***Shadow Child*: An excerpt from a senior comp**

**By Brittany VanSnepson**

She hated the long walk home from where the school bus dropped her off. It would have been easier if she had someone to walk with, but most of her friends went to middle school on the rez, and the precious few that she got a long with at the white public school didn’t live on this side of town.

Nobody at the white public school lived on this side of town.

Nobody except Meli.

The narrow road was flanked by flooded ditches on either side of its path. Past the dirt road and beyond the ditches, a large expanse of forest lingered for miles. The woods seemed crowded today. Almost as if the tall elms and even thicker hemlocks were fighting with one another for space to stretch out their long limbs and soak up the hot rays of the sun. A familiar trait to any Indian summer.

Meli, on the other hand, couldn’t wait to escape the haze that surrounded her. Glancing ahead, her eyes trailed the narrow road but spotted no potential shade spots. Maybe there were some farther off, but it seemed more likely that Meli’s eyes were just playing tricks on her. Swiping at the beads of perspiration forming on the edge of her hairline, she trudged onwards.

Her eyes scanned the sides of the road, hoping to find a thick log or something equally sturdy that would allow her to cross over one of the deep ditches. The heat wouldn’t be so bad if she could just walk in the shadows of the trees, but the stagnant ditch water that had to be at least four feet high made jumping the ditch an unlikely option. After a few more moments of looking, Meli gave up.

Dragging her feet, Meli practiced spelling her native name in cursive in the gravel. It took more time because she wasn’t used to connecting so many letters and more often than not, her impatience won out. This time was no different. The spelling helped pass the time for a little while, but it soon lost its appeal when she spotted a nicely curved rock jutting out towards the side of the road. Kicking it, she watched as it bounced along the rough terrain before landing in one of the many potholes that littered the road’s surface.

Meli’s backpack bounced as she jogged the small distance to where the rock was before booting it again. It was a game that Meli always ended up playing on her trek to and from the bus stop. It saved her from the boredom and loneliness as she continued punting the rock from one position to another, and it helped her practice beating Chetan when they sprinted in the Church’s seasonal relay race.

There was faint laughter in the distance, the kind that seemed more like a mirage than anything. But Meli momentarily looked up anyways and her foot paused in mid-air before hitting the rock for the umpteenth time.

“Hey!” a blurred figure shouted.

Turning fully, she could see three familiar outlines riding bicycles toward her. She immediately recognized their faces as those belonging to some of the more popular kids at her middle school. Two of them were twins named Khloe and Kylie. Meli had Algebra with them, but they rarely spoke to her in class. The other girl’s name was Lauren. They didn’t have any classes together, but everyone knew Lauren.

Hurriedly tucking in a tuft of her brown hair behind her ear, Meli tried to smooth out her ponytail. Afterwards, she shifted her backpack from both shoulders onto one and tugged at the wrinkles in her shirt.

“Hey,” Meli said, smiling as the three bicycles drew nearer.

Even up close, the twins looked identical in every way except for their mismatched tank tops. They both had short sandy-brown hair that bobbed every time they moved their heads and a splattering of freckles that adorned the ridge of their noses, spreading all the way to their cheeks. At school the teacher made them wear their glasses, but right now their hazel eyes were free to roam unsupervised and it put an odd twinkle in their eyes that Meli hadn’t seen there before.

Lauren, on the other hand, looked nothing like any of the girls. She had long, curly blonde hair that twisted down her back in endless waves. Her porcelain skin accented her pink cheeks, rejecting any possibility of a tan. Her baby blue eyes popped in contrast to the darker ones of the twins, and her thin pink lips were molded into a perpetual sour expression that made it look as if she were pouting.

Not wanting to get off of their bikes, the girls drove in circles around Meli. The movement made Meli dizzy and she felt like she was being swarmed by a bunch of oversized bees. She would have liked it better if they had gotten off their bikes, but Meli was content with just having them stop long enough to talk to her.

“Aren’t you that Milli girl from our math class?” the twin in the purple shirt asked. Meli couldn’t figure out which sister she was supposed to be.

“It’s May-Lee,” she corrected.

“Oh,” came the unenthusiastic reply.

The girls continued to twirl around her with their pink bikes, keeping her from walking outside their little circle. Not that she wanted to. But the bikes were stirring up dust in the air and Meli could feel it caking on her arms and legs.

She remained silent, though.

“Did you just get off the bus or something?” the other twin in yellow asked, peddling a little slower than the other two.

