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THE ONLY WORD I KNOW

By Helen Walker Jones

DURING THE 1960S, ON THE RESERVE TWO MILES from my hometown in Alberta, members of the Blood Tribe painted their homes peacock blue, sunflower yellow, rose red, and shocking pink. Back then, the Indians added Victorian-sounding first names to their tribal surnames, resulting in such original monikers as Horace Striped Wolf, Adeline Black Rabbit, Veronica Weasel Bear, and Cletus Rides-at-the-Door. As bored teenagers, my friends and I loved to read the phone book for the town of Standoff, on the Reserve, just for entertainment. My buddies jokingly christened me, "Olivia Hair-of-No-Color" because I was such a towhead. Our humor at the expense of the Indians stung me a bit, since my memories of Archer were still so fresh, but in fact, I often instigated the telephone book game, and laughed as heartily as anyone else at the unusual names.

The year I turned fifteen, I hoed sugar beets alongside the Indians, agonizing under the dizzying sun, my youthful back aching, my hands hot and painful inside heavy gloves made of pillow ticking and stuffed with a thin layer of uncarded wool. The Indians' bare hands, accustomed to manual labor, were the texture of leather and never blistered.

At the end of each row of beets, either my mom or Archer Standing Eagle, her foreman, met us with a communal dipper of water—the battered bottom half of our old, discarded double boiler. I gulped water alongside Cletus and Veronica, raising the metal rim of the pan to my lips, wiping it first, where their mouths had been.

They called themselves "The People" but seldom raised their eyes, never spoke aloud unless spoken to. They muttered constantly in their own language, a low throbbing sound much like the hum of bees when they talked all at once, rapidly. They laughed wholeheartedly at my ineptitude as a beet-thinner, not the least bit shy about offending me. But to my mom, the landowner, they were respectful, polite, mumbling thanks in English as they took their pay in cash each evening after twelve hours' labor.

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On those hot summer evenings, the Indians, exhausted from thinning sugar beets under a blazing sun, got a little drunk and went to the movies, where (for some mysterious reason related more to Hollywood's manipulations than to rational thought) they cheered for John Wayne and the cavalry during the bloody skirmishes with the Sioux and Comanches.

Back then, the Indians seemed awfully remote—in fact, almost invisible—from our way of life. Aside from the grocery store and the movie theatre, they pretty much kept to themselves. They were ardent hunters, fishermen, and calf-ropers. Nearly all of them were Catholic. The children attended a separate school located on the Reserve—one-roomed, named for a saint, painted a stereotypical fire-engine red, with a small white bell tower perched on the roof. Or was that the church? I may have gotten them mixed up.

I had no father, growing up. My dad had died when his swather tipped over in the coulee on our acreage north of town. I was seven and had no siblings. So there was nobody I could ask for behavioral guidelines relating to people who weren't like us. It wasn't the sort of topic my mom was inclined to entertain. She was too busy feeding cattle and raising sugar beets, winter wheat, alfalfa, and flax to be bothered with such silly questions. "They're just people," she'd say, shooing me away. "Like you and me, Little Miss Priss."

I wasn't even sure if the Indian kids my age were literate or not; I never saw an Indian reading anything. They all dropped out of school at sixteen, when the law allowed, and got jobs as farmhands or mechanics or waitresses, or ran away to who-knows-where. Nobody gave it much thought—except my mother, who exclusively hired Indians as farm labor. Mom always said her foreman of twenty-two years, Archer Standing Eagle, truly lived by the sweat of his brow, did immaculate work, and was the best supervisor she'd ever seen.

I NEVER VISIT my hometown any more, except for family reunions and burials. My husband's been back only once in the last twenty years. But we're here now—for the funeral of my last-remaining Canadian relative, Great Aunt Melba, aged one hundred and four at her death, the oldest woman in the province. All but three of my cousins married Americans and moved to the States years ago.

Following the burial this afternoon, my thirty-eight cousins and I, along with our spouses, assembled at the church to eat

ham and potatoes-au-gratin with sautéed corn flakes on top (it's somehow disrespectful to call them "funeral potatoes"), followed by pineapple upside-down cake. The kids got Dilly Bars bought from the Dairy Queen.

