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Waabigwan

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Waabigwan

Cover Page Footnote

This piece was written and workshopped in 19W. This piece has a content warning for trauma.

Waabigwan

The last time I saw my father, I saw him cry for the first time. Usually stoic and composed, he'd broken down into a pile of sobs and goodbyes. My mother stood nearby, silent. Stiff. Her expression was a blank page, a stark contrast to my father's look of panic and mourning. It scared me. I don't know. I don't remember it very well anymore. I don't even remember how their voices sounded. I wish remembered them well enough to miss them.

The trip was long. A jumble of uncomfortable feelings. Dry mouth, a lump in my throat, and the overwhelming silence. The men who took me didn't speak to me, just mumbled to each other occasionally. I couldn't understand them anyway.

Snip, snip. My mother cut her hair short once, when her brother died. Those months reeked of grief and heartache. I didn't understand it, but I watched her get sick. My father took care of me, then. He taught me how to fish, even though he didn't have to.

Snip. A harsh white woman cut my hair roughly—up to my jawline—the first day I arrived at Carlisle. I wondered if I would get sick too.

I tried to speak, but I was answered with a silent reproachful look. I stared at the strands of brown hair collecting on the floor.

They took the clothes my mother had sewn for me. I stood alone in a room for what felt like ages, naked and vulnerable, before the white woman returned with a plain gray dress. She did the buttons on the front and called me by a name I'd never heard before. *Mary.*

My first meal all those years ago looked exactly like the one in front of me right now. It's a strange color, not quite brown or gray, but a vile hue settled somewhere in the middle. It's lukewarm and repulsive, really, but we all get used to it at some point. Today, though, I can't eat it. My stomach twists, unsettled, unsure. I wouldn't be able to eat anything right now, but especially not this.

"Mary," says a feeble voice from my right. I glance at the girl next to me. She gives me a concerned look, guiltily glancing down at my food and then back at me.

"I'm not hungry." I try to smile, checking for onlookers before quickly trading bowls with her.

"Thank you," she whispers, grinning gratefully. I only nod.

My work in the field seems to last forever. Sweat coating my forehead and neck, I pull up the weeds in between the crops. Other girls work on the same task nearby. The sun beats down on us unforgivingly, making us long for the winter months when our work would be mostly needlework. The top of my head is burning hot. I should have forced down some food earlier. My hands and knees are shaking and I have to pause to breathe when I know they aren't watching me.

This goes on for three hours. My working clothes are filthy by the time I go back inside, stinking of Earth and fertilizer and sweat. I don't wash them right away, just toss them aside for later. I pull on my gray dress and do the buttons swiftly before rushing to the infirmary.

Emma is awake when I arrive. She's sitting up, her fingers slowly knitting together what looks like a pair of socks. Almost finished. She opens her mouth to greet me, but she's interrupted by a violent coughing fit. I snatch a few tissues from the table beside her and hold them near her mouth. She takes them, body trembling with the effort. Her face is pale and red.

"It's okay," I tell her.

"It's okay," she told me the day I arrived. We were just kids. Just girls.

It was time for bed. We slept in rows, on stiff mattresses that creaked with every movement. The room smelled like day-old wet clothes.

I was supposed to be sleeping a while ago. The woman said some things before she left, turning off the lights on her way out. I couldn't piece together the meaning until I saw the other girls lying stiffly in their beds. It was time to sleep. My mother had had a bed time for me, too.

The silence was too much. I thought of my father, cupping my face and holding his forehead against mine before I left. All at once, I crumpled. I pulled the thin blanket over my head, trying to muffle my weeping. My shoulders shook hopelessly. Tears pooled on my pillow and for a minute I could barely catch my breath.

A hand rested on my arm. I jumped, sniffing and wiping my cheeks. There was a girl kneeling by my bed. She looked a little older than me. Her hair was cut short like mine and her skin was the same deep brown as the rest of the girls'. She had a familiar face for a stranger.

"Hey," she said softly.

"Ni—" I began. I stopped, struggling. "Ojibwemowin?" I asked.

Her eyes widened. She shushed me, looking at the door anxiously.

"No Ojibwe," she shook her head sagely. "Speak English here."

At a loss for words I had yet to learn, I sat quietly, tears still falling out of my eyes without my permission.

The girl gestured at herself. "Emma." She pointed at me and raised her eyebrows.

"Ba—" I stopped again. I racked my brain for the ridiculous name they gave me today. "Mary," I said finally.

"Mary," she said. "It's okay."

