

wasn't so different from other young girls. She had a doll and her brothers and sisters to play with. Sometimes they would argue, but most of the time they got along. The young girl had a good life, especially in the summer, when it stayed light until late in the evening and the family would stay up with the light, playing games and telling stories.

But as all things must, this good life would soon come to an end. One day, after a visit to the Hudson's Bay Company post, the father came back with an ashen face. He sat with his wife and explained to her what he'd been told by the white traders at the post. A residential school had been built near the post, and the government had made it law that all *Anishnaabe* children must leave their families' camps and live at this school. "It won't be so bad," the white traders told the young girl's father. "Your children can come back and live with you for two months every summer. Think of it this way," the white traders said. "They will live in our world and learn our ways."

"And what if I do not send them to your residential school?" the father said.

"Then we are no longer permitted to trade with you, and the government will send the Mounties and they will take your children anyways," the white traders answered.

The young girl's father told his wife all this, and she cried. She knew they had to do what the government told them.

"We will go deep in the bush where they cannot find us," the father said. "We will live the way the grandfathers did, and forget about these white men."

"Even this country is not big enough that we can run away from them," his wife said. "They have airplanes that will spot our fire smoke. You won't have bullets for your gun. You can no longer shoot a bow well enough to feed all of us. What kind

LEGEND OF THE SUGAR GIRL

White men gave Indians a lot of gifts. Guns and outboard motors. Television. Coffee. Kentucky Fried Chicken. Road hockey. Baggy jeans and baseball caps. Rock-and-roll music and cocaine. But there is one gift that no one ever really talks about.

Once there was a young girl. She lived far up in the bush, past the Canadian Shield, so far up that deer could not survive in that harsh place. Her father was a hunter and trapper. Her mother made her family's clothing and cleaned the game that the father brought home, and she stretched and tanned the hides. They traded these pelts at the Hudson's Bay Company post for some of the *wemestikushu's*, the white man's, goods — goods that the *Anishnaabe*, the Indians, found made life a little easier in that cold place. They traded lynx and beaver, moose and marten and snowshoe hare and mink for flour and bright cloth, bullets, simple tools and thread.

The young girl had many brothers and sisters, and all of them helped their parents with cooking and sewing, hunting and trapping. In the winter they kept their home in the bush by the father's traplines, and in summer they moved camp to the edge of a lake where fish were plentiful. This young girl

of life would that be for our children? Running and hiding the rest of our lives like rabbits."

So the young girl's parents had no choice but to do what the government told them. When the geese left that autumn, they took the children to the residential school, where nuns in black habits, with stern round faces, waited for them.

The first thing the nuns did was cut the children's hair. The boys had their hair cut short so that it poked up from their heads. The girls' hair was cut in straight bangs, the rest of it hanging above the shoulder so that they could no longer braid it as their mothers and grandmothers did.

The next thing the nuns did was dress the children in stiff, itchy clothing. Then they told them that they were no longer allowed to speak Cree. If they did, their mouths would be washed out with soap and they would be struck with a switch. Some of the children laughed, the young girl among them, for they thought the nuns were joking. Who would hit children, especially with a switch? They were not dogs! The young girl was shocked when a nun dragged her to a room, put the young girl over her knee, hiked her schooldress up and beat her bare skin until she cried.

That night, and for the next several months, the young girl fell asleep to her own crying and the sound of the other children crying in the large room lined with beds. They missed their parents and the cook-fire and the smell of tanned leather.

Besides the haircuts and clothing and days filled with clocks and classrooms and spankings and schedules, the oddest thing the young girl experienced was the food that the nuns made her eat three times a day. In the morning, she stood in a line with the others and was given a bowl of grey mush. Then

she was given a little milk to pour on the mush. But the most interesting thing was that she was expected to place a spoonful of sugar, white as snow on a lake, onto the mush and milk. The sugar made the bland food taste good. The young girl learned to like her breakfast because of it. It made a grey morning bright for a while. Soon, the girl got in the habit of sneaking a spoonful of sugar into her schooldress pocket. During the day, when she was bored or felt like a treat, she licked her finger and placed it in the sugar in her pocket, then stuck her finger in her mouth without any of the nuns noticing. She was very careful doing this, for if the nuns saw, they would surely beat her with a tamarack switch.

