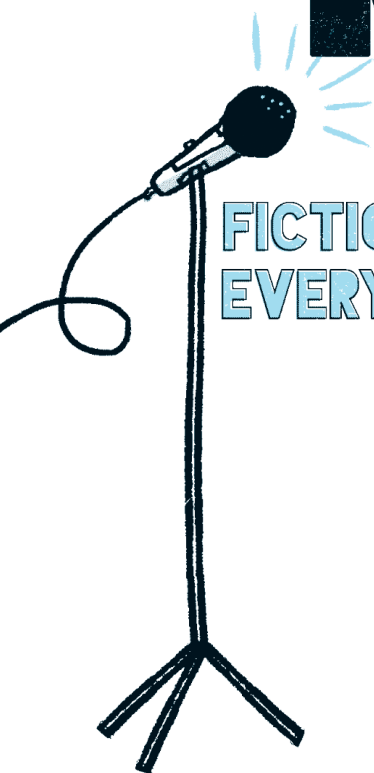


TAKE THE MIC



FICTIONAL STORIES OF
EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

EDITED BY BETHANY C. MORROW

TAKE

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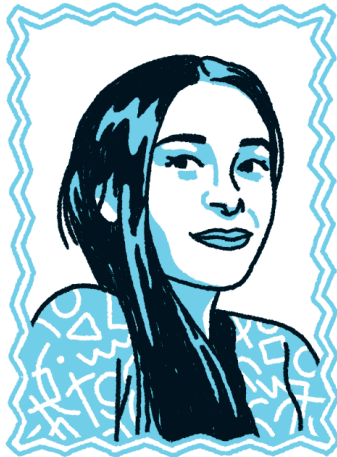
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GRACE

BY DARCIE LITTLE BADGER



WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, Mama taught me three things.

One. Someday, we'll go home. It's there, waiting, never really stolen. But until then, we gotta live like a pair of dandelion fluffs in the wind and drift around until the day comes to settle and grow.

Two. I'm alive because my great-grandma, great-great-grandma, and great-great-great-grandma resisted the men who tried to round them up and kill them or steal everything that mattered. Even when it meant hiding in plain sight, surviving in small enclaves after the world figured we all died. It hadn't always been that

way. Once, my people helped the settlers and trusted their promises of friendship. But then Texas got incorporated into the United States, and that meant my people were suddenly unwelcome in our own home.

Three. I'm Lipan Apache.

Mama has been teaching me what that third fact means all my life. No matter where my family travels and who we encounter, I am Lipan.

I was born on Ojibwe land in a winter so bitter, my earliest memory is the feeling of cold. Mama says I showed the loons how to really cry, and sometimes the birds and I screamed at each other, like we were sparring with our voices.

Four years later, my Mama remarried on Celtic land; she held my hand during the airplane trip, my first, and when we landed, we cried together. I cried because I was tired and grumpy. She cried because she felt like a rubber band stretched too tight, since her body was rooted to the land an entire ocean away. That's what she claims, anyway. She was probably tired and grumpy too.

We spent two weeks in Limerick to visit my new grandparents. They fed me buttery cookies and taught me how to weave yellow wildflowers into a necklace. At the end of the visit, my Mama wore her finest traditional regalia, a bright yellow camp dress and a pink shawl with yellow fringe. She draped her neck with the

good jewelry, dense strands of seed beads clasped by silver. Mama's bride wore a slim white suit. With a kiss, they were married.

On the flight home, when the turbulence frightened me, I held my new Mom's hand, and she patted my head and promised we'd be safe.

I started school on Sioux land; my family lived between a pig farm to the north and an ocean of corn to the south, the kind of corn that tasted sweet but didn't taste *like corn*. No wonder our rent was cheap — 'cause the smell when the wind blew from the north permeated everything. The scent of manure still makes me nostalgic. It's gross but true. Fortunately, we didn't stay on Sioux land long. My family never stayed anywhere for more than a couple years.

Unfortunately, each new land had its own troubles. Some worse than others.

A boy tried to kiss me on Paiute land, eighth grade. It happened in chess club, thirty minutes of gaming between lunch and fifth period. I joined on my first day in the new school because Mama and I often played together. When you're a stranger trying to fit in, it helps to find something familiar and use it as a life raft. Gives you confidence. At least, that's what I've experienced.

