



A PROJECT OF THE DOMINION INSTITUTE

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### **Beyond This World**

My sister Marie was beautiful, even when she was a baby. When she was born, the entire reserve gathered to “ooh” and “ahh” over her chubby bronze cheeks, congratulating my mother on her first child. My sister was the kind of beautiful that when she danced at the pow wow, in her turquoise blue dress embroidered with white flowers and trimmed with red fringe, the rest of the crowd danced a bit slower just to watch her. She wasn’t just beautiful, either, she was strong and smart. Even when all of the boys started to notice her and ask her out on dates, she would mostly stay home and work on school. When we were younger, we would lay on her bed, together in the dark, and she would tell me that she wanted to see the world.

“I want to be a doctor and help people... on the reserve but around the world, too. I want to see Kenya, and Egypt, and India...” She smiled, and turned her head to me. “Did you know that when Columbus found us, he thought he had found India, so he called us Indians?” Marie laughed so musically that I had to join in, even though I didn’t know who Columbus was, or how we had been lost in the first place, if he had *found* us. I would’ve asked her to explain, but she was already onto her next story about some great place she had seen in books.

I made the mistake of talking out of turn in school one day, and the ruler came down on my knuckles with a force that knocked the air out of my lungs. I was kept after class to clean chalkboards. My sister waited for me, flashing her brilliant smile to get me out of further punishment. The nuns were always nice to her. Perhaps it was because she was smart or well-mannered or just because she seemed interested in learning about Christian ways – perhaps they believed she was changing, although I knew it was simply her nature: she was just as excited while examining the politics of an ant colony. She



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frequently mocked them behind their backs, but never to their faces. “They are respected in their own culture, so we should respect them here.” she would say.

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The years passed until Marie was finished school, and she began to look for job opportunities in other countries. Every time a letter came to our door, I would run it to her bedroom and watch her open it. Every time, it said the same thing:

Thank you for your interest in our organization. However, the lack of standardized education you have received to this point is not sufficient for our programs.

My sister would toss each letter on a growing pile on the corner of her desk and smile. “Don’t worry, Violet. It wasn’t right for me, I just have to keep trying.” I would admire her persistence, but at night I could hear her crying herself to sleep.

Marie decided that moving off the reserve would give her the opportunities she needed. She saved up enough money to move to the city, where she had found a job doing laundry at the local hospital. She came back to the reserve frequently, and on one of her visits asked our mom if she could bring me to her apartment for a few days. I was thrilled.

The apartment was very small, and the only furniture was a couch that folded out into a bed, a stove, and a fridge. The only indication that someone lived there was the many books lying open around the room. Some were medical books, I saw, with all sorts of funny pictures of sick people. My sister brought me some bannock with strawberry jam on it. “Eat up, little one. You’ve got to get your energy if you want to walk around the city all day.” She pinched my cheek. Her hands felt rough and dry. We pulled out the couch and laid on the bed, together in the dark, while she told me stories about the world.

The next day Marie had to work, so I stayed in her apartment and observed the people on the street below her window, imagining I was a great explorer, discovering the

city for the first time. People rushed by each other without smiling, horns honked and men shouted rude words out car windows; quite a savage culture, I concluded. Finally, Marie came home and we went out for dinner. The dinner was fancy and I wondered how she could afford it all. The food didn't matter. I was happy just to be with her again. After we were both stuffed, we started to walk home. I asked her if she missed the reserve, and she thought about it for awhile.

“I miss the people. I miss the community. I miss you, a lot.” She stopped walking, and reached into her big leather bag. “I have a gift for you.” She pulled out a book: it was a poetry book, written entirely in Cree. The next morning, I went home.

Two weeks later I was jolted out of bed by my mother. “Violet, your sister's work called and said she hasn't shown up in three days. We tried calling her, but there was no answer. We're going into the city.” The four-hour bus ride from the reserve seemed much longer with my mother, aunt and uncle, sitting silently and staring at the highway, than it had when I had taken it with Marie.

When we finally arrived in the city, it seemed like an entirely different world. Were there always this many homeless people on the street? Were the buildings always so dilapidated? Were the streets this dark on the night we walked home together? Her apartment was empty. The food in the fridge was spoiled, and no one in the building could recall the last time they had seen her. Her next door neighbour was a nice older lady. “She's a very nice girl, keeps to herself mostly.” The woman said, “I only ever heard her come in and go out for work.” My mother thanked the woman and we left.

