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Surviving the Storm

Ozaawi Bineziikwe

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Surviving the Storm

Ozaawi Bineziikwe (The names referred to in this story have been changed.)

This is a photograph of the Fort Alexander Residential School at Sagkeeng, Manitoba, which Ozaawi Bineziikwe attended as a child. The school was torn down in 1970. Photograph taken from the Manitoba Historical Society, Available online: <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/pageant/14/architecture.shtml>.



How times have changed from simplicity to complexity. I've been a witness to many of these drastic changes. The thirties, forties and the fifties were times when you didn't have to worry about electrical bills, casinos, utility bills, and all that new era stuff. Life was harsh but simple. Today, everything is a mad rush: the traffic, the bills, the addictions, the diseases that people have developed in the last forty to fifty years....

For most of our lives, my siblings and I lived with our grandfather. The days always began with chores. My older brother was responsible for hauling water from the river and making sure we had enough wood for the tin heater and the kitchen stove. My younger brother sawed, chopped, and piled the wood in neat rows along the east side of the house. He would also rake up the bark from the trees and store them in a gunny-sack for kindling. Whenever we were at home, the boys would be expected to haul and fill the barrels with drinking water. It was quite the walk to the river and back. Back then, the water wasn't polluted. They also had to make sure that the rain barrels or tubs stood against the house so that we would have rain water for personal hygiene. Later on, the community hired men to deliver water on a weekly basis.

Today, all you have to do is turn on your taps and you've got water whether it's hot or cold.

We also didn't own a lawn mower in those days, so my brother Eli had to crawl around the yard and pull out the long grass. Even a rake was hard to come by, especially if you were poor, which we were. In the winter, they would spend hours in the bush with grandfather setting rabbit snares and cutting and collecting wood for the two stoves. Sometimes, Dad or Grandpa would take the boys ice-fishing. Mind you, we rarely ever saw our dad. We all loved the fish liver and caviar with potatoes, onion, bannock and lard (what a feast!). In the spring, they would hunt for beaver dams and set the traps so we could have beaver for Sunday dinner. We never knew what a turkey looked or tasted like when we were kids.

On the summers that Dad was around to go sturgeon fishing, we got to feast on sturgeon oil with fried bannock. There was no such thing as opening up a refrigerator or a freezer back in those days. Any meat we had was wild game and fish. The only meat we could afford once in a while from Allard's Store was a stick of bologna. We used to call it Indian Steak in those days. Most of the time, the old men would smoke

the meat and fish so nothing spoiled. I don't think my stomach could handle that kind of meal today, but I still have that good old Indian Steak once in a while. When you purchase it today, it costs you a mint.

Any meal we had in those days was appreciated because we didn't know what the next day or next week was going to bring. We went hungry more times than you can shake a stick at.

My older brother left home quite early; I don't remember exactly when. But all of a sudden he just wasn't living with us anymore. The next time we heard from him, he was with a woman and they had a son. As it turned out, he married this woman, and they went on to have several more children. I love them all.

My older sister also left home at the tender age of sixteen. She, too, ended up getting married and having a large family. I missed her so much after she left, because now I became the next target for the abuse she had to endure over the years; that left my younger brother, my younger sister and me to do the household chores. Ours chores consisted of the everyday cleaning around the home. We would haul our own laundry water and we would heat the water on top the kitchen stove or we would set it on an open-fire outside, weather permitting.

Whenever it was laundry day, Grandfather would keep a wicked fire going in the kitchen stove, so we could heat up the water and our little cast irons for ironing. We didn't have water heaters or electric irons or washing machines; we didn't even have electricity. Being the oldest child at home now, I was responsible for doing the laundry. My wash-line would be full of laundry that was never really white, but what do you expect from a child? I was a child with a one-track mind: play, play, play. Grandfather and I would prepare the meals together. I would make the bannocks and he would cook the meat and potatoes. My little sister would set the table and wait patiently for supper. She'd sit on her bed and watch and wait.

We didn't have a large house; we all lived in a one room house but it was cozy and

comfortable. Sometimes, Uncle, Auntie, and their son would come and live with us. There were never any excuses although our home barely had enough room for five people. We not only shared our tiny little home, we shared food, stories, dreams, pain and love.

My mother left the family when I was around five years old. I really do not have very many early memories of her. For years, I resented the fact that we had never experienced a life with two parents. I resented my mother for the fact that my sisters and I had to experience sexual abuse at the hands of a relative. I guess I resented her for every negative experience we encountered as children. I know that I couldn't bond with my mother after she began visiting me and my little family. (Too little, too late I figured.)

In my deepest of hearts, I still to this day don't know if I ever forgave my mother. For those of you out there who have your Mothers, count your blessings everyday because you are truly blessed. I pray and ask the Creator to give me that forgiving heart and little by little, I'm getting there, thank God. Dad never explained about why Mom left. We heard all sorts of stories from family and community members. But anyway, we were motherless. It almost felt as if we were orphans, although both parents were still around.

