

JOSHUA WHITEHEAD

Jonny Appleseed

I

I FIGURED THAT I WAS gay when I was eight. I stayed up late after everyone went to bed and watched *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 thinking he was Dolly Parton or Garth Brooks or something. *Queer as Folk* aired at midnight on Showcase; I muted the channel, added subtitles, and watched as four gay men lived their lives in Pittsburgh. I wanted to be like them, I wanted to have lofts and go to gay bars and dance with cute boys and blow and get blown in a Philly gloryhole. I wanted to work in comic shops and universities, be sexy and rich. I wanted that. I often jacked off to Brian Kinney's junk and paused on Justin Taylor's bare white ass to finish. I was meticulous about the whole endeavour: I'd turn down the brightness so as not to wake anyone with the glaring light from the television shining under their doors like *The Poltergeist*. To keep my kokum's brown floral couch clean and to hide myself in the event someone caught me, I brought my blanket and wiped myself with a tube sock. I had to hush my breath and curl my toes tightly to avoid gasping whenever I was about to come. When I finally did, and gushed over my chest, I thought, this must be what beauty feels like: my skin tight and burning and the body morphing into a hole that wants to morph into another.

When I got a little older, I think I was fifteen, I remember seeing Dan Savage and Terry Miller telling me that *Maybe It All Gets Better* on the Internet. They told me that they knew what I was going through, that they knew me. How, 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 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 that I like to use to conduct my business now, but at that time, the Internet was vibrant with people wanting to connect with other people, especially here in Peguis. We had Facebook and cellphones to keep us in the loop. I used to sext with people in this gaming website's chatrooms. I went by Lucia and pretended to be a girl to flirt with other boys. Often we'd play virtual pool or checkers and begin with small talk. Then, once I became Lucia, I'd put ideas of sex into their minds by playing naïve and directing the conversation towards dirty questions. 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 fantasy but I'm also the shackle. Once the image of breasts and pubic hair was in their minds 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 almost 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 cybernetic 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 digital couple.

At the time I wasn't out, but the kids at school knew I was different in some sense. They called me fag, homo, queer—all the fun stuff but I never let it bother me. I sometimes caught girls *and* boys sneaking a glance at my body. I went by a hundred different names; no one called me by my real name, Jonny. Everyone knew me as The Vacuum outside of my family. If you'd ever known me between the ages of twelve and today, you have probably come across me as The Vacuum. See, my friend through school, Shane, gave me that nickname when I shot-gunned a can of Lucky in less than eight seconds. Apparently that's the world record for Indians shotgunning beers on the rez—so, from there on out, I became known as The Vacuum and the name stuck. Throughout school I used to go by different vacuum brands as my name, I've been Hoover, Kirby, Makita, DD, and sometimes, 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 who was this residential school survivor/alcoholic who left us, like I told you earlier. Some of the elders around here say

he died in a rez fire. Who knows, I really don't care but people don't forget those stories, you know? "Oh, you're so-and-so's boy, the drunk?" random people ask me. And, to top the name-shame off, when I was a kid I went to this Christian day camp called Camp Arnes. There, our counsellor, Stephen, made us sing this song before eating a meal. It was called "Jonny 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, Jonny Appleseed, amen."

Sounds nice, right? Well, when I was at Camp Arnes I kissed my first boyfriend, Louis—he was a silver fox and was a camp counsellor like Stephen—anywho, as we made out in my bunk (in Red Fox Bay) one of Louis' coworkers walked in on us. Turns out Louis had this girlfriend in Quinzhee Bay and when caught, he got all up in arms and blamed me for coming onto him. A few hours later the whole camp knew about the incident and called me Jonny Rottenseed. Lo and behold while we prayed, no one closed their eyes and bent their heads, instead the prayer was full of shifting glares, whispers, disgust, and fear. Even at age ten, an Indian can become a predatory gay. 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 let it be touched?

It's mine, annit?