The chessboards were all different because the students had to bring their own. For a couple minutes, I

hesitated in the doorway of the classroom and watched the other club members, who seemed happy to ignore me. I saw this brown-haired white boy named Brandon — he was in my morning math class — open a polished wooden case and take out a prehistoric-themed chess set with dinosaur-shaped pieces. Velociraptor pawns, pterodactyl bishops, triceratops knights. The king and queen were both *T. rexes*, but the king *rex* wore a crown. The dinos were so cute, they made me smile, so I stepped up to Brandon's table and said, "Hi. Can I play?"

He got all serious and replied, "No." Then, when the smile dropped off my face, Brandon grinned like the Cheshire cat and added, "I'm kidding. Yeah, sure. Sit down."

It took a moment to work up the enthusiasm for a new smile. That kind of joke bothers me; it's a pet peeve, I guess. Maybe 'cause the punch line is based on the premise that it would be weird to turn down a simple request, but it's not actually weird. I'm well acquainted with the word "no." One time, a cheddar-selling woman at an all-local, organic grocery store said "no" when I asked her for a cheese sample. She had a tray of toothpick-skewered orange cubes, but they were for customers only, and I guess the box of maple sugar candy I'd just bought didn't count. Another time, I had to ask four strangers on the school bus, "Can I sit here?" and got three "nos" before

somebody moved her backpack from an empty aisle seat and said “yes.”

But Brandon was just being friendly, and he had a dinosaur chess set, and I had no allies yet on Paiute land, so I chuckled and said, “You got me,” and moved a velociraptor to e4. “My name is Grace.”

“Like the virtue?” He said “virtue” in a weird way, almost like the word had a hidden meaning.

“Yep.”

It quickly became clear that about half of chess club spent more time on their phones than in the game, but Brandon wasn’t part of that half. He timed our moves with a redwood chess clock and only spoke during my turn. Our conversation was therefore full of dramatic pauses, although the spoken content was mundane. Typical nice-to-meet-you stuff.

“Where are you from?” he asked. There are hundreds of Native tribes, bands, and nations in the United States, and by that time, I’d drifted across dozens of their lands. None, however, had been home.

“I moved here from Vermont,” I said, remembering the lush green in the northeast. They were pretty in small doses, but after a while, those mountains made me feel like a rat in a maze, imprisoned by the land itself. From my family’s rental cabin in Vermont, it was impossible to see the horizon at sunset. The light just

winked out behind a western peak every evening. I started to have nightmares about giants, about the world disappearing in their shadows.

“Yeah, but where are you *from*?” Brandon repeated. And I realized it was that kind of question. Where are you *from* from, brown-skinned girl?

“Texas,” I said. “I am Lipan Apache from the Little Breech-clout band, Tcha shka-ózhäyê, of the Kuné Tsé. My ancestral lands. I return every year for the Nde Daa Pow Wow.”

There was a long silence, but it wasn’t Brandon’s turn. “Oh,” he finally said. “That’s interesting.”

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Florida,” he said. “I moved here six years ago.”

“But where are you *from*?”

He laughed. “Okay. Funny.”

“Is it?” I took one of his velociraptors. “Your move.”

When the bell rang a couple minutes later, Brandon photographed our game board before he collected the pieces. “Can we continue this next time?” he asked.

“Uh-huh. See you Tuesday.”

Actually, the next time we saw each other was ten minutes later, in fifth period, English. Brandon waved me over to the desk beside his. “Do you have your books yet, Grace?” he asked. “You can share mine!”

“I’m all set up,” I said. But the offer was still appreciated.

That's how it went for several weeks. We'd sit side by side three classes a day, eat lunch at the same table, and, every Tuesday and Thursday, continue a game of chess that sometimes felt like playing tug-of-war with a clone. Oh, the pieces disappeared one by one, but nobody kept an advantage very long. By week six, just our kings and a few velociraptors remained.

"We can call it a draw," I suggested.

Brandon whipped out a pocket-sized spiral notebook and consulted it. "Actually," he said, "based on time, I win. You spent two-hundred minutes thinking. My time is less than ninety."

"Congratulations," I said. He stuck out a hand, and it took me a moment to recognize the gesture as an offer to shake. The whole ceremony was a bit much, considering that he won on a technicality. But I didn't want to be a sore loser over a board game. That's not a good look. Then again, "insufferable winner" is probably a worse look.

"Okay," I said, laughing. "So official."

"If you want official," he said, "there should be a kiss too."

When our hands clasped, he leaned forward, his eyes shut and his lips pursed. I tried to pull away, but Brandon's grip tightened, so I used my free hand to grab him by the chin, halting his lunge just a few inches from my face. "Stop," I said.