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MOTHER TONGUE

CAUGHT BETWEEN Sister Eustace's fingers, my ear is close to ripping off as she drags me through the schoolhouse and toward the steps that lead to the Mother Superior's room. This is the only part of the morning that hasn't gone to plan. I focus on the comforting weight of the silver dinner knife tucked into the waistband of my skirt. Its cold length digs against my hip bone and reassures me. My trip upstairs won't end like the others. All those girls who have gone before me. I will come back down. I will slay the monster waiting up there. I will kill the Mother Superior, ear or no ear.

Normally, Sister Eustace hauls us girls along by our hair, straight black strands wrapped around her hand for the best grip. Because all of mine was shorn off earlier in the week for refusing to use silverware as I ate, Sister Eustace makes do with my ear. I'd hoped for something along the lines of a bone-grinding wrist grip, but here we are. For two days, my scalp bled from the ravages of the dull knife she used to strip away my honor in front of all the younger girls trapped in this boarding school with me. As Sister Eustace chopped and hacked, she told me, with a smug smile on her face and loud enough for the whole schoolhouse to hear, that this was a light punishment for being such an uncouth Indian. She said that I should be grateful for her deep mercy, which she was showing only because it was my birthday. I smiled through the runnels of blood streaking my face. This further enraged Sister Eustace and gained me a bare-bottom paddling that lasted until Sister Francis burst into the room and pulled me from the dining hall, away from Sister Eustace. Even with Sister Francis's intervention, I haven't been able to sit down comfortably since.

The clacks of little feet in hard-soled shoes follow us toward the staircase. At its base, Sister Eustace spins, jerking me around with her. I bite off a yelp of pain and pull in a shuddering breath through flared nostrils to keep tears from welling. Sister Eustace sweeps her dull gray gaze over the group of girls trailing us. They are all dressed in the foolish black and white uniforms the Sisters force us to wear, little choking bows tight around their necks. Their beautiful black hair is cut short to rest on their narrow shoulders, as if each of them are in mourning.

Even though the full heat of Sister Eustace's fiery fury is on them, none of the girls back away. Twelve sets of brown eyes, all shimmering with held-back cries, are stuck on me.

I'm the oldest girl in the boarding school by four years. Even before I turned thirteen, the others looked to me as the mother of our fractured little Monacan Nation inside these stark white walls. My chest tightens. It grows hard for me to breathe as I look at each of their pretty, round faces. They'll be devastated if I meet the same fate as every other girl who has been brought to the Mother Superior's room.

But disappearing is not part of my plan.

"Get back to the classroom this instant." Sister Eustace's voice crashes down the hallway toward the girls. They turn and run from it. Ever since the third girl went missing and I put together the fact that anyone who's taken to see the Mother Superior never comes back, I've been trying to teach the girls how to make it through this hell we've been forced into. My chest loosens just a little to see a lesson well learned.

I get no time to be proud of these smart girls because Sister Eustace is yanking at my ear again. A tear opens between my earlobe and cheek, sudden enough to pull a whimper from me. A warm droplet swells and runs down my neck until the white cotton collar sucks it up. I squeeze my eyes shut against the agony, but it's impossible to take the stairs without seeing where my feet are going.

"You stupid Indian, can't even walk up steps the right way," Sister Eustace hisses.

My eyes snap open. Whatever tears have gathered burn away as I set my mouth in a tight line. I don't stumble anymore as we ascend the impossibly long staircase. Minutes pass, yet we keep climbing. The stairwell leading to the Mother Superior's room is strictly forbidden to any girl not accompanied by Sister Eustace. Sister Francis has always acted as if the stairs don't exist. I've never seen Sister Eustace take the steps without a screaming girl dragging along in her wake.

I won't give her the pleasure of hearing me scream.

"Three infractions just this week. Why, Theresa?" I've never been able to stop myself from cringing at the name Sister Eustace gave me when those sour-smelling army men brought me here. This time is no different. No matter how hard I try, though, I can't recall my real name. It's as if they stole it from me when I walked through the doors of Bear Mountain Indian School. But I recall it being beautiful, and right, and oh so mine.

Sister Eustace glares at me from the corner of her eye, her little mouth wrinkling into itself like she's sucking on a rock. But she doesn't stop our ascent and continues with the little lecture I'm sure she's been working on ever since Sister Francis yanked the spanking paddle from her hands back on Monday.

