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Going Native

Abstract

Tammy was tired of theory and wanted to sleep with an Indian. A card-carrying, reservation-born Native American with a drinking problem and a ninth-grade education. Since Michael had decided that long distance wouldn't work out, the thought had become the focus of nightly episodes in which she swayed in the center of Ponderosa's pine-paneled bar to the ghost of Hang Williams and Patsy Cline. She imagined being interrupted by a warrior, like Uncas from *Last of the Mohicans* or Abel from *House Made of Dawn*. They'd drink too much, the way they drank in the movies. He'd take her home; she'd let him think it was his idea. She wanted to be conquered and needed a warrior, which is why she found herself in Strychnine.

Keywords

relationships, learning, local

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July 12, 2013

Going Native

Fiction by Caitlin McGuire

Tammy was tired of theory and wanted to sleep with an Indian. A card-carrying, reservation-born Native American with a drinking problem and a ninth-grade education. Since Michael had decided that long distance wouldn't work out, the thought had become the focus of nightly episodes in which she swayed in the center of Ponderosa's pine-paneled bar to the ghost of Hank Williams and Patsy Cline. She imagined being interrupted by a warrior, like Uncas from *Last of the Mohicans* or Abel from *House Made of Dawn*. They'd drink too much, the way they drank in the movies. He'd take her home; she'd let him think it was his idea. She wanted to be conquered and needed a warrior, which is why she found herself in Strychnine.

The bar was less full of lonesome cowboys than she had hoped, and pulsed instead to dub-stepped beat; the floor was gummy and clung to the prick-points of her heels; nothing was at all like the bar of her imagination, where she had two-stepped barefoot. She'd read that Strychnine was an Indian bar, but her one-sixteenth-Cherokee, diluted by Chinese and Irish blood, seemed to carry the red man demographic. Granted, she was only six miles from home, but she'd expected Strychnine to feel like another dimension. She felt cheated by *The Toughest Indian in the World* and Seattle, a city covered with Salish salmon designs but no Indian as far as the eye could see. She sidled up to the bar.

"I'll have a whiskey, neat." Tammy had never had a whiskey, neat or otherwise, but she wanted the courage of the old west.

The bartender set the glass on a coaster in front of her. Tammy adjusted her short, brown dress and slid onto a stool at the edge of the bar and cradled the drink between her hands. She wanted to make a ceremony out of the first taste. Her tongue—the whiskey—molasses, smoke, and Christmas. Whiskey tasted like hard Southern living.

The man on the barstool next to her swayed standing up, his arm with its Rainier clutched haphazardly, jostling onto her legs without apology. The stories they told during freshman orientation about girls who drank alone never ended well. But that was the point, wasn't it? She took a drink, and her stomach lit up, warm with the 90 proof. Didn't she want to do something risky? She had written pages upon pages about Indians for her senior thesis; didn't she deserve to touch one? To escape the pages of her books and make her writing real? The more she drank the easier it was to drink more. She stared through the whiskey at the coaster underneath: Kokopelli, magnified by glass. She tipped the rest into her mouth, closing her eyes, and when she finished she looked across the bar. An Indian looked back at her.

He waved two fingers, not to call her over, but in recognition, a salute that said *you exist and I have seen you*. His hair was just as black as hers, though longer and braided. He seemed authentic. She bit her lip and glanced at the wall, flushed, and suddenly very aware that she had only slept with one man in her life. She rolled the empty glass back and forth.

Tammy didn't know anything about seduction, but she did know that she was tired of reading about beautiful red people doing beautiful purple things in beautiful green places, and she wanted something beautiful for herself, so she smiled at him. He patted the man next to him on the back and whispered in his ear, then held up two fingers to the bartender and pointed at Tammy. The bartender set down two glasses of whiskey in front of her, each uncomfortably full. They left a wet path behind when she pulled them closer.

The Indian stood next to her. "I'll trade you."

"Trade me?"

"A glass for a name."

"Tammy."

