

BARON ALEXANDER DESCHAUER
& LUCKY DESCHAUER



CONCENTRATION
CAMPS
f
CANADA



BASED ON A TRUE STORY

BARON ALEXANDER DESCHAUER
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CAMPS
of
CANADA

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Suite 300 - 990 Fort St
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Canada

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Co-written by Lucky Deschauer

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1. YOUNG ADULT FICTION, HISTORICAL

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To those whose voice I strive to hear



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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CONCENTRATION
CAMPS
of
CANADA

BASED ON A TRUE STORY



Introduction

A Story Based on the Truth

*Hello! Aniin ~ Tân'si ~ Edlánet'é ~ Dahneh Dha' ~
Nezu dágóts'e ~ Masì ~ Ah ~ Oki ~ Aba Washded ~
Tawnshi ~ Wa-é ák-wé ~ Bonjour*

Canada is the consequence of European colonial enterprise. Its Indigenous peoples were essential for the European powers in navigating, establishing trade routes, and winning battles. When peace ensued between London and Paris, the Indigenous peoples became an inconvenience. Treaties were signed with the Indigenous nations, and Canada eventually took on the role as 'parent' for all Indigenous peoples within its borders. No ownership was ever transferred to the

Indigenous nations of the land on which they were to live.

The government of Canada decided to begin a systematic assimilation of the Indigenous people with the stated objective of 'taking the Indian out of the Indian'. Residential schools were thought to be the most effective way of washing away the unwanted cultures, languages, and customs. Children were taken from their families and placed in schools (for many, year-round). They were not allowed to speak their language, act 'like Indians' or even wear their familiar clothing. (Despite knowing they hadn't reached India, Europeans continued to call Indigenous peoples Indians. Canadian legislation forces the continued use of this pejorative word by virtue of the *Indian Act*.)

It is now known that Hitler was so inspired by the residential school and reserve system (as employed in Canada and the United States against Indigenous peoples) that he used it as a model for the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. These camps were designed to break the will of its inhabitants through hard work, starvation, and dehumanizing activity. After World War II broke out, a large number of these German camps became processing centres for the mass extermination of human life. Between twelve

and fifteen million people died in these camps with that number still being revised upwards to more than fifteen million as historians process data.

The government of Canada recently admitted to practicing a culturally genocidal policy towards its Indigenous peoples as part of the Truth and Reconciliation process. Canadian residential schools forced children aged six (and some as young as four) to sixteen to work half a day in agricultural, domestic or service pursuits that would not put them in competition with settler occupations and professions. The other half-day was to be in class, learning to read, write, and speak English or French in order to assimilate them into Canadian society. Officially, over three thousand children died while in these schools. Unofficially, some put this figure closer to eighty thousand children. Historians will need to sift through the data before a definitive number is arrived at. For the most part, these children were buried without ceremony or headstone. Without birth certificates, their deaths went unrecorded and became lost to history. For parents, the consequence was the same—their child(ren) never came home.

Those who overcame the scars of these schools, from 1876 to 1996, faced the institutional racism and prejudice of a country uninterested in their problems.

Concentration Camps of Canada

This story is an amalgam of real life stories and fiction. The truth lies within.

Baron and Lucky Deschauer
Dauphin, Manitoba, Canada, 2017

Timeline

1857 *Gradual Civilization Act* – Precursor to federally-funded residential schools. Purpose was to assimilate the Indigenous peoples of Canada.

1867 Dominion of Canada created by British Parliament, effective July 1, through *The British North America Act, 1867*. Provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and the Province of Canada (which became Ontario and Quebec) became a country.

The new country was to be called Canada. The name was originally the Saint-Lawrence Iroquoian word *Kanata*, meaning ‘settlement’, ‘village’, or ‘land’. The Saint-Lawrence Iroquoians are now extinct.

1869 *Gradual Enfranchisement Act* – Precursor to residential schools.

Concentration Camps of Canada

1869 Red River Rebellion, led by Louis Riel. Métis wanted independence.

1871 Province of Manitoba created.

Rupert's Land and Northwest Territories incorporated into Canada.

Provinces of Ontario and Quebec increased in size to include area near Hudson Bay.

British Columbia joined Canada.

1879 Davin Report ("Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half Breeds", by Nicholas Flood Davin) submitted to Parliament. Led to federal funding of the residential school system. Schools were to be run and administered by churches.

