FICTION

Apple Indian

Michael Fillerup

SHE RARELY BLEW HER COOL and never ever swore, but—"Dammit! Hell!"

The metal stirring spoon rebounded off the sink and took a bite out of the kitchen wall.

The real Tracy Sequaptewa?

She glared at the digital clock on the microwave and almost swore again. The meeting started at seven sharp. As program director, she should be there by six-thirty. *Frances* would be there. Frances would be there at six-fifteen. She was probably there now, rearranging tables and chairs, setting up the coffee pot, waiting by the door to greet the other Indian parents, shaking their hands like a log cabin politician.

Tracy retrieved the spoon and dropped it in the sink. She still had to shower, get dressed, and finish the cake. It was baked, cooling on the formica counter, but she still had to ice it.

Cake. Coffee. Punch. Why not just skip refreshments this time? The parents could survive one meeting without a sugar fix. Judging by their figures, they'd be better off.

She gave her waistband a tug. *Et tu*, Tracy?

Dividing the flowered window curtain with her hand, she peeked outside. Still foggy. Gray. The winter void. Leave it to Frances to call a meeting the night before a three-day weekend. Did she just want to rub her nose in it? Tracy gazed across the houndstooth check of dark pines and white rooftops to the southern fringes where the tall cylinders of the lumber mill puffed majestically along the skyline, thickening the fog. The effect was arctic, a strangely cold beauty that made the faint black hairs on her forearms stiffen.

Icing. She snipped open a package with scissors, emptied the pink powder into a Tupperware bowl, and added exactly three-quarters of a cup of water, stirring with quick, methodic strokes. As the mixture

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began to thicken, she released the spoon and watched, a little contemptuously, as it sank into the pink vortex. Tracy the perfectionist. Brad had said it only once, in fun, after making midnight love, laughing extra loudly to assure her he was only joking—which he was, she had supposed, at the time—but still: "Tracy, you're too damn white!"

He was absolutely right and absolutely wrong. And she knew it.

So did Mrs. Brody, her matronly supervisor. At her job interview a year ago: "Tracy, we think you'd be perfect for the position. We know *you* know what we expect from the program."

Of course. To assimilate, to whitewash. To turn the Indian students into football players and cheerleaders, respectable citizens.

"And you know the people. You know the culture."

This was nonsense. But it was a real job—finally! A foot in the door. Indian Program Director.

She picked up the spoon and resumed stirring—a few swift strokes clockwise, then counterclockwise, switching sporadically, occasionally withdrawing the spoon and plunging it back into the thick pink swirl, slapping at it. Angrily. With heat. Bitterly recalling her very first interview, almost twenty years ago, when she was a newlywed with a teaching certificate plus fifteen hours towards her master's and the beginnings of a baby in her belly. Mrs. Brody, who even then seemed to have been around since the dinosaur age, eyeing her maternally and condescendingly: this pleasant little Indian girl with the Prince Valiant bangs and the chocolate chip eyes, sitting with her knees properly touching.

She had praised Tracy's credentials, her composure, her insightful responses to each question. Tracy vaguely recalled a hundred compliments. But only her closing counsel still echoed loud and clear: "We'd like to have you in our school district, Tracy, we really would. But what I *really* think you ought to do is go back to the reservation and get some teaching experience. *Then* come back and see us."

She had almost laughed—a painful laugh. Back to the reservation? She had never been there. Not really.

This was her sad history: she had been raised by an old woman she knew simply as "Auntie," in a wooden shack tucked away in a cove of cottonwood trees at the edge of a wash miles from the mesas of her forefathers. She was called "Sequaptewa," a Hopi name, but it may as well have been Navajo—Benally, Yazzie, Deswood. She was half one, half the other. Half-breed Indian.

As far back as she could recall, the missionaries had been there: tall young men with pale hair, pale eyes, pale faces. Everything bleached out and colorless. Ice People, except they wore dark suits and white shirts and walked from shack to shack smiling and shaking hands.

They carried big books in black cases they unzipped—zzzzzip! She could still hear the sound. They gave her sticks of Wrigley's chewing gum and smiled and called her "Sister Sequaptewa." When she was eight, Auntie told her she would be going away to school. It was better that way, Auntie said. Auntie was getting too old now; her hands were weak and tired and her eyes were growing frost. Tracy cried at first; she cried all night before she left, and on the bus all the way across the desert. But before that the missionaries had to bury her underwater. She wore a heavy white robe and the missionaries smiled and spoke very softly, and they promised punch and cookies after.

Her Levis and sneakers and T-shirt and windbreaker were too dirty and smelly to wear in the big blue house in Woodland Hills. Brother and Sister Williams never said so, but Tracy could tell. They were as white as the moon, especially Brother Williams with his fat round face and shiny head. Mr. Moon Man, Tracy thought, and the name stuck in her mind. Sister Williams was a tall, soft woman with stiff, golden hair who smelled like flowers. She put her arm around Tracy and said you can call me Sister Williams or Doris or Mom, whatever feels most comfortable. At first Tracy answered with a nod or shook her head, although she could understand much more than she let on. It was safer that way.

There were two little boys with little moon faces, Lyle and Kyle, and a girl her age, a moon with a blond ponytail. They called her Debbie, and she wore shiny red shoes like Dorothy of Oz. (Tracy had seen the cover on the book at the public school; she knew more than she let on.)

