

Stand Strong

by Kawenni:io Lawrence

I wish I had known it would come to this. Ever since that first shot rang out, I knew we were in trouble. But not this much.

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The summer has faded away into September, taking the warmth with it. Who knows how long we'll be sitting here protecting our rightful territory from the hands of the greedy? Protecting it from being turned into another golf course?

"Shania?" I am pulled back into reality when I hear the deep timber of his voice and the soft blanket he places around my shoulders.

"Yeah?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Huh?" I glance up at Jonah and while his words register, I find my voice. "Oh. Yeah, I'm fine". I turn back to the fire, before his eyes make me spill everything I am thinking about.

We sit quietly around the fire and watch the golden flames perform their dance. Once again the quiet night is filled with arguing. On both sides. I can see that beneath the smile, my brother Chayton isn't really happy. He and Jonah sit here playing thumb war. Chayton tells Jonah "You're losing to a five year old!" There is one thing though that Chayton's big eyes can't conceal: the worry and fear about Baba. It scares me too. If another gun war breaks out, Baba could end up like that SQ Corporal, leaving us without a father. It scares all of us. We can't just leave. We have to stay. Fight back. I look over to Chayton, his little body resting against Jonah, head on his chest. His eyelids fluttering open every few seconds, struggling to stay awake. His legs in army sweatpants dangling to the side.

Jonah notices me looking at him. He whispers in Chayton's ear, "I think it's time for bed, buddy". Just as I'm about to get up and take Chayton to the tent, my mom jumps in offering to take him. Before I can deny the offer, she already has him in her arms. "Don't worry Nia, I've got it". Winking she points her chin towards Jonah before walking off to our tent.

I feel that familiar pinch on the underside of my arm, and know immediately, Jonah is in the mood to bother me. "Stop it, you're gonna give me another bruise".

"Sorry", he replies before pinching me again, softly this time. "Come with me, I wanna show you something".

I turn around and look up, but Jonah is already running into the pines. Away from the warm glow of the fire, his tall broad-shouldered frame is swallowed by the darkness of the night.

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It's silent by the water. No more yelling between the army troop and our warriors, no more laughter one second, and the snapping of a rifle clip the next. Just comforting silence.

The crack of a twig under someone's boot makes me jump. Blood races through my veins, while my eyes frantically search for a place to hide. "Relax, it's only me", whispers the familiar rough voice. A sigh of relief escapes my lips. "You scared me," I whisper back looking into his dark eyes. His soft black hair falls over his forehead. And those eyes, dark pools, always shining with spirit and mischief.

"Yeah, had to go back for my rifle," Jonah tells me.

"So, what'd you want to show me?"

"Look out at the water. Beautiful, ain't it?" I peel my eyes away from him to look at the water, and he's right it is.

The moon, our grandmother, shines over the black water. Slivers of white reflect off the surface like the silky hair of corn. In the distance: the silhouette of the two mountains which give our community its name: Kanehsatake. Lake of Two Mountains. It's calm here. Serene. Beautiful.

It's strange how such peace can be found in the middle of chaos, like Christmas day in the midst of World War One. No fighting, no hatred. Strange to realize that happiness and hope can present itself in the worst of times. Strange that sadness can occur while somewhere in the world a mother is overwhelmed with joy at the first sight of her newborn's precious face. Strange how it all comes down to this.

The very waters I look at: I caught crayfish here as a child. I am separated from it by the sharp razor wire that the army has set up. Caged like a dangerous animal.

I wonder when it is going to end. I want to go home.

These pines have always been here for us. Planted by the hands of our ancestors. They provide protection, for not only us but for the animals that have made homes in them. If the government wins, what's left? An empty lot with grey buildings? If they win this it is just another step towards assimilation. Another home lost.

I am crying now. Jonah wraps his strong arms around me, as my salty tears soak into his shirt. He keeps the pieces of me together, preventing them from exploding and flying whichever way. The steady warm breath from his whisper on the crown of my head comforts me. "I know, I know, shhhh, we won't let them win".

