

For nohkômak, kisâkihitin;
& for Terri Cameron, I miss you every day.

I figured out that I was gay when I was eight. I liked to stay up late after everyone went to bed and watch Queer as Folk on my kokum's TV. She had a satellite and all the channels, pirated of course. At the time, my mom and I were living with my kokum because my dad had left us—I think he took Loretta Lynn a little too seriously because one day he never did come home after drinking. Queer as Folk was on at midnight; I muted the channel with the subtitles turned on so no one would hear it, and turned down the brightness so the glaring light wouldn't shine underneath their doors like the goddamn poltergeist. I loved QAF; I wanted to be one of those gay men living their fabulous lives in Pittsburgh. I wanted to live in a loft and go to gay bars and dance with cute boys and fool around in gloryholes. I wanted to work in a comic shop or a university, I wanted to be sexy and rich. I wanted that. I used to jack off to Brian Kinney's junk and pause on Justin Taylor's bare white ass to finish. To keep my kokum's brown floral couch clean, I brought my blanket and afterwards wiped myself with a tube sock. I always swallowed my breath and curled my toes tightly to avoid gasping whenever I was about to come. When I finally did, I thought, this must be what beauty feels like: my skin tight and burning, body wet as mud.

When I got a little older, I think I was fifteen, I remember watching Dan Savage and Terry Miller on the internet telling me that *it gets better*. They told me that they knew what I was going through, that they knew me. How so, I thought? You don't know me.

You know lattes and condominiums—you don't know what it's like being a brown gay boy on the rez. Hell, I'd never even seen a Starbucks and I sure as hell couldn't tell you why a small coffee is called "tall." That's also around the time when I began to collect clients like matryoshka dolls, so I suppose at least my income got better. This was of course before the photo-sharing apps and cam sites that I use now to conduct my business, but at that time, the internet was packed with people wanting to connect with other people, especially there in Peguis. We had Facebook and cellphones to keep us in the loop. I used to sext with others in chatrooms on a gaming website, Pogo. I went by the name Lucia and pretended to be a girl to flirt with other boys. Often we'd play virtual pool or checkers and just dabble in small talk. Then I'd start putting ideas of sex into their heads by playing naïve and directing the conversation toward dirty subjects. I always liked to let them think they were the ones in control. I'm a sadist like that, I guess. I may be the sexual fantasy but I'm also the one in the driver's seat. Once the image of sweaty, naked bodies got in their heads, there was no going back. Sex does strange things to people—it's like blacking out or going on cruise control. Your body knows what it wants and goes for it. This can be dangerous, as I'd learn later, but if you can manipulate the urge, you can control a person. I felt like Professor Xavier—like I was telepathic.

That was how my webcam career began, with virtual pool and cybersex. That was how I met Tias. He was my first cyber boyfriend—I was the Russian princess Lucia and he was the five-years-older-than-he-really-is Native boy who dreamed of losing his virginity.

We were quite the couple.

At the time I wasn't out, but the others at school knew I was different. They called me fag, homo, queer—all the fun stuff. But I never let it bother me. I sometimes caught both girls and boys sneaking glances at my body. I went by a hundred different names. No one outside of my family called me Jonny; everyone knew me as The Vacuum. If you'd ever known me between the ages of twelve and today, you have probably come across me as The Vacuum. A friend at school gave me that nickname when I shotgunned a can of Lucky in less than eight seconds; apparently that's the world record for NDNs. Later, I took my nickname further and would use different vacuum brands as my name; I've been Hoover, Kirby, Makita, DD (short for DirtDevil), and sometimes, especially after my mom brought me home a new shirt from her trip to Giant Tiger in the city, I would go by Dyson—when I was feeling extra fancy.

You see, I've never liked my birth name, Jonny. My parents named me after my dad, a residential school survivor, alcoholic, and would-be country star. I never heard from him again after he left. We found out later that he died in a fire on another rez. I really don't care. People don't forget those stories, you know? Random people would ask me, "Oh you're so-and-so's boy, the drunk?" And to top off the name-shaming, one summer I went to this Christian day camp called Camp Arnes. There our counselor, Stephen, would always make us sing a song before we ate our meals. It was called "Johnny Appleseed" and it went like this:

*Oh, the lord is good to me
and so I thank the lord
for giving me the things I need
like the sun and the love and the family I need.
Oh, the lord is good to me, Johnny Appleseed, amen.*

Sounds dandy, right? Well, it was at that same camp that I kissed my first boyfriend, Louis—a silver fox who was a camp counselor like Stephen—and as we made out in my bunk (in Red Fox Bay), one of Louis's coworkers walked in on us. Turns out Louis had this girlfriend in Quinzhee Bay and when we got caught, he got all up in arms and blamed me for coming onto him. A few hours later, everyone at the camp heard about the incident and started calling me Jonny Rottenseed. Then lo and behold, during our pre-meal prayer, no one had their eyes closed or their heads bowed; they were all glaring at me and whispering to each other with disgust and paranoia on their faces. Even at the age of ten, an NDN can become a gay predator, apparently. And what does that even mean? Can't a boy have a sex drive? Is it such a crime if I want to touch my body and want it be touched? It's mine, annit?

