The People Who Own Themselves

1946

I don't understand why Maa does it.

She said she didn't want me to go. I didn't want to go. But as the man opens the car door and I'm ushered inside, she's silent.

She said she had to or else she would get in trouble. But aren't we supposed to stay with family, with the community? Isn't that what I have always been taught? Why would she get in trouble for that?

I look behind me and see our house get smaller and smaller as the car drives on. I want Maa to burst through the front door and run after me, but she doesn't.

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When we arrive, my long black hair is cut, my body washed with liquids that burn my nose and sting my skin. A woman wearing black and white robes stares down at me. She hovers over me like a cedar tree but without the safety. When she rolls her sleeves up so they don't get wet, I see that her skin is light. It's different from mine; my skin is darker – Maa always said our skin was painted with shades of the earth and sun combined.

The woman scrubs and scrubs and scrubs my skin until it peels.

The whole time, she is speaking a language I don't understand. She waits for me to respond like I know what she's said. She's angry that I can't understand.

So I tell her in Michif: *I don't understand.* Politely, like how Maa tells me to when I speak to my aunties and uncles.

The woman strikes me across the face. Then, she says something else I don't understand, with her eyes wide and her finger pointed at my nose. I don't know what she says again, but I don't say so this time. I learn it's best to stay quiet.

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I am 79. Not years old. I am only 6. But all they call me here is 79.

We are all clothed the same – grey robes with a same-coloured ribbon tied loosely around our middles. I long for my bright dresses decorated with beaded wildflowers and the red, blue, green, yellow, and white hues of our sash. I miss my fur-trimmed coat, the one Uncle Louis got me from one of his hunts last year. He had put it around my shoulders, and I beamed up at him like he wrapped me in treasure. It would have kept me warm when our room here goes so cold

we can see our breaths – little white clouds that appear sporadically above each sleeping child in the forty beds lined side by side.

We are taught that foreign language. English, it's called. If we speak our language, we are struck. We get the strap.

I want to go home, or even just to a different school. I know there's more of us out there, in another school close by. It's called Beauval School.

"I'm there on Wednesdays and Fridays," Sister Annemarie tells us, "And can any of you tell me why the Beauval girls are more behaved, more studious, and can speak English better than you all?"

I wince under her angry stare. I still don't know all the words she is saying, but she says them with enough disgust that I don't need to.

"You are even purer than them," she spits, shaking her head in disbelief, "The Beauval girls are pure Indians – born only from the uncivilized. You are half-breeds, and yet you act as if you don't have a drop of clean blood."

Indians. Half-breeds.

The girl I know only as 32 speaks up. "*But, I don't know what –*"

The air changes as all children in the room tense. I wonder what the moment was for each girl where they too learned to hear Michif and feel fear, not comfort.

"What did I just say?" Sister Annemarie screams. 32 is pulled standing by the arm. She's turned around. Sister Annemarie raises the strap in the air. I stare straight ahead, but my eyes betray me and I see what happens from the corner of my gaze.

I don't know them, but I hate the girls at the Beauval School. Rage surges through me knowing that they are better, and that because they are good, we are able to be seen as less. I want them, too, to be beaten, even if I hate to be beat.

But maybe they really are better. Maybe we deserve it then.

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The girl whose bed is to my right is named Emily. That's what she told me to call her in whispers at night, when the combined sounds of the wind whistling outside and the soft snores of the other girls around us allow us an exchange.

"I told the Principal today how bad Sister Annemarie hits us," she said to me one evening.

I was surprised. "What did he say?"

"He didn't believe me," Emily answered, "He called me a liar. But remember how the Bishop is coming tomorrow?"

I nodded. We had been given newer, softer robes to wear tomorrow for the visit. We had extra classes to practice speaking English today, too.

"I'll go to him tomorrow." There's the creak of a floorboard. Emily and I go dead quiet. Only when we are sure no one is there, Emily continues. "I'll ask if God really would have thought this was okay."

