

Never Your Fault

In loving memory of my late grandmother, a survivor of the Kamloops Residential School.

You.

Even as I gaze at the stone that bears your name, a reminder that you will forevermore be one with the ground, all I can see is your face. Your furrowed brows, face tainted red with anger, sweat beading on your neck, and your hand in the air, ready to strike.

Even as the wind whistles its empty tune, a reminder that I am alone, all I can hear is your voice. Your thundering roar, hissing tongue, crackling throat with profanities to and fro.

Even as I touch the cold, sullen earth and the crisp snow, all I can feel is pain. The familiar sting on my cheek, the gashes on my wrist, hunger in my stomach, the glass bottles piercing through my flesh.

Because it was you.

You put the scars on my cheeks. The faint lines serve as a reminder of your uncontrollable behavior, your insatiable desire to destroy the ones you loved.

You put the bruises on my body. Patches of purple and blue are the remnants of your drunken madness, your undying love to mead and tobacco - perhaps more so than your love for mother and I.

Your words put the knife in my heart. For thirty years, I struggled to love and be loved as a result of your slander, out of fear that my future husband would be your incarnation.

For thirty years, I resented you. In my eyes, you were the embodiment of all the evil in this world. You were no different from war, from famine, from poverty, from slavery: you shackled our family with the chains of your addiction, your gambling, your abuse, your anger, your burning hatred.

When I got the news that you had passed, I threw my head back and tears began to fall. The elder kneeled to comfort me, but quickly drew his hand away as I began to cackle. *Finally*. You - the man who had scarred my childhood, the man who had beat my beloved mother, the man I *despised* - the world was purged of your sins. Tears of joy stained my woven carpet: to anybody else, I may have appeared possessed. But in reality, I had never felt a greater sense of freedom - of relief. My only regret was that you passed peacefully in your sleep. You did no deed to deserve it.

I swore I would never think of you again. I would detach myself from you and your memory.

For five years, ignorance truly was bliss.

But two weeks ago, mother passed away. As I visited my childhood home - yes, the one on the reserve, the one with the bloody handprints on the walls, cracked floorboards, the shattered picture frames of a never happy family - to collect her belongings, the memories of you came flooding back.

I found a box tucked away in the corner of the attic. It bore your name. I tried to fight every urge to open it, but I could not resist. You were my father, after all. Perhaps there was some merit to your name.

I saw your memories. I saw your pain. I saw your secrets.

And I let myself cry.

As my tears flowed, so did your story. You were not a man born from sin and hatred. You were not destined to a lifetime of anger and grief. You were not meant to be a violent husband and a destructive father. The world made you so, and abandoned you when you needed it most.

Your journals and photos reveal that you endured the same torment we read of as children. You were just a boy when they forced you from Nan and Pop and placed you in the concentration camps - or schools, as they pathetically called them.

When they felt anger, they used sticks and stones until your eyes were black and bones were broken. When they felt boredom, they toyed with you psychologically just for the thrill. When they felt desire, they abused your body relentlessly. Over time, you learned. Any flicker of emotion, for all you knew, was expressed through pain. Suffering. Grief. Torture. You became a reflection of them.

Now I know. I know that your screams late at night were not a byproduct of insanity - they were a byproduct of the nightmares that haunted you since childhood. I know that the bruises on your knuckles were not purely from violence and rage - they were induced by painful memories that refused to leave you. I know that the bottle shards littered around the kitchen did not break solely because of anger - they broke because of sadness, grief, and sullen tolerance.

Your actions were not always justified. They hurt Mother and I immensely. But now I know that your life of crime and the beaten path you walked, as despicable as I once thought it was, was not chosen out of your free will. It was chosen out of desperation, hopelessness, and abandonment.

I was only four when they tried you the first time. They called you a criminal. A felon. The courts, the lawyers, the witnesses, the judges - they spoke of your insanity, your derangement, all the wrongs you had committed in your lifetime.

It was a simple crime, but they took you from home. There was no mention of your past. There was no mention of your struggle. There was no mention of the decades of pain and hurt you had to endure.

To them, you were not a person. Your history had no meaning. Your name is simply a list of wrongdoings: nothing more, nothing less.

And so you relapsed. You became a repeat offender, each crime more severe than the last, because you would be nothing more to the legal system than a disaster no matter what you did. Because there was no end in sight regardless of the decisions you made.

For years, I blamed you for tearing our family apart. At school, I saw the other children holding hands with both their parents, giggling in delight, skipping in glee. I envied their full lunchboxes and the warm hugs they received, their clean hair, their fresh, cut-free skin. I resented you for never being at home. I resented you for failing to support us. I resented you for making foolish decisions and getting yourself locked away.

I always used to wonder why I could not be like the other children. Now, I realize that perhaps I could have. If only the institutions around us had been there to support you - maybe things could have been different. Maybe our family would have been different. Maybe *you* would have been different.

Yesterday, the Nishnawbe-Aski Legal Services Corporation created the Restorative Justice Program. I immediately thought of you. It was a bittersweet moment: I am overjoyed that our brothers and sisters will have the chance to experience life beyond their wrongdoings, and I am ecstatic that the courts have finally realized the merits of community-based justice, especially for Indigenous communities with decades of painful memories, intergenerational trauma, and psychological damage. I have no doubt that this will be revolutionary to the 49 communities they will work in.

But I also feel regret. Longing. Pain. I am disappointed - no, infuriated - that this was not in place during your youth. I am frustrated and torn - why wasn't this passed twenty years prior? Why now? Why did it take them *eternity* to finally advocate for restorative based justice, when our peoples have had such a system for centuries? *Why do others get to reap the benefits of restorative justice while you were left to fend for yourself?*

You would have benefited immensely. Our family would have had a fighting chance at peace and reconciliation. Nan, Pop, and the rest of our tribe would have been saved from loads of tears and suffering. Perhaps if you had spoken to a counselor, a therapist, or a support group, you would have found a healthier form of release. Instead of turning to substances and bottles, you could have been healed. Instead of turning to violence and others like you, you could have learned to let the past go: to move forward. Maybe you would have met other survivors and learned methods to handle the memories in a non-destructive manner. Maybe you would have learned to dream again. To feel again. To love again.

I truly believe that had you accessed restorative justice - had they listened to your story - you would have rediscovered your humanity. Your compassion. Your ability to love.

Perhaps we could have been a happy family. Perhaps - just perhaps - you could have been the father I always wanted: we could have explored beyond the reserve together, visited the sand beaches, and visited our ancestral grounds. You could have held me during my first heartbreak, watched me get married, witnessed the birth of your grandchildren. You could have shared your story with our tribe's youth, touched millions of hearts in Turtle Island, and been welcomed back into society with loving, open arms.

Perhaps I would have been with you as you breathed your last breath. And I would have smiled, knowing you lived your life to the fullest and finally found peace with the world around you.

I can only dream.

Although your time in this world has passed, I promise to carry on your legacy. You may not have received a deserved second chance, but I will use your story to advocate for our people in the justice system. It is no secret that our tribes are severely overrepresented in courts and trials because they are treated the same way you were all those years ago. I vow to support them so that you may, in spirituality, live vicariously through our community. I vow to support families so that they may reconnect the way I wish we did years ago.

As the turn of the century approaches, I promise I will not let your name die in vain. Restorative justice - the practice of our people - will ensure that fewer families are torn apart, fewer communities lose loved brothers and sisters, and fewer regrets remain even as life goes on.

Father, I realize now. It was never your fault.

I will carry on your legacy.

Me.