1885 North-West Rebellion, led by Louis Riel. Rebellions such as these led to the adoption of the 'pass system' where Indigenous peoples required written permission to leave their reserves. There was no free movement if you were a member of a First Nation.

Timeline

- 1894 *Indian Act* amended to make attendance of residential schools mandatory for all Indigenous children between seven and sixteen years old.
- 1905 Saskatchewan and Alberta joined Canada.
- 1907 Government of Canada chief medical officer and medical inspector for the Department of the Interior and Indian Affairs, Dr. Peter Bryce, reports that, in some residential schools, between six and twelve per cent of students died every year. This report focussed on the year 1907, with Dr. Bryce visiting thirty-five residential schools in person and administering a survey to others.
- 1908 *Indian Act* amended to make attendance mandatory for children between six and fifteen years old.
- 1922 After being forced out of the Public Service and his funding suspended, Dr. Bryce published a follow-up book: "The Story of a National Crime: An Appeal for Justice to the Indians of Canada", which showed that the

Concentration Camps of Canada

government had done nothing to improve conditions following his 1907 report.

- 1945 *Family Allowance Act* required school-aged children to be enrolled in [residential] schools if parents were to receive money for their child.
- 1948 Compulsory attendance of residential schools ended. However, many Indigenous people continued to send their children to school or else they would be penalized financially.
- 1969 Department of Indian Affairs took sole control of the residential school system.

» 1980s TO PRESENT RECONCILIATION «

- 1993 Anglican Church of Canada apologizes for its role in the residential school system.

Timeline

- 1994 Presbyterian Church of Canada recognizes its role in the residential school system and asks forgiveness.
- 1996 Last of the Indian Residential Schools in Canada closes, in Punnichy, Saskatchewan.
- 1998 United Church of Canada apologizes for its role in the residential school system.
- 2001 *The Truth Commission into Genocide in Canada* report, published.
- 2004 The Royal Canadian Mounted Police apologize for its role in the residential schools.
- 2008 Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, issues a formal apology for the creation of the residential school system and the abuses carried out within it.
- 2009 Pope “offered his sympathy and prayerful solidarity” to a delegation from the Assembly of First Nations for the Catholic Church’s role and abuses in the residential schools.

Concentration Camps of Canada

- 2011 President of the University of Manitoba apologizes for its role in educating people who operated within the residential schools.
- 2015 Premiers of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta apologize for their provinces' roles in the residential school system.
- 2015 Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin states in a May lecture to the Global Centre for Pluralism that Canada attempted to commit "cultural genocide" against Indigenous Canadians.
- 2015 *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* report published in June.

Call to Action 58: "We call upon the Pope to issue an apology to Survivors, their families, and communities for the Roman Catholic Church's role in the spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children in Catholic-run residential schools.

Timeline

2016 Premier of Ontario apologizes for Ontario's role in the residential school systems.



Chapter One

First Day of School

He was the first boy I met when I arrived. He had red hair and skin that was lighter than mine. He smiled a lot. I knew I would like him when he told me his name.

“Geezis. You know, like Jesus, just different.” He smiled and ran to the edge of the school building, peeked around the corner, and then looked back at me. I ran to join him.

“How long you been here?”

“A year, maybe longer.”

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the shadow.”

I looked where he was staring and could only see the grass blowing in the autumn wind.

"You see it?"

"Yeah," I lied. I moved my head to the left and then the right to get a better view.

"It keeps moving. I track it."

"Have you ever caught it?"

"Not yet. Sometimes, it comes close. I can almost feel it. Then it disappears." He stopped looking and walked back to where we just were. I followed. His hair wasn't cut like mine. It was long, past his shoulders. I liked the way the sun danced in it.

I saw a bush and ran to it. "Come here. Look. Blueberries!" I started picking but stopped when he didn't join me. "What's up?"

He didn't answer. I returned to him and we played a game that he liked. It involved sticks and a little ball.

"Do you like?" he asked.

"It's OK. My uncle and father played something like it but they threw the ball with the stick."

"You've seen it?"

I felt important and shrugged. "Of course. Everyone plays."

He kicked the dirt and didn't say anything.

"Does the school have the proper ones?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They don't give us those things. I made this."

I looked at it again with renewed respect. "I think I

like yours better.”

He looked up and smiled. His whole face beamed. “Thanks.”

