

Mackenzie Roberts

Mvskoke Youth Arts Festival Submission

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The Children of the White Potato Clan

The first time I was told about the White Potato clan was the first time I felt my people love me back.

It was nearing the end of Junior year, and the weather was starting to warm up. Animals and plants all perked up to the fresh, hot air snaking its way through Okmulgee, Oklahoma. The breeze would've felt nice wafting through my khaki skirt if I hadn't been fighting a red polo shirt with an affinity for asphyxiation. Okmulgee *had* to be the only school in the county to require a uniform. Most people have never heard of Okmulgee, which makes sense if you asked me. Not many people care about Oklahoma anyway. What person who calls this place a flyover state would care about the capital of Mvskoke (Creek) Nation? You pronounce it like Muh-sko-gee, but a lot of people call us the Creek. My grandma makes me call us Mvskoke, because the colonizers gave us the other name. Yeah grandma, stick it to the colonizers.

As the 8th largest Native Nation in the country, you can expect that there would be a lot of us around the capital. And you'd be right. A lot of the people I see around here are Indians. Non-Indians aren't supposed to use that, and we only say it with an accent. Like if you were to pronounce "endings" but instead the "i" is an "e" and the "g" didn't exist. See? Endens.

I can say only Indians around certain people. My dad is Mvskoke, but my mom is white. Her family has a recessive gene that makes people red headed every other generation. It skipped my mom, so now I have red hair, pale skin, and high cheekbones. The only defining

characteristic of my indigeneity was sunken into the pudgy blobs of my cheeks, like a mammoth in a tar pit. Mom thinks maybe when I lose my baby fat they'll be more prominent. Sure. Totally.

I hopped up the steps to the main entrance of the school, gripping my backpack like my father's hand on my first day of Kindergarten. The anxiety about school never really left me, even after 12 years. But instead of the icy cold fear of new experiences and different people, the tightness in my stomach was due to something painfully familiar. It was never a secret that I looked White. Anyone can take one look at me and think, "colonizer." Sure. I get it. But even after softball games with my Mvskoke family yelling in the stands, or Indian taco fundraisers supplied with my grandma's frybread, the kids at school still questioned my authenticity. My dad even told me how wanted to give me a Mvskoke name, and after thinking about it for all of two seconds, he named me Meske or summer. When I asked him why he chose that name, he shrugged his shoulders and said it was because I was born in July. Super creative dad.

Though the longer appearances of the sun gave her kiss to my cheeks, my peach complexion and Mvskoke name was always an invitation for scrutiny. It didn't matter how close I was to my grandma or how my dad spoke Mvskoke to me. I was a White girl to them, and if there was anything worse than being a White girl, it was a White girl who's playing Indian. And the person that hated White girls playing Indian the most was none other than Martha Bear, who also happened to be the reason why my knuckles were pale around my backpack straps.

Martha was a full-blooded Mvskoke, and that meant something at school. Okmulgee High School mainly consisted of Black and Native students, with a few White students from the surrounding neighborhoods. Usually if you were cool, i.e. not racist, you could get along with all of them. Money mattered a lot with the White students in Okmulgee. It was obvious if you were poorer and couldn't get the best clothes or the latest iPhone. If you were a poor farmer's kid, it

was hard to get ahead, both in the classroom and out in the halls. The Black and Native kids had their own hierarchy. If you were lighter skinned or didn't pass like they thought you should, you weren't enough. They figured that you were pretending to be something you're not, for attention or to be cool or something. Martha easily passed. Her "authenticity" was never challenged.

After I packed my bag away in my locker, I headed for the cafeteria. With the environment in the school the way it was, the poorer farmer kids and the great "pretenders" were all on everyone else's shit list. That was okay, actually. If our communities didn't want us, then we would make a community for us. And we did.

As I broke open the doors to the cafeteria, our unreserved-reserved table appeared, tucked away in the back of the cafeteria with two bodies shaking in laughter. Wasn't that a sight for sore eyes? Eddie's and Marley's cackles slowed as I hiked my leg over the lunch table bench but their smiles remained. Eddie's dad was in the cattle industry, living in a farmhouse smack dab in a large plot of land a couple miles out of the city. After a few unfounded animal abuse claims and unfortunately timed cow deaths, Eddie's dad was just keeping his head above water, having been at the mercy of fines and lawsuits. Marley was Afro-Indigenous. Coming from a Ghanian father and a Mvskoke mother, she was fiery and passionate about her people, especially about preserving their culture. But like me, both of them knew what it was like to be the most sobering label of your life: inadequate. But hey, at least we could be inadequate together.

"Good mornin' Sunshine," Eddie purred with his thick country drawl. I've seen Eddie get tased on his ass for \$5 before, but when he said good morning to me like that, I never failed to blush in spite of myself.