II

Lucia died when I was twelve. Tias asked if we could meet up, and I, thinking maybe I was girl-boy enough to elude his anxieties, said yes. We went to the Pine Cone Dairy Bar and I wondered what he was expecting. I spotted him in the back corner of the restaurant. He was wearing an Iron Maiden t-shirt and brown khaki shorts. His black hair was ruffled into a mess and faux-hawked. His shoes were muddy Jordans—basic, I thought, but cute nonetheless. We went to the same school but we hadn't ever talked. Lord knows why, we were both on the bottom rung of the school's popularity spectrum. He stuck to art classes and liked to paint while I was more interested in learning how to cook apple crisp in home ec and smoking on the church steps with the "bad girls." They used to hate being called the bad girls. Really, all we did was refashion cigarettes from the butts of others and make each other laugh on steps of the Holy Eucharist Church. We had

nowhere to go, no one to turn to, so we stuck to ourselves. “Donna Summer,” I told them, “man, she’s a bad-ass bad-girl.” *Bad Girls* was the first CD I ever saved up enough to buy and I worshipped it like nobody’s business. The girls didn’t care for it, but I thought, hell yeah, I’m a bad girl.

I would look up at the porcelain-skinned man crucified on the church front. I thought of the photos my kokum showed me of these lynched Indians hanging from trees. I had no concept of their being dead so I just thought they were these beautifully arranged, angelic, aerial dancers serving face and body from these great oaks like real children of the forest. I wanted to be that too and so I vogueed in the grass and locked my eyes with Christ’s as Donna Summer moaned and moaned into my headphones.

I let Tias sit there by himself awkwardly surveying the Dairy Bar for this hypersexual, blessedly breasted, plastically altered, redheaded Russian glamazon named Lucia. His defeated look and deflated khakis were a sad sight but I took some joy in watching him writhe—his skin had goosebumps and his face was flushed a dusky pink that complemented his skin tone well. He’s always been so wondrously pained; it would become something I’d learn to love. Pain is only an intensifier for the real emotions worth feeling; hell, every Indian knows a thing or two about intensifiers, just listen to the obscene amounts of oral intensifiers we use in our stories: “holy,” “heck,” “just,” “not even.”

After I took enough pleasure watching him bottle up his fantasies and agonize over the fact that he’d return home a virgin, I approached him.

“Stood up, er what?”

“What?”

“You’re Mathias, eh? We go to the same school y’know?”

“Yeah, I thought I recognized you. You’re the queer in Ms. Blackbird’s class?”

“Yeah, man, that’s me.”

I sat down and asked him who he was waiting for. I watched his erect hairs and goosebumps smooth back into his sandy-brown skin and listened to him ornately tell me about the girl he met online. He told me that he saved up enough money for his date by stealing from his mom’s bingo change. We both knew neither of us had money, heck, I paid for my sundae with rolled coin, but we had fantasies, dreams, and big imaginations that would last us through the reservation and beyond. We both wanted houses like the ones on *MTV Cribs* and we idolized Ed the Sock. I take a little pride in knowing that I was Tias’

first lesson between fantasy and reality—he wished for a Russian princess and instead got the reservation’s only gay Indian.

The sun was beginning to set when we left the Dairy Bar and we were both late for dinner. We chalked it up to our parents’ most infamous excuse: we were running on Indian time. We laughed but knew this wouldn’t do, we knew full well the lickin’ that awaited us at home. We walked home together down the backroads, both a little scared of the bears and coyotes that lurked in the bush. We walked with our keys interlinked between our fingers and our hands curled into a hard fist in case anything, or anyone, jumped out at us. We walked so closely that the hard bone of our middle fingers continually knocked together. Our boniness hurt but neither of us broke our pace—the friction of our raw knuckles banging together was oddly comforting.

As we neared our homes, Jordan and his cousins passed on their four wheelers. Tias panicked and broke pace, standing still in fear behind me. The boys spun around and drove up behind us—they often beat up Tias so he was akin to becoming invisible in their presence.

