

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.”