After the luncheon, we hung around the cultural hall, fondly recalling Great Aunt Melba camped out on her porch, well into her nineties, sporting pink spongy curlers and a day-glo floral housecoat, armed with the special high-powered hose she used to prevent stray dogs from befouling her prized sweetheart roses and ruffled, purple-throated irises.

Later, with our arms around each other's waists, the female cousins all posed for snapshots—a chorus line of sagging, aging Rockettes with bifocals and varicose veins. We kissed each other sadly and cried a little, wondering whose death would provide the next occasion to bring us together.

Then I went back to the motel and read the obits, planning to clip Aunt Melba's write-up to send to a distant cousin in Glasgow. I cruised past basketball scores and gushy descriptions of bridesmaids in filmy chiffon dresses, thinking that nothing in Southern Alberta had changed. But everything had. The unthinkable had happened: the newspaper had started printing obituaries of the Native People.

The first obituary described a man from the Blood Reserve whose Indian name was KAAMATSISTAAWASII, which means "Fortunate to Thrive." Funeral services were to be conducted at Sacred Heart by the Reverend Steve Stepovich, the old priest who had officiated at every funeral on the Reserve for forty years, except for the summer when he toured Poland, accompanying the Pope's entourage. According to the obituary, the deceased—Rufus Melting Tallow—"loved his rifles and his pet ferret, retired from hockey after his liver got bad, and read his Book of Mormon every single night." I was startled to read that but knew immediately how the book of scripture had gotten into the hands of Mr. Melting Tallow.

AT THE END of each harvest, Mom would hand out a paperback Book of Mormon to every one of her beet-workers, as well as all of the other people she employed, whether it was their first season with her or their twentieth. She bought those books by the hundreds, when she went down to Salt Lake for general conference and kept them in boxes on the shelves behind the ironing board.

She'd advise her farmhands to read carefully, paying special attention to the term "Lamanites." "Read a ways into the book," she'd tell them, "and you just might find a little something, a bit of a bonus." Mom knew the expectation of extra money would keep her workers in the fields throughout all the weeks until harvest was finished, and it worked. Our field hands seldom quit until the last truck was loaded. Either she didn't know or didn't care that they simply thumbed through the book until it opened at the fifty-dollar bill in Second Nephi, Chapter Five.

The Alberta Liquor Store always did a booming business the weekend after Mom gave out her harvest bonuses inside paperback Books of Mormon. In those days, fifty dollars was nearly a week's wages. And Martin Shot-Both-Sides once bragged to me that around the end of harvest time, he generally rescued thirty or more of those books from the big green trash bin behind the silos. Coincidentally, every year around the middle of October, the LDS bookstore located at the back of the dry goods store had an overstock sale of dog-eared, medicinal-smelling, used Books of Mormon. The seminary teacher picked them up for a song and kept them at the back of his classroom for the use of those who had forgotten their own scriptures.

Mom didn't care. "Thirty books in the trash?" she'd say. "So what? I've given out close to forty of them every single October since the year I got married, and at least a few of them must've ended up in somebody's hands. Don't forget, Olivia, 'if you