"You've been the shining example of a reformed Indian ever since you got here. We made such good progress with you. You could've made even the greatest doubter believe in our mission. The rest of the girls follow you like you're their little chieftain. So, when you start acting so . . . uncivilized, what do you think it's going to make the rest of them do? I tried to be lenient after Wednesday, but then you had to go and break the rules again. You've brought this upon yourself, Theresa."

I lead morning prayers. Or, at least, I did. This was the first duty the Sisters gave me when I was brought here because I spoke the most English, being the only child of traders. Wednesday, when Sister Francis instructed me to go to the front of the class and start praying, I stood there and just stared out at Ruth, the newest girl, brought to the school three weeks ago. Her lips trembled in the stillness my silence brought over the room. Not even a minute passed before Sister Eustace was on her feet, radiating anger, demanding I start praying right that instant. I looked at her with the saddest eyes I could muster and said I'd forgotten how to pray. Quicker than I could blink, Sister Eustace closed the distance between us and slapped me to the floor. She called me a spawn of Satan himself, to which I replied: amen. This gained me two sharp kicks to the gut. Once again, Sister Francis jumped in and saved me from the full extent of Sister Eustace's ire. I staggered back to my desk with the taste of blood between my teeth. Ruth, who had taken the empty seat to my left on her first day here, looked at me with circles for eyes. Her lips no longer trembled. I smiled. Sister Eustace called Sister Francis a fool for protecting a blasphemer like me. With her rosary clutched tight in an unsteady hand, Sister Francis started the first prayer. I wasn't asked to pray on Thursday.

When we finally reach the top in the interminable staircase, the boards of the landing creak out a protest. Having grown accustomed to general disuse, they detest being put to work and let us know it. Sister Eustace pays them no mind and marches on. This upstairs hallway is maddeningly short compared to the stairwell. There are no windows up here and only one doorway, at the opposite end of the hallway. Light seeps past its crevices, casting the door in a dark silhouette. My aversion

to this door is stronger than any yank or tug Sister Eustace is capable of, but I force my feet to keep shuffling forward.

Hints of a cloying stench fill the hallway. I've caught snatches of this smell before; behind my desk, at the dining table, in bed. Other girls have complained about it on multiple occasions, but the stench goes as quickly as it comes, so the Sisters have never done anything. I've explained the smell away to the girls as what's left of a coyote's dinner baking in the sun. The results of a frightened skunk or an opossum who crawled under the schoolhouse and couldn't find her way back out. Even the youngest girls know these explanations are made up, but my stories keep the worst of their fear at bay, nonetheless. We all understand that a stench like this can only come from something far removed from the natural.

The doorway towers as I get closer. My feet start winning the fight against my will and try to push me back toward the stairs. I want nothing more than to continue forward, throw open the door, and confront the Mother Superior, whatever that might entail. Now that I'm thirteen, it's my job to keep more girls from disappearing. There's no putting it off any longer. But something deep inside me—the same instinct that makes a fawn terrified of the cottonmouth sunning on a riverbank—tells me to turn and run as far away from this place as possible.

Sister Eustace rips at my ear again. The doorway had me so deep under its spell that I'm unable to swallow a howl of shock. My scream bounces off the tight walls, echoing a hundred times over, until the door swallows it, and silence reigns throughout the hallway once more.

"Uh-uh, girlie. There's no going back. In the civilized world, we face the consequences of our actions." Sister Eustace speaks with fervor. Flecks of spittle fly from her lips, landing on my forehead and cheeks. "I've done all I can with you—now the Mother Superior will set you straight."

She reaches for the plain knob but stops before twisting it. Hurried footsteps sound from the stairwell behind us. The landing boards groan again under the weight of another human body. Sister Eustace whirls us around to confront this intruder.

As she rushes down the hallway, Sister Francis holds up her billowing skirts with one hand while the other grips her habit to support the pins anchoring it in place. Sister Eustace moves us forward to meet the other Sister with uncanny speed. My feet tangle up beneath me, not used to such quickness, and I almost fall. The only thing that keeps me up is Sister Eustace's firm fingers on my ear.

“What are you doing here?” Sister Eustace’s words come from the back of her throat, cracked and filled with contempt. “You know only the Mother Superior and I are allowed on the upper floor.”