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We are walking out peaceful, all forty of us, singing a traditional peace song. Syllables strung together, dancing which interlocks us all. Carrying our message up to the creator.

Hi-Ioo-Hi-Io-Ha-Hi-Ioo-Hi-Ia-Hi-Io-Ha-Hi-Io-Ha-Ia

We have no guns. They were burnt earlier today. September 26th.

We-Ia-Ha-Ia-Ha-We-Ia-Ha-Ia-Ha-Io-We

Suddenly I'm thrown to the ground. By a soldier, I think. I can hear Chayton's piercing cry somewhere near me, but I can't see him. He was supposed to be with Jonah. He was in his arms last.

Jonah. My mother's scream for her baby. Swearing. Screaming. Crying.

A rough hand on my face pushing me down. Cement scraping my face. I glimpse Chayton alone, his big brown eyes filled with tears just watching me.

A knee on my chest. I can't breathe. More hands reaching and clawing at me. Pinning me to the ground. Pale hands belonging to the soldiers. Where's Jonah?

Someone yelling. "Get off her". Jonah. "Get off her".

The knee is gone. A warm hand, this time it's Jonah's pulling me to my feet, only to be dragged to the ground himself.

Chayton, where is Chayton? I find him still crying where he was last; I call to him and reach out for my little brother. He's now in my arms, safe again. I'm thrown back to the ground. I can't see the face; I just kick at whoever it is with Chayton in my arms. I won't let them take more from me. I feel something warm trickle down my face. I wipe it with my sleeve. It's red. Blood. I'm bleeding.

I hear laughter. Who could be laughing?

I kick again. This time my foot strikes something. I don't have time to look as I scramble to my feet. I am frantically searching for Jonah. He is on the ground. Arm twisted the wrong way. He has five soldiers on him. It's him laughing. Of course it would be him. They're telling him to give up, but he just keeps laughing. I see the flash of a knife behind them.

"No", I scream. Again I'm thrown to the ground. Chayton under me, my head smashed down and held there. Chayton is protected under me, but then he's gone, pulled from underneath. I can see Jonah nearby getting handcuffed, lifted off the ground like a fugitive. My own arms are yanked behind my back and handcuffed as well.

I can see again. Chayton is screaming, pushing at the soldier holding him, desperately trying to get away. His small hands reach for me, like the boogiemer is taking him away forever. I can't move. I'm pushed and pulled forward by the soldiers and led to a bus. They load us on one by one. Chayton is put on before me, and then I'm shoved on. Chayton's crying has settled to sniffles and hiccups now that he is in my lap. I cannot wrap my arms around him to put him to sleep, the best I can do is have him nestle his head into my neck.

Outside, Jonah is still laughing at the soldiers, who are dragging him to the bus. They order him to shut up. Give it up. It's over. Before he is shoved onto the bus, one of the soldiers orders him one last time to shut up.

"We win." One of the soldiers smirks.

Something catches Jonah's eye behind the soldier. A subtle movement. The red warrior flag is blowing in the breeze.

A last act of defiance: laughing in the soldier's face, staring him right in the eye, Jonah asks, "Really. You win? We're still alive, aren't we?"

Author's Statement

I chose to write my story about the Oka Crisis which happened in 1990. Although, I am from the Mohawk territory of Kahnawake where the actual crisis did not happen, I still feel that it is an important issue because, not only was my community involved indirectly, but so were my parents. Through writing about the Oka Crisis I was able to show how even in today's society, we are continuing to lose what little we have left. Also, it demonstrates the strength of Native people within Canada and that when we come together we are stronger than the people who try to put us down.

My characters are fictional, but the way that they were treated is not. There was in fact, a young girl who had been put to the ground by one of the soldiers, and there were parents and children separated during the chaos. Nonetheless, it was an event that no one in my community will forget. We will not forget how unfair we were treated, because of people who wanted to make a profit.

With my story I want to raise awareness of the difficulties that the Mohawk nation went through in those short months. Also I want people to know that when you are united you stand stronger than a brick wall, rather than getting knocked down like dominos: one by one.