When I got back to the rez, I did some research about my namesake at our shoddy little makeshift library. There was no Dewey Decimal system there; books were scattered in piles that were designated as Pile A (the Cosmos), Pile B (Peguis Fishermen yearbooks), and Pile C (random shit)—so it made being a Nancy Drew especially difficult. It turns out that Johnny Appleseed is some American folk

legend who became famous by planting apple trees in West Virginia. I didn't understand why we'd sung about him at camp—I wanted to know about Louis Riel, Chief Peguis, and Buffy St. Marie, but instead we were honouring some white man throwing apple seeds in frontier America. Apparently he was this moral martyr figure who remained a virgin in exchange for the promise of two wives in heaven. Oh, and he loved animals, and I heard he saved some horse by hand-feeding him blades of grass, Walt Whitman-style. I would bet my left nut that he was a slave owner too and planted his apple seeds on Treaty territory. All I know is this: apples are crazy expensive on the rez and they had now become bad things in my head.

My stepdad Roger called me an apple when I told him I wanted to leave the rez.

"You're red on the outside," he said, "and white on the inside."

When I first left the rez and moved to Winnipeg, I used Grindr and Rez Fox to find friends—with benefits, of course. My apartment was full of whiteness—white lights, walls, ceiling, even toilet. The toilet we had on the rez was so old it had turned a mocha-ombre colour, and the lid, which broke when I was a kid, was only replaced with my cousin's after he died in a snowmobile accident. My mom spruced it up by adding a fluffy red cover she bought from Wal-Mart. "I saw it in the Marlborough once," she said, "thought it looked right fancy." An NDN bathroom is a star-blanket of colours collected from garage sales, hand-me-downs, and Goodwills. Once, back when I was a kid, I was at a family barbecue scarfing down my kokum's rainbow peanut butter marshmallow squares, and my older cousins snuck me a few shots of Bacardi 151—it burned all the way down. Eleven years old and drunk in the early afternoon, I ran to my kokum's bathroom and threw up a confetti of colours into her toilet. The bowl was full of rum and peanut butter and chewed-up marshmallows. When I was done, I flushed the toilet, but the damn thing wouldn't flush. In a panic, I opened the back of the toilet and scooped up the barf with my hands and deposited it into the tank. A few days later, my uncle told us over tea and bannock that "some drunk jackass puked in the tank and god-damn mold started growing back there." I felt a little proud that I had been ordained into that world, but my face reddened at the same time.

On Grindr I found a pool of men in Winnipeg all with funny names like Fotohomo and Nudedude and I thought, who are these Dr Seuss

wannabes? There were shirtless dudes left and right and within minutes I had collected a storybook of dick-pics. I thought that these boys could learn a thing or two from my artistic selfies, they're a hell of a lot more than peach and eggplant emojis. All their profiles said "looking to chat" and "please be respectable" and I wondered, what does respect have to do with hooking up?

The first time I ever hooked up with a guy, we were at my friend's house party on the rez. He was a tall white kid who came with his NDN friend who had got him in the door and was acting as his go-between, otherwise the rowdy guys would have probably kicked his ass. He came in a shirt and tie and told everyone he was studying psychology in school. His friend gravitated toward one of the rez girls and left him alone sitting sheepishly in a corner, his eyes darting back and forth like a security guard. His fingers were long and bony, skeletal almost, and his hair was slicked back and patchy in areas. I thought about telling him that bear grease would fix him right up, but I could tell from his thin, twinkly physique that he'd shy away from anything with fat in it. He was seated quietly, his body folded into itself, his elbows glued to his sides, taking sips from his red wine as he surveyed the room. Stupid, I thought, bringing wine to a house party—it was a badge that screamed, "I'm not from here." I watched him from afar while my friend Tasha sized him up too. "He's right cute, eh?" she said. "I'm gonna snag him later." *You're stupider than you look, Tasha, that guy's gay as hell.* His foot was jiggling nervously and I thought it looked like a fishtail. I felt bad for the guy so I grabbed a can of Coors Light and sat down across from him.

"For starters, you might want to ditch your wine and drink this," I said as I cracked open the lid. "And for godsakes, take that damn tie off."

He looked at me quizzically for a second, his eyes glazing over with that strange hunger we both shared. He unclasped those bony fingers of his and smiled at me. His teeth were pink with wine stains and he had a slight red ring around his lips. How the fuck he did that was beyond me, did he place the whole of the glass around his mouth and lick the wine like a cat? I took it as a sign from Manito that this man loved rimming.

"Thank you," he said. "This wine is giving me a stomach ache."

"You want some Pepto?"

"Oh, no thank you, I try not to take medicine on account of the superbugs, you know? I don't want to develop immunity."

"Sure thing, bud," I said, "because you're not knocking back wine like it's medicine."

He laughed and I rolled my eyes—I sure as hell wasn't going to offer him bear root tea as an alternative.

"Where you from?" I asked.

"Kitchener."

"Oh yeah, that near the capital?"

"Not really, but it's a few hours by car."

"You going to take me some time, er what?" I joked.

"Well, I mean, yeah, if you're ever in the area, hit me up."