“I’ve come to bring Theresa back downstairs.” Sister Francis’s voice shakes along with her bottom lip. If both her hands weren’t occupied, I’m certain they would be quaking. I almost feel pity for her.

“You will do no such thing. This little Indian has earned her visit to the Mother Superior, just like the rest of them.”

“Surely she didn’t do something deserving of this punishment. You’re overreacting, Sister.”

“Overreacting?” Sister Eustace shoves me between them and shakes my head as if she is showing the other Sister an offensive newspaper article. Sister Francis’s eyes flit between my pain-stricken face and Sister Eustace’s, twisted with rage. “She purposefully spoke in that,” Sister Eustace gags on her next words, “. . . foul language of theirs, even though she knows it’s strictly forbidden inside our holy walls.”

Sister Francis drops her skirts, and the newly free hand snaps up to cover her thin, parted lips. Her eyes are white saucers with ice-blue chips in their centers. They lock on to me.

Despite Sister Eustace’s shaking and the agony hazing my spirit, I smile.

The mission of the Bear Mountain Indian School is simple: Strike the Tongue to Spare the Mouth. The sisters have us recite it every morning after the benediction, as if it is a little prayer of its own. They want to carve out our mother tongue. Force us to stop speaking the language of our ancestors. The other girls were so young when they got here, they only remember a few words and phrases of our language, and they lose more of it every day. I try to teach them when I can; I go to Ruth late at night once I know the Sisters are asleep and speak to Hannah in soft whispers as we set the tables for supper and meet with Mary behind a tree outside during our playtime, the hazy blue mountains of our homeland filling the horizon and watching over us. But my grasp on our language is slipping, too. And I’m not so good of a teacher.

In math class today, we were doing division tables. As we went through the answers, Sister Eustace grew tired of calling on a girl and getting the wrong number in response, so she turned to me for a reprieve. I stood to address her, just like she taught us to do, and said the word for six in my mother tongue. A strong word, gloriously streaking from my mouth like a bolt of lightning. Two syllables, a flash of light in

the back of the throat followed by a crash of thunder against the lips, so much more than its impotent English counterpart. Gasps and giggles sounded from Ruth and Lydia and Rebecca and all the other girls who had attended enough of my private classes to understand what I'd said. Half of their delight was because I dared to use our language inside the classroom—the other half came from the answer being obviously wrong. Even the least mathematically inclined girl here knows what seven divided by one is.

Sister Eustace screamed in full-throated agony and staggered back a step. Her face went as white as the chalk she uses on the blackboard. Even with all her willful ignorance to our customs and culture, she has picked up a few of our words. She's learned a handful of our numbers, too. Six she knows well because it's the age when a girl can be admitted to the school.

Six is also the number of girls Sister Eustace has taken to the Mother Superior. There will be no seventh.

Now, in the hazy light coming from the cracks around the Mother Superior's door, Sister Francis gapes at me and asks between her fingers a simple question that I'm sure she already knows the answer to: "Theresa, why?"

"Šákpe," I say.

The door behind us shudders in its frame. Sister Francis wails and falls back against the wall as if I've struck her. Life drains from her eyes and skin, leaving both a dull white, the woman now nothing more than a crumpled sheet of paper that would rip if I tried to write on it. Sister Eustace smacks the side of my head for continued impertinence, sending my other ear ringing. She snarls some sort of admonishment at me, but I can't make it out over the bell tolling inside my skull.

"The rest of the girls will be very upset about this," Sister Francis whispers, her whole body sagging. I've seen her sad, upset, and disappointed in us throughout the years, but this is the first time she's ever looked defeated.

"Then you'd better get yourself back downstairs and start consoling them now, hadn't you?" Sister Eustace asks.

"Of course, Sister. Your wisdom always proves infinitely larger than my own." Sister Francis slinks off the wall with a grunt and leaves us, offering not even the slightest of glances toward me as she goes. I saw this coming. Even the best intentioned white people give us Indians up as lost causes sooner or later. They can't stand the stress brought on

by their distaste for our very existence. Still, my heart cracks a little to watch her hunched back hurrying away.

She disappears down the stairs just as the iron hinges of the door behind me screech open. In my distraction, I didn't notice Sister Eustace had let go of my ear and stepped away from me. Before I can even process this brief freedom, her hard grip is on the back of my collar, and she hauls me into the room. My heels stutter across the floorboards in a vain attempt to dig in and delay the inevitable.