Before I could pick up the stick to play, the school bell rang and we dropped everything and ran. A big woman covered in grey stood on the steps as we all ran towards the school. One look from her got my fellow classmates to stop running and form two lines. The girls formed a line and the boys another line. As this was my first day there, I got in behind Geezis. Everyone became silent and walked up the stairs. I could smell the nun as I passed her. She had a different smell than my mother and nothing like us students. Her face wasn’t smiling.

I followed Geezis to the third classroom on the left. He sat in the back, nearest to the window. I sat in the desk next to him.

“Settle down, class. That’s it.” When everyone had found a seat, she continued. “Today, we have a new student.”

All eyes turned and found me. Some smiled, most just stared. I didn’t know why they were looking at me. I didn’t understand her words.

“Stand up. Yes, you. Good.” She pointed at me and I realized I didn’t have an option. I stood up. “Tell us your name.”

I stared at her.

"Your name," she repeated. Then, she pointed at herself. "Sister Agatha." Then she pointed at me.

"Migizi," I said. The other students laughed.

"Quiet down. I won't tolerate outbursts in my classroom." She glared at the offending students and I began to feel better. I liked that she stood up for me. "Come here," she said to me and waved at me to come forward and pointed with her finger to the spot next to her.

I shuffled towards the front of the class. I could feel every muscle and bone in my body. I could feel their eyes on me. I tried to think what I should say but my mind went blank. All I could see was her getting bigger as I got closer to her.

"As you are new here, I think you should introduce yourself to the class. I will start. My name is Sister Agatha. I will be your teacher this year." She smiled and then indicated it was my turn.

"My name is Migizi," I said, hoping I was using her words the right way. There was a little laughter, but not like before. I felt myself shaking and couldn't speak. I held up eight fingers. I don't know why they laughed at that.

"Very good, Mi—" Sister Agatha said. "But I think we're going to have trouble saying your name. How

about, from now on, we call you David? Would you like that?"

I was shaking a lot and just wanted to return to my desk. I nodded because it seemed that's what I was supposed to do. I had no idea what she was saying.

"Good boy. OK, David, you can sit down. Everyone welcome David to our school." As I walked back, she began to clap and everyone else joined in. I was feeling hot and my palms were sweating by the time I got back to my desk.

"Now, today we are going to review what we learned yesterday. Open up your desks and pull out your notebook."

I didn't have anything in my desk. I looked to Geezis and he didn't either. The woman didn't take any notice and kept on talking. I raised my hand.

"Yes?"

I held out my two empty hands.

She paused and then went to a cupboard on the wall and took out a blue notebook. She seemed to notice something as she took out a second notebook. She then took out two pencils and placed them on her desk at the front of the room. She nodded towards the pile and then at me. I figured I needed to pick them up.

When I returned to my desk, I gave one notebook

and one pencil to Geezis and kept one of each for myself. I reached into my pocket and gave him a handful of blueberries I had picked earlier. He smiled at me and I knew I had made a new friend.

*
*

“Are we supposed to eat this?” I asked when lunch was served. The rest of the morning had been uneventful. Sister Agatha talked at us and I tried to understand what she was saying. I sat in the back, so she didn’t see me. I wasn’t called. I was happy when the lunch bell sounded.

“Just wait,” he said.

“I’m starving,” I said. I put my spoon in and tried it. “Eww! This is *awful!*”

“Shhh. Just eat it.” Geezis waited with his hands in his lap. I didn’t understand why he didn’t try it. It was disgusting but it was still lunch.

“David!” The voice was loud. There were three teachers in the room now, all dressed in the same funny grey with something over their heads. The voice sounded like Sister Agatha. I guessed she was angry at one of the boys.

I took another bite.

“David!” The voice was right next to me. I turned

around and saw my teacher standing there, face becoming reddish. I looked around to see who she was yelling at.

“Sister Agatha?” I said with a small voice.

In response, she grabbed my ear and made me stand up. She then led me to the front of the room where the other teachers were standing. I could see the eyes of the entire school on me. I didn’t know what I had done wrong.

“I thought you were a good boy,” she said, loud enough for the entire room to hear.

I began to shrink. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to answer.

“I guess I was wrong. Are you a bad boy?”

I couldn’t say anything. I had begun to shake. All those eyes burned on me. And I had never had a strange elder yell at me before. If I had done something wrong, my mother or father would deal with me in private. She was still holding my ear and it hurt like nothing I had felt before.