All we had were the two old men who, by the way, loved their booze, God rest their souls. It was a regular thing with Dad and Grandpa to go out on drinking benders. Sometimes they would buy vanilla when they really wanted to party. I guess they didn't mind smelling like a couple of cakes.

I remember one incident that grandfather and his friends used to laugh at. They were partying that one night; when all of a sudden these gunshots went off. All these old men were scrambling around in a panic yelling, "Someone is shooting at us!" Grandfather later realized that he had shoved a full case of vanilla underneath the kitchen stove and because the stove was going full blast; the full bottles of vanilla extract exploded. Those were the gunshots they heard.

I also remember praying to the Creator to burn all the beer parlors down so they would stop drinking. Now that I'm an adult, I can understand how hard it must have been for grandfather to have to look after five children. Although grandfather loved his booze, I knew he loved us with all his heart. When he passed away my heart broke into a billion pieces. I missed him so much and I still do today. Once in awhile he comes and visits me in my dreams just to let me know he's watching over me. I can honestly say that there never should have been any doubt about his love for us kids but we still doubted that fact. That doubt existed because we didn't understand what forms love can come in.

We would also question and wonder about the love portion of our lives, because we spent a lot of time fending for ourselves. Today, I'm so grateful for grandfather, who deserved a break because I don't think we were angels all the time. We did our fair share of mischievousness. I remember, one summer; we broke into this building so we could steal something to eat. Another time, we stole a boat and went crazy on dad's bill at the store. We almost paid for that prank. While we were on our way back from the store, we encountered a deadly thunder storm. We were right in the middle of the lake when this storm blew in. We lost our oars and the boat was filling up with water. After about a half hour of terror, an older gentleman we knew from the camp came and rescued us.

We found different ways to entertain ourselves because we never had any toys, so we occupied our time with mischievous antics. The only toys that I remember we ever had were these spinning tops that were made out of thread spools and wooden dolls made out of drift wood. Today, children have so much that they take for granted and lack appreciation for (even for family.)

Because my siblings and I witnessed and experienced so much physical, and verbal abuse, it was hard for us to openly show any form of affection, so we would settle for a pat on the head, a treat of home-made strawberry jam or a box of Cracker Jack popcorn. Still yet today, I find it hard to show affection. If and when I do, I am very

careful that I don't send the wrong message.

This was our lifestyle whenever we had a chance to spend any time at home. There were five of us kids at home: my older brother Thomas, younger brother Eli, older sister Mary, younger sister Sally and myself. My older brother, older sister and I were the first residential school victims amongst the children. I am going to get ahead of my story a bit so that as you continue to read; you will understand the chain of events that happened in my story.

I'm sure that if our father and grandfather had other options, we never would have become institutionalized. We heard stories from friends about how their parents would take them into the bush to hide until they felt it was safe to come back home. As a matter of fact; there is a movie (Rabbit Proof Fence) which is based on a true story similar to ours. It gives you a clear and honest picture of what it was like back in the day when the Indian Agent was running our affairs. Parents had no voice in decision making on the future of their children. This of course left them with a sense of helplessness and despair. Dad used to talk about that.

In his mind, his children were not really his children, so to speak.

Once my siblings and I were in the residential school system for awhile, we would have discussions about the kind of lives we had. We would question which environment was more beneficial to our well-being. Life was not peachy in boarding school but we did spend a lot of time with no supervision from an adult at home. The point is; we were children who never expected the two-parent stable home life, so we would wonder about many things. We were institutionalized ten months out of a year in the residential school, except for the times when we were allowed to go home, for instance at Christmas and summer holidays.

I can vividly recall my first day in boarding school. My dad delivered my brother, older sister and me to this huge, cold, cucumber-smelling place that chilly September day in 1949 or 1950. I remember the priest and a couple of nuns pulling us apart as we

desperately tried to hang on to one another. I swear those nuns looked like identical twins. Little did I know that I would not see my brother again for the next ten months (not up close, anyway.) Once in a while I would manage to get a glimpse of him from a distance, but we were never allowed to make contact. If we got caught looking at one another, the nuns would make sure we were punished. We were segregated right from day one. Any eye contact with the opposite sex during meal-times meant sitting through the entire meal with a paper-bag over your head. I don't think we missed out on any kind of feast anyway, because half the time you couldn't recognize what was on your plate. Their idea of a healthy breakfast consisted of one slice of bread with a little bit of watered down milk and a dash of brown sugar. Sometimes the bread had a bitter moldy taste, but we didn't care; we were starving. You just ate whatever was being served, otherwise the sisters made you starve until the next day.