Tracy had her very own bed in her very own room, and the house was always warm without even lighting a fire. And outside, everywhere she looked, it was green: grass, plants, funny-looking bushes, trees as tall as the mesas. A jungle. There were concrete and blacktop, too. No real dirt anywhere. And noise. It sounded like the desert wind always blowing, but you couldn't feel it in the air. From the hillside she could look down at pools of water the color of Auntie's squashblossom necklace, and the cars were long colored snakes crawling in all directions; and everything else was green or black or gray.

The next morning was Sunday, and everyone rushed around like when the trading post caught fire, except instead of water they sprayed the air with sickly sweet gas that made her hair stiff and sticky and Doris-Sister-Williams-Mom said here, Tracy, you can wear this. And it was a dress, soft and blue as the desert sky. After that she never wore her dirty, smelly clothes from home again.

Her stomach howled from hunger but they didn't eat until after church which was in a great big building, part wood, part brick, and

she had to tilt her head all the way back just to see the top and wondered if those lights in long wooden boxes ever fell down and would that one drop right on top of her, crash, squash! She'd better move, and she did. The benches were soft and padded, and the men all dressed like missionaries and the women all wore gold and silver on their ears and wrists and around their necks. And they smiled at her and asked Doris-Sister-Williams-Mom if this was the little Lamanite girl, and she smiled back and said yes. And they called her that, the "cute little Lamanite girl." And the name stuck.

Her stomach was still howling so loud she hoped the others couldn't hear how embarrassing, stop that stop that please, all through the song and the prayer and the song and the bread and water and the speakers and the song and the prayer and finally it was over and they went home but they still didn't eat for two more hours it seemed, and with the smell of meat cooking all through the house it was pure torture. They're starving me, she thought. They're going to starve me to death. And she started crying again.

Later she learned it was called Fast Sunday, even though it was painfully slow, and they did it every month. Every Sunday they went to church all day and Tracy never complained, no matter how long the meetings or how boring the speakers or how empty her little belly. She did exactly what she was told. At home, at church, at school.

And after a while she got used to it. And after a longer while she liked it. There was magic in the house: you turned a knob and there was fire; another, water. Hot. Cold. In-between. You pressed a button and little people came to life inside a box. The Idiot Box, Mark-Brother-Williams-Dad called it, but he watched it more than anyone.

At school she was slow at first, the teacher said, but she worked very very very hard, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth as she tried to copy the letters exactly right, and Mrs. Toomey said she's slow, but she's a worker. Yes she is, she's definitely that, Doris-Sister-Williams-Mom said. So Tracy worked even harder even during recess and lunch and after school when Debbie was playing with her friends. Doris-Sister-Williams-Mom said Tracy's slow but she's a hard little worker, and one of these days yes sirree one of these days, you bet. . . .

Tracy got used to it. Then she liked it.

In June when she got on the bus to go home, she cried even harder than when she had left. Yes, she had missed Auntie. And the dances on the mesa. Riding horses in the wash. The smell of desert rain before it even fell, and the way the clouds came out of nowhere, smothering the sun. But she hadn't missed the shack with the wooden floor or the stench—everything had a stench now: fried potatoes, mutton, greasy bread. And she hadn't missed the outhouse or washing from a

tin basin, hauling firewood, hauling water, hauling everything you always had to haul. Hadn't missed at all the forever campfire smell on her clothes, in her hair, everywhere. Hadn't missed especially Charlie Boy the trader's son putting his hand on her narrow thigh, stroking it up and down and up and down, one hand on her thigh, the other between his legs, up and down and up and down, saying what a pretty girl such a pretty pretty little girl she was blossoming into, just like a pretty cactus flower.

One day she told the missionaries who told somebody who told somebody who told somebody, and after that she didn't go home anymore. Not for two more summers and then just to visit. Mark-Brother-Williams-Dad insisted. Don't you want to see your Auntie? You really ought to, don't you think?

Mark-Brother-Williams-Dad drove her across the hot desert in his air-conditioned station wagon, but she had forgotten everything. It looked so dry, dead, barren. She had learned about this place in Sunday School; the Dead Sea looked like this. A piece of Hell. Singed grass, rotting rocks. Everything cursed. Old. Wrinkled and rotting. Like Auntie's face. Her hands were knots and lumps, her fingers shriveled and curled like claws. When she motioned Tracy forward, holding out her droopy arms, Tracy's scalp prickled. Auntie's eyes were gone, the skin had grown tight over them, but she could still see everything. She smiled without teeth, her mouth a wound. Then she said something in her language, but Tracy shook her head. Auntie nodded grimly, as if a sad prophecy had come to pass. Mark-Brother-Williams-Dad prodded Tracy gently: Go on, talk to her. But Tracy had forgotten everything. Or pretended to. Go on. It's okay. Tracy stood between them, lost, confused, afraid. Then angry. Why had they brought her back here? They give, take away, give, take away, give, take away. Who's the Indian giver? She wanted to leave, get out, flee to her dry-wall utopia in southern California. Auntie's shack was depressing. Even swept clean it was dingy and dirty. Chicken wire covered the windows like jail bars. The wooden floor was warped, splitting, stained. With grease? Blood? Did Auntie butcher sheep in there? What was that awful stench? Rotting food. Rotting faces. She glared at the old mattress on the floor in the corner: this was where she had slept, with the bugs and lizards.