“Hey, gayboys,” one of the cousins yelled.

“Tias, is this your new girlfriend?” another asked.

“Two little faggots, sitting in a tree,” Jordan laughed.

“He’s not—” Tias haphazardly explained.

“We’re just friends, Jordan, heck, obsessed much?”

The boys circled their four wheelers around us and stood up on their seats with their arms crossed.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” Jordan continued.

“I’m not—”

“Hey gayboys.”

“H-I-V and A-I-D.”

“There’s an S in there too, Jordan, at least get it right.”

Jordan got red in the face and nodded to the other boys who had created a circle around us. Tias buckled into himself and crouched down with his head between his knees repeatedly saying “no.” The boys all grinned and unzipped their pants.

“Hey Hoover,” Jordan exclaimed, “here’s some cock for you.”

And just then each boy pulled out their soft-floppy penises and urinated all over me. My clothes got soaked and my hair shone with piss.

“Hey Tias, if he ain’t your girlfriend then piss on him too, eh?”

Tias was still crouching behind me, his eyes dishevelled. Jordan and his posse, waiting for Tias to join in on their golden shower, crossed their arms, and waited. One of Jordan’s friends slapped his fist against his palm. I held Tias’ gaze as he slowly rose. His hands were shaking as he slowly undid his zipper. I closed my eyes and slowly nodded. The warmth of his urine splashing on my chest star-

tled me. When I opened my eyes he was crying. His limp penis hung and the last few drops of his piss leaked from his fingers. His eyes were sullen, sunken deep into his head, and his hands were wrapped around his taut brown flesh. His entire body read regret, and even then, I thought, no boy has ever looked so god-damned precious.

III

Tias and I used to hustle Mush when we were kids. I liked my mushom, he was a gentle, soft-spoken man who loved Werther's caramels and Budweiser. He used to buy me party-sized chocolate bars when I was a kid, like those Jumbo Mr. Big's that were twice the size of your head. He wasn't Indian like us but kokum insisted we call him mushom. His real name was Pierre LeClerc and he was the luckiest, and only, moniyaw on the reservation. He won \$100,000 on a scratch ticket when he was in his thirties and, from then on out, he became popular among the family and all the other rez girls. He bought my mom a used Cadillac Seville and that forced her to call him Mush—half recognizing him, half detesting him. He used the remainder of his winnings to buy this gas station that was quite successful while he was alive. He gave all the Indian kids a piece of free candy whenever they visited and overloaded their bags with Twizzlers and Pop Rocks on Halloween. He was a dandy fellow.

But there were better ways to get money from him than by simply asking. Sure, if you asked kindly enough, he'd throw you a few dollars, maybe ten bones if you were really lucky, and then shame you for it when he was on a bender. If there's one rule I've learned from hustling, it's to never put yourself into a situation where you owe somebody—always leave your clients owing you. Though, if you were patient enough you could swindle forty to fifty bones from Mush by waiting for him to pass out and collecting all his empties. His house would be littered with aluminum: cans in his sink, cans in his bed, cans in the pockets of his coat, crumpled in his war chest. Tias and I used to wait at his place and listen to him and kokum tell us stories about the good-old-days, which would usually erupt in an argument about who had it worse—that's the thing about old folks, they think life is a competition of scars and suffering.

When Mush passed out and kokum got to calling everyone she knew on the phone, Tias and I would begin collecting cans like the hermit crabs that cleaned the aquariums in those city pet stores. After we had loaded up two recycle bags' worth of cans we'd take them to the vendor and exchange them for forty bones. After we split the cash we'd go to Mush's gas station and load up on all types of candy: gum-

mies, chocolates, peppermints, Eskimo Pies, and everyone's personal favourite, Nestlé Redskins. Usually, if we didn't have enough for what we wanted one of us would distract Mush's cashier and the other would load candy into their coat.