"Good morning!" Marley chirped as she squeezed my shoulder.

"Mornin'," I yawned back in response. "What's got y'all two so chipper this morning?"

Marley looked back over her shoulder to check for teachers before slowly pulling out her phone. We had a no phone policy, even before school started, and Marley's worst fear was being written up. She was so earnest. Even if she hadn't been number #1 in our class and in National Honor Society, she still would've rather been caught dead than with her cellphone out.

"Look." She said. "Coach Mec started oversharing on Twitter again. Like dude, I followed you to see pics of your dog, not to see you live tweet every time you think of divorcing your wife."

My laugh died in my throat as a shadow darkened Marley's cellphone screen. Busted. When I didn't hear the familiar ragged breath of Ms. Labonze heaving over me, *my* worst fear had been confirmed. Martha and her sisters, Lucy and Leslie, stood in front of us, Martha in the front with her twin sisters behind her.

"Hey, White girl." She spat. "Mahaya Harjo asked where you were yesterday. I told him you were probably looking for some land to steal or something. He tried not to laugh, but I saw him giggle. He knows you're just pretending too." I knew why she wanted to get a rise out of me. I had won us the Creek challenge bowl the week before, with a final question on the correct way to make *sofke*. Martha had originally started to answer incorrectly, and before the other team had a chance to steal, I responded with the right answer: Lye and hominy corn. She had the gumption to be particularly bitchy to me ever since we left.

"*God*, leave me alone. Don't you have anything better to do? Like study for our next tournament since you apparently need it so bad?" I snapped back. I saw a dark fury cloud her dark brown eyes, but her lip stayed curled in a smirk. She chuckled.

"Actually now that you mention it, I *do*." She replied. "Me and the twins just learned about our clan from our mother. She told us all about how important we are to our people. Ask

your grandma about the Wind clan and see what she says. Because Creator knows you can't ask your mom about it." She was right. I could study the challenge bowl study guide and ask my grandma all the questions I wanted, but no matter what, I would still never have this certain special tie to my people. A clan, passed on from the Mvskoke mother. I felt my throat start to dry, choking back my frustration.

"Leave her alone already, huh?" Eddie interjected. "You're just mad because Meske embarrassed you in front of the Glenpool team and all of the judges. Why don't you kick rocks or something before flies start gathering around your mouth since nothing but shit falls out of it." I just loved that boy.

"Can it Salvation Army." Martha replied without even glancing in his direction. "Or you'll be ending up like one of your daddy's cows." She finally looked him dead in the eyes to punctuate the threat, and started to leave, but not before calling me the colonizers' favorite tracker. As we watched all three Bear sisters' long, black hair sway in their departure, Eddie reached across the table for my arm.

"You don't pay her any mind, you understand?" He asked. "I promise you, people like that chill out with age. It's not gonna be like this forever. I promise." He always had a habit of looking down at his feet when he was angry, and this was the first time he looked up since Martha came over. I nodded, and managed a smile that wasn't going to fool anyone. In spite of that, Eddie and Marley gave me the courtesy of just not saying anything about it. I almost loved them more for it.

"Yeah I know. Don't worry about it. It takes way more than *fumbe* Martha Bear to ruin my day." I replied, though the tightness increasing behind my eyes told me it was a lie. Marley giggled while Eddie looked at me with his head tilted in curiosity.

“*Fumbe* means stink.” Marley laughed.

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After 8 hours of absolute hell, I was finally able to be home, away from people and the reality of my identity. As I opened the door to my house, I was welcomed by my grandma in her favorite recliner.

“Hi baby!” she greeted me. “Did you have a good day today?” She looked so cute with her night gown and house shoes dangling just off the ground, it made me feel guilty for not having a better day to tell her about. “Martha” was all I needed to say for her smile to morph into a cats puckered backside.

“What happened this time?” She asked.

That was my cue. I unloaded my bag on the couch and unloaded my day on to her. I told her about “passing,” about stupid Martha and her stupid Wind clan. I even told her about how I feel like I’ll never be Mvskoke enough for anyone ever at all. By the time I was done, my chest was heaving, and I had to clench my teeth to stop myself from crying. She looked at me for a long while, as if my angry words were deer jerky, tough to chew and hard to go down.

“Baby,” grandma began. “Has no one ever told you the story of our clans? Martha is correct on that part. The Wind clan *is* very important to us.”

My brow furrowed at her. I knew very little about the clans, and I had no idea what the hell they had to do with me being scrutinized by the other Mvskoke. And why was she on Martha’s side? *I* was her granddaughter!

“No.” I answered flatly. “*Please*, tell me about it.”