She looked at her shriveled old Auntie and felt like crying. This was my mother, she thought. And this is what happens to you here. Then she panicked. Was that why Mark-Brother-Williams-Dad had been so insistent? Had they grown tired of her and brought her back here to stay, where she belonged?

Tracy dashed outside. The sun stabbed her in the eyes, trying to drive her back in. She hid in a scraggly patch of shade. Where were the majestic pueblos she had seen in her history book? Here she saw plywood shacks and dented trailers, tin boxes squatting on cinderblocks. Orthopedic supports. The trading post looked diseased; it had leprosy. She could barely read the freckled red paint on the sign. Obese women with shawled shoulders tottered in and out. A man with a raisin face staggered up to her, breathing stink into her eyes. Another man was sprawled out unconscious, as if he had been shot in the back, pink goup gathering where his lips kissed the sand. More biblical images: "And they will lap up their own vomit."

She was only eleven, just a kid. And kids, especially that age, react spontaneously and hyperbolically to things. But still . . . what was the matter with her? Indians (*real* Indians) weren't supposed to feel this way. They were supposed to have deep connections with the Earth, with their roots, with family. That's what Mr. Margetts, her social studies teacher, had said.

Tracy had no family. Auntie was a stranger now, a grim memory. And then, during her fourth year on Placement (that's what they called it, "Placement") Brother and Sister Williams had started having "personal problems." So Tracy went to live with Brother and Sister Stockman, but in March there was a funeral for their oldest daughter, Saundra. After that, Tracy was transferred from home to home, family to family. But wherever she went, bad things always seemed to follow. Death, divorce, something. Tragedy, Tracy—were they cousins? She always felt somehow responsible. So she behaved herself. She followed every rule. She studied hard and earned A's. She did everything exactly right so nothing would go wrong.

"Isn't that right, Tracy?"

Yes, Mrs. Brody. Of course, Mrs. Brody.

Tracy split the curtain and peeked outside again. The sky seemed to have exploded. Swirling white flakes filled her window like a Pollock painting, padding piecemeal the streets and converting the town into a gingerbread village. Parked beside the curb, her aqua blue Honda Civic was a tarnished jewel, or a giant Easter egg speckled white. The naked aspens flanked it like stick soldiers raising anguished arms.

Usually energetic, tonight she felt like an invalid. She commanded herself to get busy, but nothing budged except her eyes. Textured walls and sculptured carpeting. It was nice, for an apartment, but compared to the four-bedroom home in Elk Run . . . a beehive existence. Communal living without the community. And so bland, generic. Like a motel room. That was partly her fault, partly Brad's. Three months and she was still living out of boxes, most of which she kept neatly

stacked in the spare bedroom. Out of sight, out of mind? No, unpacking meant permanence, defeat. Her penalty for naively signing a fatal prenuptial agreement eighteen years before it had become fashionable.

The white walls remained bald, faceless.

A thought struck her—oddly, because over the years the gap between her and her ancestors had widened to Grand Canyon proportions: they, too, had lived in apartment complexes—adobe cubicles skeletoned with sticks, fleshed out with mud sun-baked hard as concrete. What goes around comes around? Cooking over campfires, carrying water in clay pots, grinding corn stone to stone. A harsh, subservient existence. Who was she, Tracy Sequaptewa, to complain? She trudged into her bedroom, bewildered by these latent feelings.

Plopping down in front of her dresser, she started to unbutton her navy blue pantsuit—why not just wear it? This was another of Brad's criticisms: she was too neat, too well-dressed. Never a hair out of place. She plucked the brush from the dresser and pulled it crisply, angrily, through her perm, a wavy rococo affair she sometimes found satisfactory, other times ludicrous—a black-haired Bach? She smiled at the image. She had come that far at least. Humor was a recovery sign.

She quickly shed her clothing and slipped into the shower. The needling spray helped to perk her flesh and revive her drowsy will. She switched the nozzle to "gentle," and the warm water hummed across her face like old memories, pleasant at first: growing up in the suburbs with the Christensens, the DeWitts, the Ellsworths. Color blind, she had thought. Slumber parties, sock hops, stake dances, girls' softball. And she had always been one of them, had worn miniskirts and fishnet stockings and thought the Beatles were groovy. Then her junior year in high school, John Snyder, the All-Conference quarterback, had asked her to the prom. Why not? She was cute, she was smart, she was popular. Maybe a little too popular? A little too . . . ? She had floated around school for a week, not boasting, just happy, in an elated daze. And her friends? "That's . . . really neat, Tracy."

Mike Mickelsen, the transfer student from Sacramento, was less discrete. Outside the men's locker room, jawing with John: "Tracy See-squaw-twa? She's just a friggin' Indian! She's just a friggin' squaw!"

She had heard, coming around the corner from her gym class. Ducking back behind, her back pressed to the wall, the stucco bit the bare backs of her thighs like army ants. Waiting, listening—for what? A fight? A duel? Fisticuffs at two paces? Of course not. He didn't even . . . Nothing. She'd heard nothing.