With what little money we had left we'd buy a few cigarettes from the Jr. High chumps who stole from their moms—they actually made decent money by selling cigarettes for a dollar. Then we'd take our goods back to my place to gorge on candy and watch *Ren and Stimpy* late into the night. When we were high on sugar we'd smoke the cigarettes to give ourselves a head rush and walk around the room light-headed and dizzy—it was the closest we could get to being fucked up as ten-year-olds. Back before kokum gave us both a damn-good slap with her wooden spoon and called us both a curse, we would take turns puffing on her inhaler and pretend we were drunk and high too. That's how we thought it was, that drunkenness and being high were natural processes to growing up, to being and feeling Indian.

If I looked pitiful enough, like a brown-skin Annie singing "It's a Hard Knock Life" sad, sometimes my kokum would let Tias sleep over on the weekends. We both slept upstairs in my uncle's old bedroom and argued about who got to sleep against the cool edge of the wall. We'd usually have to jack the small fan from my kokum's bedroom and put it in ours so that we could drown out the clanging of their bottles downstairs—it interrupted our watching of *Boy Meets World*. While Tias raved over how beautiful Topanga was, I swooned over Shawn. And there was something so charged for me about his real name: Rider Strong. I used to whisper it to myself to fall asleep because I liked the way it sounded when I put a heavy breath into the spaces between its vowels: when I laid my tongue down on the bottom of my mouth and let the air vibrate to stimulate his I and O. A good name makes the perfect sex toy.

Sometimes we'd sneak down the stairs and watch my kokum, Mush, my mother, my aunts and uncles, cousins, the gas station employees, a tribal officer, and a cavalcade of brown skins party to Loretta Lynn. As she whaled behind the strum of the guitar about her man not coming home a-drinking, I'd say my goodnights as Tias watched. Funny, the people who loved me the most could only tell me so between 2 and 3 a.m. While they professed their love and pride for me, I'd slip a beer or two into the pockets of my sweatpants. Up in my bedroom, Tias and I would crack a beer and both pretend we thought it tasted good.

"Damn Good Beer eh?" Tias asked.

"I've had better, you know?" I'd reply.

“No, that’s the name,” he’d interject, “Damn Good Beer, Minhas Creek—wonder where the Damn Good Chips are?”

We buckled with a laugh that ran so deeply into our bodies that our abs hurt afterwards. After flipping through late-night programming, which was mostly old white women trying to sell patches for varicose veins and War Amps commercials where robot kids had lost their arms, we came across Showcase and both sat enthralled watching *KinK* for the first time. We watched as a drag queen put on makeup and *kaikai’d* with another queen. The taller of the two backed the other against the wall, slid her hand up the other’s thigh, and raised her dress revealing the garters that stretched beneath. The shorter one pulled the other queen’s hands up against her body, hopped into a sitting position against the wall, and wrapped her legs around the taller one, and Tias and I watched as the curls of their wigs crinkled into one another’s foreheads from sweat.

Afterwards, while we both tried to sleep, Tias kept asking if I was awake—until I finally was. He asked if I thought that scene looked like fun. I giggled and said yeah. He laughed without making noise but I could feel his laugh rippling from his gut and through the springs of the mattress. He slid closer to me and placed his hand on my leg. I rolled onto his chest and spread both of my legs over his torso. I lay on top of him. We both giggled sheepishly, our bodies vibrating a braided laugh-rhythm. We must have done this for a solid ten minutes, laughing as we clasped one another. Combined, we were the body of a guitar and our lungs and oesophaguses strummed like strings. Fitting, I thought, as we made our own music and let our limbs dance their own body-ballet without ever moving. Loretta howled in the background that the squaw was on the warpath tonight. We fell asleep like buttons in buttonholes.

When the sun was rising my mom came into our room and nudged my shoulder.

“The heck you doing, boy?”