That was when I knew I had him—I could see that just talk of the capital gave him a hard-on. He told me that he was an undergraduate

at McMaster. He started talking about his courses and told me something about the bystander effect.

"It's like this study where researchers set up an emergency in a controlled setting and have paid actors simply walk by and offer no help," he said.

"So, like, what's the point?"

"To analyze how crowds of people react to emergency situations—so those paid actors walk by and their response becomes infective to others around them, creating the bystander effect."

This hypothesis didn't seem too revolutionary to me—clearly he had never set foot in Winnipeg's North End. But I liked how animated he got when he talked, how his whole body seemed to curl toward me like a cedar branch. I liked how he moved his mouth around words, as if every word he said began with an 'O' and his mouth became one great 'O' and his breathing took on the rhythm of panting; his lips were wet with spit and if you looked sideways, his dimples looked like ass cheeks. I wanted to open him up, spread apart his skin, and crawl inside his body so I could pretend that I knew fancy phrases like dendrite, placebo, and law of effect—I didn't know that law but I had a few memorized by then, and each one required you to have memorized your treaty number. When he said "neocortex," I wondered if that was the part of the brain I was using to record him. The only cortex I knew was from *Crash Bandicoot*—maybe we were talking about that now?

As he kept drawling on, I touched his knee with mine. He continued talking methodically, but I could feel him press his knee back, then slowly push my legs apart like we were both riding bareback on

a horse. As I turned my gaze from his mouth to his knee, I could see the outline of his dick resting tightly on his leg beneath his jeans like a steak waiting to be fried up. He caught my gaze; his eyes were blood-shot now from the haze of cigarette smoke. Suddenly I got scared. His body no longer read timid and his red eyes reminded me of the stories of the wendigo my kokum used to tell me when I was bad.

He got up and motioned to me to follow. We made our way through a group of Natives who were huddled together near the door. There was always a group of them there, smoking up a storm, and acting like the goddamn NDN police: "Who are you?" "Where you from?" "Who you know?"—you may as well bring your passport and a list of your biological attributes with you if you want to get into a rez party. He went down the stairs as if he knew where he was going, and I descended too, a few paces behind. He ducked into the laundry room in the back corner of the basement, and I followed. The cement floor was bumpy and uneven, but it was refreshingly cool on the soles of my feet. He lit a smoke and stood before me, barely lit by the glow of his cigarette. There was no door to the room, only a bed sheet that marked it off, and a bunch of dirty clothes, a lot of them for a baby and some for a little kid. He pushed them all into a single pile and sat down against it, unbuttoning his shirt. His chest was a tundra save for the few tendrils of dark hair. I moved toward him and knelt in front of him, putting my nose against his before his lips reached for mine. He lifted my shirt and my belly was bare against the dark. His fingers traced their way down the trail of my pubic hair, and his index finger met the hollow of my pelvis.

"What if someone walks in?" I said, stopping him. My body was slippery with sweat and I was embarrassed—I didn't want to have sex feeling like a pickerel.

"No one's going to come down here," he replied cockily. *How the fuck you know*, I thought, *you've never even been here before*.

"Lots of people snag here, hell, that's what that there is for." I lip pointed toward the mattress in the corner.

He sighed and got up. He pulled the mattress over to the door to block it.

"Here, now if anyone comes in at least we'll have a few minutes to throw something on before they can move this," he said. He stood over me, his tall figure barely visible as my eyes adjusted to the dark. The floor was cold but his large hands were like coals over me. They seemed bigger now, wide enough to papoose me. He unbuckled his fly and let loose a hard flap of skin that pointed back up at him. He pulled my legs and slid me down while he maneuvered his hip against my ear and with a slight twirl I was tasting him. The roux of his juice—the leaking of white ectoplasm swishing in my mouth. I wanted this but didn't know what to do with it. I always wondered how he performed that magic, how he shapeshifted his body in the dark, how his edges poked me but never cut me, how he fit into me like a nipple fits into a baby's mouth, how I could read him upside down. His transforming body wrapped around me, blanketed me, made me sweat ceremonially. When he came, he grunted like a sow and his body clamped down on me like a snout.

Sex has always had a magic, an ability to awaken things in me

that have died. After we wiped each other off, he buttoned up his jeans and left. I cried. My skin was warm and scratched raw. *Maskwa*, I thought, *I travel with my tongue just to meet you.*

The funny thing about Grindr is that it's full of treaty chasers. They'll fetishize the hell out of you if you tell them you're a real NDN wolf-boy, that you got arrows pointing at their faces and cocks. But I was a professional—work smart, not hard. I used the collage that I had made of dick-pics to help me gather clients. At least Grindr had a category called “Native American” which did a lot of leg work for me. “You're Indian, eh,” someone would message me, and I'd reply, “Yeah, wanna see?” and link them to my websites. It was easy as pie—everyone on that damned app was obsessed with New Age shit like van-folk-Kerouacs playing gypsy in Canada and hipster shamans who collect crystals and geodes looking for an NDN to solidify their sorcery. “Want a stamp of validation? Here's my website!”