Later, hiding in her shower stall as the happy chatter of the other girls echoed through the tile enclosure, she had rammed the heel of her hand into the spout on the metal soap box, forcing the liquid

lather into her palm and smearing it up and down her forearms, her fingernails clawing her flesh furiously, pathetically, as she had tried to remove the dirt, the stain. The curse. Because she had read the book before they had changed the words: the Lamanites were cursed with a dark and loathsome skin, yes, but if they repented and sinned no more, drank blood no more, murdered no more, they too would become white and delightsome like their brothers the Nephites. So people at church were always smiling at her. And Sister Halfred had remarked how Tracy's skin seemed to be getting lighter and lighter, smiling so approvingly. So pleased.

Tracy had prayed day and night; she had gone to all of her Sabbath meetings, had read the scriptures daily, had tried her very best never ever to take the Lord's name in vain; never used coffee, tea, alcohol or tobacco, and never ever let a boy touch her up here or down there or anywhere, really, that wasn't covered by a bathing suit—a *modest* bathing suit, just like Doris-Sister-Williams-Mom used to say. She bore her testimony every fast Sunday: I know this church is true, I love my foster mom and dad, I know Joseph Smith was a prophet. I know I know.

But it wasn't real until her first trip to the temple to do baptisms for the dead. She was twelve. The old people in white kept fussing over her, the cute little Lamanite girl. Only this time she felt truly special. She remembered standing waist-deep in the baptismal font that rested on the shoulders of twelve bronze oxen (she had counted to make sure), and the blue tile floor and how the tall man in the white robe dipped his hand in the water and pasted back her long black hair, smiling at her. His voice raced like an auctioneer's, and the water was so warm each time going under but cool waiting in between, and the heavy white robe stuck to her skinny body (was she showing, was she?), and the white-haired lady waited with a white towel, smiling like a proud grandmother. Tracy had felt so good, so wet and clean and pure. And later, in her pretty pink dress again, walking down the corridor, she saw the mural of young Joseph Smith in a forest of birches handing a black book to an Indian chief wearing a full feathered headdress. Then the puzzle had all come together. The missing pieces had magically fit. After that, reading the book, she could truly feel the words, could see the Savior scooping up the little children in his arms and beckoning to all: black, white, bond, free. Blessed are the meek, the maimed, the merciful, the persecuted. Love thy neighbor, love thine enemy, love and be loved.

After that it had been real, and she thought she couldn't, wouldn't ever deny it. When she got down on her knees and spoke to God, it seemed as if he were right there in the room with her, listening; it felt

like warm water pouring from the top of her head all the way down to her toes. Filling the void.

But that awful afternoon in the showers, noting with derision how much paler her forearms had in fact become, nine years free of the desert sun, she knew it made no difference. None at all. Sixteen and hardly been kissed, staring into the mirror as if for the first time following plastic surgery, beneath the Spiritline smile, the 3.97 G.P.A., the debate team captain, the student body vice-president, the National Honor Society recipient three years running, this was what she had seen: a friggin' Indian. A friggin' squaw.

That was an end and a beginning.

Her first year at UCLA they had tried to put her into dumbbell English. Sequaptewa? Hardly Mayflower material. She protested. They gave her a writing exam and placed her in the Honors Program. ("Quota kid," muttered a cocky white boy her first day in honors calculus.) Later she graduated summa cum laude. Her letters of recommendation could have lit up the L.A. Coliseum. She returned to Arizona, eager, optimistic.

Job interviews. Mrs. Brody, the owl-eyed matron. Her condescending concern: "Tracy, what I *really* think you ought to do is . . . "

Eighteen years of odd jobs, substitute teaching, night classes, piling up credentials and endorsements. Then the bulletin. "IMMEDIATE OPENING. Director of Indian Education. Indian preferred."

In retrospect, Tracy wondered if the posting should not have read "Apple Indian Preferred."

She patted her face, arms, and breasts with after-bath splash and gave herself a light powdering. Better—she felt better now. She pulled her pantyhose up the length of her legs. She liked the feel, snug and smooth, the suntanned look. More camouflage. Another mandatory. Squeezing into a scarlet dress—reds made her appear more formidable, the color analyst had said—she stepped back from the mirror for a three-quarter view. Hopeless! Her calves—gift from her people. If nothing else, they confirmed her tribal identity. She couldn't hide the banana bend without dressing like Miss Grundy. Sucking in her stomach, she laced a thick black belt around her waist and cinched it tight. Now, if she could just hold her breath all night. . . . Fashion, she thought bitterly.

The clock showed two minutes till. She really was going to be late this time. More ammo for Frances. And suppose she just didn't show? Just suppose? Mrs. Brody would call her into her office. She would grimace behind her big walnut desk. Tsk-tsk, Tracy. Shame on you! No, she would more than grimace. More than tsk-tsk. Tracy had assured her she would be there.

"And I trust you'll handle the situation appropriately . . . as usual."

Yes, Mrs. Brody.

"Oh, and Tracy—could you bring a light refreshment? A cake maybe. That would be nice."

By all means, Mrs. Brody.

Tracy smiled invidiously. The old matron would hang without her. She got hives whenever she got too close to red skin. Foreign colors. "I just don't know how to talk to those people," she had confessed over coffee one afternoon. "They stare at you with those hatchet faces, and I think they're either laughing inside or itching to scalp me."