The days turned to weeks turned to months. The children became better at speaking English, but many still spoke their own language, sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose. Always, when they were caught, they had their mouths washed out with soap and were given a switching on the bare skin of their behinds. The young girl noticed that even the bravest boys, who on a dare would look a nun in the eye and insult her in Cree, could still be heard crying quietly as they fell asleep. The nights were the worst; nuns creeping like ghosts between the beds, hushing children with their bony fingers to their lips. The young girl looked forward to mornings.

When the children were very good, they were given a hard candy, sweet and brightly coloured, that they sucked on until the candy became a sliver, then disappeared. These were even better than white sugar to the young girl. The flavour was deeper, thicker. It made her think of warm sun on her skin, and made her feel the way you feel when you wake up in the morning and realize the day is all yours. The grey days of residential school passed more quickly with hard candy.

Spring came, and the children talked about soon going back to their summer homes by the lakes and rivers. This prospect made the children happy and, when they were happy, they behaved well. The nuns in turn handed out a little more candy. The young girl thought it would be a good idea to bring some of this candy home with her. She began doing favours for the other children, making their beds, tickling their backs, even giving away part of her dinner in exchange for the candy.

It wasn't long before she became possessed by the idea of hoarding candy. If she could get enough of it, she could have candy all the time and her days here would be much happier. She begged and finagled and traded so much that soon the other children began to call her by a new name. They began calling her the Sugar Girl. Some of them meant it to tease her, but the Sugar Girl was proud of her new name. The other children began to admire her intensity and focus on this sweet substance. Before long, they called her this name as a sign of respect.

Summer was a strange time for the Sugar Girl and her brothers and sisters. They had only spoken their language in secret and in whispers all year, and for the first long part of the summer, whenever they spoke Cree out loud, something inside them flinched tense for a beating.

Summer passed quickly, as summers do. Years passed quickly, as years do. Each summer as the children grew, they came back home remembering a little less of their language, until a time came when the Sugar Girl and her brothers and sisters could barely talk with their parents anymore.

During these years that the Sugar Girl was gone to residential school, her mother and father tried to live life as they'd always lived it. Father went out on the traplines or moose hunting, and Mother kept their home. But they were growing

older, and with age comes weakness. To cut and clean a moose is a young man's work, and hauling its weight back home is many young men's work. With no children to help them, the Sugar Girl's parents finally admitted that they had to do what other parents were doing. They moved to the reserve where the residential school was and, with the little bit of money the government gave them, they bought expensive food and necessities from the Hudson's Bay Company. The Sugar Girl's father had no choice but to laugh when he thought about how well the government and company worked together, how they were like two hands of the same body. One hand would give him something, and the other would just as quickly snatch it away.

The years passed, and the Sugar Girl grew up and eventually came to call the residential school home, just as the nuns and government had planned. As she grew taller, the Sugar Girl grew plumper. The nuns' food was very different from her family's food. The sauces, the desserts, the sweet teas and soda pops she discovered — all of them were thick with sugar. In some strange way, this food that she ate and grew to love replaced what had been taken away from her, and when the Sugar Girl felt sadness, the sadness that comes from deep in the stomach, she smothered it with her sugar foods.

The day finally arrived when it was time for the Sugar Girl to leave the residential school. Although she would never have imagined it when she first came there, she was scared to leave. Even though the nuns were generous with their whippings, they also gave her things she needed — her clothing, her food. But what they had neglected to give her was the ability to find these things on her own.

The government gave her a little money, just as they gave her parents a little. It was strange to realize that, now that

she was free to see her parents, she rarely did. She spoke a different language, liked different things. This fact made her sad sometimes, made her feel as though she'd lost something very important, and when the sadness swelled up from inside her, she blunted it with sugar in its many forms.

For all the pleasant feelings that these sweet things brought her, the Sugar Girl began to notice bad effects. Her teeth were turning brown and hurt her horribly. Her skin had suffered too, as the poor diet ate away at that as well. She noticed that when she didn't eat sugar she felt run down and got horrible headaches. She kept eating it.

On her twentieth birthday, the Sugar Girl's friends gave her her first taste of alcohol. That night she felt once again the way she had as a small girl when she'd been given her first taste of sugar. It made things seem brighter, warmer. It made her happy and made her laugh. It made her forget. She didn't know that alcohol was sugar in its fermented, purer form. "Think of it as candy for adults," one friend said to her that night, and she laughed and laughed until the tears flowed.

