

*Nicole Munro*

*Age: 17*

*Siksika First Nation*

*Bassano School*

*Bassano, AB*

## **These Walls**

1955

A piercing bang disturbed eleven-year-old Margaret from her dream. She had been dreaming of her grandfather and of sleeping under the stars. She had only been able to see him once during the short time she had off from school. Margaret dreamt this dream every night, a tiny shred of hope still existing inside of her. However, after the monotonous days of endless work, this shred of hope was quickly vanishing.

“Get up!” snapped a woman dressed in black.

Margaret did not react to the harsh tone; her friend, Lisa, complained on the first day about getting up so early and was punished for it. Margaret did not dare mimic her friend’s actions for fear of being punished herself. Instead, the girl silently obeyed the nun, got on her knees and prayed, and then got in line and marched down to the dining hall.

Two days to go, Margaret thought as she made her way down the hallway with the other girls. Friday she would be able to go home after school. The residential school was so far away that the trip would take two hours.

“Sit.”

Margaret hid her dismay as she took a seat next to Lisa. Breakfast arrived and Margaret ate quickly. Next, Margaret and the other girls were led to the kitchen to wash dishes. The nun stepped out of the kitchen and Margaret released a sigh as she put her hand into the warm water and grabbed a dirty dish.

“You missed a spot,” Betty pointed out rudely.

Margaret frowned, but said nothing. Her best friend, Lisa, however, shot back, “She isn’t finished. Leave her alone!”

Margaret knew she was capable of defending herself in a less harsh way, but unlike Lisa and Betty, she had not so easily grasped the White Tongue. It was difficult to learn, understand, and speak it.

Suddenly, a wet rag hit the side of Margaret’s face and she shrieked without thinking. Betty had taken her own rag and had thrown it in Lisa’s direction. Margaret had been in the way and, by accident, she dropped the plate she had been washing. There, by her worn-out shoes, lay the shattered pieces of the dish.

Betty stood there with a blank stare and Lisa pointed at Betty, saying, “Look what you did!”

“*She* dropped it!” Betty retorted fiercely. “She’s going to get it, now!”

Murmurs of agreement came from the other girls washing dishes. All of them had experienced some form of punishment. Margaret had eluded punishment by always doing as she was told. Not just because her parents and grandfather had told her so, but also because they knew being extremely obedient could keep her safe.

Hearing a loud gasp, Margaret spun around to see the nun, who had returned, clenching her fists. “You broke a plate!” The nun’s voice was like thunder.

Lisa tried to help her friend. “It was not her fault –“

“Silence! Go back to work,” the nun ordered sharply and grabbed Margaret’s wrist. “Come with me, wretched girl!” Margaret winced at the icy tone, as she was half-dragged to the hallway. Turning her head to the girl behind her, the woman’s eyes burned with annoyance. “Do you know what happens when you break things? And to think some of the other nuns thought you to be the most civilized of your kind!” They entered an empty classroom and the woman went straight for the desk at the front, yanking a drawer open, reaching for the...

The girl’s eyes widened as recollections of what the other girls and boys had said, swirled inside her mind.

*She got me real good, but I held it in.*

The woman turned around to face Margaret.

*Don’t cry ‘cause you’ll just get another one.*

The nun grabbed Margaret’s wrist, forcing Margaret to stretch out her fingers until her palm could be seen. “Maybe this will teach you not to break dishes!” With that, the nun swung a leather strap down hard on the girl’s hand. Unprepared for the sharp sting, Margaret’s eyes watered and a small cry escaped her throat. The nun’s brow knitted more fiercely than ever and gave Margaret the strap again. This time, though, Margaret tried for the life of her to hold it all in. The old woman paused, then: “That’s better.” She pushed the girl roughly towards the classroom door, “Now go!”

--

During recess, Margaret sat on the grass behind the school, hidden from all the other children, clutching her hand. Even though the pain was long gone and the redness was fading, Margaret felt that her mind would never allow her to forget the ordeal.

Constantly, she reminded herself that it was normal – everyone else got the strap and it was only a matter of time until she did. But no matter how hard she tried to shut it all away, the bitter memory of the strap had etched itself inside her brain.

Confident that only the outside walls of the school could hear her, Margaret allowed the tears to fall and she cried, quietly, wishing she were home with her parents and her grandfather.

“How dare you?” a female voice sputtered from an open window above Margaret’s head. Curious, she choked back a sob and went silent as the grave.

“I said, ‘Don’t call me that!’” another voice yelled. Margaret could not believe her ears – it was Charlie! “I’m no savage!” Charlie shouted again.

Margaret hugged her arms around her body as she heard a sound she would never forget – the sound of a body being slammed against a desk.

“What happened?” It was a voice different from the first two. Now all Margaret could hear was muffled conversation and she idly wondered why the nuns had lowered their voices.

However, at long last, she heard the first voice say, “Wipe the blood and bandage his head. He’ll survive.”

Her blood suddenly ran cold as ice. Poor Charlie ... Margaret held her breath as she began to crawl away slowly. Her heart beat so wildly, so deafening that she was sure everyone would hear it. I have to go, she thought.

Running away wasn't her only option, but it was the option that seemed most logical as opposed to keeping quiet about what she had heard. No one would believe her anyway. Who would believe an eleven-year-old girl? And Margaret certainly did not want to stay any longer. She had to leave. When she swept the back hallway in the evening, she would make her move.

--

"She was running in the ditch," Raymond explained, a friend of Margaret's family. "I stopped the car and told her to get in. She was crying."

Margaret's father nodded, grateful for his friend's help. "Thank you, Ray."

In her parents' bedroom, Margaret sat with her mother. "I'm so sorry Margaret, her mother was saying, "Your dad called them and told them to let you come home, but they said no."

Margaret sobbed as hard as she could on her mother's lap. Her grandfather was dead and buried, a memory of the past and she hadn't even been allowed to attend his funeral. That Friday night, nearly thirty days ago, had been the very last time she would camp outside with her grandfather under the stars.

--

1980

"Can we see *The Empire Strikes Back*?" six-year-old Benjamin asked his mother. "It looks cool!"

Margaret looked at her son, smiling. "I don't know..."

“Please, please!”

Margaret was about to say something more when she heard the school bus coming, a bus that would take Benjamin to a non-residential school.

Swallowing hard, Margaret bent down and kissed her son on his cheek, much to his annoyance. “Aw, Mom!”

“I’ll be right here when you get back,” Margaret said softly, “Be careful.”

Benjamin grinned. “Bye, Mom!”

She watched the bus until it was out of sight and went back inside her house. After she shut the door, Margaret fell against it with a shaky sigh, remembering that fateful day. Would her son go through the same thing, even though it was not a residential school? If he did, would he let her know about it?

Unexpectedly, Margaret began to cry. Only the walls would hear her; they had heard her many years ago and they had seen what had happened to Charlie.

If only the walls could talk.