She sounded so convinced this would be successful. I see the hope in her eyes as she says it. I admire her for it. She smiles at me, gap-toothed and real, a rarity these days. I smile back, and this alone feels like an act of defiance.

One day, Emily leaves the school. She does not come back.

1947

I'm grabbed by the waist. It's not Sister Annemarie, or Sister Abigail, or the Principal; it's Maa.

"*Please, Maa,*" I shriek. I was halfway through the field in front of our house. I twist and kick and scream fiercely, "*You said I didn't have to!* You said I didn't have to!"

"*Please,*" she repeats back to me, and I don't understand why she has tears streaming down her cheeks. She is a living contradiction. She cries for me and yet she grabs me. She promises she won't make me go back to school, but she changes her mind when the black car drives up to our house.

The driver stands outside the car with his hand on the back door handle, watching us calmly, not interfering, but my mother keeps looking back at him nervously.

"*Please, we have to,*" My mother pleads."*I'm so sorry. We have to*."

I had spent the summer playing with my cousins in this grass. Maa drags me across the patches that have been flattened from our games and into the car, cowering under the gaze of the man. As he takes me once again, I see how long the field stretches and how far away I could have run, if I did when I had the chance.

1965

I'm numb as Elder Roy recounts the stories of my mother's life. The community that I stopped growing up with sits around the circle, laughing and wiping away tears in turn as they celebrate my mother's transition from the physical to the spiritual world. As much as I try to

muster an ounce of emotion, I feel nothing. I didn't know her; the stories are from a life she lived without me.

"Your Maa loved you so much, Laura," My Auntie Margaret whispers to me. As usual, my mind fixates for a moment on just the last word: Laura. My name had sounded foreign to me when I had just gotten out of school. I think part of me will always be 79. "She did everything she could to stay with you."

I almost laugh. I left Île-à-la-Crosse Residential School in 1957, after 11 years. Every time someone came to get me and take me to school, my mother would grab me and tell me to listen to whatever they told me to do. She let me go year after year in that car, saying she did not have a choice. The first few years I fought, but I eventually learned I could never scream loud enough, beg hard enough, or run fast enough to avoid going back to school. Only in my thoughts did my mother ever wrap her arms around me and fight for me to stay home.

"None of us wanted to do this," Auntie Margaret had told me the Church sent her son, my cousin, to Timber Bay Residential School. It's one of their tactics, she said, separating us. Hearing this, it makes sense why she says what she does about my mother; it justifies her actions as well.

Apparently, our people have been unravelling the tactics of the Church for years. Only in recent years did the people in my community begin to talk about it all. I hear rumblings that some are fighting the school system, though I find it hard to believe.

When I have my son a few years after my mother dies, I promise to never let him go.

I name him Emile.

But Île-à-la-Crosse Residential School, and many others after that, closed in 1970, so I never had to send him there.

2006

Emile and I read it together.

"The Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) has been officially approved. It serves to recognize the damage Indian Residential Schools had on the Indigenous Peoples of Canada and compensate for all that they had lost."

There are 130 schools on the list. My eyes graze over every one.

The Beauval Indian Residential School – our neighbouring school back then – is included on the list. Île-à-la-Crosse Residential School is not.

The reason: they are only compensating Indian Residential School survivors, schools run by the federal government. Île-à-la-Crosse was run by the provincial government of Saskatchewan.

"That's bull– " Emile stops himself from screaming as he glances over at his daughter, my granddaughter, Clara.

Clara is playing on the carpet with her best friend, our next-door neighbour. They speak together in Michif. They are both 6. I imagine myself, as little as them, sitting in one of those classrooms, getting struck across the face when I said even a single word of Michif. I am happy that they can speak it now, that they don't have the fear that they might be beat for speaking our tongue. But as I read over the list of schools again, I worry they are growing up in a country that they will never truly feel safe in.