He held his hand out, offering her a drink. On closer inspection, he was handsome in a way her boyfriends had never been, without the fragility of Sean's Anglo-Saxon

cheekbones and the freckles that dotted his shoulders, without the smoothness of Jun's skin, without Michael's bristly, black stubble from the beard she begged him to shave. He was strange angles, of rough noses, and full lips, *the bold outline of his high, haughty features*. He took a drink and grimaced. "Fuck, you drink firewater." She laughed. He looked young, recently off the rez. He had a green shirt on, frayed at the seams, the black outline of a tree on the front and Sequoia National Park written underneath. "Don't you want to ask my name?"

Tammy looked him over. Odds were, his name would only disappoint her. She didn't want him to have an average name. She wanted him to be The Man With The Turquoise Stone Heart. She wanted him to be The Man With Scars On His Back. She wanted him to be The Man Who Would Paint Rivers Over The Hollows Of Her Hips With His Braid. She wanted him to be The Man Most Likely To Take Her Home. "I don't want to know yet."

He drank from the glass, and Tammy watched the corners of his mouth twitch. "So what are you going to call me?"

She squinted. "Geronimo."

"Geronimo." He rolled the name over in his mouth, considering it. "I like it." He smiled a dogtooth smile.

"So, Geronimo, how do you afford your firewater?"

He pushed back into the bar stool next to hers. "I'm a third year at UW. You?"

"Fourth year. What are you studying?"

"Statistics."

Tammy shook her head. She wanted him to be passing through: a priest, a poet, a heart full of something more than numbers.

"Don't like statistics?"

"Not much," she said. Tammy believed in right arguments, not right answers. "I wasn't really any good at math."

"Statistics isn't just math. I mean, there's math, but there's more, too. We get to

interpret the math. Numbers are just numbers without a context.”

Tammy didn't know how to flirt over math, or the context of math, so she gripped the glass in front of her, and when she lifted it, the alcohol dripped down the sides. She leaned forward to keep her dress dry. “Give me an example?” The whiskey burned.

“I don't have the numbers to back me up, but I'd say that you sitting alone at a bar is statistically unlikely.”

She laughed. “Who said I'm here alone?” She thought he blushed, but it was hard to tell.

“I saw you come in. What are you studying?”

“Ethnic studies. I'm turning in my thesis on Native Americans tomorrow.”

“Native Americans—cool. I grew up next to the Barona rez in San Diego.” Not on the rez, then, but near it. “Native Americans in general, or something more specific?”

“Depictions of sexuality, actually.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I don't know if I'm allowed to say anything now.”

“Are you a Puritan, Geronimo?” Her eyelashes felt heavy.

“Far from it.” He pinched the collar of his t-shirt. “But you know, the things you don't talk about with new people—sex, politics, religion.”

“I think those rules only apply if you plan on having long-lasting friendships with the new people.”

His eyebrows twitched. Tammy looked at him, the boy with the darkest skin in the crowd, so brown-red-russet it revved her courage and made her think of beautiful things she wanted to do to him. Wispy hair at the nape of his neck had come out of his braid, and he seemed momentarily breakable. She wanted to feel the braid on her neck as he pulled his face close to hers. She had spent years studying things she didn't understand, couldn't understand, couldn't touch. She wanted context. She wanted to touch him. She wanted him to be The Man Who Made Things Make Sense For A Night.

She picked the glass up and finished it, ignored the burn, swallowed hard. She put it

upside down on Kokopelli. “You’re here alone, too?”^{McGuire: Going Native}

He motioned across the bar. “Well, I’m here with friends, but not *with* anybody.”

“How do you feel about being plus one?”

He downed his whiskey. “I think I feel alright about that.”

*

Geronimo lived in a dorm with posters of Che and Crazy Horse on the wall behind his desk and books full of math on his shelves. The room was spartan, clean for a boy, or at least cleaner than the rooms of most boys she’d known. Michael’s had been a mess. No bedframe, an aura of books around his mattress; they had spent a year on the floor. No possibility of that, not in the room with a twin bed against the wall.

She leaned back against the short hallway where the door swung into the dark room and looked at him, her hands pressed hard behind the small of her back, pushing on her hipbones. Geronimo leaned against the bedframe like they’d known each other for more than an hour in a bar and a bus, like he’d already touched her the way she’d been wishing, *touch my shoulder, touch my cheek, kiss me, because I am lost and afraid.*

She bit the inside of her mouth and pulled one hand out from behind her, smoothing her hair behind one ear. It had gotten a little wet during the walk to campus. He was so dark. She wanted him to touch her first. It was windy outside and the building groaned, burying itself into its foundation. The mist had left a spider web on his hair. Why wouldn’t he touch her?