“You know what we do to bad boys? We discipline them.” She nodded to one of the other teachers who took a long wooden ruler off the blackboard on the wall. I noticed that this room wasn’t just for eating. It was for teaching as well. It was like a very big classroom.

“Put your hands on the desk over there.” She pointed to the large wooden teacher’s desk as she directed me there by my ear. She let go and I put my hand to my ear. “I said, hands on the table.” The voice cut through the room and it became more silent than if there had been no people in it.

I put my hands flat on the table, fingers together. I didn’t see the other teacher until I felt the pain. She slammed the yardstick on my fingers. I could see it raised to strike again but I had taken my hands away. My fingers were in my mouth and I could feel the tears begin to swell.

“You are turning out to be a very different boy than what I had hoped. Hands on the desk. *Now!*” She grabbed my other ear and I didn’t know where the pain was coming from anymore. My hands hurt and, now, both my ears hurt. I did what she said and felt the wood hit my hands again. I began to cry.

“That’s enough, Sister Christina,” Sister Agatha said. The other teacher nodded and returned the yardstick to the blackboard. Sister Agatha turned to me and asked, “Are you going to be a good boy?”

I didn’t know what she was saying but I nodded. Agreeing with her seemed the right thing to do.

“Then go back to your seat.”

I did.

Chapter One: First Day of School

She waited until I was back in my seat and then she began to pray. All the other students bowed their heads and repeated what she said. I didn't know the prayer so I bowed my head and let the tears run slowly down my cheeks. I wasn't hungry anymore.

I heard Geezis say something to me after the heads were up and eyes opened. I couldn't understand what he said either. My head was swimming in anger, confusion, and shame for what had just happened.

"What?" I asked. It came out a little too loud and the students from the next table turned their heads. Geezis waited until their heads returned to their food before repeating himself.

"Your name."

"What about it?"

"You didn't respond to it."

"They never said my name."

"Your new name."

"I don't remember what she said."

"David."

"Oh," I said.

"Remember. It's hardest the first few days. Keep listening for it."

"OK."

"And the food."

"What about it?"

“Never eat it before grace.”

*
*

I deserved it. I know that now. I just didn't know the rules. I told myself I wouldn't break any more of the school rules. I was always a good boy before I arrived here. My parents told me that every day.

We had to pray after our meal and then form two lines to go and work outside.

“Just do what I do,” Geezis said.

“OK.” I followed him outside.

“Watch out for the fat one. The one with the red face. She uses the strap faster than anyone.”

I scanned the teachers and found the nun he was talking about. She wasn't shorter than any of the others, just fatter. I could see her laughing with one of the other nuns. “Why do they wear those strange clothes?” I asked.

“Those? I don't know. The sisters and Mother Superior wear funny clothes. Some of the brothers, too. But the outside teachers are better.”

“How can you tell?”

“You'll see.”

“Who's that guy?”

“He's Father O'Flaherty.”

“He’s also dressed funny.”

“I know. But never say anything or it’ll mean the strap.”

I tried to understand. When I arrived, before I met my friend Geezis, I had to give all my clothes and belongings to one of the brothers. They said I’d get them back when I left. They gave me new clothes. I didn’t mind. I looked like everyone else now.

“How come they didn’t shave *your* head?” I asked. I was still getting used to having hair that showed my scalp. I noticed all the other kids had the same type of cut—except Geezis.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The Father specifically told them not to cut my hair.”

I wanted to touch his hair. I’d never seen a boy with long red hair before. No one else in the school had red hair, not even the girls. He didn’t seem to mind and began to run towards the garden.

“Why are we running? They’re just going to make us work.”

He turned and looked at me and smiled again. His hair covered his face as he did so. “We want to get the best job.”

“What is the best job?”

“One where we can eat while we pick.” He sped up and we got to the edge of the garden at the same

time as the older boys. They looked to be either ten or twelve.

"This is our area, Jesus." He was four inches taller than Geezis and three more of his friends arrived by the time I got there. "You can deal with the potatoes."

"Why don't you dig for potatoes?" Geezis said. I stood behind him the way the other boy's three friends stood behind him.

The taller boy stepped forward and pushed Geezis. "Go play with yourself. We're doing the corn and the carrots."