Emma squeezed my hand. She stayed there for a little, sitting with me while my breath slowed and the tears stopped coming. She didn't know a thing about me, but she would be my best friend from that point on. She taught me how to avoid punishments, how to pray in secret, how to survive in the big white school.

I wish I could teach her how to breathe.

The coughing seems to last forever. Emma's eyes are watering and there's blood on the tissue she's holding to her lips. Her cheeks are hollowed and there are bags under her eyes. It seems like she's become so small in just a week.

I hold the back of my hand against her forehead. Still hot. Not as hot as last night. The fever was bad last night.

Emma catches her breath after several minutes. She looks almost disappointed in herself for needing to cough at all. I relax a little, settling onto the stool beside her bed. She closes her eyes for several seconds, clearly trying to regain some composure. I don't know if I should tell her how weak she looks right now. She would hate it.

"Thomas—" she starts. She takes a breath and tries again. "Thomas died last night."

I'd heard. A lot of us have gotten sick in the past year. A lot of us have passed. They just keep bringing in more kids, though. Thomas was only five. Bringing him here was just as violent as shooting the boy in the chest.

"I know," I tell her. I reach for the nearly-finished socks in her lap. "Who are these for?"

"Whoever they bring in next," she says. "These are for a new girl. Sometimes a pair of socks can change your life."

I chuckle, running my fingers over the soft yarn. I think of my first day and decide that Emma's right. These socks might have changed my life. I set the work-in-progress back on her lap.

Emma hugs her shoulders. Cold, I bet. The nurse said no more blankets, though. Not with that fever, she said. I get her a cup of water instead.

I've been at this school since I was six, cowering under the jurisdiction of a few greedy white men, but I have never felt this hopeless. I wish we had just gone home.

Some did it. About a week after I was brought here, two boys snuck out after dark and weren't heard from again. I like to think that they made it home.

I take Emma's hand and squeeze it. I pray quietly, in English, and hope the Creator can still understand me. I can't speak my language anymore, but I can still remember my real name. *Baapi Makwa*. Laughing bear, I think.

We sit in silence for a long time. It's too hard for her to talk right now. Everything has been said—Emma just needs rest. She has to heal. Eventually, she falls asleep. I listen to her fast, uneven, wheezing breaths and an indescribable fear settles in my chest.

"Visiting hours are over," says Sister Gertrude from the door. I look back at her and see pity in her eyes. It's infuriating.

I sigh and look at Emma. I move her hair out of her face. Her skin is warmer now.

"She's getting worse," I tell the nun shakily.

"I'll give her something," she tells me. "I'll be with her all night."

I'm exhausted. I shower and hope I fall asleep quickly, but I don't. I toss and turn, terrified for Emma. She means everything to me and I can't do anything to help her right now. I'm useless in this fight.

Days pass, just like this one. I go to class, I work, I sit with Emma. She gets worse.

"Aren't you supposed to help her?" I snap at Sister Gertrude while Emma has one of her coughing fits.

"There's nothing else I can do," she says without looking up.

She dies around four the next morning. At least, that's what they tell me. I wasn't there. They don't let me see her afterward. I don't know where they took her.

Everything comes to a stop that day. Everything is still. I can't feel my legs, not really, but I find myself walking to a supply closet upstairs anyway. Emma showed me this room a few months after they told her that her parents had died. It's always been a place for us to be alone. I'm missing class, though. I wonder how they'll punish me for it.

The wooden door clicks shut behind me and I fall to my knees. I'm quiet—I know how to be quiet now. No more hiccupping sobs like that first night. Tears stream down my face and it's hard to breathe, but I barely make a sound.

I reach for the shears on the shelf next to me. They fit comfortably in my hand, like they've been waiting. I hold them up to my head.

Snip. A chunk of my hair falls to the floor. I cut off a little more, this time closer to my scalp. *Snip*. My hair was already short, so I cut off as much of it as I can.

It's patchy when I'm done. I know it looks bad. Someone will shave off the rest for me, I'm sure.

I pick up a few strands, curling my fingers around the brown locks and holding them to my chest. I wish it were Emma instead, but this will have to be okay. It's okay, I think. We always dreamed of going back home. She finally did. Being left behind is excruciating.

It doesn't feel okay after that, though. Maybe when my hair grows back.

They let me have the socks she made. The next girl who comes in is just nine years old. I kneel next to her bed that night and hold her hand. She can't speak English yet, but she takes the socks and hides them under her pillow.

They call her Anna, but her name is *Waabigwan*. Something stirs in my brain and I remember its meaning. Flower.