I'd get solicited for excursions from men saying things like, “Let's go on rad adventures to mystical forests and take a swim through the galaxy.” The only mysticism I knew was on the backroads of the rez, like when you came face to face with a coyote who clears the path of birds with her howl, or a fox that appears in the same spot on the road every damn night just to look at you. And I always got a tickle out of how you could anthropomorphize yourself within the gay animal kingdom: “bear,” “otter,” “wolf,” “fox,” “cubs.” If only these gays knew how powerful *Mistahimaskwa* could really be.

To be a gay bear, you need to be husky, hairy, and super masc, but when I picked a tribe name on Grindr, I chose bear since it was

my clan. When men looked at my profile and saw my fierce jawline, they'd write, “You're a twink, not a bear”; *funny*, I'd think, *neither are you*. When I'd correct them, they'd get annoyed and tell me not to get so butt-hurt, with a dumbfounded obliviousness; truth be told, if anal sex is hurting that much, well, honey, you're doing it wrong. And I always had a good laugh at the ol' Creator for being so mischievous as to put the male g-spot in the anus. I read once that Anishinaabe and the Algonquins translate to “beings made out of nothing” and that we were created by the breath of *gitchi Manito*. I used to think that meant I had no body, so I learned how to make love as a feral a long time ago—the pow wows taught me how, they sang the skin back onto my bones.

III

Nobody prepares you for the sting when you're about to leave home. All my life I wanted to leave the rez—and every time I was about to, I stopped myself. It hurt. Leaving hurts. It's not glamorous like Julia Roberts makes it seem. I can't *eat* anything other than fried bologna or Klik for breakfast; I can't *pray* to a God I'm afraid of; and believe it or not, even in the twenty-first century, two brown boys can't fall in *love* on the rez. Sorry, Julia, your rah-rah-we're-all-the-same walk-through didn't work for me. I'm still me: a brown-skinned boy who loves the X-Men and Jake Bass.

One fact I'd learn is that leaving always hurts—home isn't a space, it's a feeling. You have to feel home and to feel it, you have to sense it: smell it, taste it, hear it. And it isn't always comfortable—at least, not an NDN home. In fact, quite often, it's uncomfortable. But it's home because the bannock is still browning in the oven and your kokum is still making tea and eating Arrowroot biscuits. It's home because it has to be—routine satiates these pangs. And, given time, it becomes mobile—you can take those rituals with you, uproot your home as if it were a flower. Yeah, maybe home is like a flower, a sunflower whose big bright head follows the sun; or maybe that's too fancy a metaphor for NDNs? Maybe we're more like dandelions, a weed that's a pest in the yard but pretty to look at. Yeah, an NDN home is like a dandelion: pretty but disposable, and imbued with a million little seeds that dissolve into wishes for little white hands that pluck.

My home is full of hope and ghosts.

IV

At the entrance to my rez there used to be this man who'd sit in a lawn chair and wave at everyone arriving. We called him "Smiling Steven," but I always called him the hostess-with-the-mostess. He's not there anymore—he's gone, like so many others. This rez is like a haunted house now. In my mind I'm there, and I look up at the empty sky that's glazed with stars that look too much like sugar. The land is barren save for the howling-talk of rez dogs and sometimes coyotes. The spring water puddles around the rez like a blanket—the muggy fog a polluted haze that reminds me of Venus, even the air hurts us now. I wonder if my uncles are still out looking for sasquatch, wonder if aliens are looking down at us and saying "I told ya so" over there from Jackhead where the NDNs all say the military stole a UFO, wonder if my kokum still remembers how to cook rice pudding. I wonder how Tias is doing, ask the Creator to exorcise his pain so he never gifts it to his children, never re-gifts it to himself.

I look at the nothingness, at the wasteland of filth, a holy hell if there was one. I look at you and feel the tears welling up. I want to ask you if you're still here listening, want to ask if you've disappeared too? They always said our fate was to disappear and here I am thinking by god, we've mastered the art of dissolution. "Hey you," I yell into the abyss, "are you even here anymore?" And I guess the excitement and the dry harsh wind gives me a nosebleed—I feel like Elle from *Stranger Things* holding weights much too heavy for

little girly-boys. I feel the blood seeping from my nose, speaking a forgotten Cree that repeats: *freeme, freeme, freeme.*

These days I find myself far too often talking with myself. The wind ruffles my hair; I hold my palms out to the darkness and wait for someone to take me.

V

The skies are grey these days and I got used to telling myself that it's just my kokum having a great smudge in Saskatoon and that this smoke, which smells of cedar and ash, is her medicine floating across the border. But it hangs in my living room and seeps into my drapes, clings to my skin, and nestles itself deep inside the threads of my star blanket—which now lies in the shape of a body since gone. My apartment is a room of scents that stick to the walls: the smoke from a Saskatchewan forest fire, kush, the too-sweet smell of browning bananas, the pungent stink of sex. I start my mornings like this: I wake up, take a piss, warm up last night's coffee, and open the rickety window in my bathroom where I usually do my smoking, since my building is a no-smoking zone. I butt them out in an old Diet Pepsi can that has seen better days. There isn't much to see beyond my bathroom window but the grey-grit of the Odeon's bricks, a rusting fire escape, and a pigeon building its nest on the windowsill of an abandoned building across the alley. Every morning we meet here: me, rubbing the ash and crusty scum from my lips, and that bird neatly piling little sticks, roaches, and chicken bones on the ledge. Silly little bird, I always think, building a home in a dead place.