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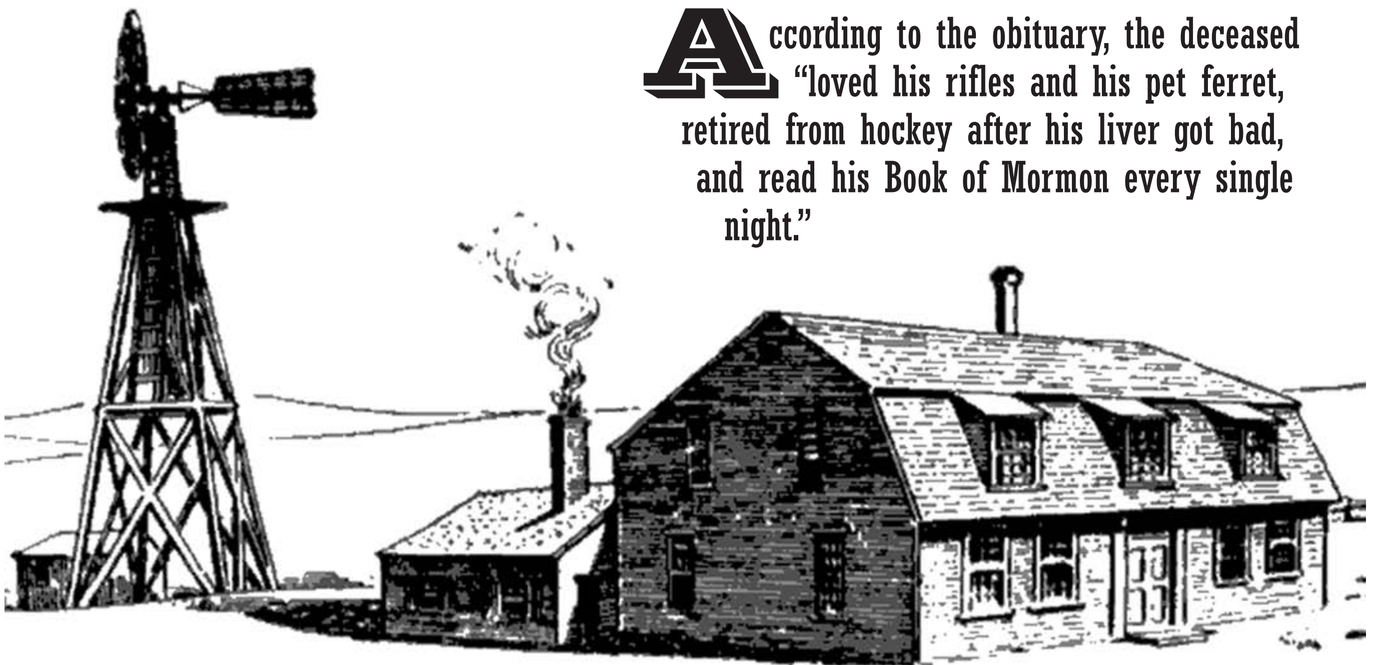

should labor all your days in crying repentance unto this people, and bring save it be one soul unto me, how great shall be your joy with him in the kingdom of my Father.'"

I have no idea if any of Mom's workers ever got baptized, but years ago, at her funeral, there were nearly eight hundred people crowding the stake center, completely filling the chapel and cultural hall, spilling out into the foyer, the halls, even the Relief Society room. At least a quarter of them were from the Blood Reserve—those who remembered her kindness to them and admired the way she, as a woman, had successfully kept the farm going with no one to help her except Archer Standing Eagle and a passel of seasonal farmhands.

ONCE, WHEN I was eleven, we went to town to pick up some baling wire and harnesses, and I needed new socks, so Archer—in an odd reversal of roles—walked down to the dry goods store with me while Mom did the other errands. Archer was a towering figure—six-foot three, two hundred and thirty pounds, with a well-kept braid reaching nearly to his waist. A former Golden Gloves Canadian champion, he had won his share of bar brawls before he gave up drinking. He was forty-seven years old and had never married. When I asked him why not, he said in a serious tone, patting his slight pot belly, "A wife would make me too fat." But it was common knowledge that he spent every weekend at the home of Mrs. Felicity Manyberries, whose husband had been killed a few years earlier when a tractor tipped over on him. Felicity, who was childless, was rumored to have a hefty widow's pension, a big feather bed, a cupboard full of copper cooking utensils, and a secret recipe for the flakiest pie crust in the province.

I knew the store clerk at the dry goods store. She lived in the Third Ward, in that stone house across from the bakery, with her ancient parents who were both confined to wheelchairs, and Mom said she was an old maid. She wore deep purple lipstick the color of bruises and had perfectly square, perfectly white teeth—and too many of them for her mouth. Mom called teeth like that "choppers." And while Mom would never have called anyone stupid, she had once whispered to me, after a fiasco with some vacuum cleaner bags, that this woman was "not exactly Einstein."

