimes those who left Earth came back to visit. Sometimes we could visit them. The Universe was a continual expansion of something beyond words. A beautiful, amazing place that I had just begun to explore.

A flash of light beamed down from the sky and surrounded me like a cocoon. "I'll always be with you Lonestar," Gramma's voice whispered inside my head. "I live in your thoughts, in your dreams and in your heart."

Ho ya ne ho ya ne ho. Ho ya ne a. Ho ya ne ho ya ne ho. Chants rang out in the distance followed by a song. *Life is a circle. A circle never ends.* I reached out for Momma's hand, then Father's. It was the best birthday I'd ever had.