Grandma didn’t notice my sarcasm, or at least pretended not to, as she heaved herself straighter in her LazyBoy, and adjusted her star quilt at the same time. Grandma used to be a

Kindergarten teacher, so every time she gets to tell me about our history she puts on her “teaching voice”: articulate and half an octave lower than normal.

“Hand me my Pepsi, baby.” She asked, thrusting her hand towards the coffee table. “I need to wet my whistle a bit before I tell you. Sit and stay awhile. It won’t be long.”

I reached for her mason jar, beads of water rolled down the sides while an onyx syrup sloshed about inside. “Stay awhile” was her way of telling me that there was no way I was going to get a start on my paper over “The Outsiders” that night. Part of me felt compelled to protest, slight annoyance from the extra work later and being told what to do blossoming in my temple. But I wanted to stay. No one ever said no to grandma. And I wasn’t about to be the one to start.

With a smack of her lips and a clink of her glass on the side table, she turned to me, burnt umber eyes boring into my peridot ones.

“In the beginning...” she started.

In the beginning, there was much darkness. Our people crawled around under the Earth’s crust, like ants scuttling about in their tunnels. One day, a great mound began to form under the Earth, and our people burst through, seeing light for the very first time. They were not able to enjoy its brilliance for long however. Soon after we emerged, a thick fog descended on the Earth sent by the master of breath, or *hesakedemese*. They were blinded, wandering about in a haze, calling out for one another out of fear of being completely alone. Their calls proved to be successful, for our people were eventually able to cluster into small groups. Finally, the master of breath took pity on our people, and sent a great wind to clear away the fog. From the eastern edge of the world, where the sun rises, the wind blustered over us, carrying the fog with it. The people were quite joyful, singing hymns of thanks to *hesakedemese*. The groups turned to one

another, swearing eternal brotherhood to each other. It is said that these groups would be as close as family, loving one another as brother and sister, or parent and child. The people farthest East who saw the sun first, praised the wind that had blown the fog away, and named themselves the Wind Clan. Because they were the first to see the sun, The Wind clan has always declared themselves the most important. As the fog passed the other groups, they too decided to name themselves. Each group chose the name of the first animal they saw, so they became the Bear Clan, the Raccoon Clan, the Bird Clan, the Alligator Clan, and the Deer Clan. And so the clans came to be.

The last few syllables hung in the air like the Pendleton jacket slouched on the back of her door. I stared at her, trying to make sense of the story, before suddenly becoming very interested in the chipped nail polish on my fingers. Part of me felt foolish, expecting that my grandma, the most “Mvskoke” Mvskoke woman ever, would know anything about my terrors of identity. Another part of me felt kind of sad. Like the intent behind grandma’s story was a waste. I loved that she wanted to help, but hearing more about the thing I would never have made things feel so much worse. And the *Wind clan*. No wonder Martha always acted like she was better than me. She actually was. I began to feel hot tears spring into my eyes, when all of a sudden, grandma cleared her throat.

“You know,” she began. “Most people only know that story. Most Mvskoke don’t even remember how rabbit stole fire for us, or how opossum lost the hair on his tail.”

I was looking at her now, quirking yet another eyebrow up at her. Sometimes I just didn’t get why she told me things. Like, why Ellen and Edgar Abernathy were collecting everyone’s

cans the other day, or how some of our people don't know our stories. Neither of these had anything to do with me, so why should I care?

"Oh yeah?" I responded, silently willing the annoyance out of my tone. Didn't work.

She chuckled at me, hand brought up to cover her toothless smile. Mom always told me that I was fun to get a rise out of.

"You youngin's are always so impatient. Things will come in time. Don't you worry." She winked and chuckled, which made even my bitchy attitude dry up. She had that affect. Probably because her laugh sounds like the Pillsbury doughboy and Winnie the Pooh mixed together.

"Anyway," she continued. "There are many reasons why they only know this story. Some because it's the only one they had ever been told. Others, the reason is more...difficult. You see, there is another clan that we have, that no ever talks about. The White Potato Clan."

The White Potato Clan? What the hell was that? Right then I *knew* she had to be messing with me.

She took my silence as interest.

"I imagine that you know clans are matrilineal; you get your clan from your mother. But there once came a time where we had tribal members with no clan, because their mother was not one of us. It brought great pain to these clanless members." She looked pointedly at me over her glasses. "Though their parents loved them dearly, the community shunned them. How would they know who to marry when our ways speak against marrying in one's clan? How would they attain brotherhood, like the original clans found in each other during the great fog? These were the issues we had to confront."

My weight on the couch in front of her felt heavier. I had just thought mixed bloods were kind of like unwanted step-children to our people. I had never known that they caused such contention in our people. I felt some of the venom that I had been holding onto leave my stomach, and a round stone of guilt took its place. Maybe things were a little more complicated than I thought.

