

GIVE ME SOME TRUTH

A Novel with Paintings by

ERIC GANSWORTH



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You Are Here

Carson Mastick

Derek had lain low throughout that first day after being shot, but him missing supper was like a dog ignoring pork chop bones on the floor. He hobbled downstairs that night and made a plate while our dad checked his lottery tickets against winners announced on local news. I don't know how my dad did with those, but this was not a super-lucky day for Derek.

The helmet-hair newsman's Top Story: an attempted robbery at a drive-in restaurant in Lockport, fifteen minutes east of the Rez. A ton of Indians worked in Lockport, but no one chowed down at that drive-in, not with a name like Custard's Last Stand. Besides soft-serve ice cream, their menu was mostly Little Bighorn-themed combos, including the Big Bighorn: a triple Angus beef burger and a bacon-wrapped hot dog, surrounded by sweet potato fries.

Did non-Indians even get the references? I only knew a little about General Custer because of a goof my mom made one Christmas, one that Derek never let me live down. She always got us coordinated gifts so that we were forced to play together. The year I was seven, she gave us some twelve-inch plastic Cowboys and Indians from the Best of the West, light on the Indians. Derek won the luck of that draw. He got Geronimo, with all the accessories, including a Tepee.

Sheila got stuck with Jane West, a blond Cowgirl, Johnny West's wife. I got it the worst without even knowing.

That Christmas morning, my shoe-box-sized present revealed a bandanna-wearing, lanky blond plastic Cavalry General: George Armstrong Custer. I was bummed. There were two other Indians in the Best of the West—Chief Cherokee and Fighting Eagle—but living in this house, you didn't want to complain about your presents. So the three of us played for a while, until our mom and dad crashed for a nap. As soon as they were out, Derek charged over to the bookshelf filled mostly with our dad's skin mags.

"You're not supposed to be digging around in there," I said. "Dad'll kick your butt if he finds your drool on his centerfolds." I didn't quite know what that meant, then, but I'd heard grown-ups teasing Derek about our dad's mag stash.

"See this?" Derek said, pulling a paperback book from the shelf. It was *Custer Died for Your Sins*, by someone named Vine Deloria, Jr. The cover showed a cartoon eagle holding a beaded tomahawk in its beak. Derek and Sheila laughed Dirty Rez Laughs at the title. I didn't get the joke right then, but I could tell immediately that Custer and Indians were *not* a good mix. On top of that, Derek quickly let me know there was a real, historical Custer, and that he billed himself as an Ultimate Indian-Killer Cavalry Cowboy.

My mom sure didn't know that either. She'd just gotten us figures that would fight each other. Being a lacrosse-stick-making and bead-working Indian woman, she would have never spent cash on General Custer if she'd been aware, even if he was in the liquidation bin at Twin Fair. I ditched Custer to the toybox graveyard as soon as I could. Even now, I still hadn't read that book Derek showed me, but I knew enough about the original Custer to know this burger-joint-owning ass face on TV was an I-Don't-Care-What-You-Think Indian Hater.

In the news report, Lockport's General Custard didn't look much like the plastic General Custer. He was a stubby, round rascal, with his hair in a freaky long blond pageboy. He had a tiny Brillo-pad chin beard with a big mustache hiding his mouth, like fringed curtains.

A fake Cavalry outfit capped the look, the kind you might find in Theater Club racks. He stomped around in a blue bib shirt with giant white cuffs, and the big brimmed hat with a star on the forehead. Did he look like General George Armstrong Custer? Maybe, if Custer had lived to retire from the Cavalry and develop bad eating habits. Who knew if the guns in this guy's costume holster were real?

Well, *we* all did, now, as he was boasting to the Reporter in the Field on our TV.

"Indian guy with long hair," he said, dragging the "long." "Waltzed in 'round closing time. I was alone, sweeping up. Always send the wife with the night deposit." He nodded like a bobblehead. "Guy was trouble." Asked why, he said the guy wore a trucker cap, a hooded sweatshirt, dark sunglasses, and he'd pulled his T-shirt up over his mouth and nose. The reporter nodded seriously. "Had his hand in the sweatshirt pocket, you know, here." Custard slapped his pumpkin gut. "Said he had a gun, and he wanted—get this—a to-go bag filled with cash and burgers." He waited and then that stupid mustache parted in a giant grin. He was loving this.

