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Age 17

### **Fight**

I closed my eyes. This was not the first time someone had laughed at me for being different and I knew it wouldn't be the last, but still the words echoed in my mind like the slow beating of a drum. I tried humming my favorite song to distract myself but all I could hear were the words "dirty Indian" reverberating in my ears.

I remembered a conversation I'd had with my mother a few years ago. I'd come home, my cheeks covered in dirt with tear tracks crisscrossing down them. She'd pulled me into a tight hug without a word and I thought for a second that she was mad at me because she was so silent.

"Oh my little baby girl... what happened?" she stroked my hair gently and when I breathed in I could smell her – I wondered if everyone's mother smelled so good. She had always smelled beautiful, like melting snow and tulips in springtime, like Ivory soap and a faint hint of citrus. She smelled so clean.

"Tommy called me a dirty Indian so I punched him. But he punched me back and pulled my hair, then I... I just wish I looked normal like everybody else," by this time I had started crying again (so hard that I could barely tell my story). My breath was coming out in ragged gasps between my seven-year old sobs when my mother knelt down and kissed me on the forehead.

"Baby, I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Why are you sorry, mommy? You didn't push my face in the dirt and tell me that it was supertime. That was Tommy and he isn't sorry at all," these last few words weren't said but sobbed, wailed pathetically as loud as I could.



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“Because I forgot that you’re not a baby anymore and there’s something you need to know. There’s something about you that’s very special,” her eyes lit up like they only did when she was very passionate about something, “you aren’t just a seven-year old girl. You are one of the Ojibwa, which is something Tommy will never be able to say.”

“Is that a good thing?” I asked after a long silence.

“Yes! Yes, honey, yes it’s a great thing! It’s something to be so proud of, not embarrassed of. It’s the reason you can hold your head high and put your shoulders back. It’s what makes you who you are. A very, very long time ago, this whole country belonged to our people. We were so happy and so free. We hunted the buffalo and told stories around campfires. We were like one big family. When white men came over from Europe, everything changed. At first it was exciting and new, but they treated us like animals. We thought our people had made a new friend but they hunted us and took our land, our homes and our families.”

“So let’s get them back!” I stood up, enraged by the story and envisioning kicking Tommy in the gut. And maybe some of his friends too.

“But that’s not the point of this story my darling. That is the kind of attitude that brought about all this pain.” At her words my face went red and I felt so ashamed, “I want you to know something. Are you listening? You want to know what it means to be Ojibwa? It means that we are wise. We are beautiful and handsome, we are blessed with many gifts from the moment the Creator puts us on the earth. We love our families and we love life. We respect the world around us and are a happy people. But here comes the most important part.”

“What is it? Do we have magical powers or something?” I was drinking in her every word and couldn’t wait for the most important part.



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“We are human. No matter what anyone tells you, we are all equals here on this earth. No matter how you are treated, you have the blood of great men running in your veins and the bravest heart I have ever seen. Although things are no longer how they once were, you can make the world a better place by showing everyone who you are. Although you know that no man is any better than you are, not everybody does. You will prove this when you do not punch back, when you show kindness to those who have shown you none, when you make a name for yourself. It will not be easy. Every day will be a struggle, but you are the future of our people. You want to fight for our freedom, my little sparrow? Fight with the goodness of your heart and a forgiving nature. Fight with a gentle hand and flexible spirit. Fight even when you want to give up, even when you are humiliated and scorned. Fight for me, fight for all those who haven’t learned that the best way to fight is by being a friend.”

Now more than ten years later I remembered my mother’s words. I opened my eyes and looked straight at the girl asking for the wrong kind of fight, getting in my face and pushing me backwards. I smiled and she hesitated for a second.

“Don’t mess with me,” I held my head high and put my shoulders back, “I was born to fight.”