“And then what?” I asked, surprising both of us. “What did we do?”

Grandma closed her eyes, reaching far back into her mind to find the legend someone probably passed down to her. When she opened them, her eyes looked right through me, as if she was looking at all the heartbreak myself and the other mixed bloods had felt.

“Once when I was just a girl,” she started. “I had asked my grandmother about mixed bloods. I had a cousin named Emily who could shake shells like the rest of them, but her hair was like corn silk, thin and light looking. And her eyes were green like yours too. I wanted to understand why aunties other than my mother always excluded her. So, I asked.” She took off her glasses and started rubbing her eyes, as if looking into the past too long had agitated her cataracts somehow.

“She said that she had no answer to my question, but she did have a story to offer. I think it went like this.”

When the others invaded the land of the People, they settled in and made homes here. This first wave of the invasion gave the appearance of peace, so they were met by us in peace. For many years the People and the ‘others’ lived side by side, finding friends in one another, and some even finding love. The People took these “others’ as wives, and eventually, they were with child. This created a problem for their children. In the Mvskoke tradition, clan is passed through

the mothers' family, but since the 'others' did not belong to any clan, the children were clanless. It was a bad thing to be clanless. You can never marry within your own clan, so how would future marriages for the clanless children be held? The children were well loved by their parents, but were not completely accepted into the community.

The mothers of the clanless ones were very saddened by what was happening to the children so they went to the Elders and asked for advice. The Elders told them to go out together and pray to Creator, and if their hearts were pure, then he would hear their prayers. The women then departed from the village and went out to a place of prayer. For many days they prayed and Creator took pity on them. He told the women to go to the place of soft ground and black waters, and to stay there and search until they found a plant that would cry out to them from under the ground. They were told that if they found this plant and did as the plant instructed, they would not only find a clan name for their children, but they would also give our people a gift that would feed the People forever.

The women left the place of prayer and went back to the village. They said goodbye to their husbands and children and left for the place of soft ground and black waters. The place of soft ground and black water was a place filled with biting insects, snakes, thorns, mud, spiders, the hungry logs, and strange spirits. This was a place that would test the hearts of the women. For many days they searched and listened for the plant that would call out to them from under the ground. Just as the women were about to give up hope, they prayed again to Creator and finally heard the voice of the plant calling out to them. It was difficult to find the plant because it was hidden from view, but finally they found it and dug it up. The plant told the women that even though it was from under the ground, Creator had given it the ability to see in every direction at one time. This made the plant quite special.

The women were carefully instructed. They were to take the plant to the village of the People. Once there, they were to take a knife and cut out the eyes of the plant. The eyes were to be planted on a small mound. If the women followed these instructions, the plant promised to grow and it would feed the People. The woman followed the instructions of the plant, and the clanless children became known as the White Potato clan, and the plant has continued to feed the People until this very day.

That time I did nothing to stop the fat wet tears from rolling down my face. I hugged myself so tightly, as if I was trying to comfort myself. Like I was making up for years of time lost to resenting myself. There was a place for me. A place in my tribe for me to belong. I mattered, and I could be wanted by my people. I really could be Mvskoke after all.

I had suddenly felt a light hand patting my back. I was crying so hard, I hadn't even noticed that she moved from her spot.

"I know baby." She said. "Emily was the same way. She loved that story so much when I told her, and I hoped it would bring you that same comfort it brought her." I wiped my eyes and put my hand on hers. It felt warmer than usual.

"So, where is Emily? How come I haven't ever met her?" I asked.

Grandma laughed.

"You have met her! She's just so old now, the corn silk makes sense."

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The next day, my knuckles remained the same color as the rest of me. I still braced myself for the calls of white girl or Pretendian. I still had a shudder in my spine at the thought of

narrowed eyes baring down on me when I spoke Mvskoke to Mahaya Harjo. But I finally had one thing that no one could take away from me. A birth right. An authority. The blood that flowed through my veins was Creator's permission for me to walk through Mvskoke Nation as a Mvskoke woman, no matter how I looked.

Before I got to my locker, Martha had gotten to me first. She seemed insatiable, like a starving dog who got locked in a butcher shop overnight. Like the butcher shop, my daily dose of Martha would also be a bloodbath. It was just a matter of seeing whose blood it would be.

"Hey, White Out. Did you ask your grandma about the Wind clan? I hope that got you to finally stop acting like you're Indian and to stay the hell away from us. You'd be stupid to try anymore." Martha said. I looked at her, smile spreading across my face like spilled *sofke*.

"I actually found out what I am yesterday." I announced. "White Potato clan."

"White Potato clan? What the hell? Are you messing with me?" she laughed.

"I understand if you don't know what it is." I giggled. "It's okay. I can teach you."