My life for the next eleven years was like a nightmare. I had feelings of abandonment; abandonment when Mother left, abandonment when Dad delivered us to the residential school, and abandonment when we lost Grandfather. I'm sure there were at least a hundred and fifty children around me, and yet I felt so, so, alone. Although my sister and I were in school at the same time (physically) we were never allowed to sit and spend time together. I can't even begin to remember if we ever spoke to each other the whole time we were in school. So, I had to love her from a distance too, just like my older brother. Now, when I think about those times and the feelings I felt then, it was almost like being adopted into a white family. The clergymen were our fathers, the nuns were our mothers, and all the children at the school were our siblings. My sister remained in the system for approximately seven years, and then she was whisked away to a girl's home. They finally gave up on her after her sixteenth birthday. I'm sure she was ecstatic to finally be free of her residential school shackles. Many times during our residential school years, I witnessed the emotional and physical abuse

my sister endured silently. Mary always had bedwetting problems as a child. They made all the girls who wet their beds parade up and down the hallways so that the rest of the children in the refectory would see them. The nuns who were supervising the lunch hour would stand by the doorway, and perpetuate the snickering as they announced the *Piss Parade*; as they called it. My older sister experienced that humiliation every day while in boarding school; yet she never complained. Who was she going to complain to anyway? You had nobody, so you suffered in silence like my sister did. I wet the bed once, my first night in school. I was too afraid to go to the washroom. I covered my sheet with my bedspread so my sheets would be dry by morning. Eventually, the nuns discovered my stained sheets and I was in for a beating.

My younger sister experienced similar abuse and humiliation once she entered the system. She used to wet the bed too. But she was a fighter; -she refused to allow these vicious, wicked people to do to her what they wanted. She would kick, scream, bite, and curse at them. Boy! That was fun to watch. She usually had an audience who cheered her on. Later on, after the fun was over, her audience paid with brutal consequences. Of course, I played a part in the cheering, so I was punished just as brutally.

You knew what was going to happen to you and yet you enjoyed the moment, and of course that's typical of any child. The nun who was supervising the playroom would punish you by having you stand on top of the table while she wildly swung a yardstick across your legs. If she missed you the first time around, you can bet she was going to get you (next time). There was nowhere to hide, so you just tried to be tough. There was no escaping anything in that horrible place. If you broke any bones, you were never taken for medical treatment you healed and waited for the next event.

Every day at four o'clock, we would gather in the playroom and get dressed to go outside. We would all get these big round biscuits for our four o'clock snack. I sometimes wonder why I didn't break any teeth. Later on I found out those biscuits

were dog biscuits. We were so hungry all the time that anything that was thrown at us, we ate. It was as if we were animals; animals who knew nothing but hunger. We would steal from the garden whenever we had the chance; it didn't matter if you ate the mud on the raw potatoes and carrots. It didn't even matter if we were caught, we would still steal the next day. All I can say is; hunger turned us into desperate little thieves. Today there is absolutely no need for anyone to starve. The food banks are always willing to help you out in your time of need. I know I've had to ask for help many times when my money just didn't stretch far enough. I thank the Creator that I am able to provide for my children, and that they never have to steal in order to eat.

I hated, (the four o'clock play session) because this dirty old man (who was one of the workers) would come into the playroom and feel up the girls. Ever so often, I'd be one of his victims. Although this went on regularly, I was afraid to open my mouth. Who would have believed in a savage anyway? This dirty, evil old man reminded me about who I was (a savage) and warned me about being a tattler. He said nobody would listen or believe me anyway, so I kept this my dirty little secret. I always wondered if I had done anything wrong and why this old man did what he did to me. He would wait for me to remove my dress so that I could put my pants on, and then he would grab me and sit me on his knees while he fondled me. I wanted to scream but nothing would come out. It was almost like I had lost my voice. I always knew when he entered the playroom that I was going to be one of his victims again. I wanted to go home to Grandpa's where I felt safe and warm. Mind you, with Grandpa, that safe warm feeling would vanish whenever the drinking began. So there was nowhere to hide, no one to confide in, I just had to be tough and learn to take whatever people dished out. I was just like someone's pet dog, I aimed to please and licked feet everyday if I had to, but I still dreamt and wished I could go home to Grandfather's.

Many a night, I would lie in bed (in the dormitory) and listen to the old steam

radiators that sat along the wall. The whistling noise that these radiators made reminded me of my grandfather's teapot. At home, every night, Grandpa would put this ugly little enamel teapot on top the tin heater which stood in the center of the room and let it simmer till it made that little whistling sound. In residential school, the nights were long, cold, and lonely and I missed grandpa and his little whistling teapot. I would cry myself to sleep and try to dream about food, and grandfather's warm downy comforter.

