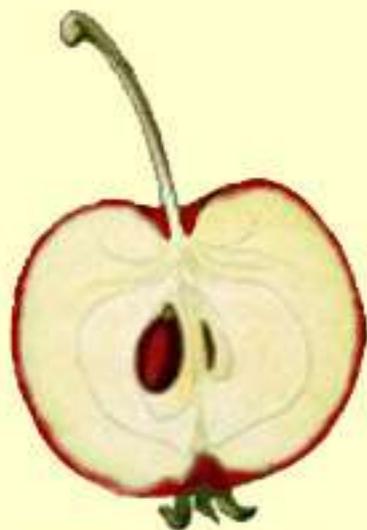


apple



charlotte walling

Mother says I have a gift. When I was born, another daughter was born with me. But as I lay screaming in my grandmother's arms, my sister was already cold. Grandfather went to sweat lodge later that spring. When he came home, he told Mother that my sister and I are one spirit, that she still clings to me. He said that I am a connection to the ancestors.

I remember when grandmother died. Mother cut off my hair, then my father's and then finally her own. That is what we do in my village when someone dies. As I sat by the fire with my family, I remembered how Grandmother would tug at her ears. "Grandmother will be waiting for us," I told my mother. I didn't hear a voice. I only spoke the words that came into my head. "The ringing in her ears is gone now." After that, mother didn't cry anymore.

The year I turned six, a white woman came to our house. She came with a man who spoke Lakota. The man told my mother that my cousin and I had to go with them. They took us and put us on a bus. As we drove away, my cousin and I held tight to each other. Our family chased the bus as it rolled down the dirt road through the center of our village. Even our grandfather, who hobbled on a leg that would never mend, ran as best he could. Eventually they fell behind us and all we could see as we looked back was dust, rising into the sky.

The school was the biggest building I had ever seen. It was white, three

stories. The children in the school yard had their hair cut too short, especially the boys. My cousin put her lips close to my ear. “These children must be orphans.” Her hand held mine like a vice.

The white woman took us into the school and locked us in a room with some other children we didn’t know. On the far side of the room was a door. We could hear someone crying on the other side. My cousin clung to me even tighter. A man in a white coat stepped through the door. He looked at the two of us holding hands and grabbed my cousin. I tried to hold on, but he was too strong. He took my cousin into the room and slammed the door behind them. I could hear her crying on the other side. After a while, the door was opened again. This time the man in the white coat came for me. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me through the door. My cousin was still there. Her hair had been cut off like all the other children. Her eyes were red and puffy. The man sat me in a high black chair and took his scissors to me. Strands of hair were dropped into a pile as they were cut away.

“Are we orphans now too?” my cousin asked.

I spoke the words that came into my head. “Our parents are not dead, but we are gone from them now.”

That first year was my worst. We went to school every day and to mass

two times a week. A man called Father Thomas spoke to a whole crowd of us for a long time. I thought the white woman who had come for us might have been his wife, but she wasn't. She was the school matron and her name was Mrs. Brown. I cried for my mother at night, my bare neck a constant reminder that I would not feel her fingers braiding my hair. Mrs. Brown gave me a new name. From then on I was to answer to Ruth. My cousin would be called Martha.

The first time I saw a desk, I was afraid to sit in it. Mrs. Brown paddled my backside with a plank and then I knew that I must learn the rules quickly. Some of the other children tried to help us understand, but they were forbidden to speak Lakota. Others had already forgotten their tongue. Still more had lost their voice. That is what happened to Martha. She hardly speaks at all now. I was able to speak a little English within a few months but the older children laughed at my accent. They called me a name I didn't understand, but I could tell that it was bad.

As summer approached an older boy called John told us we would be going home for the summer holiday. The younger children giggled with excitement but John seemed indifferent. "You'll be disappointed," he said. "Someday when you're older, you will see."

