Residential School Nightmares by Zach Toohey- Indigenous Arts and Writers-2006 writing winner

(Age 15 -Mohawks of Kanehsatake- Ratiheń:te High School -Kanehsatake, Quebec)

Jackson Nelson sat up, drenched in cold sweat. He had just had a nightmare again, the same one he’s had since he was 11. He glanced around the room, his eyes wide as dinner plates. He’s gone to countless psychiatrists, even going as far as hypnosis. Nothing had worked though.

 ”What’s wrong honey?” his wife asked.

”Oh nothing, I’m fine,” he replied.

”Okay,” and she rolled back over and drifted off to sleep again.

Jackson walked to the bathroom and rinsed his face in cold water, and went to lay down again. *Why did it happen to me*, he thought as he went back to sleep.

He felt awake now, but his surroundings were vastly different. Instead of his white-and-beige room, he woke to a flickering light, and barely illuminated grey walls and carpet that looked older than him. He heard a sharp pounding on the door.

“WAKE UP!”

He didn’t dare respond, but silently got dressed. He heard the deadbolt on his door click, and he saw Sister Chloe walk in.

“Get out here, now.”

He hurried out, but she tripped him as he was walking out.

“Now why’d you do that, dumbass? Come with me after roll call, I need you for something.”

Oh no, what’s she gonna do? He looked up and heard “John Richardson…. JOHN RICHARDSON, GET OUT HERE!” He saw them open the door, but they didn’t need to unlock it, because it had been broken that night. John (Jackson’s best friend) had told him the day before that he was going to get out that night or die trying. So apparently John had escaped this hellhole. Surprisingly, they actually cared enough to call the headmaster, but they also went on with the roll call.

“Jackson Nelson!”

He looked up at Sister Lisa with fear in his eyes, and she just laughed and walked away. Roll call finished soon after that, and he waited for Sister Chloe in the hallway.

Sister Chloe came and got him after about 5 minutes.

“Come with me, I have a surprise for you!” Due to Jackson’s naivety, he actually got excited about what was coming, because he didn’t know the evil that was in this woman’s heart. They went down the stairs to the basement, and then they made a beeline to an unoccupied room. She slammed the door.

“SIT DOWN!”

He practically dove into the chair, scared out of his mind. He had the guts to ask her, “What kind of surprise do you have for me?” in a very quiet, shaking, almost mouse-like voice.

“Oh a very good one, you’ll like it.” She opened the closet door and pulled something out. Jackson couldn’t tell what it was when she first got it out, but he could tell it wasn’t good. As she walked closer, he made out what it was. It was a whip! “Stand up,” she said. He stood up, shivering, feeling like he was about to faint. She wound up; his heart was about to burst out of his chest. The whip made contact, and obviously, a young boy’s skin and a whip are not a harmonious union. No matter what solution would come to him, nothing would work, the blows kept coming. Ribs, back, stomach, back again, will it ever stop? She kept whipping and whipping, eventually the pain became too much. His eyes became cloudy with tears, and he screamed, louder than he’d ever screamed before, a scream for absolution. Between all of the whippings, and the strength it took to utter that scream, he passed out, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

He awoke right back up though, as she was carrying/dragging him up the stairs. The fear shot right through him again, and he fainted again. When he finally regained consciousness, he was sitting on his bed, with Sister Chloe standing at the door.

“If you tell a soul about this, so help me God I’ll whip you until I can see bone. Go to class.” He proceeded to go to his classes, and then went back to sleep that night, having a nightmare about the mornings events.

The next day, he woke up before the sun was up. He just sat up in his bed, shaking. About 3 hours later, he heard Sister Chloe outside of his door, unlocking it.

 “Wait for me again, I’ll come and get you.”

They went through roll call again and he was called, but was scared, shaking like a leaf as he waited for Sister Chloe. This time was different however because Sister Lisa was with her.

“Come on, it’s okay Jackson.” Instead of going to the basement, they went upstairs, to Sister Chloe’s room. Sister Lisa locked the door behind them, and they both started beating him. He wanted to hit them back so badly, but he knew it would have to wait, because it would be futile with how strong he is now. How would I, an 11-year-old, be able to fight off a fully-grown woman? He stayed awake all night, thinking about what he would do. Finally he decided he would break out, like his best friend did. He wasn’t quite sure how he would do it, but figured that anything would be better than this. He went out to roll call, and Sister Chloe told him to wait again, and he did. She took him down to the basement, but he had thought this through now. She went to get the whip, and he said “No.”

“Excuse me?” said Chloe.

 “I SAID NO!” Jackson said, and ran out of the room.

His heart was pounding as he raced to the doors.

*Where do I go, where do I go?*

The truth was there wasn’t really a place to go. Where would an 11-year-old Indian boy be able to find refuge in Quebec, while he’s running from the authorities of a residential school? The truth was, the only way he could get home is to find a reservation, because those are the only other people who truly know the hell that is a residential school. He was in the middle of the woods now, but it ached every step he took, from where he had been whipped. He knew however, if he went back, he would almost certainly be beaten. He wouldn’t let it happen again. He walked for what seemed like an eternity, until he saw lights. He turned towards them and started running. He saw a gas station and ran in. Now that he stopped, he couldn’t walk and collapsed.

He woke up on a bed, and saw a native man tending to him. His strength was drained however; he just had the energy to say “…Red…. Lake…” before darkness took its hold. He could tell he was in a car, but couldn’t see sharp enough to see what he was doing. When he finally had slept enough to regain strength, he sat up and saw his mom and dad. His mom nearly had a heart attack; and his dad hugged him.

BUZZ! His alarm clock went off, he shot up with a start. Again he was reminded of his tragic youth, but he knew he would make it through. He has tried everything you can try; it just doesn’t work. The memories he has, they’re like a stain or spill. The longer you leave them to settle, the harder it’ll be to take them out.

**Author's Statement about the story**

My paper tells the story of Jackson Nelson, a Native man who constantly relives his past in the form of horrific nightmares about his time at a residential school. Even though my story is entirely fiction, these events really did happen to Native men and women.

I think that residential schools are important to Indian culture for several reasons. My first reason is that people in our society today went to these hellholes they considered schools, and we don't know about it. A lot of these people are scarred for life because of them. Reasons are varied about what actually scarred them, whether it was being taken away or the abuse. About the abuse, it wasn't just physical either. Some were raped. Some of these so-called holy men and women raped children. I don't see how there wasn't prosecution to them, because shutting down the schools wasn't enough. It still doesn't take away the fact that these evil men and women raped these innocent Native kids. They need to be incarcerated for there to be closure for the Natives. Another reason that this is a very important event to the Natives is that the government actually admitted they were wrong, in the form of monetary compensation. Relating back to before however, money isn't enough. You need to lock up the men and women that raped these kids for it to finally begin to make up for their horrific crimes.

I wrote this because I think it's downright horrific what happened to these people. I can only hope that someone out there will read my story and be at least partially informed of my story, even though I think I may have dramatized my story a little bit for intensity, for all I know things like this could have happened every day. I'm not quite sure personally though because I thankfully never had to go to a residential school. I personally enjoyed and didn't enjoy writing this story at the same time. I enjoyed it because I like writing short stories, and this gave me the opportunity to be rewarded for doing what I like. I didn't like writing it however, because it brought the events that happened to my mind. Thank you for taking the time out to read this.