Scalp you?

Rushing down the hall, telling herself not to, Tracy switched off the lights and put on her dark wool overcoat. Clutching the grocery bag of paper cups and napkins in one hand and balancing the cake on the other, she stepped out into the night. Aside from a few truant flakes, the snowfall had stopped. She thought she heard voices—like a choir singing a melancholy song. She paused on her doorstep to listen. Nothing. Maybe Brad was right. Maybe she was paranoid. Maybe she really was losing her marbles. A car cruised by, its tire chains thumping the snow-cushioned streets. A flake or two touched her cheek, like cool kisses. The smell of woodsmoke brought to mind happier times, her honeymoon at the El Tovar Lodge, sipping hot chocolate with Gerald in front of the fireplace. Her bishop had cautioned her against the marriage. Mixing blood was bad enough, but mixing beliefs was suicide. Remember what Paul told the Corinthians: "Be ye not unequally yoked together. . . . " No, there was nothing morally wrong with it, mixing blood or beliefs. But in his experience . . .

Maybe, but what was her alternative? Marry some jerky Mormon who's as intimidated by a woman with melange as he is by a woman with brains? Double-fault, double-suicide?

Bishop Fairchild didn't appreciate her attitude. Not one bit. But it was only the second time in her life that she had spoken out. And it wasn't as if she hadn't tried. Brett the pre-med returned missionary Eagle Scout Mr. Wonderful. He'd had everything but the guts to tell his mother no. It would break her heart, he said. What heart? The stodgy choir director trundled into sacrament meeting like a Sherman tank: Outa my way! Outa my way! A sneak preview of Mrs. Brody. She wanted a smiling little blond to complete the family portrait. Tracy would have been a smudge, a red-brown blotch on their celestial pedigree. No, she'd never come right out and said that, but close enough: "You're a very sweet girl, Tracy. We think the world of you—we really do, but . . . " What we really think you ought to do is go back to the reservation and mate with your own kind.

Was it an act of love, inspiration, or defiance that had finally compelled her and Gerald to see a justice of the peace?

Gerald. She could still picture perfectly the way his reddish-blond eyebrows would twist and squirm like fat caterpillars whenever he flashed his Howdy Doody smile. And he was always smiling, always up. Before Gerald, life had been duty and drudgery. An eternal checklist of do's and don'ts, yeas and nays. He had brought a little craziness into her life. Joy. "Leave it for tomorrow, Trace! Let's go surfing!" Surfing? In the middle of Arizona? "Come on!" And he would drive her out to the sand dunes, march her to the top, stand her on a sheet of plywood, and send her screaming riotously down. "Leave it for tomorrow!" he would say, as if tomorrow were a magical someone who would complete her tasks.

She could recall a few petty quarrels over sex (frequency, not quality) but, otherwise, it had been a good marriage. Yes, they had been student poor. They had lived in a dumpy little trailer park hedged with odorless oleanders, but for the first time in her life she had felt truly at home and part of a family.

That had lasted ten months, almost. While Gerald was working the late shift at the Circle K, some punk hood put a bullet in his chest because he refused to empty the cash register. Gerald the hero; Tracy the widow.

Shortly after that the boy had died. She knew it was a boy, and she knew he was dead. When the doctor finally cut her open, he was an "it," a shriveled little reddish-brown bald rabbit, strangled by the cord. Hers. She couldn't even do *that* right.

She had tried to do it right with Brad, but it had never worked. He used to tell her babies didn't matter, that they were a family, just the two of them. But he'd always throw that failure at her, in a heated moment. Just to stab and hurt.

Tracy had thought it was a strange God who finally gives you something just to take it away. Who's the Indian giver? One, two strikes, you're out. "If ye love me, keep my commandments." "Be ye perfect." Was this her reward for doing, or trying her very best to do, everything exactly right? She wanted to know why, but the women at church just said God works in mysterious ways. He knows best. Your baby's exalted now. He's in a much better, happier place. You'll be reunited in the hereafter—you and the baby, to raise up anew. And Gerald? God knows best. God will deal justly and mercifully. God loves all of his children. . . . They brought her casseroles and every possible cliché of comfort, but it was still her fault, her stupid rotten fault: If she hadn't married a nonmember. . . . A dead husband, a dead baby.

This was her eternal contract? Her one shot at happiness and she had blown it?

She wondered now: had it ever been real to her? Really real? She had been through all the programs, had earned the certificates and awards, had tried so hard to make it real, yet when the other sisters and her home teachers and even the bishop had tried to comfort her, nothing had soothed. They were like well-intentioned parents assuring her that, yes, there is a Santa Claus, yes, a Tooth Fairy too. But she was left feeling nothing but a deep, impossible grief. The bottomless void. She was a slab of flesh floating in limbo.

The phone rang. Well, let it! she thought, even as she slipped back inside with the cake and paper bag to answer it, missing by a ring. Mrs. Brody. It had to be. Are we running on Indian time? Her little jokes. Hurry, Tracy. We're waiting. The parents, Frances.

Frances! A Passamoquoddy from New York, chair—"chief" was more like it—of the Indian parent committee. They had first met at a private conference with Superintendent Brody her first week on the job, a year ago January. Frances had insisted. (Did she always get her way? *Always*? In all things?) Frances wanted to meet the new Indian Program director and discuss some other urgent business. Of course, with Frances everything was urgent. A crisis. "She's a six-foot stick of dynamite," Mrs. Brody had forewarned. "Don't let her intimidate you. And believe you me she'll try!"