My social worker calls me a few days later to schedule a meeting. Emile had convinced me to see one when he felt my drinking had become excessive. I wanted to change for him and Clara.

"Well, I'm furious," I tell her like it's obvious, when she asks me about the settlement agreement. It's an insult to all the decades of work our people have done to get residential schools closed and survivors' experiences recognized in the first place. "Did I not also get taken from my home for ten months out of the year? Did we not also get beaten, go to sleep bloody and bruised? Did we not have the same teachers as the ones at the Beauval School? Didn't children, like Emily, never get to grow up, too?"

She nods her head and looks just past me, like she doesn't know what to do with that. Then she says,"I see how that is so unfair for you."

That alone tells me that she doesn't actually see it. If she truly saw the deep injustice of this, she would rise the way Emile did when we first read the announcement. She would be screaming at the unfairness of it all at the top of her lungs. She would tell her bosses, co-workers, family, and friends that we *needed to do something about it*. But she just sits there, waiting for me to respond, an expression of pity on her face.

Once again, our people rise, though no one else does. We sue the government.

2013

I step out into the street where Dorthy from two houses down has her fiddle out. There are nearly a hundred people gathered – some jigging to the music, their feet quick and nimble in time with the strums.

Timber Bay Residential School lost their lawsuit to be recognized as a residential school. All the students there are not legally recognized as residential school survivors. Like us, they get no compensation. Like us, they too are Métis.

No progress has been made with our lawsuit, either, though it has been nearly a decade. I have long learned that no one will ever want to take responsibility for us. Back then, we fell in between being Indian or European, not Indian enough to be allowed in federal Indian Residential Schools, but not white enough to be allowed in provincial public schools. The result: many of us half-breeds had to go to provincial residential schools. Today, they use this technicality to deny us compensation. How can you get justice, when you have always been shoved in the cracks of the system?

Île-à-la-Crosse was open for over 100 years. Seven generations of our people went to the school. Repeatedly, I witness my people misuse drugs and alcohol or kill themselves to dull the lingering pain I know never seems to go away. And though my son didn't go to residential school, or his daughter, and many others of their age in our communities, I see how they are still impacted by what we went through. We were separated from our families and communities. We never learned to be part of a family, or how to parent. And I have tried my absolute hardest with Social Services to protect them from further harm, but every day that our experiences are denied, we cannot fully heal. It's an open wound passed down like genetics – it will live in Clara, and her children, and her grandchildren, and their children, and so on.

And yet, our people fiddle and jig in the street in front of my home. Children of all ages sit in groups around the Elders, watching carefully as they meticulously bead designs into their clothes.

They tried to get rid of our culture, our language, and our identities. They tried to separate us and make us hate one another. But they underestimated the resilience inherent in who we are.

"*Otipemisiwak,"* I once explained to Emile. It was Elder Roy who explained it to me first, during some of the hardest times in my healing. "That is the name our Cree kin gave us over a hundred years ago. It means that the Métis lead, govern, and care for themselves."

"'Their own boss'," Emile translated, nodding profoundly.

"Yes," I answered, "Or, 'the people who own themselves'."

And haven't we always? Despite it all, we are still here. We come together. We form healing circles and share our stories. We have our sweats, our ceremonies; we teach our young how to bead wildflowers and wear sashes and fur with pride. It is through my people that I have healed the most, through them that I, and many others, find the strength to continue to fight.

"Laur!" Dorthy waves her fiddle and bow at me. Pat and Eliza beckon me to join as well, unashamedly calling out, "Laura! Laurie-Laur!" while doing a dance they know ladies our age shouldn't do anymore. I shake my head at them, but the corners of my lips twitch upward in spite of myself.

Government lawsuits be damned. In *this*, we've won.

2019

I am 79.

79 years old.

This year, the federal government came to an agreement to compensate Indian Day School survivors, those that got to go home to their families at the end of every school day.