She put her arms under my pits and raised me up. I wrapped my arms and legs around her and breathed her in, the smoke, the booze, the sweat and tears that made up her perfume. She rubbed the wetness from my eyes, which she called sleepies, and kissed my cheek. Her nude-coloured lipstick left a pinkish-brown imprint riddled with lip lines and a dabble of blood on my cheek. The black mascara that darkened her waterlines streamed down her face. In my half-asleep state, I was half afraid, half concerned.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“M’boy,” she said, pulling my face into her breast and crying, “I’m not the drink, I swear, okay? I’m not the drink.”

She put me back into bed beside Tias and covered both of our bodies. She kissed us both on the forehead and said, "My boys, kisâkihitin."

I could hear my mom's boyfriend calling her from downstairs, his shout sounding more like the pitiful welp of a dog licking its wounds after a fight.

"Mom?" I asked, "Can you lay with me until I fall asleep?"

She crawled in between Tias and me and pulled us tight against her body. Both of our sleepy heads nuzzled into a breast. Her heart-beat, which sometimes raced, sometimes paused, lulled me to sleep. When we woke up in the morning we found that one of us had pissed the bed.

We never found out who.

IV

The best advice I've ever received was from my mom. I was eight when she gave it to me. See, my momma is the toughest Indian in the world—a real hard ass but the kind you need, the kind who breaks rocks and divines rivers. She walked into my room, all casual-like, her hair knotted into a ratty bun and the gold glitter of Elvis' face on her t-shirt caulked with flour. She took a liking to a thunderbird I was braiding.

"Who's that for?" she asked, pointing with her lips.

"No one," I shrugged. Little did she know that I was actually making it as a gift to give to Brayden Walker—the first boy I ever liked. And I know, the two names sound alike but that's what you get when you live on the rez: a million Braydens, sixteen Jasmynes, a light-skinned boy named Devin, and a little femme-boy-fatale named Jonny. Momma picked up the bird I was making and held it up against the window to inspect it. The little beads dangled in the dusty afternoon light and the spaces between the beads lit up an inverse thunderbird on the floor—a miniature greatness half-winged on the carpet not two feet away from the stain from a can of Budweiser.

"You know your dad was a whatchamacallit?"

"Thunderbird?"

"Yeah, that's the one. It's good," she finally said after twisting it into a multitude of shapes, testing the torque of the beadwork, "Real good. What you making off it?"

"Nothing," I replied, "it's a gift."

"Boy, you better be kidding me."

And when I shook my head she scrunched her brow, revealing the chicken-pox scar that perched above her temples. That was how you knew she was *real* mad—a deeply imprinted oval that hid beneath the

lines in her skin, a little oval that looked like an angry eye. “Work like this? Boy—you’re something, you know that? Really something. Don’t you ever let me catch you doing this again.”

And I asked her what she meant, half shaking, thinking she knew about Brayden and that she’d reach for her wooden spoon and give me a lickin’ like the schoolyard boys used to do. They’d swipe at me with their handy-me-down shoes and dirty fingernails. “You’re Oglala,” they’d tell me, “not some fairy city boy.” When they walked away I used to mutter beneath my breath, “No, it’s oh-*lala*,” and vogue in the blood and sand. Really, I was neither, I was Oji-Cree but to them it was all the same.

“You’re good with your hands,” she said. “And people notice that. If you want to survive outside my house, boy, you got learn how to sell yourself. Work like this? Shit, you could earn an easy ten dollars selling it to them touristy white folk. Hell, maybe twenty if you looked sad enough. Listen m’boy, if you’re good at something, don’t you ever go doing it for free, you hear me? When you grow up you’re gon’ learn all sorts of things—find what you good at and put a number to it, you hear? And when you get that number, you double it. That how you gonna make it. Lord ain’t give you these skills so that you be making them for no punk that don’t give two hoots about you. Don’t be thinking I don’t know who this for—you like that Walker boy. I’m fine with that, son, Creator, he made you for a reason—you girl and you boy and that’s fine with me but what’s not fine is you selling yourself short. You gotta leave if you wanna survive, and when you do you’re gonna need the steadiness of those hands, m’boy. You’re gonna need a rock and a whole lotta medicine.”