Geezis launched himself head first at the older boy. All I saw was the flurry of red hair and his feet pushing. The older boy was surprised and fell over. Even some of his friends stumbled.

"You can stick your potatoes," he screamed. He then jumped on the boy and began punching his head. I still don't know whether it was from shock or fear that the older boy didn't fight back. I tried to look tough in order to keep the other three boys away, but two men rushed between us. They picked up Geezis and told me to join him. The other man grabbed the older boy. I found out later that these two men were called brothers Georges and Nicholas.

"What is this about?" The darker brother Georges said when he had pulled us apart.

“Ogimaa won’t let us pick the corn. Or the carrots. And we got here first today.” Geezis’ face was smeared with mud and his nose was bleeding. Other than that, he looked fired up. I stood taller with pride.

“Who?” Brother Georges had his hand on the strap.

“Matthew,” Geezis said, suddenly aware of who he was talking to.

Brother Georges swung and hit him on his bare leg with the strap. He hit again. No tears. He then hit the other leg. I saw Geezis grimace but held back the tears. “The first two were for the fighting. The third was for refusing to call your classmate by his name.”

I got one strap for participating and felt pretty good. I deserved something but at least it wasn’t three. I don’t think I could have handled it as well as Geezis.

“Joseph.”

“What?” I heard the name but didn’t know what he was talking about.

“You’re supposed to call me Joseph and not Jesus. If you call me Geezis, you’ll get the strap.” He walked back to where the potatoes were and we took the little shovel and began to dig.

“Careful not to cut the potatoes. You need to loosen the dirt next to the dead plants, then you get on your knees and feel for the potatoes.”

“OK,” I said. I didn’t comment on the names, but I saw what happened when the rules were broken.

“Just put the potatoes next to where you have dug. We’ll come back later and pick them up.”

“How did you learn so much about this?”

“Last year.”

“You learned a lot. I’ve never seen a potato except on a plate.”

Geezis liked that. “Nothing to it.” His leg was showing a big red welt where the strap hit him in the same spot. Mine wasn’t so bad. The bigger boys were stripping the corn and digging up carrots. I could see them sneaking some of the food into their pockets.

“They’re taking food for later.”

“Don’t snitch,” he said.

“Why not? They’d do it to us. Besides, I don’t want to break the rules.”

“The teachers have their rules and we have ours. Don’t snitch.”

I wanted to say something. It didn’t seem fair. I kept my head down and put the shovel into the ground and pulled on the handle. The ground became loose and I did it all over again. By the time the bell rang, we had done the entire row. We were filthy from the dirt but happy. I enjoyed it.

On the way back to the main building, Brother

Nicholas pulled me aside.

"You can't go back like that. You're too dirty." He had me by the shoulder.

"I can clean up inside," I said.

"Let me. We should be able to knock that dirt off you." He began dusting and patting me to drive off all the dirt. It worked. My T-shirt looked almost clean and my jeans were normal, except for some grass stains on my knees that wouldn't come out from that technique.

"Thanks!"

"Hurry up. You don't want to be late." He smiled and waved me back into the line.

Geezis had saved me a seat next to him for supper. We kneeled first as Father O'Flaherty said the prayers. He left us to the nuns and we all sat down. There were a lot of us there, all the girls and boys and all the grades. I was with the younger students as I was in Grade Three. The older boys sat together by grade. The girls were on one half of the room and we were on the other.

"I'm starving more than at lunch."

"Don't hold your breath."

"I don't care what it is. I'll love it." I was serious. I never came across a meal I couldn't eat.

Geezis looked at me with his elbows on the table.

We watched as the older kids got their food and returned to their seats. It was done by the table. We were last. I hoped there would be food for us by the time we got there.

"It's not so bad," I said as I sat down.

"Looks like yesterday's and tomorrow's and all last year's," Geezis said.

I took a bite. "Not bad. Meat and potatoes. I wonder if they used the potatoes we just dug up."

"Really?"

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say to that. I ate in silence for the rest of the meal. There wasn't any dessert. Sister Agatha led the prayers, while we knelt, after eating. We were then dismissed. We lined up two by two, as we did all day, and walked to our dorms. It wasn't far. We slept one floor up from the kitchen and dining room. The older boys and girls slept in separate dorms upstairs. The school was separate from where we ate and slept. I was happy about that for some reason.

"Can I sleep next to you?" I asked Geezis.

"Sure. Grab a bed and make sure everyone knows it's yours. You should be OK."