During the time it takes me to smoke my cigarette, we stare at each other. The pigeon cocks its head from side to side, keeping its beady eyes fixed on me, and I bob mine along to the hum of the street below. I wonder if the bird thinks the same of me, if, in its own pigeon-head, it's saying: what a silly man, making a home on the land

of ghosts. We are both two queer bodies moving around in spaces that look less like a home and more like desperate lodgings; both trying to make our beds with other people's garbage. Maybe we are both dreaming of utopia, thinking that these places once used to house celebrities and other important people, and that it will imbue us with a similar vivacity? Puffing on the remnants of my cigarette, inhaling smoke more from a burning filter than tobacco, I nod at the bird and say, "I'll think you are if you think I am," and blow a cloud of smudge from my lips that smells less like the stink of ass and cock and more like the bear root that my kokum always drank. "It's magic," she'd say. "This is what woke Mistahimaskwa up."

I go and fry a couple of eggs and the heart-shaped pieces of bologna I have left, then pour myself some orange juice which only fills about a third of the glass, so I mix it with Tang and top it off with tap water—an NDN breakfast if I ever did see one. I scroll through Facebook on my phone and read lengthy monologues by people I went to high school with: so-and-so is pregnant, my cousin's cousin's boyfriend is on another bender, a rez fire, a little boy attacked by wild dogs, and a million posts about missing girls.

A beep goes off and I see a new message blinking on my screen. Someone named Hatehound has messaged me asking, "DTF?" I type back, "Who's this?" and see the three little dots telling me he's replying. He's quick, I tell myself, and I think that's a good sign for some easy cash. Quick guys don't take much work, I usually don't even have to work my way up to fingering myself, usually a few playful dick-pics will get them off and earn me a solid twenty to thirty bones; it's the

slow guys you have to be careful of, they'll exhaust you and your body and still want more. Pictures and webcam shows are one thing, but let me tell you how tiring it is to create an entire world for clients that fits your body and theirs, and no one else. I can be a barely legal twink for them if they want, but that's going to cost extra—and I don't charge them for the ugly memories those fantasies dredge up. Most times, though, they only want me to play NDN. I bought some costumes a few Halloweens ago to help me: Pocasquaw and Chief Wansum Tail. Once I know what kind of body they want, I can make myself over. I can be an Apache NDN who scalps cowboys on the frontier, even though truthfully, I'm Oji-Cree.

Once, one of my clients told me I had a "red rocket" and while I moaned for him while Frank Waln rapped in the background, I continually asked him, "You want my red rocket?" Later, I looked up what "red rocket" means, and I found out that it's the dick of a dog. I thought for a second, then accepted it: I added "canine" to the list of entities I could morph into and started charging an extra few bucks per session.

Hatehound's reply showed up on my phone. "April told me about you this morning, apparently you blew his mind last night?" April? He must mean "hardck22," I think he said his name was April—I never ask for real names, but I remembered his because I laughed thinking he was joking or feeling nostalgic for spring. A part of me wanted to say, "April, eh? Yeah, and I'm fucking January Jones." Another part of me wanted to cry and confess that April was the month my kokum died. But I just laughed and I think he got mad—I wish he knew that

when an NDN laughs, it's because they're applying a fresh layer of medicine on an open wound.

"Give me twenty minutes?" I replied to Hatehound. I saw the three little dots pinging on my screen and pondered who I wanted to transform into this time. I can inhabit so many personas while the client can only be one—that excites me. I have so much power when I transform—all that power over blood, veins, and nerve endings.

"Sure," he replied, and I squealed a little. I took my black velvet bodysuit from the closet. For the next thirty minutes I'd not only be Catwoman but every iteration of her, the better parts of Michelle Pfeiffer, Julie Newmar, and Anne Hathaway. When I slid the bodysuit over my calves and onto my shoulders, I watched my brown skin disappear beneath the pull of a zipper and felt so much more in control. Maybe as Catwoman I'd have the courage to ask how he could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us?

"Catwoman?" Hatehound asked after I sent him a picture. "April says you dress up as yourself, you know, with the fringe and shit? Why are you acting weird?"

I scoffed, and upped my fee to thirty dollars for the session. When he declined and sent only twenty-five to my Snapchat piggybank, I took off the cat ears and asked him: "Who are you pretending to be?"

When we were kids, Tias's parents took us camping at Hecla, which was about an hour east of the rez. It was in this park, Grindstone, and full of trees, water, and white people. We took out our tents and set up in one of the lots: a little tribe of brown-skins camping in pup tents while next to us a family of three was hunkered down in an RV worth more than our house—I always wondered what the inside of those giant machines looked like. Tias and I got on our swimming trunks and headed toward the beach, which was a twenty-minute walk through the park. All around us dandelion seeds billowed through the air, twirling like ballerinas. Tias's face always seemed to soften whenever he was surrounded by nature; his usual pained expression disappeared, and the dimples in his cheeks rose like little stars.