V

And that was how it always was: Tias being this haunted love in my life, that was his specialty; mine was being Lucia, the spectral, online sex worker. See, I made my coins based on my ability to sext—Snapchat piggy banks. I made my way down to Tias’ house and snuck in through his window. We were both masters at popping out window screens without breaking them. See, if you slide a butter knife in between the screen and the window frame and you wiggle it back and forth, you can pop out the bottom plugs that click it into place. And from there on you can push it into the room with your thumbs. In fact, Indians have made a million tools of useless objects. You can lock a door with a butter knife by sliding it in between the doorframe and the wall. Or you can use a coat hanger as a toaster if you bend it

into a v and place it atop an element. It makes some damn-good Indian toast.

I crawled in through the window and fell on top of Tias on the bed. “You awake?” I jokingly asked and he nudged me in the ribs. His skin was a dusky hue in the pale luminescent ceiling light. He was reading this book by some guy named Charles Dickens.

“What’s that about?” I asked, rubbing the wrinkled spine of the book.

“You know that Christmas movie about Donald Duck and those three ghosts?”

I nodded.

“It’s that, but you know, not Disney—but you wouldn’t like it.”

I hmphed as he kept on reading. I dug around his room. A copy of *Ariel* was on the floor of his room open to a page titled, “Daddy.” I wondered if he had a fetish for older men? I dug through his closet. There were crumpled-up jeans, a few shirts, these *Redwall* books about mice fighting other mice on the cover and a bundle of fabric tied with elastics. I untied it and found this old plush rabbit wrapped up inside of it. It had a brown body with a white belly and blue eyes that were hot glued onto his head. Its left ear was torn off and held in place with a bobby pin.

“I’ve had him pretty much all my life,” Tias spoke up, making me jump, “his name is Floppy Ears. My grandpa gave him to me when I was little, well, I mean, one of my foster grandpas, not my biological. He was this old Polish man, survived the war and everything, a real hard ass.”

“This guy is sure beat up eh?” I laughed.

“Heck—that ain’t even half of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Throw him here.”

I tossed over the plush and he pulled his neck tight. “See these stitches? He had his head ripped off during one of my first foster placements. I lived on this farm with a Hutterite family just a few miles outside of the rez. They farmed cows and our neighbour had an ostrich farm. I used to play with them birds all the time. Flop and I’d go up to their pens and feed them seeds. When I teased them they’d ruffle their feathers and sway in circles. Then, one time, one of those god-damn ostriches stretched his long-ass neck out and plucked Flop straight from my hands and all the other birds nipped at him while the thief ran about. And I guess these two birds got into a fight over Flop—ripped his head clean off. My foster mom later went and collected his head, body, and his gutted innards. She stitched him back up for me. I wasn’t allowed near the birds after that.”

"That's crazy—I didn't know we had ostriches around," I laughed, "that's some *Looney Toons* realness."

Tias fake-laughed and cradled his plush. He sat quietly.

"Sorry, Tias," I said after a few minutes of silence, "shit's rough. But hey, you still got this little guy." I filled my voice with optimism.

"Yeah," he said, "little guy's the toughest sonuva I've ever met. Been through hell and back and he's still here. He's a fucking mess," he laughed, "but every mess on his body has a funny story behind it."

I laughed and climbed into bed beside him. I nuzzled my head between his armpit and pectoral. He wasn't wearing deodorant but I kind of liked his stink, it was one of his sexiest attributes. I laid my left arm and leg over his body and he rested his chin on my forehead.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, "you gotta tell me sometime—"

"Little by little," he interjected. "Little. By. Little."

As we began to fall asleep I thought about the Dickens book he was reading. He was right, I didn't care for it but that doesn't mean I hadn't read it. I think Ebenezer and I had a lot in common: we both liked money and to screw.

And weren't we both haunted by ghosts?