Morning would come and I would wait and see what the next day held. I was either going to experience pain or I just did my best to avoid being noticed at all cost, that way, I didn't have to get hurt. I soon learned to blend in with the walls and the playroom fixtures just to avoid unnecessary beatings. I remember being on the receiving end of many of those beatings, I just can't remember why I got them. I was either getting whipped or struck with a yardstick or getting my ears pulled so hard that I wondered when mine were going to fall off my head. Every time I look at myself in a mirror; I'm reminded of those horrifying times in my life.

The educational part of being in residential school was not a totally different experience. As a matter of fact, the abuse just intensified. My self-esteem at this point was non-existent. I wore this label that said, "Tout savage", meaning "little savage. I had already come to believe that I was nothing but a dirty little Indian and a savage. When you're a child and adults label you or call you names, you start to believe that that's who you are. In the classroom I was taught how to become a civilized little Indian. We were reminded of our evil rituals and how we were going to go to hell if we practiced them.

From seven in the morning till eight at night we were taught how to pray and beg for forgiveness for the fact that we were savages. Every morning, we had catechism. The priest hung this calendar in the classroom as a reminder of our unworthiness. This calendar was known as Lacombe's Calendar. I remember always worrying about meeting God and having to hear Him say, "You were bad and you're an

Indian so you go to hell,” -that is where the people who stood on the left hand side of God went. According to the priest and the nuns, we were standing on that left hand side of God. I struggled to memorize every prayer that the priest ever taught me.

We especially had to pay attention to the Act of Contrition. It began like this: “Bless me Father, for I have sinned, it has been these many days since my last confession,” and then we had to admit to sins we didn’t even know we had committed. I don’t remember knowing what a sin was; I just knew that I had to concoct a whole bunch of them just so the priest would forgive me. For some reason, I felt that I desperately needed to be forgiven, especially from the priest, because he said he was the only connection to God I would ever have. He would give you your penance by asking you to say this many Our Fathers, a couple of Act of Contrition’s, and maybe twenty Hail Mary’s, depending on how he was feeling that day. For a while, that ritual gave me some inner peace, but only because I thought I had earned some love from the priest who had heard my confession.

It seemed I was always looking for love, acceptance and approval. I can’t really recall ever being exceptional when it came to academics; but I sure learned to memorize these prayers real quick. One of the priests used to invite my friends and me to come and visit him at the seminary. We didn’t understand then what his motives were, but stuff happened during those visits. Being the giddy, foolish and love-starved little girls we were at that time, we just accepted his advances as a show of affection.

I just went along with the flow, waiting for the day when I didn’t have to stay in that hell hole. Several times during my school years, I remember having my knuckles rapped with the sharp side of a ruler: I don’t even remember what I did to deserve that. If you pulled your hands away and Sister missed you, she would get a couple of the boys to hold you down on her desk and then you really got a wicked knuckle busting. I have problems with the joints in my fingers today, but I don’t know if it was a direct result of those beatings.

I was whipped until I couldn’t cry any more. I was dragged around by the hair until I couldn’t feel my scalp and I don’t remember why. I was scrubbed until my skin was red and sore. They had these big tubs in the laundry rooms where the scrubbing took place. After the redness would go away, I would worry because my skin was still brown (Was I going to get another scrubbing?)

The sisters also had this horrible smelling powder that they shook into our hair. This container had the picture of a witch with a broomstick in her hands. I can’t recall the name of the product, but I believe it was for lice, and even if you didn’t have any cooties, you were still powdered. I wish I could recall why I had to experience all that torture as a child. I believed that I was never going to be forgiven, never loved by God, and that I was nothing more than a dirty little savage. But you had to swallow hard and learn to be tough or you were never going to survive. That is why we are called Residential School Survivors. You know what? Today I am proud to wear that label because the truth is I am a survivor.

In 1957, five of us junior girls ran away from the school. Every evening, we were taken to evening benediction (time to pray some more). Remember I said we had to pray real hard because of who we were? That particular evening, we begged the supervising nun to let us spend extra time outside. Our begging, of course, fell on deaf ears. Instead we ended up having to go in earlier than usual.

It was 7:30 in the evening on a beautiful warm summer evening. The sun was still up but Sister couldn’t wait to get rid of us for the evening, so off to bed we went. In rebellion we sang, “I’m in the Jailhouse now”, and boy, that really irked her. As we were preparing to retire for the night, several of the girls began making escape plans which, of course, I was a part of. At this point, I didn’t care; if running was our only other option, then so be it. So as soon as Sister went into her room, we all jumped up, pushed the fire escape door open and ran down the fire escape stairs as fast as our little legs could carry us. I guess Sister came out of her room just as we managed to push the door open.

She came to the top of the stairs and began yelling, “Run, girls, run!” out of frustration.

We ran across the school yard, across the gravel road and into the bush. My crazy cousin Mal decided to be funny. She ran up one side of the teeter-totter and down the other side before she continued to run with us across the school yard.

