



Louis Bellrose
Part 2
Tell your story...

After a good cry, I made my way to a hotel in Slave Lake, where I stayed the night. The sun was going down as I hit the highway, and I realized the birds didn't seem to sing as loudly as they did when I drove into town. I looked around and noticed the leaves stopped dancing, and the wind was still. Maybe it was my mood, or maybe, just maybe, mother nature had heard Melvin's story too...

The next day, I drove back to Grouard to listen to another survivor. We agreed to meet at the bridge just before town. I got out of my car, stretched, and noticed the number of fishermen out that day.

There is something so peaceful about fishing on a hot summer day. Lines cast lazily over the edge of the bridge, mesmerizing ripples of water glistening under a kaleidoscope of colors beneath the sun's light.

I smiled to myself, thinking of all the memories this spot must hold. The excitement of a child's first catch, celebrations, disappointments, and stories swapped about the 'one' that got away.

I looked around and searched for the familiarity of a stranger I was about to hold space for. I must have looked out of place because when Louis got out of his car, he instantly knew who I was and waved.

We chatted a bit and agreed the activity on the bridge would be a distraction, especially for a fisherman like him. It wasn't a place we could talk, and we decided to meet at St. Bernard's church.

We arrived and found some shade, hoping the noise of the nearby quads and lawnmowers would settle. Louis started the interview off by sharing a bit of his family history. He had a contagious smile, but after a while, his smile disappeared. I got a sense that perhaps, even though he had shared his residential experiences before, this was going to be a tough day for him, and it hurt my heart.

Louis attended St. Bernard Residential School from the age of seven to eleven. He lived in the area and walked three miles to the school and back every day. He told me even though he was a residential day school kid, he was treated just as severely as the children who lived on site.

Louis told me he felt the priest and nuns had absolute control over the children and took everything they were all born to be away. Instead of learning how to read and write, Louis was hit, kicked, and sexually abused. He was exposed to lessons from the nuns no child should ever learn. His innocence and thoughts of what love meant were stolen and altered. Louis quietly told me, "It's hard to take that kind of abuse and find love after that."

One day while attending class, Louis must have done something the nun thought was wrong. Holding onto a thick book, she raised it above her head, threatening to strike down on him. This particular nun used to hit everyone over the head with her books, and for some reason, this time, he had enough and stopped her from hitting him. She ran and told the priest, and he knew what was coming next. While running down the hallway to the stairs, he could feel the priest behind him. Louis reached the second step and felt something hit the back of his head, not knowing it was the priest kicking him. Louis fell down the stairs, lost consciousness, and woke up to the priest putting snow on his face. He struggled to get up and was told to stay down. Louis pushed him aside, got up, and walked the three miles to his home. Louis didn't stay in school much longer after that.

At the age of fifteen years old, Louis started to drink. He was an angry young man and decided he needed something to help him forget what was done to him. When Louis drank, he admitted he was mean and fought everyone that got in his way. Pain and suffering had a way of taking over, and hurt turned into anger. Louis confessed it was because of the trauma he suffered at the Residential school but stated it was still his choice and eventually learned to take responsibility and make positive changes in his life.

While we took a break, I reflected on what Louis had shared with me. I realized we all stumble in life pretending to be ok, but we aren't. For some, shame silences us, and our memories that aren't diluted by self-destructive tools wait to be heard.

We protect and keep our deepest pain, storing them safely on the inside, convincing ourselves, the bad memories will go away, but like most things that sit below the surface, will rise in one way or another.

If and when we are ready to share our stories, we can release the horror of what happened from our body and mind. We have all experienced being afraid of vulnerability, the feelings that terrorize us, preventing the baring of one's soul to a world of stone-throwers who look out from their glasshouses.

We need to realize that when we talk about the things that scare us the most, we connect through stories and compassion. Thus, freeing ourselves of our suffering and the agony of something or someone that has us in its hold.

I shook my head of my thoughts as Louis ended the interview with some last words.

"They want us to hide what happened to us, to pay us off with a few bucks. Tell everyone your story of what happened to you."

Tell your story for you and for the ones who can no longer speak...