

# A SPECIAL OCCASION

Short Story



## Written by Drew Hayden Taylor

Drew Hayden Taylor, who is of Ojibway and European ancestry, is from the Curve Lake First Nations in Ontario. He is an award-winning playwright and has been artistic director of Canada's premiere Native theatre company, Native Earth Performing Arts. He is also a journalist and columnist, short-story writer, novelist, television scriptwriter, and documentary filmmaker.

### Before

Preview the visual and the title for this short story. What links do you predict this selection might have to the theme of truth and reconciliation?

### During

As you read, try to make connections between this story and the theme of truth and reconciliation.

“What do you think? Does he take after your side of the family or mine?”

Walter's voice was hushed in the relative silence of the hospital room. Outside in the hallway, he could hear announcements coming over the loudspeakers, nurses milling about, and what sounded like a large Greek man joyously celebrating the birth of a family heir. Sharon, on the other hand, only had ears for the six-pound, eight-ounce by-product of their four years together.

“Well,” she answered, “look at how dark he is. He definitely got that from your family.” Walter was Ojibway and Sharon was correct. The baby already looked like he had a tan. The sleeping child squirmed for a moment, as if disagreeing with his mother's assessment.

“But check that hair. That is definitely not Aboriginal hair,” he added. Unconsciously and unsuccessfully, Sharon tried to smooth down the baby's tuft of reddish hair. The child's Irish genes seemed to be in a state of war, trying to assert their independence from the Ojibway—or, to be more technically accurate, Anishnawbe—chromosomes they shared the double helix DNA strands with.



Sharon looked up at her husband. "Yeah, but hair colour is recessive. There must be some red hair in your background. C'mon. Fess up, Walter. Your family got a Celtic in the closet?"

Leaning forward, Walter picked up the small blanketed bundle from his wife. The baby let out a small murmur but otherwise didn't object. "Actually, I think one of my great-grandmothers might have come from that side of the Atlantic. We don't like to talk about that side of the family. The white sheep of the family. And besides, just because your grandparents came from Ireland doesn't mean the red hair did. If I remember my history correctly,

didn't the Vikings used to stop in there quite frequently to grab a bite and some R & R? Scandinavians, now they have some serious red hair."

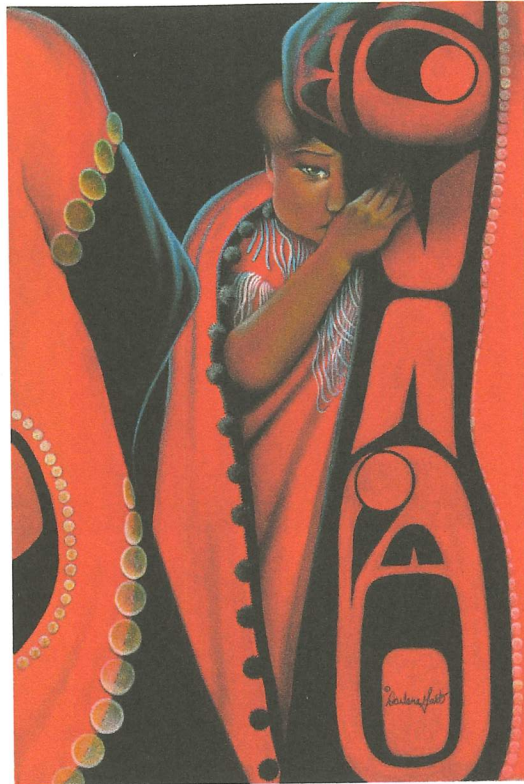
"No. We're pure Irish. I hate herring and Ingmar Bergman."

Taking in a deep breath, Walter appreciated the scent of his new son. He held it in his lungs for a few seconds before reluctantly releasing it. "How about that? They actually do have a new baby smell. A lot better than our new car."

Father and son, Sharon thought to herself. This is only the beginning of the journey, for both of them. "So, we've got a half Ojibway, half Irish baby? What do you think that makes him?"

"Ojiberish?"

Sharon smiled. They had casually touched on the subject, danced around it, and, like now, made jokes about their bi-cultural creation. Both were aware that in today's day and age, it really didn't matter much. In the past ... well, that would have been a whole different story. Families had been torn apart and feuds began by the mixing of the blood. Innocent children often devastated



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by the prejudices of adults. However, an unexpected benefit had been the development of several different subcultures formed by such unions. The Métis and the Creole to mention just two.

“Or how about Anish-rish?”

Not to be outdone, Sharon added, “Or ... or ... since he’s half Ojibway and half what you could call Caucasian ... he could be considered an Occasion? A special occasion.”

“I think I’ve heard that one before.” Now it was Walter’s turn to smile. “Irish and Ojibway. An interesting mixture. What do you think this means for his cultural and biological legacy?”

Sharon pondered the question for a second. “Well, stereotypes of massive amounts of drinking aside, he might be able to plant potatoes in the Canadian Shield?”

“Or maybe he’ll drive all the snakes out of Ontario with a braid of sweetgrass?”

This time they both laughed. A similar sense of humour was one of the things that had brought them together not that long ago. And once again, the baby murmured its disapproval at the sudden interruption. He had just been through a long and difficult day with some harsh travel involved, and he needed his sleep. All this talk of blood and race would have to wait. He needed what babies of all cultures and backgrounds needed; a little sleep, some milk, and a lot of love.

Everything else didn’t really matter.

### What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

“As someone who has an intimate knowledge of the issue, I have always been interested in exploring the concept of biculturalism, ever since I ‘came out of the closet’ as a writer. A piece like ‘A Special Occasion’ gave me the opportunity to imagine what two parents would say when holding the product of cross-racial love. I wanted it to be both fun and revealing. Who says exploring and writing can’t be fun!”

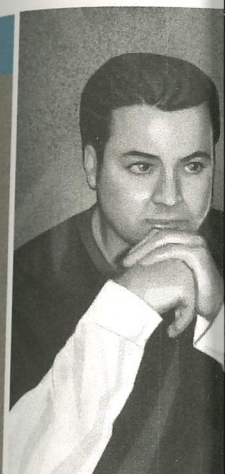
## After

- 1. Reading for Meaning** Does this short story relate to the theme of truth and reconciliation, in your opinion? Give reasons to support your answer.
- 2. Understanding Form and Style**
  - a) Do some research on the use of humour in Aboriginal storytelling. Write a summary of your findings.
  - b) How does the author infuse humour into what some may consider to be a very serious subject? Give examples from the text.
  - c) Why might the author have chosen a humorous tone to present his message?
- 3. Speaking and Listening** This story concludes: "All this talk of blood and race would have to wait. He needed what babies of all cultures and backgrounds needed; a little sleep, some milk, and a lot of love. Everything else didn't really matter." As a class, hold an informal debate on what impacts children of mixed racial heritage will have on cultures 100 years in the future.
- 4. Critical Literacy** Why do you think the author chose a baby as the focus of a discussion on race and culture? What impact does this choice have on truth and reconciliation?
- 5. Metacognition** Analyze how your own ancestry has shaped who you are and your appearance, interests, and beliefs.

## Beyond

**Inquiry** In a well-supported essay, consider the effect Métis authors have had on the literary landscape of Canada. (This is a broad topic, so you will need to choose a thesis that focuses on one aspect.)

## WAITING



### Before

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### During

As you analyze the questions running

### What Insp

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