That bush was swamp but people still built their homes there. We spent a good portion of that night in those swamps just waiting for all the lights to go out at the school. We watched as the lights scanned the entire school yard on each side of the school. It was almost like a movie: they (the priest and the sisters) were the wardens and we (the girls) were the prisoners. The water was bitterly cold but we were tough Indians except for one of the girls who we half carried out of the swamps as we headed to the highway later that night. Cousin Mal always had such a big heart that she removed her undershirt and her petticoat so that we could wrap up our friend’s feet. That was just before the roads were paved.

I don’t know exactly what time we arrived at Auntie’s that night, but Mal reassured us that auntie would feed us and put us up for the night. Well, she did, but Uncle Chuck didn’t seem happy about this situation. We realized later that he, too, was afraid of getting into trouble for taking us in. I’m surprised the Principal didn’t order some kind of reprimand for Uncle Chuck. The next morning, four of us girls felt it was time to make our exit. Mal obviously had other plans why, she didn’t bother to get dressed that morning! She thought she would be safe staying behind, but she sure had a rude awakening an hour later.

While we were walking along the ditch, the school Principal and Uncle Chuck pulled up and ordered us to get into the car. We were then driven back to Auntie’s house to pick Mal up. On our way back to the school, the principal decided to drive to one of the girls’ mother’s home. As soon as Mrs. Frumond came out and saw who was sitting in the car, she began yelling and pointing the finger at Mallory. As usual, Mal

was the scapegoat; although we all knew the decision to run was made as a group.

Mal just took the yelling and the finger pointing and shrugged it off. She knew she would be the one to shoulder all the blame anyway. Mal was always perceived as tough skinned; she just never let anybody see her pain. I loved her back then when we were kids, and I love and respect her even more today. She is one of the true survivors.

“This is for you, Mal; if you should happen to read this and you recognize our story; I love you for being the kind, loving person that you were then and still are today.”

When we arrived back at the school, our parents were sitting in the parlor. The father of one of the girls hit her so hard that she flew across the room into the hallway. That was to appease the glaring Principal who was watching. After our parents left, we were ordered to go to the dormitory and rest.

We walked into the dormitory to find all the girls sitting on their beds waiting for our arrival. Sister then ordered us to remove all our clothes, put on a night-gown and go to bed. We didn’t even make it to the pillow, and the Principal walked in. Father Principal then ordered us to line up in front of him. He had a huge belt in his hand and before he executed the whipping, he gave a lecture warned us anyone else any ideas about running, this was what would happen. I cannot begin to imagine instilling that kind of fear in a child. I remember some of the smaller girls breaking out in sobs as we were being whipped- my little sister was one of them. Every time the belt hit our little bodies, we had to say, “Thank you, Father”. Of course, tough-skinned Mal refused to say, “Thank you, Father”, so she received extra lashings. I swear to this day that that was no ordinary belt; it was more like a fan belt with these metal tips that cut into your flesh.

Anyone who was ever whipped at that school can attest to the fact that the belt that was used was no ordinary belt. After the whipping, we compared the welts on our bodies. We looked like we had been burnt, but we scoffed at the marks although they were very painful.

For weeks after that, we were treated like common criminals. I can't recall if we were even allowed to change our clothes. We were ostracized by the whole school. I had feelings of guilt and shame every time I saw one sister who was pretty decent to me. I would catch her staring at me and when we'd make eye contact, she would shake her head and look away. I wondered if she would ever be nice to me ever again. Later on when I became a parent, I learned how to lay those same kinds of guilt trips on my daughter. The nuns and the priests were sure excellent teachers when it came to teaching those Painful Attributes.

Our parents weren't aware of the beating that took place on a regular basis. But one Sunday afternoon while we were visiting our parents, one of the Sisters reported the beatings to Mal's mother (Lydia). When Lydia saw how badly her daughter had been beaten, she was furious and marched right down to the Principal's office. Lydia was not the kind of person who would hold back if she had to say what was on her mind, especially because she was already aware of several other incidents related to her sons. Shortly after that, Mal was removed from school for awhile, but eventually returned. My cousin Mal was my source of strength. I felt that if she could endure all that pain, so could I.

We experienced horrendous brutality, but we survived. The kind of brutality we were exposed to was sinful and hard to comprehend because we were children. How do you protect yourself when you're a small child? It's too bad we didn't have children's services back then. We had a truant officer, but I don't think he had a whole lot of power or control over their matters.

In the early sixties, I was expelled from the residential school, because I finally fought back. I had taken enough. I couldn't take it any more. I guess I had reached my breaking point. I remember thinking that if I was going down; I was taking Sister Greta down with me. Somehow I found the strength to fight back.

