



A PROJECT OF THE DOMINION INSTITUTE

Wild Flowers

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Rose opened her eyes to the sight of a great building. The bus pulled up and parked alongside, and she looked up at the wall of windows and brick in astonishment. Lights all along the exterior of the first floor lit the building, throwing light up high to the third floor. The school was alive in its size. It made the sky seem like a puddle. She sat up straight, and wriggled her cold toes and fingers. The 10 hours in the poorly heated bus, and its climb higher and higher into the mountains had filled her stomach and head with nausea. As she stepped off the bus, in a line herded by the bus driver, she pulled her eyes away from the school and scanned the grounds. Tall, untended grasses and weeds stretched towards thin forest and were coated in the night's frost. Darkness and dim nothing touched the horizon.

Rose clutched onto the sack her mother had given her before boarding the bus, and used it to block the cold wind from her throat. There was dry meat and bannock inside, and the canvas still held onto the bitter, musky smell of porcupine quills and moose hair.

Settled into a hard cot that night, Rose listened to other girls chatter in the darkness. Some spoke Cree, but most spoke Slavey, and she listened to them make jokes about the nuns in their stuffy dresses. Rose listened to the wind wrestle with the large windows at the end of the room. She tried to stay as still as she could, and squeezed her thighs together. They had been ordered to urinate before bed, but the stalls and crowd of strangers in the bathroom had made her bladder lock up tight in self-consciousness. Now it was ready to burst and she was using all of her energy to will it away. She let her breath out in tiny wisps into her pillow.

Hours later, Rose awoke to the shrill sound of a bell and realized she had wet the bed. Humiliation pounded through her ears. When she refused to stand up, Sister Florence wrenched her out of bed and discovered the mess. Instead of having breakfast, she was stripped naked in the shower room. Rose shook with cold, and stared at the tiled wall. She sputtered against the water that fell from the ceiling above her - it was colder than any rain she had known, and it tasted metallic. The Sister forced a bar of soap into her hand and gestured for Rose to rub it into every part of her body. It smelled like moose fat. She closed her eyes and imagined her mother's smokehouse flooding with water.

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It was a bitterly cold November afternoon, and Louis was waiting for his turn to play stick hockey on the ice rink in the boys' yard. He paced along the fence, running his stick along the open grooves. The loud, grating noise of it satisfied his frustration.

"Senáneh" A girl, his age, was sitting on the girls' side of the fence on the edge of a snow bank with her teeth bared in a grimace. Her hair was cut into a short bob that grazed her earlobes, the style forced onto all girls at school, and her honey-brown



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cheeks were blotchy with cold. Her lips, sitting open, were topped with a perfect cupid's bow. She turned her back to him and went back to fidgeting with something on the ground between her legs.

Louis leaned into the fence. "Sorry." He needed for her to turn around. "What you doing?" He needed to look at her face again.

"Get lost, you crazy Bush Indian." She swatted in his direction.

Louis felt a giggle rise from his chest, and his stomach relaxed into a lazy puddle. He was happy to be anything she wanted to call him. "What's your name?"

"Rose. Why?"

"I'm Louis." Everything about her felt like a book being read. Something someone had to have written about already. She had dark eyes and cheekbones sitting high in chubby cheeks. "You need help with something?"

Rose's face grew soft. "Could you teach me how to make fire?" She showed him a handful of broken twigs. Her fingertips and palms looked raw. "I'm trying, but nothing is happening."

"Ná." He held his hand out towards her, and she stuck the twigs through the squares of the fence and into his palm. He rubbed one between his fingertips. "What do you need fire for?"

"If I'm going to make it all the way back home, I'll need fire to keep me warm."

"You're going home?"

"I tried to get into the storage room with all our stuff from home, you know the coats and gloves they took from us, but it's locked. So it's even more important for me to learn how to make fire to keep warm."

Louis lowered himself onto his haunches, and rested his elbows on his knees.

"Well, I know how to make fire. I could teach you."

A smile shot across her face and she scooted herself right close to the fence. She leaned forward. "Or you could just go with me. Tonight's movie night, so everyone will be in the basement. We can sneak out and just follow the highway out of the mountains."

Hunched over, on the other side of the fence, Louis realized that he was close enough to smell her. Her icy breath fogged into his face. It smelled like soup, mixed in with a smell of oily, flowered soap that he imagined must come from her hair. It was the best smell in the world. The idea of wrapping himself around her made him feel his heartbeat in his pelvis. "Is your town very far?"

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While a projector roared in the basement, illuminating a room full of rapt faces, Louis was layering socks. His own pair, marked with his identification number 19, was the first layer of three other pairs he stole from the dirty laundry. He used his wool blanket as a sack, and he filled it with extra clothes, paper for kindling and crusted bread and beans that he saved from dinner. He was growing more and more nervous, thinking of the cold winter air outside and the darkness they would walk through.



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He walked softly down the stairs, with his breath held in his chest. Each impulse to go back, empty his sack, and crawl into bed was drowned out by a new and vibrant image of Rose sitting across from him.