I looked at the single bed on the steel frame. "Don't we get any covers?"

"In winter, yes. I'm hoping they'll give us some

blankets now as well.”

“Don’t you get cold?”

“You get used to it.”

“Being cold?”

He smiled. I was starting to become afraid. It was the first time that I missed my home and my parents. I’ve been cold before, but I always had my parents to warm me up. And we had blankets. And a fire on very cold days. I could feel the concrete on my feet and the cold rising up into me.

“Everyone, time for prayers. On your knees. Good. Take your rosary out and recite the Apostles’ Creed and The Lord’s Prayer with me.” Brother Nicholas had come into our room and cast his eye over all the beds. His eyes fell on me briefly. I nodded. He smiled in return. I didn’t know what a rosary was or what they wanted to pray about. I decided to keep my mouth shut, kneel and hope no one noticed.

The concrete was colder on my knees than my bare feet. It hurt but I knew I had to stay down. I looked around and everyone was on their knees. They were all saying the prayer out loud. I felt ashamed that I was the only one stupid enough not to know it. I was determined to stay on my knees but it hurt. I looked at Brother Nicholas and noticed him looking at me. He must have known that I didn’t know the words.

“Back in bed. Lights out.”

He left without doing anything to me. I felt the relief as I sunk into my bed. I thought about the look on my parents’ faces when I left for school. I had never seen my dad cry before and he had just returned a hero from the war. I even saw the medal. But his eyes were brimming earlier today. My mother looked at me like her face was set in stone. I didn’t understand what they were concerned about. School seemed fine to me.

Chapter Two

Speak Only English

“The shadow is back.”

I looked to see what he was talking about.

“It rolls along the edge of the field, see?”

I didn’t see.

“Last year the shadow came *this close*.” He held his fingers a couple of inches apart.

I didn’t want to tell Geezis I couldn’t see anything. I didn’t understand, but he knew the school. I thought I’d wait. Maybe I’d see the shadow eventually. Besides, he had been in school for a year. I had only been going for a day.

“Swings?” He turned away from the same corner as the day before and ran towards the swings. They were usually full but we found one swing to share.

I watched him tuck his legs behind him as he went backwards and make them straight as he came down and up. His hair looked like fire in the morning sun. I wished I was more like him.

Earlier that morning wasn't easy. The brothers came in clapping for us to get up, pray, shower, and eat. We were now enjoying the few minutes before we had to go to the other building. I liked the dorm better than the school. At least I could learn the rules. School was something I wasn't sure I would be good at.

I got two turns on the swing before the bell went and we had to go to the classroom. I noticed Father O'Flaherty watching over the schoolyard from the steps of the school. I thought he was looking at us. By the time we got to the school, he had returned inside. I noticed Sister Agatha standing where the Father had been and she ensured we all got back to our classes.

"Settle down, class. Good. Today we will be practicing writing. I have written something on the board. Can anyone read it for me? You, Timothy, stand up."

She pointed to a boy in the class I didn't know yet. His face looked dirty, like he forgot to wash. His hair had been cut short, like mine. He wore almost identical jeans to me, with the front going all the way up the chest and back with clasps that held it together. He had a red shirt on. Mine was blue.

He stood without speaking, his eyes lowered.

"Timothy? Anything wrong?"

He said nothing. His face seemed to get dirtier as he stood there.

She let him stand and turned to us. "Class, this is an example of what you do not want to be. You need to be reading and writing by now. Is there anyone who can read this? David?"

I shook my head. I could barely understand the English she spoke. I heard her speaking some other language to the other nuns.

"Joseph?"

My friend stood up and looked intently at the board. "*Je ne comprends pas,*" he said. I turned and looked at him as though he had spoken alien. I then turned to look at Sister Agatha's face. I thought I saw a hint of a smile.

"*Assieds-toi, mon fils,*" she said. "You, too, Timothy. Sit down." She returned to the board in front of the class. "OK. So we need to go back to the basics. You will write out the alphabet in small and capital letters. We will then begin to put those letters together to form words. Can anyone tell me what a word is?"

A girl in the front raised her hand. I noticed her hair wasn't cut as short as mine.

"Everything is a word," she said.

“Correct,” smiled the sister. “We take letters and they create words. Words are what we speak when we talk to each other. We write them down so we can communicate with others—in books or letters.” She began to erase what she had written on the board and replaced it with the alphabet. There was nothing else in the room showing us how the letters looked.