“Yeah,” Meli replied, looking at the twin until her neck had to crane too far to see.

“Don’t your parents come pick you up?”

“No,” Meli said, shuffling her feet.

The girls on the bikes shared quick glances with one another.

“I like the long walk, though,” Meli was fast to say.

“Do you gotta walk all the way to the rez?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a long walk.”

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t ever let my parents make me walk that far.”

Meli shrugged, but it was too hot outside to put her hands in her short’s pockets.

“Why don’tcha get a bike?”

Meli opened her mouth to answer but stopped when the purple shirt twin yelled at her sister.

“Don’t ask her that!” Purple hissed, her handlebars jutting a little too far inwards. “Her family might not be able to afford it.”

Meli stopped shuffling her feet.

“I was just trying to be polite.”

“No you weren’t.”

“Yes, I was.”

“No –“

“I’ve got a bike,” Meli said, interrupting the banter between the sisters. “But it’ll probably get stolen if I leave it at the bus stop.”

“Oh,” both twins said in unison, making their resemblance even more uncanny.

The two sisters continued to glare at one another, but the distinct clearing of Lauren’s throat interrupted them. She was standing with her arms crossed as she leaned against the seat of her bike, having gotten off in the middle of the twins’ verbal scuffle. For the first time, Lauren looked at Meli, giving her an intense once over before sliding her gaze over to the twins.

“So are you guys going to ask her or not?”

Noticing Lauren, the twins quickly got off of their bikes. Meli liked the stillness, and she edged her feet a little backwards so that she was now a part of the circle instead of the only one standing in the middle.

There was an awkward pause until Purple Shirt nudged her sister with the front wheel of her bike.

“Ask her already.”

Yellow Shirt rolled her eyes before landing them on Meli.

“We were wondering if you wanted to go to the eagle’s nest with us.”

Meli tried to hide her immediate smile and nodded a little too vigorously.

The eagle’s nest was a common enough attraction for everyone, both on the rez and off. Everyone wanted to see the huge nest that connected the land and sky in a way that no other geographical feature could really do as effectively. Meli guessed that, of anyone, she had probably seen the nest the most. After all, she was the only one forced to walk this road every single day, and the nest was pretty close to the middle of where the road started at the bus stop and ended at the rez.

“Great,” Lauren said, getting back on her bike. “Let’s go then, before it gets any hotter.”

Lauren had already peddled off and the twins were both hopping on their bikes when Yellow Shirt looked over at Meli, then back at her sister.

“She’s gonna need a ride.”

Meli picked at some dirt on her shorts.

Purple laughed as she spun her wheels fast, stirring dirt as she followed after Lauren.

“Shotgun, not it,” Purple shouted from ahead, widening the gap from her sister.

The clouds of dust lingered in the air in Purple’s wake. Biting on her lower lip, Meli walked slowly towards the remaining twin. Yellow Shirt narrowed her eyes, and Meli couldn’t decide if the twin did it out of anger or because the glare of the sun seemed to be getting worse.

Either way, at least she didn’t have to walk.

Moving towards the front of the bike, Meli was about to try and sit on the handle bars when Yellow Shirt screeched.

“What are you doing? Ew, I don’t want your butt in my face!”

Meli’s cheeks reddened.

“Get on the back of the bike.”

Mortified, Meli stood by the back wheel and stared in confusion. There weren’t any pegs to stand on. This bike only had tiny little screws that indicated where the pegs should be connected, if there were any. Glancing up, she was about to state her confusion when the twin huffed.

“Hurry up and get on or we’ll never catch up to them.”

Worried that the twin might actually leave without her, Meli scurried to get on. She pretended that the screws were just as easy to stand on as any pegs would have been, but it was clear that her imagination wasn’t much of help. Wobbling, she grabbed a hold of the twin’s shoulders, making sure not to grip too tightly. Before she could completely stabilize herself, Yellow Shirt took off and Meli prayed with every bump that she wouldn’t be pitched off of the bicycle.

There were two of them on the bike, so they didn’t catch up to Lauren and the other sister as quickly as they probably could have with one person. But Meli still wouldn’t have minded switching spots with Yellow Shirt, even if she had to do all the peddling. With every pothole, Meli could feel her feet slipping a little bit further off of the screws. And when the holes were really big, her legs jostled about and scraped up against the spokes.

Wincing, she said nothing.