We went to the police station. My mother explained the situation to the man at the front desk. “Please fill out these forms.” The officer ignored my mother, and handed the papers directly to my uncle. My uncle asked my mother questions and began to write. I looked back to the large office where a few policemen were speaking to each other. The constable looked up, glanced at us, and then continued with the paperwork on his desk.

My uncle finished the forms. “What now? What do we do?” The officer took the forms, and put them on a stack. “We’ll process them and be in contact with you.”

That night we stayed in my sister’s apartment, but no one slept. We laid there in silence, listening to the noise from the street. When I finally fell asleep, my demons came in the form of dreams.

The next afternoon, they called us back to the police station.

“We’d like to ask you a few questions. Which one of you was the last to see the woman?” My uncle told him I had stayed with her for a few days, and the officer walked towards a small room with a metal door, and a barred window. “Come along with me, then.”

He didn’t ask me many questions at first. He watched me, and wrote a few things down. “Was she working?” I nodded. “Had a lot of money in a bank account, for an Indian girl from the Rez.” “She was saving for school” I objected, but he ignored me. He reached into an envelope, and pulled out a picture of my sister in her turquoise fancy dress. “She was quite pretty. Was she a prostitute?” The sergeant barely flinched from one question to the next. I would’ve laughed from the absurdity of the suggestion, had I not been so scared. I shook my head again. He stared at me, and his blue eyes were as cold as ice. “Was she seeing a lot of men, then? Did she go drinking?” I didn’t know what to say to him. All I could manage was “She wouldn’t run away. She was going to be a doctor.” and he seemed irritated. “Lots of ‘em go missing around here, don’t know what the real world is like.” What did he know about the ‘real world’? He had the protection of being a white man, the protection of society and the law. My sister had none of these things. My eyes burned, so I shut them. When I opened them again, the officer had left the room.

After I had rejoined my family in the waiting room, the police chief came out of his office to talk to us. “We’re sorry for your loss” he started, directing his comments,

once again, only to my uncle. Only to him. “As you realize, in a city of this size, these things happen all the time. It’s hard to say really, what the chances of finding her are.” He spoke nonchalantly, as if it was a wallet that had been misplaced, instead of a human being. From the corner of my eye, I could see my mother digging her nails into her fingers, trying to inflict outer pain in hopes of silencing the devastating inner pain. “We’ll let you know if we find anything out.” The constable gave a disheartened smile to my uncle, and glanced quickly at my mother, avoiding eye contact.

When we left the station, silent tears ran down my mother’s cheeks, leaving shining rivers on her dark skin. I looked back at the officers, and caught the last part of a conversation casually thrown in our direction. *“Yeah who knows. She probably just wandered off, left with some guy or something.”*

We stayed at Marie’s apartment again that night. I was angrier than I had ever been before. I felt the anger rise inside my soul and it made me sick to my stomach. I was so angry that I kicked the books. These books had brought my sister away from her family. These books convinced my sister that people were good spirited, and trustworthy. These books planted dreams beyond her reach in her innocent head. If she had just stayed on the reserve, this wouldn’t have happened. I would still have her.

My mother came into the room, drawn by the noise I was making. She wrapped her arms around me, and pulled me into her chest. I screamed at her, my eyes welling with tears that blurred the room. “Why should she have to worry about where she goes and who she talks to? Why should she have to be afraid of everyone and everything?” I wiped the tears away from my eyes with my sleeve, and looked up to see my mother with her arms wrapped around herself like she was cold, staring unwaveringly down at a tile in the floor. “Because,” my aunt started, “the world isn’t safe for us.”

We thought about having a funeral for her on the reserve. My mother objected. “She’s not dead. She will never die, she is only lost. We have to use our spirit to bring her



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home, wherever she is.” We planned a pow wow instead, to celebrate her achievements. The night before the pow wow, my mother came into my room with Marie’s turquoise dress. “I want you to wear it. She would want you to wear it.” She laid it down on the bed. I touched the silky fabric and began to cry. My mother took me in her arms and we cried together.

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Three years have passed since I last saw my sister. I think about her every day, but I am no longer angry. I don’t imagine what might have happened to her, because I know she wouldn’t want that. She wouldn’t want me to be scared. She would want me to continue living the life I have worked hard for, and I promise her every night, when I lay in the dark with her, that I won’t ever lose my hope.