

Bravery

By Noemi Milne

I do not want to go.
I say to Nimosôm in Cree.
He shakes his head,
his grey whiskers twitching
like the hairs of
a young rabbit.

Promise me, you'll be brave,
he replies, also in Cree.
You must.

I do not understand
what he is saying.
Why must I be brave?
I ask.
It's just school.

You'll see. Just please.
He responds,
shaking his head sadly.

I hate to see him like that.
So I say
I'll be brave.
Just to reassure him.

He smiles a little,
the rivers of wrinkles etched into his face,
telling a story that I do not know.
I am about to ask
but he is seized by white men.

I walk up
to the red brick building.
A tiny spark of hope
kindled inside of me.

I squint to read the tiny lettering
above the door,
but it's not in Cree.

I don't understand the
many tiny shapes,
that resemble,
worms,
bead patterns,
blades of grass,
rocks.
They don't mean anything to me.

I turn to wave to my grandfather,
but he is already gone,
ushered away.
My joy leaves me,
replaced by fear.
Terror.

I slide my hand into my pocket
touching the coloured beads,
as a reminder of home.
They feel safe and familiar.

I am dragged inside,
by a smiling nun in black robes.
Her smile, just teeth.
She is muttering about Indian children.

I am confused.

Who are these Indian children?
I don't see any here.
Just rows upon rows
of sad children,
like me.

I see a boy my age,
crying.
Someone is cutting his long hair,
his identity.
His cries sound like someone is cutting off his arm.

He cries something out,
in another language, I think in Blackfoot?
I don't quite understand.
I smile encouragingly.

Then we are beaten with cotton ropes of death,
while tears are streaming down our faces.
They explain, in the little English I know:
We are not to think about our culture,
or acknowledge the other gender.

Why? Why not?

Then it's my turn.
I don't struggle as they toss aside my severed hair,
because I don't want to feel
the ropes of death on my bruised legs again.
I feel hot tears cascading down my face
like a gushing waterfall.

The beautiful braids
with red ribbon ends,
tossed aside like garbage.
A piece of me,
gone with them.

They take my clothes away.
I don't know why.
I needed them
to get through this year.
Another piece,
gone.

They give me new clothes,
which are bland,
which are frilly,
which feel scratchy,
which I hate.

I am shown a looking glass.
I see a person
who I don't recognize,
staring back.

I look like a different person,
except for my brown skin,
dark hair
and dark eyes.

I don't like this person.

I am led towards the other girls.
Nervously, I look back at the boy.
He is standing there,
his head almost shaven,
a slight smile creeping across his face.
I smile back.

I am given a number.
I don't want to be #87,
but I have no choice.
The ropes of death are scary.

I touched the beads
I slipped into my pocket.
Another girl
purposely bumps into me.
The beads go crashing to the floor,
sounding like a hailstorm.

All the nuns spin around,
leaving the two squabbling children,
the screaming girl,
another boy's haircut,
alone.

They glare at me with eyes piercing,
like sharpened spears
similar to the ones Nimosôm uses
for hunting.
They scoop up the beads,
telling me off
I am dragged into a dark closet.

I cry softly in the cramped, dark cage.
I don't want the nuns to hear me.
I have nothing but the sound of chewing termites
to keep me company.
I feel my familiar warm tears against my cheeks again.

I don't know how long it takes.
I rest my head on my knees,
dreaming about fishing with my family.

My nitsanak.

I go without supper.
Then finally, the door opens.
Light enters.
A man in black and white robes comes into view,
with a cold, penetrating gaze.

*To civilize you,
you need a civil name.*
Kirsten.
he says.
It sounds like the word for snake
kinepik.
I detest snakes.

I repeat the name,
to my eight year-old self.

Kirsten

Kirsten

Kirsten

Wondering.

Three years later,
I barely remember my Cree name.
Kôna, I say to myself. *Kôna*.

But they hear.
The ropes of death come out.
Biting me again,
like there is no tomorrow.

I'm tired of eating lumpy porridge,
which taste like
worms are inside,
not even fit for a crow.
I'm tired of listening to English
and not hearing my family's voices.

I'm tired of memorizing prayers.
I'm tired of this school,
I'm tired of this world.
I just want to go home.

When class starts,
the nuns tell us
our cultures are bad.
We are savable.
I whisper to the person beside me.
No.
Thankfully, the nuns don't hear.

In a sewing class,
my finger slips.
It gets caught on my needle.
It feels like a wolf's bite.
I am silent like an owl,
even though blood stains my uniform.
I am scared of the ropes of death.

