

When We Were Alone

By David A. Robertson

We went over to the back gate. There were vines covering the gate, and they reached all the way to the ground. When my kókom turned to fix the latch, I saw that her braid hung almost as low as the vines. It was like she had a tail.

“Nókom, why do you wear your hair so long?” I asked.

Nókom said, “Well Nósisim...”

When I was your age, at home in my community, my friends and I grew our hair long, just like our people have always done. It made us feel strong and proud. But at the school I went to, far away from home, they cut off all our hair. Our strands of hair mixed together on the ground like blades of grass.

“Why did you have to wear your hair like that?” I asked.

“They didn’t like that we were proud,” Nókom said. “They wanted us to be like everybody else.

But sometimes in the spring, when we were alone, and the grass had grown so long and thick in the field, we would pick the blades from the ground. We would braid them into the short hair they had given us, and we would have long hair again.

And this made us happy.

“Now,” Nókom said,” I always wear my hair very long.