After I told the clerk my size and said I wanted three pairs of white anklets, she glanced up at Archer's glossy braid, snaking across his shoulder and over his chest to the pointed tip of his plaid cowboy shirt's pocket, where the stubbly black ends were caught with an elastic band. Then the clerk fixed her gaze on my blonde ringlets and blue eyes.

"This your little girl?" she asked, popping her gum and grinning. Archer rested his broad, callused hand on my head and glared at her.

"I got no kids," he said gruffly. "No wife, either. You interested, lady?" He tossed his business card onto the countertop. It said, "Archer Standing Eagle, Foreman, Allsop Land and Cattle Company, Ltd." The woman looked at the card as though it were contagious, then swept it onto the floor with the tips of her eggplant-colored fingernails. As the bell over the door tinkled to signal our exit, Archer glanced back at the woman who was standing with one hand on her hip, the other one covering her mouth, her fingernails curved under on the ends like talons.

"I'll pick you up Friday at closin' time, lady," Archer said, laughing in that silent way he had, that made his belly shake.

He snorted and coughed with his hand over his mouth when I asked, "Did you want a date with that lady, just to make Felicity Manyberries jealous?" All the way back to the harness store, he kept his hot palm on my head, as though he were piloting me along the sidewalk.

Archer attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings four times a week, and stayed sober until he ruptured his aorta, trying to heave a massive irrigation pipe, single-handedly, into the bed of Mom's old GMC pickup truck.

After his funeral, despite the protests of the priest, five befeathered brothers (Horace Striped Wolf's boys) performed a hoop dance around the hole in the ground where the coffin sat suspended on ropes, and then as Archer's last will and testament had specified, Bishop Jenks dedicated the grave. I stood in my best dress—a sheer lavender nylon with ruffly lace sleeves and a poufy petticoat—holding a tiny basket of purple asters. I felt conspicuous and out of place—more like a flower girl in a wedding party than an official mourner.

Felicity Manyberries gave me a peck on the cheek and a tight squeeze. Her mascara had puddled in the hollows beneath her eyes, and her eyelids were nearly swollen shut from crying. Three of Archer's old aunties clucked their tongues when they saw me and bent to kiss my cheek, muttering in their own guttural language. One of them had a black wig perched on her head, which didn't cover the long white strands dangling at her nape and peeking out below her ears. It reminded me of the tightly curled, ponytailed wigs the Queen's Counsel wore when they argued cases on BBC mystery shows. The bewigged auntie reached out, stroked my hair with her sandpapery fingertips, as though she were reading Braille, and said in heavily-accented English, "Look at this one. Hair like clouds. Archer always say this one have curls white as a palomino's mane."

Throughout the graveside service, the aunties wept aloud, making no attempt to muffle their dramatic, heart-rending sobs, while Mom sniffled and dabbed at her pink-rimmed eyes and I kept wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand. After the "Amen," by pre-arrangement, I gently balanced the basket of asters on top of the coffin, and then whispered the only Blackfoot word I knew—KUAYTIMUTSIN—meaning "I'll see you again." Archer had said that to me every Friday, before paying his weekend visit to Felicity Manyberries.

I made Mom stay there by the grave with me until everyone else had gone home—even Felicity. We sat on the brown folding chairs for nearly an hour, both thinking of Archer and of my dad. Finally, Mom stood up, fussed with her pillbox hat, blew her nose, then stuffed her rumpled hanky inside her black patent leather purse. In a frail, quavering voice, she said, "Olivia, sweetie, you and I are the unluckiest females in this entire world, losing the two finest men we'll ever know, in two

rapid blinks of an eye, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it." Although my mother worked in the fields and in the corral for more than forty years, alongside foul-mouthed farmhands, branding crews, and itinerant combiners, that was the one and only time I ever heard her swear.

