

Between Worlds
by Sunshine O'Donovan

q^woq^wzám - Invite death

“Flirt with death, invite death [by doing certain inappropriate things, such as impersonating a mourner, giving one's name when a young person, bringing fir or hawthorn boughs into house, weeping, cutting one's hair].” - Thompson River Salish Dictionary

I was always a girl with great curiosity. I wanted to learn everything there was to know. When I asked my elders something, they would smile silently and shy away from my questions. They wanted me to learn by experience. Oh, how that would frustrate me!

When the trucks came that day for my sisters, my brother and me, we didn't know what was happening. I didn't want to leave my mother, but the police said I would go to a place of learning. All I'd ever wanted was to learn. When my siblings and I left, they wouldn't let our mother hold us. My last memory of her was her shaking body as the truck drove us away. After the bumpy ride in the open truck with other children, my brother was separated from us. I called out to him in our language, but the nun hit me.

She took my sisters, some other girls and me to a room. I remember thinking how clean the room looked: white walls, dirtless corners, the stark light. The nuns brought out scissors, but I didn't know what those were. They were so shiny; nothing natural, not even the stars could twinkle as they did. I watched intently as the scissors went closer to my skull. Then I heard a snip and felt a tickle on my neck. I looked down to the floor and saw a clump of my hair.

My breath hitched, then my eyes started to water. This was going against our teachings. Was I fated for a short life? My younger sister saw my tears and she started heaving too. That day I saw many children cry. It was the sorrow one never forgets. It was crying turned to wailing; tears, snot and sweat mixed together like mud and sticks pulled into high water in the spring river. I pushed the nun away, but she pulled my hair to control me. By the end of that day, all the children's heads were shorn and bowed. When the nuns cut our hair, they invited death to come for us.

I kept on learning. After a few months, my younger sister died from coughing up blood. I kept on learning. I joined choir. After a year, my older sister disappeared. It was hushed, but I heard that she and the baby died after a complicated birth. I don't know if they were buried. Or where. Still I kept on learning. I joined Irish dancing. My brother, who could never talk to me because he was kept separated in the boy's side of the school, tried to escape. They caught him, but I never heard anything about him again. I learned to never cry. I became fluent in English.

I didn't forget. Whenever I could, I snuck down to the burial ground, hoping I'd find the right places where my siblings lay. I prayed at every mound. Not the “Our Father” prayer, but one in the language I thought I had forgotten. I was still alive.

When I was of age, they said I could go back to the reserve, or I could try university. I chose university. I was the only one who still lived. I survived to make my life count.

I wanted to see my mother before learning separated us again. I took a bus to the town and then walked home to the reserve. I stepped up to the wooden screen door. Inside my mother was fanning herself with an old envelope. At first her eyes looked tired, then they flashed with recognition, “cke?e ke?”

steyt"? *Are you hungry?* I just stood there. She repeated her invitation. When she saw that I didn't understand, she placed a bowl of salmon soup in front of me. For a long time we just stared at each other. She hardly knew English, and I had forgotten nle?kepmxcin.

Finally, she murmured "whén us nke ł nscméyt"? *I wonder where my children are?* Her gentle face told me what she meant, even if I didn't recognize her words. The guilt stormed inside me as it had when each of my siblings left me without saying goodbye. Tears stuck in my eyes and would not fall. I shook my head, and told her in English that I was going to the city for more schooling. Her voice argued in words I didn't understand, which made it easier for me to go. When I turned to leave, I felt a worn and calloused hand close over mine. We hugged, and I left. She died before I saw her again.

I studied education at university because I liked learning. After graduation, I searched for a teaching job, but the people hiring said I didn't have the needed experience. I wanted to wander the world to learn, but I ended up back home on the reserve teaching primary grades at the new school there. I met Ernest at the band school, a white teacher with long hair. During lunches he glanced in my direction, but never sat near me. Finally, I walked up and sat down beside him. He was quiet, but he made me laugh. We married a month later. He never mistreated or left me, even though we were unable to become parents. When childhood returned in my dreams, he awakened me from the nightmares.

It felt good working with the children, but they brought back hard memories. When I saw a child coughing hard, I'd shiver. Sometimes when I looked out the classroom window, I saw the playground swing moving, even though the pupils had all gone home and there was no wind. When we were children at residential school, my younger sister had told me that playing on swings made her feel she was between worlds, between the ground that couldn't hold her and the sky that didn't want her. My siblings visited my dreams, speaking to me in our parents' language, in words and meanings I'd now forgotten. I was so much older, yet for a long time I was unsure of what was needed. Then I heard from an aunt that my mother had asked the school to return her children's bodies to her, but she was refused due to the cost of shipping. I couldn't bring all those children who died at the residential school back to their families for a proper burial. I couldn't even bring home my own family from the place of fear. At best, I could honour my sisters and brother, so that they wouldn't be stuck between worlds.

On an Easter weekend, Ernest and I drove to the deserted residential school. Our old truck was full of fencing, paint, and flats of marigolds and zinnias. I didn't recognize the hitchhiker we picked up, but when he heard where we were going, he offered to help us on that sunny day. The men fenced the overgrown burial ground, while I weeded and planted the flowers. I wanted to put rocks on graves, but I still didn't know where to put them. So once again, my sisters and brother and the other dead children were left anonymous. My family was still hollowed out, between worlds, with no ceremonies nor mourning songs.

The man must have had his own dead relatives in the graveyard. When we had completed our work, he began to sing a mourning song in our ancestral language. His voice keened high and travelled with the wind. It pulled the grief up from my heart and into my eyes which finally shed their stinging salt. When his song ended, I hugged Ernest and sobbed a childhood of tears.

Wind brought the acrid smell of smoke. We looked around but couldn't see the hitchhiker. We heard the roar of the school dormitory burning. Embers flew to the sagebrush, where wind fanned small flames. The sage smoke billowed and cleansed us. It lifted suffering and left peace in its place. Raindrops began to fall. Grateful, we paused before leaving. Ceremony had helped us to find our way home.