“Do you,” he cleared his throat, “want to watch a movie or something?”

“Not particularly.”

She blinked. Why did her parents ever warn her about men and sex? They never seemed to want sex, or at least they never seemed to want her, they never seemed like they understood anything at all. She always led the breadcrumb trail to her body. In her romantic history, she’d never fended off advances; never been thrown up against a wall in brutal passion; never been wanted so much they couldn’t make it home. Maybe modern men were lazy. She didn’t want modern men. She wanted the warrior. She put her hand back behind her, and he scanned the room for another distraction. She rolled her eyes and wondered if she’d picked the wrong Indian. Maybe this one was too young. Maybe he didn’t know what to do with a woman. He was a year younger than

she. Just one year. Was it possible that he didn't know what it meant when a woman asked to be brought home? When she pressed her hips out, did he not know that he was to pull them close to his, to take the breath out of her throat? She had never struggled to have her body language understood before, but maybe Michael had a translation guide Geronimo couldn't touch.

“So what do you want to do?”

She looked up at him, but didn't answer him; didn't want to have to be in charge; wanted the warrior. Maybe this was a mistake. She licked her lips, and he made eye contact with her, and she hoped that her hazy eyes looked beautiful and sober and promising. The wind blew harder and the floor moved under her feet. Whiskey was stronger than she had expected. She felt brave but didn't want to make the first move. He leaned back into the wooden bedpost, and she thought about statistics, and science, and the way the words the body used had nothing to do with the words their mouths did. Why wouldn't he touch her?

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He pushed off the bedframe and walked across the room, standing on the opposite side of the tiny hallway, but still, he didn't touch her. Her confidence, thin at best, faltered; maybe she wasn't enough. Maybe she didn't know the body language that meant *I want you for tonight, then become a memory.*

“Why don't you want to know my name?”

“I know your name. You're Geronimo.”

“My real name. Why don't you want to know my real name?”

“Because it's better this way.” She inhaled, her chest rising as anxiety took hold, and she exhaled hard to push it out again.

“What if my name is ridiculous?”

“Then I'll be surprised.”

“Do you want to hear it?”

“No.”

“What would you do if I told you my name?”

“I’d leave.”

He took a step forward, got as close as he could possibly get without touching her, and she breathed in. Exhaling would mean they’d have to touch. She wasn’t sure anymore. This had felt easy in her head, but the body that was so close to her felt threatening in ways her imagination had never been, and she didn’t want to bridge the gap; she wanted to deflect, run down the hall, and exhale without another body so close. She really should have been working on her thesis. She thought about the end of *The Last of the Mohicans*. She hated the movie, its thousand digressions from the original. But the way Magua held out his hand. The silence. Alice jumping off the cliff. That wasn’t the way the book ended.

“Would you leave now?”

The inches fell apart, her face moved toward his, and he was gentle. He kissed too softly, with more wetness than she usually liked, but it wasn’t unpleasant. She pressed her hips toward him; he didn’t press back. He pulled her hand to wrap around his waist and made her meet him. Geronimo kissed her again, and she touched the braid, a thrill rushing through her spine, finally.

He was tender, and as she pushed him and moved to make him move, she realized that she was fighting a losing battle. He wasn’t The Man Who Makes Love Like The House Is On Fire or The Man Who Thrusted Until He Was Done or The Man Who Ravished White Women. He was The Boy Who Met A Girl In A Bar, The Boy Who Worried About Women’s Feelings, The Boy Who Brushed Women’s Hair Off Their Faces And Kissed Their Eyelids. She worried that she had judged him too quickly, that this was a mistake. But as mistakes went, it was a pretty good one.

*

Tammy pulled the elastic band from the end of his braid, wiggled her fingers in between the strands, and slowly pulled the twists apart. His hair was crimped by the plait and the rain that had dried shiny in his hair.