When I got home from Archer's funeral, there were four distinct lipstick prints on my cheek, from the aunties and Felicity: one pink, two red, and one orange. They overlapped at one corner, just beneath my cheekbone, and fanned out like the little cardboard color samples Mom had brought home to help me choose the paint for my bedroom. I had opted for a pale shade called French Ice because it was so subtle, so totally foreign to the brilliantly hued paint jobs on the Reserve. And besides, it matched the color of my nearly cloud-white hair. I realized, even then, that my blondeness would be the reason people would continue to single me out and say, "Look at this one." At that moment, my hair was the only thing in my pitiful orphan's life that made me happy.

Of course, we never even dreamed of submitting Archer's death notice to the local newspaper. Any obituaries of the Natives would have been given orally, in the Gladstone Memorial Hall on the Reserve or at the Sacred Heart Church, overseen by Reverend Stepovich, and soon forgotten except by the old aunties rocking and chanting on their porches, cataract-glazed eyes able to discern only the brightest colors, such as peacock blue, sunflower yellow, rose red, and shocking pink. I often wondered if The People were oblivious to the creamy beige granite of the Alberta Temple, two miles away, high on a hill, its Western windows glittering in the setting sun.

I CLEANED UP, FINANCIALLY, selling every acre of the Allsop land to one of those big, automated agri-businesses that rotates their crops by computer. And now that Great Aunt Melba is gone, I'll never again have any ties to this place, whatsoever. The cemetery would be the only place I'd care to visit.

Yesterday, on what would have been Archer's ninety-fifth birthday (the first day when I no longer required permission from his next-of-kin), I accompanied my husband to the temple where he acted as proxy for Archer's baptism, endowment, and sealing to his parents: Gertrude Goodstriker and her husband, Lionel Standing Eagle. I sincerely hope that Archer approved of the work and accepted it. Who knows—in a few years, I may even do Felicity Manyberries's temple work, in case she and Archer might like to be sealed someday.

But don't start thinking I'm one of those saintly people who sacrifices herself in the service of others. Anyone who knows me would tell you I'm stubborn, intolerant, and shallow. I don't like coming back to my hometown. It makes me feel superior and inferior, both at once.

Today, at the cemetery, after they lowered Great Aunt Melba's coffin, I laid chrysanthemums on the graves of my father and mother, my grandparents, and Archer Standing Eagle. I pictured myself in that lavender nylon dress, and found myself repeating the only word he ever taught me in Blackfoot: KUAYTIMUTSIN.

That one word sums up everything I comprehend about eternity. It's the word I commissioned Jonathan Weasel Bear to carve on the back of Archer's headstone, after I came into my inheritance. It was my way of telling him, "I know I'll see you again, Archer, surrounded by all of those we love."

I suppose the real reason I felt the urge to do his temple work, and to buy his headstone, was because even though I was so fond of Archer personally, I have never loved or understood his people enough, or embraced them as my brothers and sisters. No matter how things have changed otherwise, you might say I am still wiping the metal edge of that dipper pan before pressing it to my own lips.

Still, every time I see a father with his daughter, I recall the way Archer kept his hot palm on my head, as though he were piloting me along the sidewalk, back to the harness store. Strangely enough, it was a good two years before I realized that store clerk was being facetious when she asked if I were Archer's little girl. It hadn't registered on me that no one—not even a horsey-toothed sales clerk who was no Einstein—would ever have mistaken Olivia Hair-of-No-Color for a member of the Blood Tribe.

MY SKIN

My skin turns dark in the springtime sun
as I work their gardens and fruit trees.
The flax-haired youths look at me with intrigue,
their skin reminding me of melting wax at St. Francis's.
They mouth the word *Lamanite* as I work the garden.
Should I cry out *this is not my identity*?
I do not speak the language mastered by their missionaries.

Yet they try to coax me into their chapels, into a waiting pool.
They send their tagged young men to speak words I do not comprehend.
Jesus Christo, they say, as they cradle their black bound books.
Their look of pity meets me and my skin made dark by the sun.
Do they not see in me my mother's German eyes; sense her light hair?
No, they see only Lamanite, whose skin will lighten someday,
if only I will accept their book, their pity, and their waiting pool.

—JOHANN DE LA ROSA