Sister Eustace slams the door shut once I'm past the threshold.

The air in the Mother Superior's room is frigid. My breath clouds as it leaves my nostrils. The shivering starts immediately, though I can't say if it's from the cold or the abject terror entering my body with every shallow gasp I manage to take. The chill freezes me in place. My eyes refuse to break away from the planks on the backside of the door. They are crisscrossed with deep gouges, too numerous to count. Long scratches, like those made by a bear sharpening her claws against a tree, intersect at wild angles and turn the door into an impossible labyrinth. The stench is inescapable now, confirming this room as its source. It's a combination of every evil scent there has ever been. The little hairs on my arms and the back of my neck turn into quills. My brain shrieks a command to flee over and over again. I dig my fingernails into the soft meat of my palms and concentrate on the press of silver against my waist to keep from making a futile break for the doorknob.

Something far yet way too close behind me shifts. It's massive, larger than a black bear in late autumn. Moist squishing accompanies its shifting, as well as the sound of innumerable salivating mouths opening and closing in anticipation. The stench swells with the movement and ebbs when whatever is back there settles again.

My mouth is drier than pipe-ready tobacco.

"Hello, sweet one." The hiss of myriad voices worm into my ears, all different pitches, tempos, and volumes. My toes curl until their joints pop.

"You will face the Mother Superior when she speaks to you." An impossible order to follow, but Sister Eustace doesn't wait for me to disobey. She clamps her large hands on my shoulders and spins me around. I want to shut my eyes, but my eyelids rebel.

The room is larger than anything that could possibly fit in the small schoolhouse. Like the hallway, there are no windows on any of the walls. The dim light illuminating the room has no particular source. It's just

there, as if the creator placed it here long ago and it has seen no reason to move since. Across the room's expanse, leaning against the far wall, a diminutive old woman sits on a pinewood stool.

She wears the same habit and robes as the Sisters. Her robes are overly large and drape in limp plumes from her thin frame. The habit sits so far down on her head that it covers her eyes. An elaborate rosary hangs around her bird like neck, its crucifix large enough for me to see the sad face of their undead god even at a distance. The scant skin she shows—the bottom half of her face, her nubby-fingered hands, her bare feet—is moon-pale and thin enough to reveal the blue webbing of veins underneath. Her line-thin lips twist up in a smile and show teeth the color of deer hooves.

“Why have you brought me this, Sister?” The Mother Superior speaks in the simple, thin rasp of an old lady now.

“My Mother Superior.” Sister Eustace's words turn to mist in front of her mouth. She crosses the room, takes one of the Mother Superior's hands, and kisses her arthritic knuckles in a deep bow. “She is in need of your correcting.”

“Oh, I can see that plainly enough.” Though her eyes are covered, I can feel the Mother Superior's gaze slither over every inch of me. Somehow, her breath is unaffected by the cold. “You know I prefer them to be younger, Sister.”

“Of course, my Mother Superior,” Sister Eustace says with another dip of her head.

“Hm.” The thoughtful grunt has more resonance than her small chest should be capable of producing. It fills the room. The whole world. My knees grow weak under the Mother Superior's blind stare. “Even so, she will do. Leave us, Sister.”

“Yes, my Mother Superior.” Sister Eustace turns and starts for the door. Thick, silvery mucus covers her nose, lips, and chin. The skin underneath has little blooms of black frostbite. She smirks as she passes me, spreading the mucus in sticky strings. I flinch when she shuts the door behind her.

Silence dominates the room. I don't even breathe for fear of breaking it. The Mother Superior's full attention bores a hole into my chest and tries to weasel its way into my soul. The chill intensifies. Numbness creeps through my fingers and toes. I feel my lips begin to chap. The stench grows, too, until my eyes water with it. The Mother Superior's mouth droops open just a bit, and she begins to pant, hoarse and full

of phlegm. A chorus of gasps join in to make a discordant cacophony. Again, my brain screams at me to run away.

But I haven't come this far only to be a coward when faced with the end. I'm thirteen now. Such an age demands the bravery of those who claim it.

"Yes, you'll do just fine, my tasty little savage." The Mother Superior speaks in the myriad tones she first addressed me with. Her last word echoes through my body in a hundred different voices. My fear crumbles away, and a rage-fueled resolve builds up to replace it.