That stark, dreary morning, the day began like many other days. We all sang the

national anthem, "O Canada", and "God Save the Queen". Of course we also prayed for what seemed like an eternity. Heaven forbid if we didn't pray for our savageness. We were having a Latin class that day and I guess we weren't fluent enough for Sister Greta, who was our teacher at the time, her wickedness seeped out of her mouth first and her fist later. I was one of those who felt the boniness of those fists that day, so I struck back in self-defense. I remember thinking, "I don't care if I commit a sacrilege. I'm an Indian and I'm going to hell anyway", so I hit her back. Sister Greta began screaming at the top of her lungs about the sin I had just committed and about how God would never forgive me, and that I was going to hell for sure. I was ordered to leave the classroom immediately, so I did.

Not being sure of what my next move should be, I went upstairs to the dormitory to hide, but one of the nuns came and found me and ordered me to leave the school premises immediately. Later on that day, I found out I was expelled. I ran home and announced the fact that I was free at last.

I was so elated that day that upon my arrival at home I worked frantically to clean house just to let my happiness show. And to celebrate my new-found freedom, I baked a horrible-tasting raisin pie for my grandfather, but he ate it anyway. Years later, he told me he had forced the pie down with his tea, it was so horrible. I remember making my crust just like bannock and to thicken my raisins, I used a mixture of flour and cold water. I baked my pie in one of grandfather's enamel plates. I waited for him to sit down at the table so I could present my first pie. I was so proud of myself. Too bad we didn't have frozen pastry back then. At least grandfather wouldn't have needed the five cups of tea he needed that day.

There were several other pupils who felt Greta's Rage that day, and who were also expelled. We've kept in touch over the years so we could share our boarding school experiences (or our nightmares, as we so often referred to them). We would relive some of the horrors and wonder whatever became of our tormentors. After all that abuse and after all these years past, we

were still able to laugh at the whippings and the fact that we were still alive today. Someone was truly looking after us.

I thought that the nightmares were over. As fate would have it, I was still to suffer the after effects of those horrible years.

In the early sixties, I married my now deceased husband, John, and we had our daughter Gillian. My husband was a wonderful, loving, easy-going man. He provided for our every need, whether it was financial, emotional or physical. Many a night, John and I would exchange our nightmares about the boarding school. He talked about all the physical and sexual abuse he encountered during those school years. He would talk about his childhood and the fact that he never felt loved either. John and I spent twenty- some years together. Some of those years were hard because I still suffered some abuse. The abuse would happen whenever he felt the urge to go out and drink or when he wanted to spend time with his former girlfriend.

During those twenty years, we swore that we were never going to allow our children to experience what we had experienced. We never shared the horror stories with our daughter or our foster children. I guess we felt that there was no need to burden our daughter and our foster children with all that negativity. As the old adage goes, "let sleeping dogs lie". That is what we thought we believed we were doing by not sharing that part of our lives with them.

Now, today, I realize how unfair that was to our daughter, because she is only now just beginning to understand why we were the kind of parents we were back then. We lacked parenting skills and we certainly didn't know the first thing about nurturing children, much less how to be loving parents. How could we teach or give something we had never had in our childhood?

Now, in my sixties, I have made it my life's focus to change what I can in the way I treat my daughter and my grandchildren. I no longer carry that burden by myself, because it was never my cross to carry in the first place. I was a child, an innocent

child, with no knowledge of anything.

My husband and I fostered thirteen children right up to his passing in December of '82. I had to let all my foster children go after we buried John. For months, maybe years, I lived in a trance where I can't remember if I ate, slept, or even conversed with anyone. My daughter took over the role of mother to all my children. I never even made time to console her when this should have been when we were closest. My self pity rode the show. I thought of no one but myself. I forgot I had a daughter who needed me. I ask the Creator every day to forgive me for treating my child the way I did. I thank him for my gift, my daughter. Still yet today, in my heart I celebrate our wedding anniversary. Every September the 6th, I'll do something special to remember our marriage. Losing my husband was like losing an essential part of my being. I always felt empty and angry at the world and especially toward the Creator. My spirituality was non-existent at that point. I quit believing in God, life, love and myself.

I was so distraught that I turned to the bottle and to drugs. I fell in and out of abusive relationships. I didn't care who I went to bed with, I just needed to be with someone. I weighed just a little over two hundred pounds before my husband died. I had several nervous breakdowns, and ended up in the hospital every time. I was in such turmoil over my loss that my weight went right down to less than a hundred pounds in just a few short months. I carried on for about five or six years, before I finally realized what I was doing to myself and my children. During all this turmoil, I forgot I had a daughter who needed her mother. I forgot I had two beautiful grandsons. I was so busy wallowing in my self-pity that I became this selfish person and it was time to wake up and start all over.