And so it was that alcohol became her new candy. But the effects of this new candy were stronger. She felt its effect soon after she drank it, felt it the next morning. Worse than that, she did things while drinking that she normally wouldn't do. For the first hour or so she and her friends would talk more and laugh more than normal, and that was nice. But when they continued to drink, the laughing turned to sadness or anger. She never knew for sure which way it would go.

She wanted the warm feeling of happiness that first came upon her to last, but the alcohol wouldn't allow it. When the Sugar Girl drank too much and the sadness or anger came, she tried to figure out where it came from. She was angry with the

nuns. They'd threatened her and hit her until she'd become what they wanted. But she didn't really know who or what this new person was that she'd turned into.

There were mornings when the Sugar Girl would wake up sick, never wanting alcohol again. Sometimes there would be a man she knew, or even one she didn't know, lying beside her. On these mornings, the Sugar Girl wanted the life of her childhood back. The fire at night. The sound of her mother singing an old Cree song. Her father's stories, the games with her brothers and sisters. But her parents were too old now to go back and live in the bush, to teach her brothers and sisters how to hunt and trap and make Indian clothing and prepare game for eating. That life was gone.

As those awful mornings turned into afternoons on the reserve where she lived, and her body began to feel better, the Sugar Girl questioned whether she even wanted that old life back. She'd gotten used to and learned to like what the nuns and government had given her. The soft bed, the radio and its music, the food that was as available as the Hudson's Bay store. Life was easy. If she was careful with the money the government gave her each month in exchange for her family's old hunting grounds and life, she could just get by. But there was still the nagging worry, like a mosquito buzz late at night, that her life was missing something.

When the day came that the Sugar Girl found she was pregnant, she thought maybe this was the thing she had been missing. The white doctor informed her that not only was she to have a baby but she had a disease, something wrong with her body and how it dealt with all the sugar she'd consumed since childhood. "You should take better care of yourself," he said. "Many of your people have this problem. Your bodies can't deal

with the awful diet you subject it to. If you're not careful, if you don't change your ways, it will kill you."

And so it came to be that the Sugar Girl gave birth to her sugar baby. She gave him a Bible name, in the hope that this would help him in his life with the white people, and raised her boy as best she could. She thought back to her own childhood and what her mother would do when the Sugar Girl was sick or acting up or needed help. But that seemed so long ago. There weren't too many memories of that time left. Sometimes it was easier to do what the nuns had done to her, and spank her boy when he was naughty, and quiet him with candy, and feed him the same things she ate.

For a short time when she was pregnant and when she was breastfeeding her baby, the Sugar Girl felt as healthy and happy as she had as a child. But it wasn't long after that time that she fell into her old ways again. She saw it in the grocery store, at the restaurant, in her home. It had made itself a permanent part of her. It was impossible to separate herself from the thing she had become.

So she raised her child as best she knew how and lived as best as she knew how. But the Sugar Girl got sicker and sicker. The same sugar that had befriended her and comforted her as a child and helped her live as the nuns demanded, was her enemy, had been her enemy from the beginning, eating away at her from the inside out. And by the time it was the son's turn to help look after his mother, he too was taken away to the residential school. The Sugar Girl had lived long enough to feel the same pain her mother and father had felt. The son suffered the fate of a residential school child, and in painful ways, at the hands of certain sick men, that his mother had fortunately never faced.

But legends are not meant to be sad stories only. They are told to express a people's magic, to make victors out of weaklings. The Sugar Girl died, but a part of her was carried on in her son — that good part that the nuns couldn't take out of her, that had been in her all along though she didn't know it.

The Sugar Girl's son was strong. After all, his blood was Cree. He left the residential school and watched it crumble at the hands of the ones who had built it, watched it rot and collapse because of their physical and mental and sexual abuse. The Sugar Girl's son went on to learn everything he could about the dangers that had silenced his mother, and in turn he taught some of his people about the dangers of the sugar disease.

White men gave Indians a lot of gifts. Hockey and electricity, prefab houses, snowmobiles, running shoes, pickup trucks, pavement and reserves.

In turn, Indians gave white men some gifts back. Lacrosse and long hair. Corn and the peace pipe. Names for professional baseball teams. Powwows, Tonto, Custer's Last Stand. Land. Lots of land. Thanksgiving.

It's the gifts that are never mentioned, though, that we all feel the most.