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Peguis

18 years old

Scars, stars, beacons, and new beginnings

The clock on the far wall indicated that lunch was soon to arrive, signalled by the routine bell in fifteen minutes. With each agonizing second, the hands on the clock crept toward 12:30 pm. With my pencil tapping on my notebook, an exasperated sigh escapes my lips. Usually Mr. Gary's class kept me mesmerised drinking in each second. I adore English class, but today my distraction holds an exception; it is June 11, 2008. This day marks history, and I believe will help shape the future. Although summer break is close, it is far from my mind unlike my classmates. They are buzzing with anticipation of the hot summer months ahead; I am abuzz for a whole other reason. Something quite remarkable has just happened. A formal apology regarding the subject, and events of a great scar in Native-American history: the Residential Schools.

“Waubosse” Mr. Gary said in hopes of gaining my attention.

“Waubosse!” He yelled aimlessly. I was still off in my own world.

“Wau- Ms. Roux!” his final bark had caught my attention, and my head snapped in his direction in alarm.

Any regular individual would probably wonder why this man- Mr. Gary- was yelling white rabbit in Ojibway in front of a grade eleven English class. However, anyone who knows me, knows it is my name; Waubosse, meaning, white rabbit.

“Y-y-yes?” I stuttered in reply.

“Can you please tell us three central themes of Macbeth, or were you to busy daydreaming to be able to identify them?” He said this with a smirk plastered on his chubby face. Instantaneously heat rushed to my face in embarrassment, and as I gazed around me I sensed everyone was watching in anticipation of my failure.

“Death, tyranny, and most importantly, corruption.” I was pleased to have concealed the nervousness I felt by a more definite tone in my voice. Luckily, everyone fell for this white lie.

He gave no other reply than an exasperated grumble of, “eyes to the front please.”

His vexation was clearly written on his face, echoed by my twenty six peers around me. I smiled despite this. The bell rang overhead, followed by the horrid sounds of scraping chairs being disturbed by desperate students trying to reach the door, and escape Shakespeare’s Grasp. I was just as eager today. Macbeth had a strange and sad parallelism to the subject I could not get off my mind today. I find my mind dancing around Prime Minister Harper’s apology, and what it means for my people. I know it has significantly moved my community, and many have said this apology was long over do, although, it is also welcomed with tears of heartfelt acknowledgement. Regardless of this I can’t help myself from thinking, where do you go from such hurt? I am personally living out the consequences of such hurt and devastation upon a culture. My traditions and cultural ways are so dishevelled as a result of the residential schools, and it is incredibly hard to see a way back to them. Not only has my life changed, but the lives of all Native people, and history overall. The permanent damage can be seen, and felt through the generations, especially those who were directly affected, and still suffer as a result of afflictions against them. Like Macbeth’s tyranny had struck his people, religious, and cultural tyranny overshadowed my people in the recent past. A sudden descent which has sent us falling so hard even my generation has risen winded, and dizzied.

Sadly this is not the only similarity. Bloodshed, and death, coupled by corruption seduced this nation not long ago, all for one thing: power. I often loose myself in daydreams wondering what it would be like if there was no residential schools, no industry, or manifest destiny. When I am in that place, I can’t help but think of all the cultural richness that I would never touch, or be a part of. If only we were an untapped glory, and what would it be like to live off the land in sublime harmony? Bloodshed and death is still seen today, as a result of the past. Only now, it is seen in our own self destruction through addictions, and suicide. This saddens me the most, especially as my own grandfather took his life by the bottle. I cannot begin to imagine his pain, as he too, was kept against his will at one of the many residential schools. My grandmother went to residential school as well, in addition of many family friends; so many people, in such a great amount of pain. I feel it when my grandmother cries, I feel it when I see my people drink, and do drugs, when I see another teen suicide in the paper, I feel it when I am discriminated against, and when others are discriminated against. Caught in a vicious circle, we as a people feel so much pain.

