

# 494

I heard three knocks hit the old wooden door from inside the closet. The police came to check if any children need to be taken to the residential schools. Mother always tells me that I'm lucky that I've never been to one. Both my parents were taken away to residential schools when they were young and returned to find their family dead. I could hear my mother's voice telling the officer that no children were inside the house, but he did not seem convinced. Suddenly, I heard loud footsteps heading my way. *Will I get taken away? Will the same thing that happened to Mother and Father happen to me?* The door creaked open, and I looked at a man and noticed that he was wearing army attire. It was the officer.

The officer dragged me towards the door. He slammed it open, put me in his car and drove off. Finally, after about an hour, I saw the school, it looked exactly like how my mother had described it. It was huge and the bricks were a bone-white colour. There were several windows. I walked to the grand entrance, and it was indeed grand. I stumbled through the entrance and was greeted by a young-looking nun. "Welcome to Fort Vermilion residential school. What's your name?" The nun had an unusually high-pitched and innocent voice. "Shania Huaman" I mumbled while trying to cover my red puffy eyes. "Walk with me." the nun said emotionlessly.

We walked through the halls until reaching the girls' shower room. I entered the room and was greeted by another nun who took me to a dirty shower. The nun started rubbing and scratching against my skin with very hot water.

“The colour isn’t fading” the nun groaned. I realized she was talking about my skin colour - she was trying to rub away the dark muddiness and replace it with a pure white. I felt ashamed, I was always proud of my colour, but now I wish it was gone. After washing me, the nun told me to turn around. She picked up scissors and started cutting off my hair. My long hair had always been so special to me because my father told me the longer your hair, the greater connection you have to the land. I could feel the connection to my land and culture being lost.

The Nun showed me the way out to the room I would be sleeping in. The room was packed with other girls wearing the same dress with the same short straight hair. We all looked the same- I couldn’t even recognize myself. I headed over to a bed and sat down on the rock-hard mattress. I began to contemplate if I should try to escape before anyone noticed. Eventually, I got too tired and fell asleep.

*DING DING DING.* In the morning, a Nun came in and pushed everyone out of the room and told us to head to the cafeteria. I took a seat next to an older-looking girl that was in tears. I got up and grabbed two bowls of porridge for me and the girl.

“Are you okay?” I asked the girl impatiently.

“I wish I could say yes.” the girl quickly replied.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I want to go home.” the girl muttered; a rush of tears fell from her eyes.

“I know I wish I could leave this horrid school. What’s your name?” I asked.

“My real name is Aiyana.” she responded. Aiyana and I sat in silence for the next few minutes.

Later, we were all told to line ourselves up so that we get our numbers. When my turn came a nun handed me a paper with the number “494” and a schedule. She told me that 494 was how people were going to refer to me.

On a late December night, I woke up and Sister Mary was next to me.

“I’m so sorry to tell you this, but your friend passed away.” She whispered. I gulped - she was talking about Aiyana.

“What? How did this happen?” I was confused. She took a deep breath.

“Diseases run wild in these schools. It’s already killed so many innocent children, and Aiyana was just another poor victim”. Tears ran down from both my and Sister Mary’s eyes. Even after the devastating news, I was confounded because she was calling Aiyana by her real name and not her number.

“I just have a question; is there any way I could visit Aiyana’s grave or just say bye to her for the last time?” A hurricane of tears fell from my eyes.

“I wish you could.” Guilt filled her face.

“I need to leave, no one can know I was here or that I told you any of this. Sister Mary left and shut the loud metal door behind her, which woke up several of the girls. After

she left, I cried for the remainder of the night and hid my tears during the day so that I would not get in trouble.

As the snow started to disappear and the once broken and fragile trees became lush and green, everyone became hopeful. Everyone patiently anticipated the release day of these so-called schools. It was a prison disguised as a school. I should have been happy, but instead, I was fearful. Only God knew what was awaiting me when I returned home. The possibilities were endless - ranging from good to bad, but somehow only the bad ones seemed to cross my mind. Each thought more frightening than the last. I felt as if it would be better if I didn't find out. However, chances were that my parents were still home waiting for me, and I could never leave them.

Finally, the day arrived; we were released! We were told that our parents would be waiting for us outside the building, however, when we left the building, no one was there. I waited for hours until suddenly the thought hit me; *maybe my family was gone*. I tried silencing my thoughts and decided to wait an hour longer. Eventually, the sunset and all light were lost. I had to find my way back myself. After walking for several hours, my legs began to ache and my throat was a drought, but I continued.

As I entered the village and crossed the small river, the sun rose, creating the most beautiful orange reflection in the river. I would have never thought about who was sending me a message through the sky. I looked around at the unbothered birds flying on top of the river. I arrived at the front door. I knocked on the door. No answer. I

knocked again. Still no answer. I went over to my neighbour, Okwi's house and knocked on the door. She answered immediately.

"Hi sweetheart, how are you?" She asked with worry.

"I'm good." I said anxiously.

"You might want to come inside; I have something to tell you." I stepped inside their house and removed my shoes. I walked on the crooked wood floors and sat on the off-white living room couch.

"Your mother... she passed away. Your father, he was taken away." she explained with guilt.

"WHAT? HOW DID THIS HAPPEN? YOU'RE LYING." I screamed in denial.

"Your father asked me to take care of you. I don't know where he went." she said solemnly. I stayed silent as tears filled my eyes.

"Follow me." My neighbour quietly showed me the way to my room.

She welcomed me into the large clean room. It had a warm citrus smell and a beautiful view of the river. I gave her a warm long hug. I was relieved that I had someone to care for me. When we reached the room, she gave me an old leather notebook.

"This was your mother's notebook" she whispered.

"Thank you" I replied. I remembered seeing Mom return home with a notebook the day before I left.

I went into the room and Okwi closed the door. I placed the notebook on the stained brown desk. Terrible thoughts stormed my head as I began to think about how

my greatest fear came true. I would never connect with anyone the way I did with my mother and father. My childhood, family, and feelings were taken away from me.

I needed somewhere to put my bottled-up emotions. I looked at the notebook and walked over to the desk. I sat down and began to write. Once I began my ideas ran endlessly. I would usually write fictional stories about a peaceful future where First Nations can appreciate themselves, however, one day, I decided to write about my experience in the residential school. I wrote about everything I was feeling, and when I finished writing it, you will finish reading this story. I wasn't a human, I was 494.