Turning over a new leaf in my life was not the easiest thing to do, because I still hadn't done anything to deal with my mental, spiritual and emotional issues. I even took refuge in a mental institution because I felt I needed to hide from the world for a while. I needed to come to terms with every skeleton

in my life. I needed to find myself again and I most certainly needed to reconnect with the Creator's love and guidance. I was so totally lost and messed up by that time I knew I had a lot of work ahead of me.

While all this was happening, my daughter and I resented and hated one another. We were not on speaking terms, so I couldn't go to her for any emotional support or vice versa. She was going through severe hard times too, because of her father's passing. I always felt that she kind of blamed me for his death. I understand why now. When you lose a loved one, you find yourself blaming the people closest to you, and of course, you blame the Creator too.

Instead of bonding, we went our own separate roads to hell and misery. We rarely ever saw one another during those hard years. We attempted once or twice to go for counseling, but that just opened up feelings, so we stopped.

My daughter and I ended up sharing accommodations for several years. Once in a while we would have pleasant days, and then sometimes we would make life a living hell for one another. She would make me feel like a helpless little child, who needed acceptance and approval for everything. Of course, I completely forgot to consider how she must have felt when she was going through the same kind of abuse. Her need for acceptance and approval must have been a hundred times greater than mine; after all, she was an only child, a lonely one at that.

Here I am trying to teach my children about love, respect, honesty, and all those saintly attributes I don't even have. Right now, as I'm sharing these experiences, I am shedding tears because I can feel the pain all over again. I shed a few tears every now and then because if I don't, I'll explode emotionally. Twenty-two years later, and I'm still riding that emotional roller-coaster. Emotions built up from my nightmarish years in residential school and my personal life experiences, but I guess the Creator must know what He's doing when it comes to his plans for me. Those emotional build-ups are getting fewer and easier to handle

as time passes, and I've learned to leave my pain in His hands. I have become a stronger woman in every sense of the word. I have grown mentally and spiritually over the years, but I know I still have a lot to learn.

I've come to believe that our plans aren't necessarily the Creator's plans. I've come to believe in destiny, His destiny. I understand now that there's a reason for everything that happens in our lives. I believe He directed my path and made a way for me to meet this wonderful lady Ella, God bless her. I knew when I first met Ella that she was the one the Creator had sent to guide me. Our paths crossed not by accident, but by destiny. I believe the Creator was, and still is, designing a plan and a purpose for the little bit of knowledge I've acquired over the years. He made a way for Ella and I to meet so I could write this story for you out there that might be hurting.

I refuse to be pretentious about my Anishinaabe ways, but I'll wait for His guidance. Maybe the fact that I'm writing and sharing my experience with you is part of His purpose for me and you the reader (Meegwetch indinaa Manidoo). Right now, there's a law suit against the government and the churches for all the abuse that was inflicted upon our people. At the onset, when this was just in the talking stages, I had refused to acknowledge anything and everything to do with residential school. I just wanted to forget about the whole sordid event and carry on with my life. In my mind, I felt that our torturers had already been dealt with; especially the ones who went onto face their Creator. But I guess we are all meant to walk our separate roads so that we can find forgiveness and inner peace by not allowing the pain to fester within our minds and hearts. By that, I mean we need to deal with what had happened to us as children. As we know that God knows everything, then surely He also knows the effects our past experiences have had on our children and grandchildren. So we need to deal with the issues, we need to share them with loved ones, but we also owe it to our children to explain why we are the way we are as parents.

What did we ever learn in residential school

about love and nurturing? My daughter and I have discussions about these painful topics and about our relationship and how my lack of parental skills has affected her parenting skills. My daughter has two sons. She has had to come to terms and admit to her sons that the abuse stemming from my past had filtered on to them. I never realized that I was abusing my daughter until this talk about the boarding schools came out. I didn't abuse her by leaving welts or scars on her body; I abused her by hurting her spiritual, mental and emotional being. I'm ashamed to say that it was almost as if I was on a high. Here I was an adult with control over a small human being who couldn't defend herself. Does that sound familiar?? Sadly, this is how it was for me, too. I was unable to defend myself against my tormentors. I will never stop apologizing for the pain I inflicted on them, although I know the blame does not entirely lie with me. I try to teach my children to forgive no matter what.

So why am I finding it so hard to be forgiving? There's a saying, "practice what you preach." I, for one, am not always able to practice what I preach. I am proud of my daughter for all her patience, and I thank her for her willingness to forgive me, and I am extremely thankful for the blessings that the Creator has given me, my grandsons. I so need their forgiveness for what I did to their mother and how my past has filtered down into their lives (Meegwetch Noosinaan). Hopefully, one day when they have their own families, they will recognize the warning signs. I pray and hope that I will live long enough so that I can hold my first great grandchildren from each of the boys.