The Mother Superior's jaw unhinges. A thick, pale tongue unfurls to the floor with a wet plop. The tongue is three times as long as she is tall, and the reek rolls off it in thick waves. Its sharp point lifts into the air, a pit viper preparing to strike. With a whip's crack, the tongue stretches toward me. I'm barely able to get my arms up to protect my face before it wraps around my chest six times and squeezes hard enough to snap a few ribs like kindling twigs after a rainless week. All the air in my lungs hisses out my mouth with a few droplets of blood and a puff of steam. The tongue lifts me off the floor and drags me deeper into the room.

The illusion ripples and fades, and I see the Mother Superior's true form. She is a small hill of translucent flesh taking up over half of the enormous room. Her body undulates. Points of antlers and tufts of coyote fur dot her writhing skin. Every inch of her oozes that silvery mucus I saw on Sister Eustace's face. Her black robes have mostly been absorbed into her form. The only places where they are still visible are the sleeves covering the two small arms jutting out of her from unnatural places along with the hem around her useless, tiny legs laying slack against the floorboards. Her low-seated habit is still intact, sitting atop her head in the middle of the quivering mass. Beneath her human chin is a gaping maw at least twice as wide as my body. The tongue constricting me comes from this wet, black void. Spotting the flesh around it are countless smaller mouths, each salivating a sickly-colored ichor and babbling childish prayers of anticipated pleasure.

The Mother Superior is so much worse than our storytellers could've ever hoped to convey. I want to scream and curl into a ball, but I can't pull in even a slight gasp or move the bottom two-thirds of my body. The tongue brings me in closer to her massive mouth. Row after row of twisted teeth wait to rend my flesh, all of them the mottled brown of rotted oak wood.

Only a little time left to act before it's too late and I've thrown my life away for nothing.

Fighting against the Mother Superior's constriction with all the might in my body, I wiggle my fingers into my waistband and pull out the dinner knife. A beautiful length of pure silver that Ruth squirreled away while Sister Eustace was paddling me for eating with my hands, Mary dropped into my school bag as Sister Eustace called me a demon for not praying, and I strapped into my skirt as I dressed this morning. Its handle settles into my palm, light glinting off the blade's dull edge.

I slash the Mother Superior's tongue once, twice, three times. Ropes of black blood pour from the gash I open across the pale, spongy flesh. The blood covers my hands, stinging them with a flash freeze. I don't stop. I cut at the tongue again and again, carving away.

Strike the Tongue to Spare the Mouth.

Its hold on me goes slack and I tumble to the floor with a hard thunk. The tongue plops down next to me. The Mother Superior roars.

Without thinking, I pull in a deep breath from where I lay, crumpled and aching. The stench mixes with the cold. I gag, but there's no time to vomit. The severed tongue returns to normal human proportions and wriggles next to my hand. I flick it away and push up, slipping a couple times on the ice creeping over the pool of blood around me. By the time I get to my feet, I am drenched in icy scarlet.

Somehow, I managed to hold on to the knife in my fall. I brandish it in the empty space between me and the Mother Superior in case a second tongue comes my way. The storytellers always said these monsters could speak from both sides of their mouths.

The Mother Superior shrinks back into herself. Though she is no smaller physically, her presence is tinier than it had been when she was an old woman on a stool. She holds out one of her tiny arms between us, as if that pitiful thing could shield her from me.

"Please, in the name of God, don't do this, Theresa," all her small mouths beg as I push the arm out of my way.

"My name is Nawaji."

The moment I severed the Mother Superior's tongue and bathed in her freezing blood, my true name returned to me. It rolls off my tongue in three cracks of glorious syllabic thunder. Speaking it out loud, I bring about the first moment of true holiness this school has ever known.

The Mother Superior starts howling before I plunge the knife into her cold flesh. The first step of the school's Mission is to carve out our mother tongue. The second: tear out our hearts.

This will be the last time I follow their example.

I can see the icy-blue block of the Mother Superior's frozen heart as I slice through her. It'll be so cold in my hands. I'll probably have frostbite for months. Might even lose a finger or two. That's okay. Ruth and Mary and Rebecca and Lydia—I cannot wait to learn their real names and throw these false ones away forever—are downstairs. If they were good and listened to my instructions, there's already a healthy fire burning in the hearth. Ready and waiting.