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## *Picture Day*

**T**HE SILENCE OF THE WAITING ROOM is broken every second by the unnerving tick of the clock. It looms over me like an angry father, simmering under the surface until it reaches its eventual boiling point. The secretary avoids eye contact with me as I shift uncomfortably in my chair, wincing as I run my hand over my bandaged knuckles.

My ears burn and I try not to tug at them as I feel eyes on me from behind, students staring as they walk past the principal's office, glaring at me through the large glass window at my back. I imagine their whisperings, their stifled giggles as they try to keep the rubber soles of their patent Mary Janes away from the shards of glass that line the hallway.

Most of all, though, I feel the weighty authority of Mary, Mother of Jesus on my shoulders, crushing my body into the ground, all but forcing me into an early damnation. I don't need to see her portrait, which hangs directly overhead, to feel her intimidation radiating throughout the room.

"Lizzie," a voice calls from the doorway.

It's my grandmother.

"Let's go."

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Marie didn't often speak of her time at the school. Our conversations were peppered with small vignettes indicative of a much longer, much darker childhood. She bore the weight of her trauma alone, deflecting

systemic injustices into personal failures. Blaming the world for what she suffered wouldn't reunite her with God at the end of her life. So, when the Sisters beat the back of her hand raw with a ruler because her dress shirt didn't match those of her classmates, it wasn't Catholicism's fault. It wasn't abuse; it wasn't racism. She should have remembered it was picture day.

"Marie," the Sister snapped in her direction. Marie turned her head but looked down at her shoes.

"You'll need to sit in the back today," the nun said, directing her to a desk at the back of the small classroom. "Maybe your shirt will be less noticeable from back there."

Marie tugged at the cuff of her dark-grey shirt. She fixed her gaze on the ground, shuffling her scuffed Mary Janes to the back of the room. With three younger sisters, it was a challenge to keep on top of the washing. And at the rate she was growing, she was lucky she had any blouses that still fit. She'd snagged this one from her mother's closet when she'd noticed her white one hadn't made it out onto the clothesline yesterday.

"And everyone, big smiles! Sourires!" The photographer waved his hand as he flashed the bulb, making all the little girls flinch in their seats. Marie ran her fingertips over the angry, red welts that had begun to form on her right knuckles.

Marie didn't leave the school with a diploma. She left the school at sixteen, with little to show for her time there. What she did take away was a deep sense of piety, an understanding that if she asked God humbly for forgiveness, repented for the sin of being Native, she would find salvation in the afterlife.

And so, she did.

Poverty was a sin God bestows upon Native people, the Sisters told her in the school. Marie knew it was no coincidence that once she began to hide that part of herself, to abandon the old stories of a Creator for a more specific, more frightening ideal of God, her life improved. She would blame her tanned skin on the harsh July sun and her dark hair on a distant European aunt.

She married her husband, Samuel, another Native man, in a Catholic church, before the same nuns who had mistreated her at school.

"Marie," one Sister fawned, running Marie's tulle veil through her now-bony fingers. "God is so pleased with you, my daughter."

"We are so proud of you, my girl," another chimed in. "You've become a proper woman, a woman of God. You'll be rewarded in Heaven."

Marie really believed this. She walked herself down the aisle, small bouquet of baby's breath tied with blue ribbon in hand. Light poured

through the stained-glass windows on either side of the pews—deep purples and reds—and she felt relief wash over her.

She worked herself half to death every day, raising her three children and caring for Samuel, who worked long hours at the lumber mill in the next town over. She baptized her daughters in the holy water that had been used to drown her spirit as a child. As they grew taller, one after the other, she made a myth of the single bed she'd shared with her three sisters. She taught them the prayers she'd recited to herself over and over, trying to wash her hands of an inconvenient culture.

Marie sent her daughters to Catholic school, in the same building where she'd endured years of abuse at the hands of nuns and priests. But it would be different for them. The priests and nuns were long dead. The government no longer controlled the school. Teachers didn't hit kids anymore. It would be different.

Sadie didn't fully understand she was Native until she was an adult. As a kid, she would wonder why the other kids at school would refer to her and her sisters as savages, or why their mothers would call hers a squaw behind her back. If they were truly Irish, or French, or whatever mix of European ancestry Marie had adopted that day, what did these insults mean? By the time she went off to college, it had become obvious to her that Marie had not been truthful about their background. Still, Sadie continued the charade, refusing to acknowledge her truth for years.

What Sadie brought home from the school, rather than the bruises of her mother's time, was a deep sense of guilt and shame for her existence. She moved through life knowing that from the moment she was born, she had a lot of making up to do if she planned on finding eternal rest with a Christian God. And so, when, twenty-two years old and unmarried, she gave birth to a baby girl, she saw that baby not as a gift, but as a reminder of her perpetual sin.

"I'm not going to have this conversation, Ma," Sadie said, securing a diaper around her newborn.

"There's no conversation to have," Marie replied. "You will baptize that child."

"I don't understand why you care so much, Ma," Sadie said, eyes rolled back into her head. "Nothing's going to happen if I don't."

"You had better hope to God nothing happens to her. You'd be promising that innocent child an eternity in Hell."

Sadie would have baptized me even if Marie hadn't insisted. Why tempt fate, she thought, with an innocent baby? Though I wasn't innocent, was I? When Father Alain sprinkled holy water across my forehead, I cried. Just twelve weeks into my life, I became absolved of my original sin. The sin of being born. The sin of being born Native.

As I grew, I sat in Marie's favourite pew every Sunday and learned to say Hail Mary. I took the sacrament. I prayed on Marie's favourite rosary. I felt nothing. Church was not an emotional experience to me, good or bad. I went through the motions, blind to the trauma the four walls of the church had inflicted on my mother and grandmother. I didn't want to be there, but I didn't know why.