Frances had swept into the board room ten minutes late, a double-jointed jangle of arms and legs. Like a spastic stork, Tracy had thought. Or a three-legged giraffe. A long-sleeved pullover sheathed Frances' matchstick arms, and baggy brown corduroys added an illusory ballast to her girlish hips. Bound in a bun, her dirt brown hair sat atop her head like a chocolate cupcake. Her mongoloid jowls labored when she spoke. She's ugly, Tracy thought, and for a moment felt secure as she smoothed the front of her pinstriped dress.

Mrs. Brody settled her buoyant buttocks into a cushioned chair on one side of the huge table while Frances grabbed a metal folding chair and straddled it backwards, opposite her, with Tracy between the two, legs crossed like a stenographer's, on the far end. Frances got right down to business. "Fifteen percent of the school district's student body is Native American, so how come only two percent Indian teachers? What gives? We need more Indian teachers! Fifteen percent at least!"

It got nasty. Mrs. Brody jabbed her finger at Frances: "The school district cannot and will not ascribe to a superficial quota!"

Frances called her a liar, a bigot, a hypocrite. She demanded a letter guaranteeing that more Indians be hired.

Mrs. Brody threw up her hands. "Absolutely not! We can't warranty any special interest group against the effects of budgetary cuts and attrition!"

"Oh, bullshit! Chicken white bullshit!" Frances thrust two fingers in the matron's face: "Mrs. Brody speaks with forked tongue!"

Tracy couldn't believe it. It was like the mouse that roared; like a Chihuahua taking on a St. Bernard.

During a brief lull, both women had turned to Tracy, looking for confirmation, her swing vote. Well, Tracy? What do you think? Where do *you* stand?

Well . . . she was determined not to be a yes-man; wasn't going to be an Uncle Tomahawk. But she wasn't going to be stupid either. Mrs. Brody was partly right. Many Indian applicants *weren't* qualified. At interviews many acted put upon and inconvenienced. Resumes, when submitted, were shabbily conceived. But Frances was right, too. Tracy had been a bird dog, a highly qualified one. She had beat the bushes, knocked on doors. Eighteen years of "Sorry, try again," and "What I really think you ought to do is . . . "

Tracy glanced at the strip of rawhide circling Frances' anemic wrist; at her hungry, energized eyes.

Tracy?

"I know it's not easy, Frances, but I'm afraid I have to agree with Mrs. Brody."

Frances flashed her knife eyes; Mrs. Brody gave Tracy a manly nod, exactly as John Wayne might have.

That night she had gone home filled with a new bitterness. She hadn't been to church in years—she'd gradually just quit going. Internally she had blamed Brad—he'd always made such a subtle stink about it. "Hey, Trace, let's go to Oak Creek Canyon! Have a picnic!" "It's Sunday, Brad. You know that." Football and beer. But that night she had knelt down and tried to pray. Had she forgotten how? She had gazed up at the foamy white ceiling, tongue-tied. Just whom had she been speaking to all those years? The Father, of course, in the name of the Son. Yet while praying, she had always pictured the Savior in her mind. Not the Old Testament God of blood and justice—he played favorites, had his sacred waiting lists. No, she had always seen the Good Shepherd gathering up his lost flocks in the jungle-strangled cities of America. "My bowels are filled with compassion. . . . " Giving eyes to the blind, legs to the crippled, hope to the hopeless. She had always regarded him as a friend, an older brother in the purest sense. "Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God!" But a desert dweller from a barren land of mud huts, not so much different, surely, from the adobe pueblos of her ancient ancestors. A Jew. A semite whose

skin must have been toasted brown to combat the Judean sun. Born in a manger. A stable. Amidst the fecal stink of animals. Conceived out of wedlock too. If you followed human logic, a bastard—shhh! Tracy! She had tried to edit the thought, but it had given her a strange solace. Harlots, thieves, liars, tax collectors, Samaritans, yes, even Lamanites—Indians: He loved everyone, regardless. He even seemed to have a special thing for the underdogs. "Be ye not as the Scribes and Pharisees. . . . " "The last shall be first. . . . "

No, she wasn't going to be like so many others and blame the Church for taking away something she'd never had to begin with. It wasn't the doctrine but the hushed and tucked-away footnotes underpinning it, the unspoken sermons she had caught in a smirk, a nudge, a look that silently said: yes, you too can become one of us, Tracy, if you do your very very best always. As we are, you too may become: white and delightsome. Pure and delightsome. We. Us. Kings and queens. Gods and goddesses. Eternal white butterflies.

But wait. Was it really so awful? Yes, her life often seemed like a never-ending string of big and little tragedies, but was it really? Of course there were good times, happy moments. When she won the L.A. County spelling bee, she was interviewed by four reporters and appeared on the local TV news. But the headline the next day read, INDIAN STUDENT WINS SPELLING BEE!! with double exclamation marks, as if this were on par with dividing the Red Sea. Every little joy or triumph was discolored by the ugly other.