On the beach the large waves whipped up from the wind swallowed us like crawfish. We waded into the water until it went up to our stomachs. Tias laughed and put his hand on my pouch and a finger in my navel. What a funny word, navel, but perhaps it was fitting, as my skin had pruned in the cold lake water and bubbled up like the skin of an orange—I too was full of juice. His finger continued to prod me, it felt like a leech suckling on the rump where nikāwi cut me free. I pushed him away and then jumped on his back, laced my feet around his waist, and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, our long wet hair coming together like sweetgrass. He carried me out in the water as far as we could still stand, the shore drifting farther and farther, the water throwing our laughs back at us. When Tias was

finally exhausted, he let go of me, and we stood there, looking at one another, the waves throwing us back to the shore.

"This is like *Titanic*, eh?" I said.

"Hated it, it was so long. Two fucking VHS tapes, what the—?"

"Don't be such a smart ass." I slugged him in the arm.

"Okay fine, I'm Jack, you can be Rose," he said and put his arm around my head like he was rescuing me.

"You sure?" I said. "You know I'm dink-eyed as fuck. I'd cut your damn hand off if I had to chop you free with an axe."

We continued to play in the water as our bodies became raisins—we looked like elders with tiny bodies, like NDN Benjamin Buttons. And time passed too quickly for two little Nates to measure. The sun was going down and we had drifted much too far to recount our steps. Our bodies were tired, legs drained of energy, so we linked arms and filled our bellies with air so that we could float like salmon swimming upstream. We stopped resisting the waves and let the water push us back to the shore, our shoulders and hair moussed with seafoam.

When we got back to dry land, our bodies were exhausted. I sat on the sand to catch my breath while Tias ran ahead to look for the towels we had recklessly thrown down. The sun was falling and tinted the sky lavender. Tias left a trail of prints in the sand, some disappearing from the pulse of the waves, others filling with water. I got up and followed the steady path of prints; I found him not too much farther ahead, lying exhausted in the sand. I quietly watched him for a few moments before he noticed me, his forearm glittering in the purple haze, his skin so bronzed that he melded with the sand. I sat down

beside him, our naked shoulders rubbing, shaking our hair loose of the water like wet dogs, telling stories.

"You know," he began—much like he always does, the way NDNs expect you to know every story like a telepath—"I have this photo at home."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Of my sister, she's a baby—"

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah, well, *had* a sister."

"What happen? She die or something?"

"Worse. She was taken."

"You mean, like Liam Neeson kind of *Taken*?" I've never been able to handle uncomfortable situations very well. I always try to use humour to deal.

"You think this is a fucking joke?" he said, his hands rolled into fists. He kicked me and knocked me over and before I had a chance to get up, he climbed on top of me and punched me in the side of the head.

"What do you know about anything, Jonny?" Another punch. "You think because you're gay you're the only one with problems in this world?" And like that his face was pinched up with pain again, his wet ass up against my cock—I guess I got a half chub. I could tell he felt it pushing against his rear, and at first he sat there dumbfounded, didn't move, just looked down at me, his eyes like two brown wormholes. And then he jumped off me.

"You're sick, you know that? Who the fuck gets horny from being

punched?" We sat in silence for a few seconds, then both burst into laughter. "You're really something, you know that, Jonny?"

We got up and started to make our way back to the campsite—ready for the lickin we were bound to get for being so damned late. But first I wanted to collect a souvenir from the beach. As he went on ahead, I found a snail shell poking out where Tias had pushed me into the sand, and put it in my pocket. I looked down at the outline my body had made in the sand, and his right next to it; I traced the mark left from the soft hollow between his legs.

I caught up with him and we made our way back in the peppy light of the moon. The willows were shaking in the breeze, the waves now a distant world away. Tias's back was glowing from dead stars, dead light. His parents were wicked mad and sent us both to bed without any supper, called us both a "goddamn curse" for making them worry. We giggled in the tent and made shadow animals with a flashlight. His was a wolf, mine an eagle.

I never had to tell him, that was how I knew I loved him—I never had to tell him.

VII

After I had finished and cleaned myself up, I transferred the money to my bank account, typed back, "Talk soon, HH," and signed off. I lay back in my bed and traced the imprint of Tias's body with my finger. It still smelled of him, like the citrus-olive oil blend of his pomade and the robust smell of his Axe body spray, Phoenix I think he said, the blue can. It's pretty expensive, you know, especially for him, a boy still living with his rents who are, themselves, living off child-tax credits and food banks. You can get a can of Axe for a toonie though, if you ask old Peggy to pick you up a can. See, Peggy is our best NDN smuggler, she'll take a list of items you want from any department store—Wal-Mart is her favourite target—steal those items, and sell them to you for a hardcore discounted price. It benefits everyone. Momma always said that woman was the epitome of resource, that she saved up enough from pulling over to the side of the road to collect cans from ditches, got extra cash from coupon savings, and hoarded one-litre Pepsi's when they were on sale to sell at the bingo halls—said she saved up enough cash over a few years to buy her own momma a new washer and dryer. Before Uber was a thing, Peggy offered rides to people for a few bucks and if you needed a lift down to the hospital or if an Elder needed to head into town, she'd give you a ride for free so long as you threw her a few smokes and a slab or two of bannock. Momma says she's sort of the folk hero of the rez, everyone has mad respect for her. Though, these days Peggy hasn't been able to hold herself down since she got a criminal record for assaulting the

social worker that scooped up her babies and now she mostly flip-flops between Winnipeg and the rez—and it works for us Nate boys who want to smell fancy for cheap. Of course, we all use each other to haggle with our own troubles—she'll save up enough for a couple king cans of Bud and pass out down Portage and us, well, we use our skills to hustle and make a few bucks. It's an endless loop. I guess that's the NDN bartering system?