"Young man!" A high voice screeched, just as the lock on the front door's knob clicked open. The door was stuck with ice around the edges. The nun yanked hard on the back of his coat and it knocked the breath out of him.

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Rose wasn't at morning Mass. No one had seen her. The entire day stretched like a path through muskeg. His feet dragged and he had to struggle to keep himself standing straight. During Afternoon Mass, Louis listened to the Father drone on, and felt his muscles flexing and jumping in panic against the cold wood of the pew. He focused on the shaved head of a boy in the row in front of him. He watched a single louse cross his skull in a slow, steady path from one side of his head to the other.

The door to the door to the chapel opened right after Holy Communion, just as the last pews of students returned to their seats. Sister Florence hurried to the front of the chapel. She whispered something to Father David, and his face blanched in reaction.

"Children. stay in your seats." Father David was a balding French man with thick glasses. He followed the nun out of the room.

Louis stood up and made his way to the chapel door, almost tripping on the kneeling post. He peered into the hall and followed the sound of voices coming from upstairs. He sat near the top of the staircase, peeking through the banisters. Father David and the Sister were huddled by the front door, along with Mr. Galibois the Indian Agent.

"RCMP got the call two hours ago. A trucker saw her on the road, a few miles from here. Sent me to handle it" Mr. Galibois's voice was raspy, but soft in the middle. "Should I take her to the hospital in town?"

Louis placed his hands in his lap and stared blankly at the bundle of cheek and blanket lying at their feet.

"There's nothing can be done now. You have to take her to her family. Bring her home." Louis could see the side of her face. Her skin was pale, as if she had been rubbed just slightly with dust, and her lips were pursed shut.

Everything seemed to stop then.

Louis was sent to a different Residential School the next fall. It was over a thousand miles from the fence and his conversation with Rose, but no farther than a night of sleep without dreams of her.

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A newborn whimpers and squirms in her tight papoose of hospital blanket. "Shhh. Momma's trying to sleep, Rose." Louis reaches for her in his sleeping wife's arms, grasps her under the shoulder and bum, and draws her to his chest. He cradles the baby into his



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armpit, lets the feathery weight of her rest on one arm and curls the other arm around her. She has slanted eyes, tiny rounded nostrils and a little bow atop thin lips. A tuft of dark hair swirls atop her head and her skin is a soft pink. He loosens one arm free from the fleece blanket and sprawls out her hand with his index finger. Tiny fingernails catch hold of the deep lines and rough texture of his skin. Water runs across the smooth film of his eyes. He blinks, and tucks the blanket back around her arm.

He walks slowly to the window and looks out into the hot, July afternoon. The maternity ward is on the second floor, at the back of the hospital, and a field of grass sits below. Bumble bees and a dragonfly flutter past the window; one hits the pane with a little tap and buzzes back on its way. Patients, in crisp hospital robes, smoke on benches king beds of yellow flowers. They squish their cigarette butts into a tin ashtray with a twist, and squint through the sunlight at one another as they speak. He focuses on a barbed-wire fence in the distance that separates the hospital lot from a forest grove. It's old and bent forward, its top rung reaching toward the weeds.

Louis closes his eyes and imagines drifts of snow washing across the window sill. A heavy, brilliant white packs down the field grasses below and weighs down the tree tops. A young girl appears through the haze of swirling snow. She swings a canvas sack, back and forth, and stops to smile at him. Her eyelashes and the hair framing her face are frozen into crystals. Her cheeks are perfect circles of pink. She gives him an impatient wave with her glove and motions for him to hurry. Then she is swallowed by a flurry of snow, and the frozen world outside begins to melt as the edges as his lids open.

"Rose," Louis looks into the newborn's face. "I promise to teach you everything I know."

Author's Note on Wild Flowers:

A few years ago, I was hired by my band as an assistant to the Residential School Healing Project. One of our greatest goals was to create a book using a compilation of survivors' stories and artwork. This process aimed to help in the healing process for each storyteller, to bridge the gap of understanding for younger generations, and to preserve a part of our history that might otherwise be lost. Through reading their stories, I was given the opportunity to better understand what my grandfather, mother, aunts and uncles have been through and how it has shaped who they are today. It has given me an even greater sense of respect for the strength of those who came before me. I am a member of the first generation not to go to Residential School in my community, and acknowledging that comes with a feeling of responsibility.

there is nothing we can do to fix past sorrows, but we can honour them by emulating their strength in our own lives. As to where the inspiration for Wild Flowers came in, I must say that the stories of the Survivors in my family and community have made a huge impact on the way I see the world and on the kind of stories I want to tell. I



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was also inspired by the movie *Where the Spirit Lives*, which I loved when I was little girl, but whose implications I never understood until I grew up.

"Unresolved trauma from residential school abuse continues to impact individuals, families, communities and nations and will do so until it can be expressed, validated and released in healthy, creative ways." -Aboriginal Healing Foundation