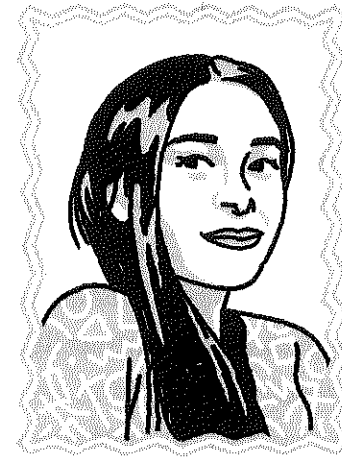


GRACE

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.

Brandon looked at me with wide eyes; they were a pale shade of brown with the hint of something greenish. I'd never seen them so clearly before, since I rarely make eye contact with anybody. In my family, it's considered rude, not a sign of friendship or trustworthiness. But now, I held his stunned gaze.

"I just . . ." he started. The chess club people around us were staring, their faces a mixture of amusement and fascination. No offense to chess, but Brandon and I were probably providing the most entertainment they'd ever known in that half hour between lunch and fifth period. Only our supervisor, an English teacher with her nose in a paperback book, was oblivious to the drama.

"What?" I asked.

"Jesus. It was just a kiss on the cheek. Sore loser."

"Come on. This isn't about chess."

"Suuuure. Don't make things weird. The US is puritanical. In Europe, everyone kisses each other. It's literally a handshake." Was he speaking loudly because he was angry, or because he was acutely aware of the audience to our conversation?

"For future reference," I said, "none of that matters. Ask next time."

"Uh. Yeah. There won't be a next time."

By his defensive tone, Brandon meant that to be an insult, but I was relieved. No more kisses. Fine. With.

Me. At the time, I didn't realize that he was referring to more than unwanted physical contact. Things between us changed. We still sat side by side in class, but whenever our teacher assigned a group project, Brandon turned his back on my desk and waved at a student across the room. He stopped attending chess club, which left me the odd person out, so I stopped attending too. And at lunch, Brandon moved into the center of his friend group and all but ignored me at the edge of the table.

It took a couple weeks of passive-aggressive Brandon before I got that he wanted nothing to do with me anymore. Had we ever really been friends? I convinced myself that it didn't matter. Some people had spring cleaning; I had summer packing. A chance to throw all my belongings into a few cardboard boxes and leave my personal baggage behind. All I had to do was avoid Brandon until the inevitable move in one or two years.

As luck had it, I didn't need to wait that long. In late April, as the school year entered its final stretch in a flurry of pep rallies and cheer that flowed around me but didn't sweep me up, I returned home to a stack of cardboard boxes in the living room. They smelled like ripe fruit and wine; Mama and Mom must have collected them from the liquor store dumpster and the grocery store downtown. We never bought boxes, and in the long run, that probably saved my parents a thousand dollars. Mama popped up from behind a mound of

cardboard. Her hair was bound in a high ponytail, with a bandanna wrapped across her brow.

"What's this?" I asked. "Are you building a fort?"

"Grace," she exclaimed, "we're going home!"

Typically, she faced moves with a somberness appropriate for all the expenses, stress, and unknowns of relocating to a strange new place. But that day? She was beaming. It weirded me out.

"We have a home?" I asked.

"Always. But now we can actually live there."

I must have seemed confused — that's no surprise, since my emotions tend to shape my face like it's clay under a sculptor's hands — because she followed with, "We're going to Texas, and we're *staying*."

"When you say 'staying' . . ."

"I mean it. Buying a house. Starting a garden. Getting a dog. Grace. Grace, do you know what this means?"

I did and I didn't. *Home* had always seemed beyond our reach, like we were knights chasing the Holy Grail. My mama was born near the border, just a few miles away from the birthplace of her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, great-great-grandmother, great-great-great-grandmother . . . well, you get the point. Since our people didn't have a reservation, though, she had to leave when a flood destroyed her parents' house and they couldn't afford to stay. When Mama spoke of the warmth and beauty of the desert, she always

smiled, if only wistfully. Homesickness followed us across every territory like a ghost that haunted my family of three.

But what would it mean to be still? To stop running — not from something but to something — because it wasn't necessary anymore. Would I be disappointed? Bored? Would I feel trapped, like I did every time we lived among mountains?

"It means change, I guess," I said. "But why now? Can we actually afford a house? Did Mom find a job?" Mama always said we'd buy our own place when she'd saved up enough money for my college education, and that was a high bar to meet.

"She hasn't yet," Mama said, "but she will. It's time." For a moment, I thought that was all the answer I'd get. But then she continued, "I've been thinking about the future of our tribe. Sometimes, I wonder . . . if we found a way to be in Texas sooner, would I be on the council now? Maybe. You shouldn't have to wonder the same thing."

"It's not too late for you, Mama."

"You're right. I'm going to throw in my hat for director of education." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "You'd make a good chairwoman someday."

"Noooo. I'm too much of a loner for a leadership role," I said.

"There's nothing wrong with being an introvert." She squeezed my shoulder affectionately. "It's not a

popularity contest, anyway. Well. Maybe a little bit. The thing is, a good leader knows our ways and loves our people and is not afraid to fight for them."

"You think that's me?"

"Yes," she said.

I smiled.