The rest of the morning was spent doing that. I had seen my parents draw and write. They were respected in my community. When my dad joined the army, my mom would sing to me and we would play games. But, I don’t remember learning the alphabet. It was strange. Almost as weird as the strange language Geezis spoke—or that the sister replied in. I felt even more stupid that morning.

Lunch was exactly as the day before. Some soup with swollen bread floating on the top. We had a glass of milk because the men who were supposed to pick it up didn’t come. The cows produced milk whether they came or not. I was told getting milk was a treat and we should enjoy it. I did.

The afternoon wasn’t as fun as yesterday because we didn’t get to the garden in time. We were forced to gather the dead plants and hay. I don’t know if they fed it to the cows or horses or burned it. I just collected it. The only thing I enjoyed was being next

to Geezis.

“What language did you speak in class?” I asked.

“French.”

“You speak French?”

“And Ojibwe. My mother is Ojibwe and my father was French.”

I looked with renewed respect at my friend. Each time I learned something more about him, he seemed smarter and better than I had expected. “Did you father go to war as well?”

He lowered his head. “He died this summer. I heard just before I came back to school.”

I didn’t know what to say. He was the only person I knew whose father had died.

“And I speak English.”

I laughed. “I know. We’re speaking it now.”

He laughed. “Sometimes I don’t know. I like speaking French but there is no one to speak it with other than my family.” He didn’t say anything about the Indian language he spoke. I didn’t either.

We scratched the ground some more with our rakes before I continued. “What are you going to do without a dad?”

“I don’t know.” He started looking at the edge of the field like he did earlier. I couldn’t see what he was looking at.

“Are you now the head of your family?”

“I don’t know. I’m the oldest kid but my uncle and grandparents do most of the things that need to be done.”

“I have a grandmother who makes medicine,” I said. “She makes me go with her into the bush. I carry what she picks. Sometimes, she uses a knife and takes some of the bark off trees. Sometimes, she gathers grass or even branches of the tree. She gives it to me and we go back home. Then, she does something with it and it becomes medicine. Everyone says she is the best healer we could have.”

“We have someone like that, but he’s a man—”

Our conversation was interrupted with the sound of leather hitting skin. I realized it was my skin and began to cry. It was a delayed reaction. I didn’t realize I was hurt until I saw the brother standing over me with an angry face. I think it was the face I was crying at more than the hit. He also hit Geezis but he didn’t cry.

“You know the rules. No talking about those things,” he said.

“What are you—?” I tried to ask him what I had done wrong. Instead of a reply, I got another hit by the strap. I shut up after that.

“You are to speak only English in this school. You

are not to bring your heathen ways into this place.” His face was getting red as he leaned over us. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said.

“*Oui*,” Geezis said. Then he quickly corrected himself. “Yes.”

The brother glared at my friend and then me. Then he walked away. Everyone stopped to watch us being disciplined. I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me but it didn’t. It stood firm and held me. I felt the soil between my fingers. It felt good.

“Is that what Sister Agatha speaks?”

“French. Yes.”

“Is that why she likes you?”

“I don’t think she likes me,” he said. He started scratching the ground again with his rake. I didn’t ask any more questions. I didn’t want the brother to come back.

We weren’t allowed to stop working until almost five o’clock. It was that time of year. There was a clock in the dorm and I was taught by my mother how to read the clock when I was young. I noticed the other boys and most of the girls didn’t know how to read the clock yet. I just wanted to eat and go to sleep.

Dinner was the same as the night before. Boiled meat and potatoes. I started eating and was finished

before I knew it. I wanted seconds but the food was already all gone.

We still had prayers and I didn't like kneeling on the concrete. I did my best and didn't draw any attention to myself. There were extra prayers for the sick kids who couldn't come to class or work in the fields. I had heard them coughing but didn't think much of it. We all coughed once in a while. Geezis told me that some were so sick they had to lay in bed all day. I wished that I could be sick so I didn't have to go to class or work outside all afternoon.

We went to bed and I was pleased that they had brought covers. It wasn't cold but it was hard to sleep without covers. I turned to say goodnight to Geezis but noticed he was gone. I thought he must be using the toilet. I turned the other way and closed my eyes. I slept a deep sleep, content with the sounds of all the other boys sleeping in the same room as me.