I was knocked back in to reality once again, this time by physical pain. My knee caught the corner of one of the cafeteria tables sending a radiating shockwave travelling up my leg. I inwardly cursed myself for my clumsiness and altogether awkwardness as I headed down another hallway. High school is hard enough let alone being different, and that is exactly how I feel: different. Besides my total lack of social graces, it is hard sitting in the classroom looking around you and observing the wall of visible minority/majority. Perhaps I am the only one who notices it, however, I still feel different. Not to mention the overall oddness of my name, which also singles me out. I am often more than cross with my mother demanding she let me change my name, and why she would even consider naming me something so ridiculous. My mother on the other hand, besides being totally offended, adores it, and thinks it makes me stand out, special even. During this argument she would always recall the legend from which my name originated. It came to tell of a young girl who on a vision quest was invited to walk the Shining Trail, which extended from the earth skyward, to a far off point in the sky, exceeding the distance of the farthest star. Waubosse then met three spirit beings, and one called Bright Blue Sky. Though she did not see Bright Blue Sky, she was told several things which both confused and mystified her by their meaning. She then awoke from her vision, and a moon entered her lodge. It too spoke to her, and it was not until later that she had discovered the true meaning behind the moon, and Bright Blue Sky's words. Waubosse had been given the power to heal, and see the future.

Although the name is deeply rooted with my culture, and helps define me, I feel it is too grand for me. Maybe my mother was wrong; maybe I was named after the wrong white rabbit. Perhaps I am better suited named after the white rabbit that Alice had followed, which mistakenly landed her in a topsy-turvy world of whimsy. Maybe my mother was completely wrong, and I was more likely suited to the character Alice. Lost and lonely Alice caught up in wonderland, looking for a way home. Yes, this makes much more sense than the grandeur of my real name, which unfortunately complicates things. The white rabbit may have been late, but at least he knew where he was going. I am just poor lost lonely Alice, relentlessly chasing after my rabbit.

The school day dragged on as did the long discussions over today's events at the dinner table, and as dusk had finally set, and the moon and stars dominated the night sky, and I went to the

one place where I found my escape from reality. Climbing out my window and onto the shed, I carefully lifted myself onto the roof of my house. I settled onto the rough shingles, and pulled my legs up to my chest, and took in the night air with a long deep breath.

My gaze turns upwards to the stars above, which shine like bright, burning beacons in the darkness. Despite the coolness of the night air nipping at my exposed skin, I can't help but feel a sense of comfort. Healing may not come today for my people, or for several after that, years perhaps; but what I know, and feel as I gaze up at the stars is that my ancestors are there with me somewhere above in the spirit world. What the feeling is, is a small but powerful comfort living in this wonderland, and knowing as long as my heart beats, there is hope of a new beginning in the youth and future generations. I close my eyes and begin my silent prayer for strength to come to my people, and that one day healing may come to our nations; brothers and sisters strong again. I know life is not fair and there is a lesson for all of us, to each person their own song to sing, but Creator light the lives of the people. Let shine a light out of the darkness, like the bright stars above, to guide and protect us, so we may emerge in a humble vindication.

History has proven cruel no doubt, but what sets us aside from the feeble is our willingness as a whole to rise up against adversity. And so we will rise, this I promise myself as I whisper to unforeseen greater forces, “mígwetch Kitche Manitou (thank you great spirit), all my relations.”

Author's Statement

I was often told by many of my teachers about how important it was to understand the past, as it directly affects the present and future; however, nothing would have prepared me for challenges the past has created for my generation. These challenges have inspired me to write a story about how we as native youth have been affected by the residential schools, and the daily emotional, spiritual, and cultural struggles faced. In addition to these struggles is the overall identity crisis many aboriginal youth battle with. I wanted to capture the missing links, and sadness the aboriginal community has as a result of the residential schools the best way I could: through experience. I envision as aboriginal individuals read this story, they may relate to one or more aspects of it because of the monumental historic event, which has shaped daily life, as well as my story. “Scars, stars, beacons, and new beginnings”, focuses on a bright new future overcoming

the past. What is more powerful than devastation from past events? Overcoming adversity, and it is my hope that the community can come together to heal recent wounds into scar tissue. Still seen and felt, but not the desperate pain and power, which it held in the past.