

The anguish of separation has never pulled at my heart more than it has now. After all, being separated from my own family was a thought that had never crossed my mind. Why would it ever cross my mind, let alone someone else's? The yells of desperation from my parents and the cries of the children beside me made it difficult to keep my composure. My endless amounts of attempted reassurance to those who were younger than I made it seem near impossible to prevent the situation any further. Just how exactly was I supposed to uphold my expectations of being a leader, my own goals to keep everything under control when something as inhumane as this was going on?

The kiss I got from my mother and the hug from both of my parents were the last. My eyes looking at the land belonging to the Wabanaki, the Passamaquoddy, my own home, my tribe, was also the last. I was being taken away by men who were dressed in a different way than I was. There was this one particular man who held my wrist with a firm grip, pulling me away. He wore a shirt that seemed like flannel, these odd straps of leather that were attached to his pants, the pants having a tan color, shoes, and short, blonde hair. I wanted an explanation as to why this was happening, but what would I get in return with that simple of a question?

I am only 12 and my long hair has always been my sense of pride. Whenever I say that I mean that it's always been the thing I'm proud of. It reflects Mother Earth's long grasses and my sense of physical strength, power, and virility. It demonstrates my soul. As I stared forwards at the building in front of me alongside many other Wabanaki children, those that stood in front facing us were white men that had looks of disdain. Judgment. We never made open acts of judgment towards them, so why are they giving it to us? What did we do?

Saint Mary's Catholic Indian Boarding School. We were located on an Ojibwe reservation in Odanah, Wisconsin and this school housed many of my people, including me. As we were taken inside the building, the first thing we could see was women dressed in long, black robes having the same face of disdain we were shown by the men outside. They all always looked so mean towards us and all we even did was walk. We didn't speak, we didn't make any gestures, we didn't do anything. I never would've thought that the year 1935 was going to probably become my worst nightmare.

I had been taken by a nun and separated from the group like many other people were. I wasn't exactly sure where we were going, but it had seemed like we were heading to a room. She introduced herself, it seemed, but I couldn't understand what she was saying. My knowledge of the English language was very little, so her introduction became null to me. What was an introduction if I could not understand? I had been sitting down on a stool in front of a mirror, the woman grabbing what looked like scissors. It wasn't too long until she raised them into the air, snipping away at my hair. I had quickly hit her hand away in a desperate attempt to leave it alone, but all I got was a hard, painful slap in my face. She aggressively grabbed me, making my body stationary as her nails dug into my shoulder like a claw. It hurt. My shoulder, my face, my sense of pride, everything hurt. She continued to cut my hair until it was shaped like a bowl haircut, my once long hair being shorter than ever. My soul was cut.

As time continued to go on, my sense of self was continuously being chipped away as I could no longer tell who I was anymore. Every day, we would sit down in these classrooms, constantly being lectured about the habits and arts of civilization. We couldn't speak our native languages, we couldn't practice our culture, we couldn't do anything that we were previously able to do every day on a normal basis. Every time I try to converse with my classmates and just have a simple conversation, I was beaten with a long stick simply for speaking the only language I could understand. My native language was prohibited and I was practically made mute.

I was taught along with everyone else how to speak English, or at least I tried to learn. It was difficult and so different from my native language, but it was so pointless trying to argue. I couldn't ask for help whenever I needed it because I couldn't speak English and I couldn't speak my language. I couldn't speak at all, so all I had was my inner voice and the hopes to even continue to learn. I was being forced to learn the ways of American civilization and how to be a man. A white man. Whenever I looked out the window, I would see the cemeteries outside of the kids I had seen before now six feet under the dirt, no longer living because of the endless amounts of abuse, scarce sense of food, and poor medical attention. The parents would come around, leaving in tears as they read their child's name on the stone where they now laid. It was cruel, all of it. Why couldn't I end it?

After I was 17, I spent 5 years in this school trying to withstand the environment. My only goal was to get out of here and go help my people whenever I could in an attempt to put an end to whatever was going on, hoping that it would all come to a complete stop. The classroom I sat in had many empty desks, which would sometimes be filled with new children, replacing those who once sat there and either left or laid along with the others in the school's cemetery. Some were unmarked, some were. How painful must it be to not know if your child is alive if you haven't seen them in years, but their name isn't in the cemeteries? We were forbidden from having any contact with our families at all and I hardly remember what my parents look like anymore. I can't remember their voices. I can't remember mine.

The accent I used to have, the native language I used to speak, the practices I used to do, my culture. All of it was gone. I had short hair and wore a uniform that took a military-like style and my English was perfected to the brink. I had been now sitting down in front of a camera, which pointed directly at me as I was instructed to face in a certain direction and pose a certain way. My tanned skin was the only thing that reminded me of who I was, but as soon as the woman behind the camera clicked a button, a bright flash shined my way as the picture then snapped. The flash was so bright that in the picture, my once tan skin was now white and bright. It was gone. On the outside was a mask of a successfully turned white man, but on the inside was me I remembered. My culture, my native language, everything was still there on the inside. The only thing I can do now is hope. Hope that I can help my people as much as they helped me.