And I should correct myself here, Tias isn't a hustler like me, no, he is a different kind of hustler, maybe more a prisoner than anything, but he has to live with his momma until he ages out of foster care because she needs the child-tax and he needs the roof. And between you and me? Tias is twenty, but since his original birth certificate has been sealed and rewritten, his documents say he's still seventeen. There's funding for him until he's nineteen when he'll age out and be left to his own devices. His momma is no Susan Sarandon type of mom, no, she is more like Halle Berry in *Monsters Ball*, but Tias, he's a tough kid, knows how to play the game. I like to think I helped coach him on the art of performance when he first fell in love with Lucia, the Russian princess. When he was a kid, his foster dad broke his nose on the ice because Tias asked if he was his real daddy—it's funny, you know, since his leather brown complexion didn't make any sense compared to his foster dad's porcelain skin. I guess that makes all of us NDN kids hustlers. We're cheating a system that's supposed to be doing us good.

On my bed, I nestle my body inside Tias's imprint, my knee angled into the curvature of his, my arms stretched wide, my face tilted

slightly upwards. His sleeping shape looks like a ballerina. After freeing my body of its fluids, I have no reason to still be awake or to feign a smile. I want to be him too, wear his skin like a suit, cuddle it against my body as if I were a cat pressing myself against my owner's legs.

He often sleeps over and helps me prep for work. He doesn't mind, but he also says he isn't gay and I tell him me neither. I still don't think he gets what that means, even when he's inside me. At first he used to will himself to love me if I made myself more feminine, when I told him I was still Lucia. I'm fine either way, to be honest. I'm like an Etch-a-Sketch—every cell in my body is yours to define. I always tell him he can stay as long as he likes, move into my bachelor if he wants, cause lord knows I can't keep up a steady stream of seven to eight clients a day to pay this rent. He needs a lot of loving, I can feel it in the spasm of his legs when he comes, see it in the hard curl of his big toe, see it in the gnarly fingernails that his daddy cut too short after we painted them silver. Then again, I need a lot too. There are tons of unfuckable holes in me that need to be filled.

He's supposed to come over again later tonight with dinner. I think he said he had a few food stamps for Hamburger Helper, though a part of me wants to text him and say, "Let's scratch dinner because I got to make some extra cash to take off back to the rez."

See, my stepdad died this morning.

These days, I keep dreaming of Armageddon.

VIII

I have this recurring dream where I'm standing on the shore of this ocean. The sky is dark at the edges but lit by the glow of the city behind me. The water is a rich black-blue in colour and when it washes over my feet I see all sorts of things in it: mud, grass, even blood. The tide is retreating—there are dead fish, aluminum cans, and metal bolts lying in the wet sand, which shine in the glaring light of the city. But the water is not calm—it retreats only to gain momentum. And the sea foam is no precious Grecian thing—the froth bubbles black with grit and oil, burning holes into the land. As the waters retreat farther, I see a dark wave rising on the horizon. Every ounce of the ocean's strength is contained within it. And the city is panicking now—I hear air horns and blackouts and screams as loud as bombs.

And there I am—a lone brown boy naked on the precipice of the end of the world, the soles of my feet burning in the residue of an angry beach. Turtles scurry between my legs and become boulders on the sand, holding steady onto their own. I hear the doom song of orca, wolves, and bears all around me—the cacophonous cry of an animal feeling death like the texture of gauze sticky with blood and stone. A multitude of birds take flight towards the wave, carrying sticks, grass, and little rodents in their claws. They are going to fly over its crest and make a new home—somewhere over *there*, in the distant West. Suddenly a large bird, an eagle perhaps, digs its talons into my clavicles and lifts me into the sky. But it doesn't hurt, as there are grooves in my bones, grommets even, for these claws to fit. I am like a toy in

JONNY APPLESEED

an arcade machine being lifted by a claw. And the higher we go, the colder it gets, so I climb onto its back and nestle in its feathers.

The great wave is nearing and the skies are now red from a silhouetted sun, flashing lightning. Rain, hail, and winds peck at our faces, but we push on through the storm. The wave is higher than we expected. The great bird won't make it—it'll have to pierce through the crest of the wave. The winds are strong enough now that they yank out my hair and scoop out handfuls of feathers from the bird. We are weathered and worn—both of us bleeding in the sky. And I decide, if we are both to live, that I must shield the bird from the impact of the wave. So I climb higher up on its back and wrap my torso around its head, tuck my legs beneath its stout neck, pull my body tight against its, then lean in and whisper, with gentle kisses, "It's okay, it's okay."