Then what was it? What? Skin? Or soul? Where the heart is. Yes, where? This: when she was seventeen, she was called as second counselor for her Laurel Class. She overheard her adult advisor, Sister Weaver, telling Sister Price that it would be a wonderful growing opportunity for Tracy. And it was, at first. Everyone said so. "Isn't it wonderful to see that cute little Lamanite girl up there conducting the meeting?"

Lamanite. She had grown to truly hate that word. And "Placement." It should have been "Displacement".

She remembered the day Sister Weaver asked her to give a talk in sacrament meeting on Easter Sunday. "Something on the atonement or the resurrection would be very good," Sister Weaver said, "very appropriate." And that had been Tracy's intent, it really had. But as she had fasted and prayed and searched the Book of Mormon for inspiration, something odd had happened. Perhaps the stench of poverty from her most recent, and final, visit to her homeland was still a little too fresh in her nostrils—something, anyway, had kept drawing her to King Benjamin's address and to the prophecies of Isaiah, the sin of pride and the haughty daughters of Zion.

Easter Sunday she was brutally frank. Glaring down at the sea of white faces, she exhorted, "You shouldn't be wearing fancy clothes and driving flashy cars. Not when countless others are starving and going without. King Benjamin said we're all beggars before God. You shouldn't think, 'He's not poor, he's just lazy! He brought it on himself!' You have no right. You shouldn't judge. You don't know. You shouldn't think you're better than other people just because you have more money. You should use that money to help the poor. That's why God gave it to you, not to buy cars and clothes and big houses."

Tracy's remarks were not well received. Old Brother Dixon harumpfed in the front pew; Sister Connelly, the stake president's wife, pulled her rabbit fur stole indignantly over her shoulders.

Tracy rambled passionately for another ten minutes before Bishop Jenkins, a young plastic surgeon, stood up and whispered in her ear. Tracy flushed, closed her Book of Mormon, and sat down. Bishop Jenkins smiled into the microphone: "We appreciate Tracy's remarks, but we do have a full program and we're running a little short on time . . . "

She was the first of three youth speakers.

Later, at home, Tracy heard her foster parents arguing in the bedroom. Sister Sackman: "How could she *do* that? How could she say those things after all we've given her?"

There was silence; then Brother Sackman, meekly: "Well, maybe she's right."

A witchy shriek from Sister Sackman: "*What*? What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Maybe—"

"Oh? And you're the one to talk, aren't you? Puttering around in your little BMW! Playing your eighteen holes every Saturday!"

"Like I said, maybe she's right."

"Right? Oh, sure! It's very easy for *her* to stand up there and criticize. Like *she* doesn't have nice clothes and live in a nice house and get a decent education! And this is the thanks we get—a nice big fat slap in the face! Maybe she *is* right. Maybe she should go back to her stinking little reservation and live in a pig sty. Maybe that would make her happy! Or at least make her appreciate what she's got! What we've given her—what the Church has!"

Tracy was not asked to speak in sacrament meeting again. She was not released from her calling as second counselor, but Sister Weaver monitored her very carefully whenever she stood before the other young women. She told her exactly what to say and how to say it and wagged her finger discretely whenever Tracy drifted into questionable waters. This was called "training."

But there were still some good times, some happy moments. Brother Sackman took her—just her, Tracy, as a graduation gift—to the

Ahmanson Theater where they saw Jon Voight and Faye Dunaway in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But afterwards, idling at a stoplight, staring forlornly at the windshield blistering with raindrops, Brother Sackman had turned to her, sighing sadly: "Tracy, it's a white world. A white church. Someday it may be different, but for now . . . "

The phone rang again. Mrs. Brody in the panic seat. Tracy plunked down on the barstool, waiting, counting, debating: ten, eleven, twelve desperate rings. Furious rings. 7:45. The meeting was half over by now, unless Dolores Manymules was telling her life story for the ninety-ninth time.

Tracy thought she could hear the voices again, sad and distant, like carolers mourning Christmases past. She closed her eyes and set her mind adrift. Soon she was floating past ivory spires, ice castles, forests of giant toadstools. Then white whorls on glass: Auntie's soft white hair like shaving cream against the purple satin of the coffin. Tracy's third and final visit to the reservation, the week before she was asked to speak in sacrament meeting. It was a white man's service, Cope Memorial doing the honors. But the old people had come in droves, wearing blankets and shawls and silver bracelets studded with turquoise. Tracy could still hear the lamentations of the old women as they had filed past the open casket. She remembered, too, the stoic forbearance of their men, the flowers stinking up the little church house with their false sweetness, and her last obligatory look at the old pottery maker: her withered brown fingers, dried up earthworms cupped on her belly; her bloated face (rejecting the embalming fluids of Cope Memorial's "economy package"), her putty lips, already cracked and crumbling, puckered as if for a final kiss, or curse.

She had been seventeen. Once again it was her foster parents who had insisted she cross the great red desert to attend the service. And all the way home she had suffered a nail-in-the-gut nausea for having pouted and complained earlier because she would miss the stake dance, the JV baseball game, whatever excuse she could invent to escape the ordeal. Now she tried to summon up in her mind those brittle twig fingers that had once taken clay, mud, common earth, and turned them into works of simple beauty; that had chopped wood, carried water, ground maize on slabs of rock. As she tried to feel into those hands, she almost wept, not so much at the loss of her Auntie as her inability to generate true tears on her behalf.