When they did finally meet up with the other girls, the bikes formed a V-shaped pattern. It was as if they were landed geese whose wings had been clipped, and Meli liked that for once she wasn’t navigating alone—even if it meant her legs were going to be raw by the end of the ride.

There wasn’t any idle chatter like the kind Meli had heard when the girls had approached her, and she wanted so badly for someone to strike up a conversation. But no one did. Instead, the void was filled with the constant whirring off the tires as they turned and the ever growing huffs of the yellow shirted twin as she struggled to keep up with the others.

“Is that it?” the purple shirt twin asked, pointing to the left of the road.

Meli followed the direction of her finger and noted the familiar trail that lead to the eagle’s nest. The grass had long ago stopped growing due to all of the people traversing the path, and now only brown dirt paved its way. It was also the only place where a log could be found connecting one side of the ditch to the other.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Meli said with a smile, happy to finally be of some use to the group.

As they all slowed down, Meli jumped off of the back of the bike and if her legs could have thanked her, they would have. Peering at the makeshift bridge, Meli gave it a visual inspection for safety before deciding it was good enough to cross over.

“Wait,” Yellow said, no longer huffing. “Where are we gonna put our bikes?”

When everyone just stared at her, Meli shrugged her shoulders. The safest bet would have been to bring their bikes across the ditch, but looking at the slim nature of the log, Meli knew someone would end up tipping over into the water. And then the day would be ruined.

Meli didn’t want that to happen.

“Just leave them there. Nobody ever comes down the road at this time of day.”

Yellow put her bike on the ground.

“What are you doing?” Purple asked.

“Leaving my bike?”

“Are you crazy?” Purple hissed. “We can’t just leave ‘em here.”

“Why not?” Lauren interrupted, her lips more pursed than usual.

Yellow shot her sister a fierce look.

Moving her eyes from face to face, Purple huffed before pushing her kickstand down a little too forcefully.

“Fine, let’s go.”

Giving the murky water below a quick peek, Lauren swiftly darted to the other side of the ditch. Without waiting for the twins, she began following the trail.

Meli didn’t wait behind.

The shade of the trees was a welcome luxury, and Meli found herself trekking with renewed vigor. The path was beautiful at this time of year, with all the leaves on the trees changing to the rustic hues of red, orange, and brown as if green had only ever been a momentary fad. The sunlight streamed through the deadened foliage, casting shadows that seemed to make Meli blend in with her surroundings while making the others stand out.

As they continued their hike, Meli liked this new sense of camaraderie. The belonging that she had always longed for from the kids at the white public schools finally felt tangible, more so than it had ever felt in the past.

The shrubbery on either side of the trail brushed lightly against the girls’ legs as they continued on their journey. It wasn’t common to see so much plant life so late in the season; usually the autumn frost would have taken its toll by now. But this season was different.

This day was different.

Smiling, Meli could see Lauren’s hair bouncing in front of her, and she wanted to reach out her hand and touch it. She had always wanted blonde hair, but being a native prevented her from having that trait. She watched as the sunlight peaked through the branches of the trees, hitting on Lauren’s golden waves to make them shimmer.

Twirling her own hair around her finger, Meli tried holding it up to the sunlight, but it only looked like another shadow. So she stopped.

Bird droppings and small rodent bones began to cover the ground, a sure sign that they were nearing the nest. It loomed in the air above like a flying saucer, dominating the sky like a huge rain cloud that would never leave. The darkness made the world below it look like a graveyard for all the smaller animals of the woods, and Meli felt a stirring sensation.

This was sacred land.

Lauren and Meli stopped walking when they reached the trunks of the three trees that supported the massive nest, each spanning a good fifteen feet apart from one another. Meli had to crane her head back as far as she could just to see where it sat on the very tops of the elms.

The twins were still shuffling behind when Meli motioned, with her index finger in front of her lips, for them to quiet down. Nobody wanted an angry bird on their hands, especially if it had babies perched up there.

But the warning didn’t help.

“Gross,” the twin in yellow said. “Do you see all this bird crap? I’m getting it on my shoes.”

“You’re getting it on your shoes?” the other sister yelled sarcastically. “What about me? I’m wearing flip flops!” Looking at Lauren, she continued to whine. “Can we just get the stupid feather and leave?”

Meli immediately stilled at the mention of an eagle’s feather.

“That’s illegal,” Meli said quickly, watching as the other girls shared glances with one another.

Then for the first time that day, Lauren smiled.

“Not if an Indian gives it to us.”