

The Admission

by Kevin Annett



In a society where murder is officially sanctioned, there can be no regret and no justice.

- Simon Wiesenthal

It is always possible to bind together a certain number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggression.

- Sigmund Freud

The man was friendly, as his kind always are. He paid for our tea and muffins and seemed genuinely concerned when I spoke of my recent divorce and being robbed of my daughters.

He was, after all, an expert on children.

“They were generally well-behaved kids, but there were always the ne’er do wells who tried running away,” he smiled. “We gave them a single warning. If they persisted, they went on bread and water for a week. Sometimes not even the bread. A second offense brought more severe punishment.”

His name was Terrance MacNamara and until 1982 he had been an Oblate priest at the Catholic “Indian residential school” on Kuper Island. He spoke to me on a rainy Vancouver day in 1996 with the glib self-confidence of someone who knew he would never stand trial.

“What does ‘more severe punishment’ mean?” I asked him.

“We had wooden stocks set up in the yard. And we used them, rain or shine. Three days and three nights in the stocks. That was the prescribed punishment for felons.”

“But how could they be ‘felons?’” I asked, confused. “They were just children!”

“You obviously haven’t read the federal legislation regarding Indians, my friend,” Terrance smiled again with a gloating look.

“What else did you do, besides locking kids in the stocks?” I demanded, my anger boiling.

“Well, flogging the malcontents in front of the other children was always a good deterrent,” he said matter of factly. “Then we’d put them in manacles and lock them in the cellar. But even that didn’t stop the worst of them. So then, more extreme measures had to be taken.”

I angrily tossed a death record from the Kuper Island Indian school onto the table.

“Is that why over half the children died at Kuper?” I exclaimed. “From ‘extreme measures?’”

“No, of course not,” he snapped. “Outright murder of so many would have been too crude and messy. We let the weak ones starve to death. But the best method was to lock them in together, the healthy with the sick, and never treat any of them. That way, tuberculosis got rid of most of them. That was death by so-called natural causes, you see? All neat and tidy for the records.”

It was a most un-Canadian moment, when a participant in official mass murder admitted to the crime. But it was not an admission of guilt, for he was not guilty of any wrongdoing in Canada, either then or now.

“And nobody objected?” I said to him, shocked.

“Object?” he chuckled. “Who would object? All the churches did it. The system was government approved and perfectly legal.”

“That was the Nazis’ defense at the Nuremberg Trials,” I remarked.

“And they were right,” Terrance smiled as he sipped his tea.

I almost decked him right there, especially since I had learned from other former staffers about the Nazi doctors who had experimented on children at the Kuper Island school before and after World War Two. But I was determined to draw him out, and I had the ammunition to do it with.

“Did you know a local boy named Richard Thomas?” I asked him. “His sister Belvy claims that you and Principal Dunlop killed Richard right after he threatened to tell his family about the mass graves of kids behind the school.”

Terrance frowned for the first time as I handed him Belvy Breber’s affidavit.

“Belvy says you made all the children walk by Richard’s dead body and you told them they’d be killed too if they ever spoke about what went on at Kuper.”

I expected the priest to become angry and self-defensive. Instead, he said with an icy calm,

“The trouble with bleeding hearts like you is you don’t understand what has to be done to bring the Indians to salvation and into the modern world.”

People who think they’re god and are untouchable can be goaded into disclosing things they shouldn’t. So, as I was doing with the United Church officials who were just then gutting my life and livelihood, I provoked Terrance to disclose even more.

“I hear every residential school had a punishment log,” I said. “How about you guys?”

“Naturally we had one,” he said. “It was a government regulation to record everything we did to the kids. And not just the punishments. The special treatments too, like for the children tagged for the Indian hospitals or the Defense Research labs.”

“You mean for medical experiments?”

“Of course,” he said, scratching his white whiskers. “Sterilizations, drug testing, behavior modification, the whole gamut. We made a lot of money farming out the kids that way.”

“And that included working with German doctors like Heinz Lehmann, Ruth Kyander, and even Josef Mengele of Auschwitz infamy, is that right?” I asked him.

He stared at me coldly again, but with a deeper malevolence that chilled me.

“You may think you’re smart, Reverend, but you’re the one in danger,” Terrance said quietly.

“I’m the protected one, not you. I can admit to anything, and nothing will ever happen. Most of our records were trashed and shredded long ago. No-one will believe you if you try speaking about this. They’ll say you’re crazy and you’re making it all up. You’ll face imprisonment, or even worse. So, you should think carefully about that before you say another word.”

I’ve never liked being told what to do, and his smug warning made me explode.

“How the hell can you sleep at night when you murdered so many children?” I exclaimed.

“I sleep fine,” Terrance retorted. “I have three children and five grandchildren now, and I’m still a deacon in my church. I’m a very happy and contented man.”

He was indeed, by his expression. And to prove his point and rub salt in my open wounds, Terrance went on to ply me with accounts of children’s teeth being pulled without painkillers, of secret midnight burials and incinerations of little bodies, and of the mandatory monthly “death quota” in the Indian residential schools prescribed by church and state officials.

Terrance finally stopped and stared at me self-assuredly.

“I’m not a monster, Reverend,” he said. “I was just one of many people. The whole country either knows about this or doesn’t want to know. Nobody will ever be prosecuted for what we did to those children. And if you keep this up, you’ll be the one who’ll suffer.”

Terrance MacNamara’s crude threat didn’t deter me, although it turned out to be an accurate prediction of what was to follow. For even now, nearly thirty years after my encounter with MacNamara and decades of campaigning and exposure, Christian Canada remains unprosecuted and untarnished for its Group Crime. It’s even pretending now that the slaughter of 60,000 children never happened. Because in Canada, nobody likes a snitch: even when the snitching is about tortured and murdered children.

Or, to quote Brian Thorpe, one of the top United Church officials who destroyed my life during that same revelatory year of 1996,

“We all know about those dead children, Kevin. The only problem is you talked about it.”

I can’t think of a more perfect epitaph for our fallen nation.



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