



Stephanie Wood

North Vancouver, BC

Squamish Nation

17 years old

The Indian in the Child

"Mr. Speaker, I stand before you to offer an apology..."

He stood before the people, after a strong applause. Their skin was dark and worn with the reopened wounds of their past.

"...a sad chapter in our history."

A sad chapter. It was a sad chapter. One that would not be forgotten, not among the broken people. Not among the children and grandchildren born of them, born into a life still in lasting affect of this "sad chapter".

Residential schools.

To this day, there is still something foreboding in the name. Born over a hundred years ago, drifting into death only twelve years before this speech.

They were made to convert.

To control.

To civilize.

Those were the goals.

"Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture."

There was a girl, Lucy. She had long dark hair, brown eyes, high cheekbones, and the rich skin of an Indian. She was very small.

It had happened calmly. At least, calm compared to the incidents where children were physically forced from their homes. Her parents had been threatened. She'd had her things packed. She'd left her parents, with her sisters. It had been alright, at first.

"You'll be living on school premises. You'll be speaking English."

What was he saying?

"Úx-"

Slap.

Oh, that's what he meant.

She was given a white uniform, a dress, and separated from her sisters. For how long this would go on, she didn't know.

"Most schools were operated as 'joint ventures' with Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or United churches..."

First thing Lucy noticed was that many of the children looked sick. She wondered why they were continuing to go to class when some were dead-white, glassy in sweat. Soon she saw that it was the teachers that were making them attend. She asked a girl beside her what it was that was making them sick. The girl didn't know. Nobody did. Yet it seemed almost as if these children, hot and weary-eyed, coughing and thin, were disappearing.

"Tragically, some of these children died while attending residential schools and others never returned home."

Second thing she noticed was the teachers were powerful. Three traits were common: Firstly, they often knew nothing of their subjects. Secondly, in causing anguish to their students the foolish instructors seemed to relish. Thirdly, they resented her culture, and none of them cared about her. She tried to make a promise to herself not to give in, but their methods were persuasive.

A teacher asked her what her nationality was.

"Skwxwú-"

Whip.

"Skwxwú-"

Whip.

"Squamish. I am Squamish."

"The government now recognizes that the consequences of the Indian residential schools policy were profoundly negative and that this policy has had a lasting and damaging impact on aboriginal culture, heritage and language."

It was the end of her first year, she was going home for the summer, and Lucy could speak English. Lucy could write English. Yet somehow, in the midst of her forceful education, the ability to grasp her native language had nearly left her. She would spend mornings trying to dress herself to conceal the bruises spotting her skin so her parents would not see, and trying to reconnect with her sisters.

Needless to say, that summer at home was very quiet.

They were sent back to school. Attendance was obligatory. Lucy spoke English and wrote in English and she had Catholicism pushed upon her, the white man's ways suffocating her and slowly filling up her insides, so her original self and heritage had no room to remain. Throughout her education Lucy had nuns whip her and priests hurt her.

"...overshadowed by tragic accounts of the emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect of helpless children."

Lucy left when she was fifteen, and she felt hollow. She had lost her native home and family; she was not a part of them nor they a part of her. They spoke different languages and had not seen each other for more than two months at a time for years. They'd gone on without her. She had no hope, nor a place that she was needed. All the years of being treated as if she were purposeless and worthless had ground the notion into her brain. Her life felt like an aimless trail of pointless being; her faith was lost. The weight of nine years in Hell pushed down upon

her until all she could do was crawl, shuddering through liquor and smoke and anger, all of them makeshift walls against her horrific memories, feeble attempts to forget.

"The legacy of Indian residential schools has contributed to social problems that continue to exist in many communities today."

Who would care? Lucy thought. Who could help? No one. She had no place. Anybody she knew was the same. Into her adult years, Lucy got married and had five children with a man who'd submerged himself into alcohol. She tried to raise her children right, but lack of a proper parent or even a person of authority made her an uneasy mother. It was during this time that she stopped hiding and letting herself wither away.

"I need you to take them to school."

Silence. He had beer in his hands, and strewn across the floor. His eyes were glazed and empty in the glare of the television. It was nine in the morning and he had not slept.

"I need-"

"Shut up, alright? I'm not taking those useless things to school."

"I'm work-"

"Shut your stupid mouth. I don't care."

And so she stopped. She'd been interrupted before. This was not a place where abuse would not be endured. This was a place where it would not exist. Not for her, and not for her children.

Who would care? Children for their mother, and a mother for her children. Keeping them from their father was the one thing she could give them to make up for her vain attempts at parenting. After leaving her husband, she had three of children live with her mother, and in that time married a man who could share a future with her rather than a shadowed past.

"It has taken extraordinary courage for the thousands of survivors that have come forward to speak publicly about the abuse they suffered."

Lucy was a mother. In time she became a grandmother, and throughout her life she had managed to chase away the darkness that had lurked in her mind. She treated her grandchildren

with love and tenderness. She made up for her unstable mothering by being a caring and gentle grandmother, and held her family as the basis of her life. Maybe this, she thought, keeping her family together and simply loving them, was the place that she'd been looking for.

"You have been working on recovering from this experience for a long time and in a very real sense, we are now joining you on this journey."

To kill the Indian in the child. That had been the ultimate goal. To remove the culture, the language, the beliefs and leave the children as a shell with all but the appearance of the white man, inflated with the ideas of the self-proclaimed dominating race. The grey-haired, influential man stood at his podium in a dark blue suit with an apology typed up before him. The past is past.

In the end they may have killed the child in the Indian, but the Indians live on.

"God bless all of you and God bless our land."

Author's Statement

I chose to write about this event, the apology of residential schools on behalf of the Canadian government, and incorporate it with an individual story about the experiences of a survivor who attended a residential school. I chose this angle for my short story submission because I think that the formation and disintegration of residential schools had a major impact on the culture and the survival of the aboriginals of Canada and their culture. People were broken when attending these schools, and whether they had the strength to put themselves back together again or were too impacted by the abuse to gather that strength, it impacted the presence of the culture. Many aboriginals today do not know much about their heritage or are involved with the language or the traditions that it entails. Elder aboriginals are struggling to maintain the presence of the native culture in their families and pass on the language and the traditions and the story. I think it is important to acknowledge the pain that natives have gone through because of residential schools, and the lasting impact it has had on the families, the survivors, and the culture in general. We must continue to fight against the issues that have continued to this day, like relying on welfare

and getting addicted to alcohol and drugs, or getting involved with violence. It was an tormenting experience that people of the culture will never fully recover from emotionally, but can try to build up their society and heritage again within their families and the community.