"There are boxes in your room," Mama said. "Don't worry about packing yet, though. We can go slow until summer. A couple boxes a day."

"When are we actually leaving?"

She shrugged. "Whenever we're ready."

"Why not tonight, then?" I asked.

She shook her head, amused. "Because somebody needs to finish eighth grade."

"Fine. Guess it's just six weeks." Six weeks of avoiding Brandon and passing classes. Shouldn't be too hard, I figured. I'd just keep doing what I was doing.

Unfortunately, the universe had other plans.

Our math teacher loved group work as much as our English teacher. Both of them claimed it taught important teamwork and communication skills. That may be true. Honestly, it just taught me to envy people with friends. They did group work in easy mode.

Well, after the chess incident, Ms. Welton went, "Pair up. We're doing worksheets today." I turned to the right, but my usual buddy was absent.

Movement caught my eye; from across the room, a hand shot up, and a familiar voice asked, "Can I be in a group of three, Ms. Welton?" That's Brandon for you; he was the kind of student who didn't wait to be acknowledged before speaking, as if the act of hand raising was just a symbolic gesture. When we were friends, I figured he was too excited about learning to wait. But now I think differently. His quirk lost its charm fast.

"Who still needs a buddy?" Ms. Welton asked.

I ignored her question, planning to sneakily complete the group worksheet by myself. It wouldn't be the first time. Maybe that's why my plan fell through: Ms. Welton expected it.

"Grace?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you need a buddy?"

"Need? No . . ."

"Work with Brandon, please." She handed me a single pink worksheet. Great. We had to share.

Screech screech screeeeech. Brandon's desk made a nails-on-the-chalkboard sound as he scooted it across the tile floor. "I'll do odds," he said, "and you do evens."

"All right."

I placed the assignment between us; it covered the half-inch gap separating our desktops, like a flimsy bridge. The paper made me think about Brandon's

chessboard and the slow-motion dinosaur battle that had petered out, unresolved, between us. Was Brandon thinking the same thing? About unsettled games? He had whipped out a piece of lined scratch paper and was speeding through an equation, as if racing to the answer. Good idea; the sooner we finished, the better.

On your mark, I thought. Get set. Go.

At first, Brandon and I kept a similar pace. He answered #1 as I answered #2; he answered #3 as I answered #4; but as I answered #6, #8, and #10, Brandon remained stuck on #5. That made me nervous, 'cause we only had one period to do sixteen questions, and I didn't want to be penalized because my *buddy* was too proud or sore or whatever to ask for help. I glanced at question #5, did some calculations, and said, "The answer is C."

He hunched over his scratch paper, as if hiding it from the eyes of cheaters.

"Question five," I said. "The answer is C."

"I'm working on it."

"You don't have to, though. I just told you the answer."

"Okay."

I returned to question #12. About five minutes later, he filled in an answer bubble on our shared worksheet. I shit you not: He thought the answer was B.

"That's not right," I said. "It's C."

"I got B."

"It's a trick question. I'll go through the calculations with you. . . ."

"Just do your work," he said.

"Our *group* work?"

He hunched over his scratch paper, a signal that our conversation — if you could actually call it a conversation — was over. I stared at the wrong answer, which had been penciled in so confidently, it would be difficult to completely erase from the brightly colored sheet.

"Right," I said. "I'm not doing this with you."

When I stood, he finally started to say something, but I didn't have time for Brandon's games. I swiped the worksheet off our desks and made a direct line to Ms. Welton's desk. My so-called "buddy" watched me from his chair, mouth agape, like I'd just slipped into a clown costume and started dancing around the classroom.

"Miz?" I said. "I need another group."

Ms. Welton had an expressive pair of thick black eyebrows; at my request, they shot up behind her red-framed glasses. "Why, Grace?"

"Brandon's ignoring me, and I don't want a low grade 'cause of him."

She shook her head. "I'll talk to —"

"Ms. Welton, can you please just give me my own paper?"

"I understand it's difficult sometimes," she said, "but in the real world, you need to associate with all kinds of people. Find ways to get along and work together. It's important."

Real world? Did she think that everyone younger than eighteen lived in a simulation? I leaned forward and continued in an almost-whisper, afraid I'd start shouting otherwise. "Brandon tried to kiss me, and I said no. Now he's treating me like garbage. I don't have to work with anybody who disrespects me that way. *Ever.*"

I didn't think my math teacher's eyebrows could go any higher, but they managed somehow. Ms. Welton handed me a new pink worksheet. "If you need help finishing on your own," she said, "please let me know."

"Thank you."

After transferring answers from the old to the new assignment, I returned to the island Brandon had made with our desks. "We're working by ourselves now," I said.

"Oh."

He just looked at me for a bit, like he expected more. An explanation? An accusation? An apology? I gave him nothing. About a minute later there was a *screech screech*, and the space between us widened.

During the next group project, Ms. Welton let me join a team of three. My buddies and I finished the

assignment ten minutes early and spent the rest of class talking about superheroes in nondisruptive indoor voices. A few days later, when Ms. Welton returned my work, I noticed that she wrote "Great Job!" beside my grade. I folded the neon-pink sheet of paper into a photograph-sized rectangle and tucked it inside my scrapbook of mementos.

It was a reminder of my real ally on Paiute land.