This emptiness followed me to school, when I sat in a shiny classroom in the newly finished extension the church had built onto the side of the old school. Breathing in the smell of fresh paint and linoleum, I'd try to keep my eyes from fluttering closed as my Religion teacher gave a deeply uninteresting overview of the reforms made during the church's Second Vatican Council. I spent my days staring at the floor. I found the broken aglet on the end of my shoelace more interesting.

In history class, I was assigned to report on a piece of local history. Motivated by nothing but the desire to keep a decent grade in the class, I made a pilgrimage to the archival section of the school library, a deserted corner of the otherwise lively space, filled with dusty books and binders overstuffed with yellowing pages.

I flipped through the fragile pages of a binder labelled "School, 50s and 60s" — a collection I chose solely because I thought that's when my grandmother went here. I passed the papers through my fingers, half reading, half searching for something interesting to jump out at me, when I locked eyes with a girl in a photo who was hauntingly familiar to me.

My grandmother.

She must have been ten or eleven, hair combed into a precise bob, with dark, thick bangs that almost covered her eyes. The photo was in black and white, but I could see that the blouse she wore under her dress was a different colour than those of the twenty-or-so peers sitting around her. All of them at desks, hands folded neatly on the tabletop. Nobody smiled.

I thought I'd seen this photo before. Leafing through my grandmother's old photo albums, trying to stave off boredom after church some Sunday afternoon. But I'd never seen the text at the bottom of this photo, scrawled in messy handwriting, fading from time, and yet clear enough for me to read.

*St. Thomas Indian Day School – 1967.*

*Indian Day School.* I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was reading the words correctly. I rubbed my thumb over the words, thinking maybe if I pressed hard enough, they'd disappear to reveal a softer, more truthful

reality. The ink didn't vanish. The caption stayed in place, unveiling to me an atrocity that had been hidden from me for generations.

Through my increasingly blurred vision, I looked more closely at the photo. Three nuns stood at the back of the classroom, behind the students. They were familiar to me. Not like I'd seen them once in my grandmother's photo album, but like I'd seen them in the hallways every day on my way to class. They'd wished me luck on my English exam or had chastised me for being late to fifth period after lunch. I slipped the photo out from the protective sleeve it had lived in for upwards of sixty years and placed it carefully into the chest pocket of my uniform shirt.

Marie had never breathed a word to me about Indian Day School. I don't know if my mother even knew about it. All three of us had spent years in this building, being taught by the same nuns, the same priests, and we'd never talked about what it used to be. What it still was.

I found myself in the east hallway of St. Thomas Catholic Day School, the one lined with photos of old school administrators, groups of nuns huddled together like friends, and classes of graduated students standing piously on the front steps. I scanned their faces, knowing there was a match for the women in the photo with my grandmother. Then, at the end of the hallway, next to the staff wash-room, I saw them. *The Sisters of St. Thomas, 1965–69.*

Maybe my anger was misplaced. Maybe I was overreacting. These nuns weren't the government. They weren't even really *The Church*. They just had jobs, and their jobs just happened to hurt others. But the bile rose in the back of my throat and my cheeks grew hot, and my salty tears spilled out over my bottom lashes. I thought of my grandmother's raw knuckles, bloodied and scabbed. I thought of the shame my mother felt about her very existence. I thought about myself, about my lack of direction. I thought about the numbness I felt coming to school every day. I am the result of sixty years of trauma. I am the product of 500 years of violence.

I almost blacked out. Something bubbled up towards the surface of my skin from a place I did not recognize. All I could see was red. Behind my eyes, in front of my face. Red. Face to face with the Sisters, I didn't think. I saw the wickedness in their eyes, the power that was bestowed upon them to hurt innocent children. To hurt my grandmother.

With the weight of my ancestors behind me, I drove my clenched fist into the protective glass of the picture, cracking it. I punched the frame again, and then again, until large shards of glass fell to the floor and shattered. I did the same to the adjacent photos—*The Sisters* from 1961, 1957, 1953. In one instant, the east hallway became covered in glass—and blood. My blood. I looked down at my knuckles to reveal

raw, broken skin. I was bleeding. But the blood was already there—it was already all over everything. I only brought it to light.



My mother and grandmother agree to take me home for the rest of the day. Sadie humbly accepts the terms of my punishment—a three-day suspension—and heavily implies that I'll face more repercussions at home. This Sunday, she'll sit in a confessional and ask God to forgive her for that lie.

On our way out, she threatens me under her breath with laundry duty, though this does not faze me. I already wash my uniforms twice a week, and I actually really enjoy ironing. We walk towards the front door of the school to go out to the car, which my mother has parked in a Fire Route, when we notice Marie is not walking with us. We call out for her in loud whispers, before we spot her—a small figure standing at the end of the east hallway, staring at a recently defaced photograph.

My mother tries to get her attention, to caution her from stepping in the glass which has yet to be swept up. My grandmother doesn't respond. She just stares at the photo. We move inconspicuously down the hallway—not wanting to draw any more attention to ourselves—and try to meet her gaze. My mother puts her hands on my grandmother's shoulders and tries to walk her in the direction of the front door, and I see my grandmother's face.

From her left eye, a mascara-tinged tear rolls down her blushed cheek and settles at the corner of her lip. The hardened expression I'd seen her wear for years softened for the first time.

"I'm sorry, Grandma," I say.

"I'm sorry too," she says back.

She puts her arm around me as we walk out together to the parking lot. We drive home in silence, but with a newfound understanding of one another. We don't speak of it again.