The School in Spanish

When I was six and had just welcomed two new baby sisters into my life, I was taken away by men in the night. They were White and clean shaven and had brought me to Spanish, a blink-and-you-miss-it town three hours west from the reserve where I’d been born and raised. There had been no howling and screaming that night for my Maa because they had said so. They had hauled me into a car and watched me shake and panic until dawn rose and then they had handed me a rough, filthy blanket and spoken to me in harsh, condescending tones.

“Quit your whimperin’, boy! Ain’t a fat lot of help that’ll get you, all the way out here. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a cryin’ Savage.” He paused. “This school’l do you some good. You ain’t gon’ be a Redskin anymore. From here on out you is a White boy. And if you know what’s best for you, you’ll stand down and let them priests assimilate you.”

“He’s right.” The other White man had called. “Otherwise they’ll just beat the Indian right outta you. And they don’t hold back on nobody - even for a youngin’ like you.”

It had not been apparent to me through the night but when I had calmed down enough to survey my surroundings; I saw that there was another child there as well. She was older than I, that much I could tell, but not by much. Her long braid hung over her russet-colored shoulder and bore the purpling of a fresh bruise. The tears in her eyes had long since dried and she had still been breathing in the panicky-trapped way of a scared animal yet she had still held out her hand and grasped mine in comfort.

Later that next morning when we had arrived and the White men left us, they had left us with two words that they expected us to embrace - Joseph and Judy. I was surely not a Joseph. I was Ahanu Wasiia’beni. And Judy was certainly not a Judy. She was Aiyana Misquadance. Yet the years that followed saw me as Joseph and her as Judy and that was that.

On that first morning when we had been removed from the vehicle, I saw that there were other huddles of russet-skinned children all being herded into the same cobble-stoned building. There was a bell that tolled out thrice as we entered and I whimpered as we were brought into a room with a large bellied priest and various nuns. The habited women were solemn and deigned to speak no less than they had to but doled out an occasional smile and reassuring hand when a few tears were shed. They held cutting shears and sat us boys on wooden stools by their laps and trimmed until only a fine layer of fuzz remained. As one afterwards, we were stood in a line and waited until the girls had hair trimmed to their shoulders. Nobody spoke and nobody moved and nobody dared make eye contact. When we were all stripped and placed into white button downs and beige breeches, we were taken to a mess hall brimming with children of all ages. No other child spoke and paid even less attention to us than I would have if I had seen a group of strange children in strange clothes walk into a room. That hadn’t been very comforting.

When I was seven I was brought, protesting, to meet Virginia and Angus of the upper grades. They were ten and eleven, respectively, and looked at me with contempt in their eyes.

“Joseph,” Father Michael had said, “These here are your older brother and sister.”

*Brother and sister?* I said nothing. They were older and looked at me like I was a plate of squash and beans, a meal that I and every other boy I knew dreaded. Father Michael had proceeded to proudly tell me of their placement in the school when I was barely a three year old, like somehow I would feel a close connection to them. I didn’t. Maa had never mentioned a brother or sister. Continuing on in his story, he said Virginia and Angus could now get to know me and form close family bonds like the good Lord had wished. He smiled. I stared. They merely looked at me.

When Father Michael had left, I looked at them and spoke. “Aaniin Nisaye, Nimise.” *Hello Brother, Sister.*

Angus looked outraged. “You do not speak that language out here, for anybody to hear. Have you not learned anything from the priests?” He paused before clutching onto Virginia and turning away. “You must not be our true brother then. A true brother of ours would never be so careless.”

It was awhile before they permitted me to follow them or speak to them again without consequence. The first time I had tried, they had watched over their shoulders and whispered to each other and giggled. I was not so happy to be near them as I did not truly believe they were my blood but Father Michael and his kind, crinkly smile had said and seemed to believe so and had pushed us together more and more often. That day they had wandered down to the river and sat in the stones in the shade. The nuns had not liked us children being near the rushing water for fear of a tragedy but had grudgingly allowed us to anyway. Angus and Virginia clearly hadn’t been afraid so I sat near them and said nothing and played with the rocks near my feet, as quiet as I could possibly be. I could hear their whispers but did not engage in any conversation because they still looked at me with anger in their eyes. Before long Angus had approached with a sneer.

“Gitawaagan. Your ears are too big. Ours are small. You must not be our brother.” I said nothing. So then he threw stones at me until Virginia came and ran, thus taking him with her. Even after this assault, I did not scare of him and continued to follow them, for if they were my relation, I wanted to know them, truly.

When I was eight, I was able to speak Latin and French and had been further condemned to ever speak Anishnaabemowin, my language, the Ojibwa language, ever again. Many had already begun to forget, and had been either terrified to go against God’s will or were in total belief of their “White” heritage. The lessons we had been taught had stamped out any heritage, tradition and culture we had grown up with. If we were forced to forget the past and embrace a White future, how could we ever remember? Judy was one of them, one of the children who were starting to accept what the priests had taught. But by this point, Angus and Virginia had accepted my presence and spoke to me in our language down by the safety of the river daily. If I could not convince Teddy and Jerome or even Charlie to remember their past, I could surely convince Judy.

Leaving the mess hall weeks later, I rounded up Judy and led her to our spot at the river, where Virginia smiled and greeted her. “Aaniin.”

I watched as her eyes grew wide and she put her hand against Virginia’s mouth. “You must not speak the language here, Joseph’s sister! The Fathers’ have warned us.”

“I am not Joseph.” I cut in, gently prying her hand from my sister’s mouth. “Ahanu nidizhinikaaz.” *My name is Ahanu.*

Virginia smiled and took Judy’s hand. “Aaniish ezhinikaaziyan?” *What is your name?*

She smiled. “Aiyana.”

One year later, I learned not to challenge ‘the word of God’ or his priests in any way, least of all in a joking manner. The tolling bells that overlooked the school were large and human-powered and emitted a gong so loud, it could be heard for miles. This was a sound that we had been trained to stop for, no matter what we had been doing because the priests had valued strict obedience in their pupils. One foggy morning when Charlie and Alphonse and I were scouring through the fields picking dew worms, the bell rang out and they hopped down the embankment and made their way towards the front doors. I had a pail of wriggling worms, worth a buck to the Spanish fishermen and farmers and didn’t want to lose any of my pocket change for the week. So I took my time and made my way to the doors slow and steady while the priests watched on. When I had come close enough, Father John strode forward and yanked the pail out of my hand, not even grimacing as a stray worm bounced off his robes. I wanted to shout but held my tongue and stayed still.

“Joseph,” he began sternly, jowls quivering and eyes narrowing. His hair was the color of summer corn and hung limply against the nape of his neck. “Did you not hear the bells of the Lord? You are required to *freeze* when you have heard them rung.”

“But Father,” I said slowly. “It is not cold enough.”

It was only a joke but a half hour later I was stood on a wooden block in the middle of the mess hall, stark naked and eyes downcast with shame. Aiyana had cried out, in sympathy but knew there was nothing to be done. I had seen Angus rise angrily when I was hauled in but he was promptly sent to the wall with a welt on his cheek, as his act was considered defiance to God. I myself could not see the two angry red welts that had risen on my own back but I could feel the lingering bite the gnarled branch had left behind. Those were the first of few times over the years and each had hurt the same as the last, every single time.

Those years were both misery and a blessing in disguise. By the time I was fourteen I had further met siblings who went by Leo and Daniel and Delia, and the baby sisters I had left behind when I was six were introduced and named by the nuns as Martina and Vivian when they arrived. I had been one child taken in the night from his Maa, only to reunite with a family larger than imagination.

Word Count: 1,752