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## With a Little Help from My Friends

"Cut it off," I yelled.

"Shut up, or my dad will hear you," Carson Mastick said. "He's not that drunk yet, and I'm gonna have a hard enough time explaining how you come down looking like a different kid than the one that went upstairs." For ten minutes, he'd been farting around, waving the scissors like a magic wand. Now he yanked the long tail of hair from my neck and touched the scissors an inch above my collar. "Is this about it? There's no turning back once I start chopping."

"Yup, that's it," I said.

"You think cutting off your braid is going to make those white kids suddenly talk to you?" Carson's cousin Tami said. "If you believe that, you need brain surgery, not a haircut. What do you care what they think anyway? You've had this braid since, what, kindergarten?"

"Second grade," I said. "If you'll remember, *someone* stuck a massive wad of gum in my hair that year and I had to cut it all off and start over."

"Was an accident," Carson said, the same thing he said

whenever he did something terrible that he secretly thought was funny.

"Give it to me," Tami said. "I got better things to do." She grabbed the scissors.

"Wait," Carson said, "I didn't —"

Suddenly, it was gone, the hair I'd grown for five years. Tami held it out in her hand and I turned around.

"You didn't fix it first," I said. Everyone on the reservation knew that when you snipped off a braid, if you wanted to save it, you had to tie off both ends before you cut. And since almost no one cut off a braid casually, you always saved it to remember the reason you had cut it. What Tami held looked like a small black hay bale. "What am I gonna do with that?" I yelled, and Carson made the shush expression with his face. "You can't braid it loose. It's not boondoggle."

"You could always do what I do," Tami said. "I have my stylist sweep it up for me, and then when I get home, I let it go in one of the back fields, so the birds can nest with it."

"Your stylist," Carson laughed. "*I'm* the one that cuts her hair."

In the mirror, my hair fell in strange lengths from Tami's cut. "Let me even this out," Carson said, but with each slice he made, my hair looked worse, like I was in one of those paintings at school where the person's lips are on their cheek and one eye sits on top of their ear.

I noticed something else in the mirror I hadn't registered before. "When did you get a guitar?"

"Last week," Carson said, picking it up and strumming it, then tossing it back in the corner. "I told my old man I wanted one, and he *knew* I was talking electric, but he brought this

piece of crap home. Showed me a few chords, said if I'm still playing it in December, we'll think about the electric."

"Where'd it come from?" I walked over to pick it up, but he grabbed it away.

"Sorry," he said with a fake sad face. "The old man said no one else could touch it. We just got it on hock. Bug Jemison was hard up for some of his Rhine wine, so the old man bought him a few jugs 'til the end of the month, and we're holding the guitar hostage. If he don't pay up when his disability check comes in, the guitar's mine. But until then . . ."

"Can you play any Beatles?" I asked, hopeful.

"Beatles! They broke up and ain't never getting back together. Get over it."

I left a few minutes later, starting my long walk home across half the reservation, still gripping the hank of hair. I opened my fingers a little every few yards to let the August breeze take some for the birds. As I turned the corner at Dog Street, where I lived, I could see my old elementary school. The teachers would be in their classrooms now, decorating bulletin boards with WELCOME TO THE 1975–76 SCHOOL YEAR! in big construction-paper letters. They were going to be puzzled by the fact that the United States Bicentennial Celebration wasn't exactly a reservation priority, since *we'd* been here for a lot longer than two hundred years.

The sight of the school reminded me how I got in this situation in the first place. It probably started back in third grade, when I had become a novelty. When I told my ma I was going to be featured on Indian Culture Night as the only kid from my grade who could speak Tuscarora fluently, I thought she would be happy, since she was always talking good grades this

and good grades that. But she laughed like she did when the case worker asked about my dad's child-support payments during our monthly visits to her cubicle.

"You're just the dog and pony show," Ma said. She spoke a couple of sentences in Tuscarora. "Know what I said?" she asked. I shook my head. "Didn't think so. They're looking for cash to keep the program going. Everyone wants to believe we can rebuild what the boarding schools took away from us. You're Lewis the Horse, the proof that it can be done, that kids could learn the traditional language. But I don't know who you're going to speak it to," she said. "No one your age speaks it, and no one out in the white world would understand you. Concentrate on subjects that are going to actually help you out."

She refused to attend Indian Culture Night. I walked to school myself and did my bit to amaze the teachers. Then I went home the same way I'd gone, on foot. I was known as a carless kid, but for that night, I was the smart kid, and I liked the change. I kept up my grades, moving into advanced reading with the fourth graders, a year older than me, and I kept up with the work, welcoming a change of identity.

So when Groffini, the reservation school guidance counselor, sent our names over to the county junior high at the end of fifth grade, they tracked me into what my brother, Zach, called the smarties section, the brainiacs. Trouble was, they apparently didn't think any of the other rez kids would make it in that section, so they tossed me in with twenty-two white strangers.

Maybe the fact that I'd been good at learning Tuscarora made them believe I'd be able to pick up the white kids' language easily.