We returned to our village on the same bus that had abducted us. The

sound of the engine brought many of the people out of their homes. When Martha and I stepped from the bus, no one came to greet us. The neighbors stared at us from just outside their doors. My mother was one of the last people to make her way outside. As soon as she saw the yellow bus she started walking toward us. When she was close enough to see my face she broke into a run. Only then did the other people approach. Mother dropped to her knees in front of me. I remember she was smiling but tears were running down her cheeks. I looked down at her belly. It was round.

I could hear them speaking. I could hear them say my name. I understood the words but for the first time they sounded strange to me.

“Did you forget your gift?” My grandfather hunched over me with all his weight on his good leg.

“No.” But I really had forgotten my gift. I hadn’t thought of the ancestors since the day they cut my hair. I waited for some confirmation that I hadn’t lost it, but it didn’t come. It happened a few times that summer that a person would come to me and ask me to pass on a message. I spoke the words they asked me to, but I couldn’t be sure the ancestors heard me.

When we left in the fall, Martha and I were not afraid. We left without tears, but Martha still held my hand the whole way. I grew accustomed to the

cycle. In the fall we went to school and in the summer we went home.

For many years, I lived two separate lives. There was life at home and then there was life at school. The only common thread between them was the silent presence of Martha. At school, I believed in the Bible and I accepted the gift of salvation. At home I still spoke to the ancestors, but the words felt empty. Sometimes I would have a thought and it would feel like it had come from my sister. But to acknowledge it felt like sin. So I kept it to myself. By the time I was 12, people quit coming to me with their messages. That was fine with me.

During my sixth year at school, John asked Father Thomas if he could stay over the summer. Martha and I were sitting outside when he came to us with the news. Martha kept silent as she usually did.

“Why don’t you want to go home?” I looked up at John, who was a full head taller than me.

“Father Thomas has agreed to do a private study of the bible with me over the summer. In the fall I’ll apply to a seminary.” For the first time since I had known him, the bitterness had left his voice. “They’ve never accepted an Indian before, but Father Thomas says he’ll put in a good word.” Poor John. He could talk like a white man and think like a white man. But he would never *be* one.

That summer the rest of us left and John stayed behind. He stood with Father Thomas in the school yard. The two of them waived as the rest of us drove away. It was not surprising to see Father Thomas smiling, but John almost never smiled the way he did that day. I remember thinking that he would be handsome if he didn't always look so solemn.

Martha and I kept mostly to ourselves that summer. We went home at night to sleep but we spent the days together. Mother would sometimes ask me to stay home for the day. Her pleas seemed childlike to me. She sat on the floor, clinging to my little brother, who would be old enough to go to school in a year. When I left for school that fall, only mother and grandfather saw me to the door. They didn't walk out to the bus the way they had in the past. I was a stranger. The worry on my grandfather's brow made my heart ache, but I didn't want to show it to them. I was anxious to be gone from that place.

I embraced my mother and then my grandfather. I turned to walk away, but Grandfather seized my hand weakly. He stepped forward with his good leg. "Don't forget the gift, Granddaughter."

I don't remember whether Father Thomas ever read Leviticus during mass, but when I heard the words in my mind, they came in his voice. *And the soul that turneth after such familiar spirits, I will set my face against that soul,*

and will cut him off from among his people. Then my own thought followed.
Don't say it. It will kill him if you say it.

I spoke. I said the words even though I didn't want to. "There is no gift." In the few seconds that it took to speak the words, my mind was ravaged by a war. I thought of Jesus and the ancestors. I thought of John and Mother, Grandfather and Father Thomas, heaven and earth. I turned my back on Mother and Grandfather and walked to the bus.

Martha met me in the back seat. I tried not to cry, but a tear managed to slip from under my closed eye lid. Martha saw it. She grabbed my hand and squeezed.

When we got back to school, Mrs. Brown informed us that John had died.

"Has there already been a service?" Martha surprised us all by speaking.

"There won't be a service." Even stoic old Mrs. Brown struggled with the words.