She glared at the faded curtains, refusing snow, the voices, the world beyond that flimsy gray veil. If he had chosen a Barbie doll blonde, aerobically streamlined with tight round buttocks and nose cone breasts and a Pepsodent smile, that might have been understandable. Livable. But she was nothing like that. Nothing at all. A few

years younger, yes, but prognathic jowls, fat fish lips, bulgy eyes, sunken cheeks, bee-stinger breasts. Skinny. A broomstick. She was ugly, dammit! Ugly!

Of course Tracy had suspected for some time. Brad's curious comings and goings. Graveyard hours at the office. And when he was home, he always seemed to be looking for a fight, some petty excuse to flee the house in an adolescent rage. But the humiliation, the shame. Stalking him late at night like a private eye: bars, the bowling alley, the movies, the mall. He must have known. He was always clean, always had an alibi.

Naturally she had caught him by accident. She had been in a hurry, as usual, posting the revised agenda for the November parent committee meeting, rushing to meet the twenty-four-hour public notice deadline. As a courtesy, she was taking a copy by Frances' home, an old malpais rock rental on the westside, near Stimson Park. But . . . strange. What was Brad's red Cherokee jeep doing, parked across the street? No. It couldn't—they didn't even know . . . well, wait now. They had met once, briefly, at a parent meeting in October he had deigned to attend on her behalf. That night Frances had jumped on her soapbox, ordering—not asking, but *ordering*, *commanding*—the parents to demand more Indian teachers. Waving her fist like a tomahawk, ranting and raving and making a complete utter ass of—no. It couldn't be. *He* couldn't.

But this was the other image that always came to mind when she thought of Frances. Dusk, storm clouds brewing over the peaks as she tiptoes around back, trying to reduce the autumn crackle of the fallen leaves. Pressing her face to the window, through faded drapes she sees them intertwined on the throw rug like two human pretzels. They are all hands and hair and heat, and she will never ever forget their hungry panting and his final ecstatic shriek followed by the loud horsey laugh flying from her mongoloid mouth.

Of course she was angry. Furious. But what does a woman do when her husband . . . well, what? Grab the culprit by the hair and beat her brains out Roller Derby style? And who's the real culprit? Whose brains do you beat out? Your husband's? His lover's? Or your own?

Of course she could lay blame. She could say he did this and he didn't do that and she shouldn't have done this and she could/would/should have done that. But it was immaterial. Moot. You can't beat love into someone, although you can sometimes beat it out of them. But there was all the stupid other to deal with. Or maybe that didn't matter either. He was a jerk, a moron.

"It's not what you think. It's a cultural thing. I never felt right about you. Not really."

Bullshit! Chicken white bullshit!

Yes, but he had chosen *her*. Ugly pushy pain-in-the-ass Frances. The six-foot stick of dynamite. How was it she wriggled? Passamoquoddy style? In the end only one thing had mattered; only one image survived: their two bodies, one white and one earth-brown, swirled together like a marble fudge dessert. And it had made her hungry.

Listening for the phone again, she was filled with a rage she had never felt before. She clenched her fists and her eyes, her body tightening like a long knot. "Oh God," she groaned, "God-damn-it! God-damn-me!"

When she opened her eyes, she saw her face on the curved chrome of the stove, distorted like a Mercator projection, fat up here, shrunken down there. At first it looked spooky, then comical. Like fat-lipped Frances. She sneered at herself, made a false face. Yes, Mrs. Brody. Certainly, Mrs. Brody. Why of course, Mrs. Brody.

She looked at the cake, perfectly baked, iced, untouched on the counter. She picked it up like a waiter, hefting it gently in one hand. There was her face again, stretched, bulbous. She smiled, made a clown frown, flashed a full set of teeth. By all means, Mrs. Brody. My pleasure, Mrs. Brody! And with a shot-put motion she shoved it at her nemesis—splat! And it was everywhere, little pink pieces spotting the floor, the stove, the wall. She was laughing. Oh my God! Oh my God! She was laughing her head off, a high horsey Frances laugh. She could see her mouth wide open on the chrome like a great cave ready to swallow her whole, like the whale swallowing Jonah. Then it was a volcano surrounded by pink lava, and then her mouth with a frothy pink beard. It was so funny she couldn't stop laughing, not even when the tears came and the phone rang and she looked and it was 9:05. Nine-zero-five, Tracy! Nine-zero-six! Where the hell were you, Tracy? Where the hell—well, I want to see you in my office first thing tomorrow morning!

Tomorrow's Saturday, Mrs. Brody. Indians don't work weekends, remember? Indians don't work period. Especially the apple variety.

But the phone kept ringing. Ten, twenty, thirty times. Oh, she was fuming! Tracy could feel every ring. It was wonderful! Sweet deliverance! Ring out, wild bells! Ring out!

But then it stopped, and she had to face the winter void again. Cake to clean up. Face to clean up. Life to clean up.

She got a bucket, some damp rags. She listened a moment for the voices. Silence.

When she peeked outside again, the sky was falling like a tickertape parade. Passing headlights momentarily silvered the aspens. She told

herself to get up, get moving, but she remained there for quite some time, arms folded, forehead pressed against the cold glass, watching the snow build tiny pueblos on her window.