I could fill a million pages, and my story still wouldn't be complete. Every once in a while, I'll share my story with my co-worker, just so I can release some of the pain I'm be feeling at that moment.

Many, many years have gone by, and I'm still haunted by my residential school nightmarish memories. You can suppress those memories for a while, but you eventually have to deal with them, because if you don't, they can resurface and hurt you and your family spiritually,

emotionally, and mentally. So if you are reading my story, and you have had similar experiences, please don't hang on to them. Share them with your children, so they'll have a better understanding of why you are the way you are. You will cry a million tears while you are sharing the memories, but that is what it takes in order for the healing process to begin. I know I've cried a lake-full over the years, and I'm still not done with the crying yet.

There are some years of my life that I did not want to share with anyone, but because this story is my life I will disclose everything. After losing my first husband, I didn't think I would ever remarry. On one of my long strings of jobs, I met someone whom I thought I could trust with every aspect of my being: emotionally, spiritually, and mentally. I trusted this man so much that I listened to his lines and tuned out other people who loved me genuinely.

In '93, this Romeo and I tied the -knot. We spent seven years together as husband and wife. He fed me a million lines and I was stupid enough to believe him, only to find out; that he had betrayed my trust. Although Romeo swears to this day that he is not guilty of his crime, I know he committed adultery. There I was again, playing the good little housewife so I could receive approval and acceptance. This man had absolutely no concept of trust, honesty or love for that matter. He was everything I didn't need in my life, but I have still been able to find the compassion in my heart to forgive him. I gave him every ounce of my love.

His daughter was slinging sexually related accusations at me, which at the time I was not listening to. I found out later that there was a lot of incest in his family, just like mine what a connection to make, eh? I also supported him financially. It seemed that as soon as Romeo realized I was able to go out and work, he just quit working altogether. For a number of years we lived on welfare (Easy Street, he called it). I worked part-time so I could support his gambling and smoking addictions. What a fool I was!!!

By the year 2000, I was alone again. I didn't

realize how heavenly being alone could be. I don't feel the need for male companionship anymore because I'm satisfied just having my children. There is no doubt about their love for me. I don't have to buy their love: it's free.

My life has changed completely in the last eight years....my daughter and my grandsons have been my inspirations and I've decided to take them up on their advice to return to school. Although I had many doubts about my academic capabilities, I went anyway. The first year was hard for me because I lacked the study and time management skills. Again, I just kind of went along with the flow, just like I did in boarding school. I realized I was still stuck in the residential school rut and I needed to find a way to escape from that rut, and I did. To my greatest surprise, I found myself enjoying my academic activities and the fact that I'm actually a very intelligent human being. I completed the Adult Ten Program and received a grade ten certificate and then I decided to take my journey a few steps further.

I applied for a language course at the local college in the city where I'm currently living. I shocked myself by completing and receiving my Diploma as a certified Interpreter and Translator. I was an Honours graduate at that. So much for being a stupid savage. I went another mile by taking the teacher education program. At first I thought that I would receive an incomplete mark as I did not finish my practicum. I did not participate in the graduation program that year. Several months later, I received this letter from the director of the program, indicating to me that I could verify my certification. I'm not making any excuses here, but I honestly could not afford to purchase these documents. Every job I had did not pay me nearly enough to do anything but survive. I was struggling financially so I was juggling the money and the bills with what little I had, and we still had to buy groceries. I was so fortunate to have my children with me: otherwise, I would never have made it money-wise.

Now! I'm currently in a position where I can apply my life experiences and my teaching skills. Shortly after I learned that I would be teaching; I wondered about this certificate

business or the lack thereof, so I took my concerns to an Elder in my community. His answer to my concern was, "You know who you are. You are Anishinaabe aren't you? Who told you that you needed this piece of paper that would give you permission to teach your language? Your language was a gift from the Creator; share it and teach it. I never needed that piece of paper to teach my children how to be Anishinaabe."

So here I am; I will teach what the Creator gave me. I am sure He won't require a piece of paper that says he is giving me the permission to share and teach his gifts.

As you read my story, can you recognize the mind-set of always needing permission to be a human being? It is always about approval from someone other than oneself. For once in my life, I am giving myself that approval to pass on to the younger generation what I learned these past sixty years. I give myself approval to share my experiences and my gifts from the Creator. I give myself approval to be able to show love to my children and my Anishinaabe brothers and sisters.

I could write forever because I have so much to share with you, but I will conclude my story and leave you with this message:

- *Believe in yourself and others will believe in you*
- *Love yourself and your fellow person will love you*
- *Share the gifts the Creator gave you*
- *Be proud of who you are, whether you're Red, White, Black or Yellow*
- *Forgive those who hurt you and the Creator will forgive you also*
- *Respect yourself and others will respect you.*

Miigwech

Ozaawi Bineziikwe (Golden Eagle Woman)
(My spirit name)