We are told to act properly,
be happy,
and speak English.
But that's lying.
An inspector is coming.
If we don't,
the ropes of death appear.

We all line up
in front of the school,
faces washed,
short hair brushed,
smiling.

But it's not smiling.
It feels wrong.
I don't feel it in my heart.
It's just there.
The Smile of Fear,
we call it.

I watch the Supervisors wipe down the sign

above the door.
Now I can read what those shapes mean
that I saw the first day:
Indian Residential School
They don't look like the
worms,
bead patterns,
blades of grass,
or rocks anymore;
they look like letters of the alphabet we learn everyday.
But I still don't understand one thing;
Who are these Indians?

At this one mealtime,
we eat like kings.
Finally, we get
scraps of beef,
over-cooked carrots,
and starchy mashed potatoes.
And we get seconds!
The whole time the inspector gazes
down his long nose
at us.
Never smiling.

Every other day besides today,
hunger is my enemy.
It never leaves my side.
But I am not desperate like Bertha
who takes scraps
from the Swine Barrel.

In the morning,
Mary and Josephine
have moved on.
Stone cold.
Frozen.
Piled in the ground.
Their bodies unwashed,
No moccasins on their feet,
No sweetgrass in their hands.
No tobacco.
No respect.

Coughing wakes me up.
Celia is hacking,
blood in her cough.
The supervisors rush in.
What is that noise?

They stare at Celia.
Then force her to eat her throw up.
What kind of evil spirits are they?

A week later,
Celia,
and then Dorothy,
then a few older girls
who I don't know
have moved on.
I will miss them.

Still, the supervisors do
nothing about it.
They just toss them in the hole,
like the others.
Like monsters.
Like monsters.

Linda begins to cough.
I don't want her to die either.
When she wants water,
I sneak some from
a scooped out well to give to her.
Then I grin into her thankful eyes.

But I am caught.
I am shamed.
I face the ropes of death,
bravely again.
The fear still sparks within me.

Why can't I help?

I visit my family that summer.

They don't recognize me.
They speak in a foreign language,
once, my own.

I don't *quite* understand them.
Tears spark into their eyes.
My little brother, Maskwa
runs and hugs me.

It's too late to turn back.
His future is planned.
Like his burial.
Tomorrow, he'll be coming with me.

My grandparents know
a small amount of English,
that we can communicate with.

Let's go fishing
Nimosôm says,
Like we used to.

But those fishing trips,
out on the lake
have become
distant memories.

For one night,
there is laughter,
good familiar food,
good people.

Nimosôm makes me promise to visit again,
but something tells me
I can't.

Maskwa and I lean in
to feel Nimosôm's warm hug,
becoming a memory after it ends too quickly.
I want to remember this warmth when the days are cold.
I want to remember my family when times are tough.
I want to remember what my life was like before, as Kôna, not Kirsten.

I wave as

I head back to school,
Maskwa, my brother,
beside me.

Take care of him!
Nimosôm shouts,
but I do not know
how to tell him,
I can't.

He is taken from me
the second we arrive.
His prized long hair,
shaved.

Kôna!
He calls out my name,
Kôna!
He is held still.

He meets the ropes of death for the first time.

During our three mile walk to church,
I see Maskwa again!
This time,
his face is pale,
his hands are dirty,
his ribs show through his uniform.
I haven't seen him for so long;
I can't help myself
and I run and hug him.
The ropes of death sneakily
appear.
I face them again.

One day a nun tells me,
my brother, Michael (Maskwa)
is dead.
She doesn't say how.

I can't stop myself.
Sobs burst out of me.

She says with no sympathy,
Stop it! Big girls don't cry!
I cry harder.

The ropes of death,
greet me again.

Memories of Maskwa, not Michael,
drift lazily through my mind,
like dandelion puffs
in spring.

His beaming face.
His ringing laugh.
Our snowball fights.
His loving hug.

Now
gone.

That night, I stay up,
remembering.

The Blackfoot boy's smile.
Maskwa's heavy head on my shoulder.
Nimosôm's warm, soft hand clutching mine.
His gruff laugh.
Then his twinkling, beautiful eyes.
His pursed lips as he tells me:
Be brave.
You must.

Thoughts fill my head about these last three years.
My distant tribe.
These nuns and ministers.
The things they took;
like my family,
my identity,
me.

I promise you Nimosôm, and I mean it.

I'll be brave,

I must.

I will face school,

with bravery.