It's okay.

Then with a great flap of its wings, we shoot through the crest of the wave. The coldness of the water stings my flesh, the pressure and force rips open my back as if it were a zipper, and the debris that churns inside the wave bruises our tired bodies. We emerge on the other side of the wave, both a bloody mess—both a sad, scalped sight flying through the sky. We ready ourselves to find a promised land on the other side with the Fur Queen and Whisky Jack waving us home, but instead we see that the water has not calmed, and there are waves as far as the eye can see. The waves are coming—they are here to take back what is rightfully theirs; we are all due—a thunderbird and Nanabush both.

Tias always hated having his picture taken, but he sure loved to collect photographs. I liked to snoop through his belongings whenever I went to his house. He had one of us tucked in a collage he made for school, part of a report on Thanksgiving—how cute, I thought. In the picture we're both poking at a dead porcupine that had curled itself into a ball and looked like a dried-out dandelion. His mom took the picture and I remember how happy she was to see that porcupine dead: "Damn thing's been eating up our shed!" We all knew there was a porcupine nearby because several of the rez dogs were moping around with white quills stuck to their faces that looked like bones growing out of their mouths. I always thought porcupines were cute little animals, all grey and bunched up like a little elder. Serves people and animals right for being attacked—not everything is yours to touch. But we poked and prodded and played with that carcass for hours, pushing a little too hard on its soft belly, the stick piercing through its skin, which oozed blood.

When I told my kokum about the porcupine later, she gave me a slap upside the head and made me grab two buckets and take her to its body. When we got to the kill site, it stunk like the combination of moldy cheese and an old man's BO. But my kokum walked straight up to it, touched its soft spot, and put tobacco down for it. Then she grabbed its little paws, splayed it out like a crucifix, and began ripping the hairs out. "Bring one of them buckets over here," she said, and when I did, began tossing the clumps of hair in it. "Since

you want to play with porcupines, you can help me de-quill one." I watched as she pulled the hairs out like they were weeds, making a noise like she was ripping grass out of the earth. "Gotta get these guard hairs out first, y'know?" After she was done, she took out her buck knife and started running the blade over its back. When her blade touched its skin, she flicked it downward, and the white quills started flying off. "Now you," she said, and passed me the knife, forcing me to shave its body clean from ass to neck so that we could harvest its quills. Damn thing stuck me a bunch, and cut my hand up in a few spots, but my kokum just stood over me, arms crossed. "An eye for an eye," she said. "Hope you learned your lesson." We filled up both buckets, and when we were done I carried them back home, my arms sore from scraping, while my kokum carried the porcupine which now looked like a giant chicken breast, all pimples and loose skin. "Good for eating," she said, "and quill work." At home she skinned the rest of the porcupine and cooked it in a stew, which she made me eat for three days straight, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, until we finished the pot.

"Always respect the animal," she said after the stew was all gone, "and use everything if you're going to kill one. They give their life for you, so you honour their entire body, y'hear?" I nodded, angry as all hell then, but forgiving because my kokum had a way of being easy on me even when she was punishing me. "Now, you want me to fix you a sandwich? Fry you up some eggs?"

"Heck no, gran, I'll be full for a year!"

She laughed, and I ran to put my shoes on.

"You know, Jon," she said as I made my way for the door, "porcupine was a kokum once too."

When we were kids, Tias's room was ridiculously masc: posters of the Manitoba Moose and the Winnipeg Jets, Tech Decks and Tony Hawk stickers, a nudie calendar his dad gave him. One night, I was being nosy and rummaging around in his nightstand drawer, and found a photo buried at the bottom.

"Hey Tias, what's this?"

He glanced at the photo. "Oh, that. That's ju—" He took it from my hands and stared at it intensely. "It's just an old picture."

"Is that you?"

In the picture was a little boy and an old man sitting together on the steps of a house. They're both as brown as the mud around them; the old man is chubby, his forehead crinkled like barbed wire, and his eyes deeply sunk into his head. The boy is wearing these oversized aviators and is smiling up at the man beside him, who stares straight at the camera.

"Boy you're nosy, you know that?"

I watched him study the picture again. The house looked like the ones on the rez, two-storeys, an off-green shade, and two windows on the second floor that look like eyes. We always thought our houses looked like Oscar the Grouch's—maybe they were like that everywhere? Do all rezzes look the same? Like some NDN *Sesame Street*?

"Yeah, that's me, as a little kid before I was, you know, adopted."

"That your papa?"

"No, that's my gramps."

"Can I see it again?" I looked closer and saw the edge of something white and shiny. "That a car?"

"Yeah, that's the one that came for me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she came to look at my sis and me. It's a white car. The door opens, a woman comes out in a skirt, and she's got a lot of pens, notebooks, a bag full of papers." I look again and see horses in a pen in the background. There's a screen on their front door that shields the mess in the house behind them.

"They came to ask us questions, kept saying words like 'assessment' and 'foster.' My mom says Gramps was a good man, that he had to give us up because he was too old."

"You ever see him again?"

"Only in the newspaper," Tias remarked. "And only that I survived him."