For us, still nothing. Still nothing for Timber Bay.

“Law,” Clara tells me one morning at breakfast, when I asked her what she plans to study at university. She’s applying this year; the first in my family line.

Clara is 19 years old now. She has grown up seeing the injustices our people face, and she tells me this is her drive to study law. My gut reaction is to tell her to choose another path. I am scared that this world will not accept her; that they won’t accept her dark skin, her embroidered red earrings, long enough to graze the bottom part of her cheek, that the languages she speaks are English and Michif, not English and French.

Instead, what comes out is, “You should. You should do what you love.”

I never had the luxury to choose to go to school. The world will still be hard on her, that is something she cannot choose. But she can choose to go to school.

“I’ll support you in whatever you decide,” I say earnestly, and her eyes brighten. I add in Michif,“*I love you, you know?*”

From ages six to fifteen, for ten months out of twelve, I never heard the words *I love you*. I’ve long come to understand my own mother had little choice in this. I imagine she said it thousands of times over to herself while I was away, hoping I would somehow still hear her through the distance between us. And I suppose she was saying it when she followed what the Church officials said, because that is what kept her and I alive. But now I get to tell my family directly. I tell Emile I love him. And Emile tells Clara he loves her. So we all learn that we are loved.

Today

“Your name, your age, whatever,” Pat instructs me. She’s only a year older than me, but always offers her words of wisdom on how to keep my brain sharp. “Say them again and again.”

She’s been at my bedside all day, continuing the sashes she’s weaving. She’s done five of them in the last week, only heaving herself up from her work when someone comes by to sit with us or offers to make a meal in my kitchen now that I can no longer do it myself. Red, blue, green, yellow, and white thread is strewn across my floor.

Before I can do as told, Emile appears in the doorway, arriving home from work. He looks right at me first and relief washes over him that I am looking right back.

"*Thank you, Auntie*," he says to Pat in Michif, kissing her cheek.

"*You know I'm not going home yet, right?*" she answers, then she points at me. "*Hey, make sure your Maa does her mind exercises. She's already starting to forget you and Clara and all the rest of us.*"

Emile laughs. "*Sure, sure. You're doing them, right, Maa?*"

I keep my mouth shut, just to be stubborn and see the grins on their faces, Emile's playful; Pat's lovingly annoyed. But that night, when I'm alone for the first time all day, I say to myself –

My name is Laura.

I am 86 years old.

And I name Emile and Clara and Pat and my people, and I try to weave them into my mind as tightly as the threads in the sashes Pat built next to me.

I don't have much time left in the physical world.

No, we have not yet received compensation.

No, we are not yet legally recognized as residential school survivors.

They named September 30 the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. It is meant to honour the survivors of residential schools, but I can't help but wonder still: do we count?

Undoubtedly, there is more awareness about the struggles of our people**.** There have been more claims that change is coming. I don't know if anything will truly come of them, but what I can trust is that my people will always be fighting.

Clara studies at my bedside most days. She tells me her stories about school.

Her classes are hard, but her teachers host office hours to walk her through the topics she struggles with. Every event at her law school starts with acknowledging that they are gathering on what was historically our land. There's an Indigenous Students in Law Association, and they're organizing an awareness campaign about the Île-à-la-Crosse and Timber Bay lawsuits.

I love to just look at her, at her sun and earth skin, and think of the world she will build. There is still a long way to go, and though I will not see justice in my time in the physical world, I can rest.

But the fight goes on.

Canada's residential schools were a government-sponsored, church-run system created to forcibly assimilate Indigenous children and erase their culture, language, and traditions. Operating from the 1880s to 1996, Métis children – those of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry – were part of the over 150,000 Indigenous children removed from their homes and sent to these schools. They, along with many other Indigenous nations in Canada, have fought for decades to get true justice for the immense loss of familial connections, culture, and life.