Geronimo sat up, and his legs dangled off the side of the bed. He slid on his boxers, and as he leaned forward, the waterfall of hair reached halfway down his back. She ran her finger down his spine and counted vertebrae. She felt like sex itself, lying on top of Geronimo’s yellow sheets, and she pointed the tips of her toes out to touch the wooden footboard.

He stretched his neck, rolling his head from side to side, and stopped to look back at her. "So, do you have a last name?"

"Chen."

"Really? You don't look like a Chen."

"My dad's a Chen. My mom's an O'Brien."

"That makes more sense."

"What are you?"

He crossed the room and filled a glass of water at the sink. "Animal, vegetable, mineral?"

"You know what I mean. Like, ethnic, tribal."

He leaned back against the sink as he drank. "Does it matter?"

"No, not really. I'm just wondering." She laid back into the bed, pressing into the thin mattress.

"I'm American. But my parents are from Mexico." She opened her eyes. "Thirsty?"

"No," she said too quickly. She reached for the sheet and wrapped herself tight. She groped for her dress on the floor, and he handed it to her, then turned to face the opposite wall. It was sweet, the privacy he gave her as she dressed, but it was something else as well. She pulled the dress up, but the zipper was caught on the fabric.

He turned and watched her fight with the metal teeth. "Need a hand?"

"I've got it." She didn't.

She felt his hands on her skin, cold from the glass of water still, and he leaned down to look at the zipper more closely, his nose grazing her waist. He teased out the fabric that obstructed the teeth.

She stared straight ahead. "What's your name, Geronimo?"

“Carlos.”

“Are your parents Aztec, Carlos?”

“I don’t think they call themselves that anymore.”

She looked down at him on his knees. “But are they?”

“Maybe my parents’ parents’ parents’ were.”

“That’s a native right? And Mexico is part of North America, right?” She swallowed and let her eyes grow wide. “Does that make you a Native American?”

Carlos put his hands on his knees, pressed up to his feet. Tammy hadn’t realized how tall he was in the bar when they were sitting down, but now, she appreciated the tall reed of him, the slimness and the lean muscles that moved with his twisting. “Did you think I was an Indian?”

She looked away.

He laughed. “When’s that thesis due?”

“I should go.”

He looked at the clock on his nightstand. “It’s three in the morning. You’re welcome to spend the night, if you want.”

“No, I should go.” Tammy slipped her feet back into the too-tall heels she had worn earlier in the night. The wind had died outside, and the room was unearthly in its quiet.

“Do you want me to walk you home?” He began braiding his hair again.

She grabbed her purse from the foot of the bed. “No, I’m fine. I don’t live too far from here.”

“If you’re sure.”

She stood in the tiny hallway again. She was uncomfortable with being uncomfortable; how do you say goodbye to someone you only briefly met after they’ve been inside

you?

“Well.”

“Well.”

Tammy pressed forward on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. She left alone.

As she walked the ten blocks back to her apartment, Tammy listened to the sounds of parties on the Ave and looked away when she passed the Burke Museum. No more Salish salmon. The semester was coming to a close, and in five hours, she would be dropping off her thesis with her major adviser; three months, and she'd be starting grad school. Ethnic literature. She rubbed her forehead with her hand. She wished she could tear her thesis apart and start again.

When she got home, she opened her laptop and hit print. She didn't want to read what she'd written, and she didn't care about what she had thought. As the printer cartridge ran back and forth, echoing in the hollow darkness, she stripped for the second time that night and climbed under the covers on the left side of her bed. She still hadn't learned to sleep in the middle.

Tammy didn't know what to think of before she fell asleep anymore. Patsy Cline didn't comfort her, nor did James Fenimore Cooper, definitely not sex. She wasn't *The Woman Who Strung Together Twenty-Thirty-Forty-Fifty Pages Of Bright Thoughts*. She wasn't *The Woman Who Brought The Text Into Her Flesh*. She wasn't *The Woman Who Seduced An Indian In A Bar*.

Native American In A Bar, she corrected herself. Native American.

Caitlin McGuire is a James Dickey fellow at the University of South Carolina, Yemassee Journal's fiction editor, and co-managing editor of Cartagena. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Paper Nautilus* and *Whiskeypaper*. Born in California, she's still not clear on where the west starts, but remains open to suggestion.

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