"'Heavy on the cash,' he said. I told him, 'Son, you don't need to go *off the reservation* in my place of business.'" He nudged the news guy and added, "You see what I'm saying here?" The news guy asked why he thought the robber was an Indian. "*Attempted* robber," General Custard said. "His trucker cap, perfectly clear. Had those beads all over it on the brim, like the Indians wear. You've seen 'em at the gas stations buying beer by the case, I know you have. Well, I shot him in the a—"

The news cut back to the studio, saying the suspect was still at large. They showed a police sketch, which looked like half the Rez Men under fifty. They added that the suspect had been wearing a Led Zep shirt. The newsman wished a speedy capture of "the Hamburglar," and the sports and weather guys yukked it up as they went to commercials.

Normally, my dad would rage about how we got the shaft in the news and we'd stay out of his way, but he'd watched Derek limp into the kitchen, knowing when he'd been out the night before, and noting

that he hadn't left his room much since he got back. He also knew Derek had a beadwork cap, because he had been its first owner.

And so began a period of sustained harassment like I had never seen before. The Butt Cheek Incident seemed like yesterday, but it was a month ago, and though the story faded from the news, it didn't at our house. First we had hamburgers for five days straight, which our dad cooked, frying up all noisy in the kitchen, like he was doing construction. At the end of the week, I heard him grumbling and slamming pans again and we all sat at the table for the sixth time as he yelled, "Get your asses down here to eat!" He walked in with one serving plate for us, and an additional one, stacked high. He set it in front of Derek and gripped his neck from behind, telling him to "eat up." Derek got through nine before he could leave the table. Our dad let him go only when it was clear my brother was gonna blow chunks all over us. Eventually, he just started calling Derek Hamburglar.

As that month wore on, our house formed a new rhythm. Derek could put up with it or leave, and he wasn't a Moving Out kind. The rhythm was so steady, you could tell when our dad was ready to rumble. He usually started quiet with "Where's that cap I gave you anyway?" Derek would mumble some shit about misplacing it. This was an excuse for our dad to poke at him with a You Gotta Be Careful speech, usually with some unwelcome umph, like a backhand whack or a lacrosse stick jab on Derek's left butt cheek anytime he was in striking distance. He never actually asked about the night in question, and Derek never back-talked, and so it went on.

Our house wasn't the only place the story was kept alive either. The *Buffalo Evening News* had printed enough information for Derek's new nickname to spread across the Rez within a week, though no one would ever say it around any outsiders. Derek's stupid move became a celebration for some and he usually drank free on nights he showed down on Moon Road. He'd been the first Indian to do something about Custard's Last Stand, and I kind of admired my brother for taking a stand of his own. I didn't think I could. Not like that.

I tried to get out of the house as fast as possible when my dad

started up. At first I tried to get him to lay off, but then he started giving me lessons on why that was a bad idea. When my dad's monster hand slams you, you didn't forget it. So now if they revved up at night, I split and didn't come home until past two in the morning. I'd check Derek's wound for him, go to bed, and then wait for our dad's bullshit machine to crank again the next day.

Finally, yesterday, the school year ended. I'd set my alarm for 7:00, just in case, but my stupid body still woke up at 6:30 like I was getting ready to go to first period. And I wouldn't have to do that for another two months. For the summer, I was working with my mom repairing lacrosse uniforms as they came in, which kept me in gas money and guitar strings, and didn't require early rising. My mom worked a lot at home in the evening, watching TV, so she usually went in around ten. This morning, I could smell her making coffee downstairs.

"You wanna cup?" she asked.

"Nah, I'm up. Thought I'd give Lewis a ride. His summer hours at the garage start today—I told him ahead of time I'd swing by this morning."

"Nice of you," she said, in a tone that meant: *Why are you being nice?* "Tell him I said to drop by. We haven't seen him in a long time." I guess in her eyes, Lewis was still one of my best friends, even when I blew him off for months.

"Promise." She'd be seeing a lot more of him. Sometimes I was a nicer guy than anyone gave me credit for.

After our Memorial Day surprise gig, I had made plans. By the fall, I'd have Lewis, Doobie, and myself in place as three foundation members of my Kick-Ass Rez Band. And now it was time to let Lewis know about his future, in the usual way. Partway to his house, I spotted him hoofing it to work.

"Get in, Gloomis," I said, pulling over. "Told you I'd give you rides until you could afford to get your bike out of the repair shop."