I turned and ran from the crowd of children that had amassed around Mrs. Brown. She called after me but she didn't follow. I was going to have my hide tanned when she found me, but I didn't care. I ran into the sanctuary and toward the door to Father Thomas' office. But Father Thomas wasn't in his

office. He was sitting in the first pew, staring up at the great crucifix on the wall above the pulpit. I slowed nearly to a stop, clutching my side and gasping for air as I walked. “Father Thomas. What happened to..”

“I got the letter yesterday.” Father Thomas interrupted. He stood from the pew and turned to me, holding out a single piece of paper. “I didn’t have the courage to tell him till this morning. He was dead by lunch.” He pushed the letter into my hands, but I didn’t look at it. I crumbled it into a ball and threw it on the floor. I turned and ran away. When Mrs. Brown found me, she didn’t tan my hide.

I didn’t sleep that night. I lay awake wondering whether John wasn’t getting a Christian burial because he was an Indian, or because he had killed himself. Around midnight I was startled by the sound of the school bell. Someone was ringing the bell erratically down in the school yard. It was then that I realized that I smelled smoke.

I jumped from my bed and ran to Martha. She was waiting for me. We ran into the hall. It was clogged with other children who were trying to run down the stairs. Smoke poured down the hallway toward an open window near the ceiling. Everyone was coughing. Some had pulled their collars up over their mouths and noses. We made our way down stairs and out the front doors. From

the school yard we could see that the sanctuary was on fire. Mrs. Brown was trying to organize the children. Father Thomas was looking around wild eyed at the school.

One of the caretakers ran from behind the school with a shotgun. “We’re under attack!”

Mrs. Brown ceased calling names and looking into children’s faces. Instead she stared in horror as the high roof of the sanctuary caved in. Flames flung wildly into the black sky from the hole in the roof. “They are all here.” I saw her chest heave when she sighed. “The children are all here.”

The children were all safe, but somewhere someone was still ringing the bell. I looked around for the source of the wild clanging. It sounded like it was getting further away. I squinted to see a shadowy figure in the distance. After looking at the fire, I couldn’t make things out in the dark. Someone called, “There he is,” pointing toward the figure in the distance. The person was hobbling away and had almost reached the trees on the far side of the meadow. I saw the caretaker lift his shotgun. A single word came into my head: grandfather. I heard the shot ring out from somewhere to my left. The figure fell to the ground a fraction of a second later.

When I go home, the people in my village still speak to me, but they see I am changed. Some of the other girls call me apple. Red on the outside white on the inside. But really I am neither.

From the Author

Apple is a work of fiction. While the plot drivers in this story (Ruth's gift and the suicide of John) were merely that, plot drivers, many of the events that take place in the story are conglomerates of the testimonies of real people who attended boarding schools in the United States. For example the hair cut process is one that has been described by many Lakota as troubling considering the funerary significance of haircutting in Lakota society.

In boarding schools, abuse was not uncommon and the systematic de-culturation of native youth was the goal. Captain Richard H. Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian School, said at a convention in 1892, "A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with

the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.”

This brings me to why I wrote this piece. I grew up in the Black Hills of South Dakota, an area of religious significance to many of the American Indian tribes of the plains, including the Lakota. There is always tension between the native and white people in this area and sometimes it boils over. Last summer, a Lakota man and two white police officers died in a shootout. Tensions flared and it was difficult to engage in polite conversation for a while. This is the reality of living in the Black Hills.

I can't quite put into words what I was hoping to achieve when I started this piece. It was not understand in the strictest sense. I don't presume that I am capable of true understanding of the native condition and all of its nuances. On the other hand understanding on a basic level might be possible. While each person's experiences are unique, there is a core emotion at the center of them. It is small and cannot possibly encompass all that a person would feel, but it is present. I may not be able to understand what it would have been like to be separated from my family and stranded somewhere between European culture and Native culture, but I have felt pain, I have felt stretched between two

competing philosophies. That tiny little piece at the core might share commonalities that permeate culture and bind us all together as humans. I like to believe that if we can all take some timeout from complicated social problems and operate in that small space of commonality, that we might find peace. That could just be the wishful thinking of a white girl from the Midwest who is weary of racial tensions, but I hope not.