


"Eric Gansworth fearlessly lays down the truth about what it's like to grow up poor, and the strength it takes to hold your head high and find a way out."

— LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON, author of *Speak and Forge*



IF I EVER
GET OUT
OF HERE

Eric Gansworth

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IF I EVER GET OUT OF HERE

A Novel with Paintings by
Eric Gansworth

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“Band on the Run”

Words and Music by Paul McCartney and
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For the Bumblebee,
flying smoothly between
Venus and Mars,
and for Chuck Collins
and Jeff Ewing,
on their respective
planets





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PART ONE

If I Ever Get Out of Here



3:7



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. But with all my supposed brains, I didn't grasp that the way we talk to one another on the reservation was

definitely not the way kids talked in this largely white junior high. On the rez, you start getting teased a little bit right after you learn to talk, and either you learn to tease back or you get eaten alive. One girl in my class, Marie, got stuck with the name “Stinkpot,” courtesy of Carson, when we were in first grade. You can see how I was okay with “Brainiac” by comparison. You might also be able to see that if I thought calling someone “Stinkpot” was a good way of making friends, I was in for a fairly rough ride.

So the first week of sixth grade, I thought I’d come up with nicknames for two kids I wanted to hang out with, to show them I was Prime Friend Material. I tried an easy one first, calling Stacey Lodinsky “Spacey” instead, like she was an airhead. And Artie Critcher seemed like a friendly enough guy, so when I noticed that his hair curled out from the front and back like a dirigible, I made the obvious leap and started calling him Blimp Head.

Stacey maybe just didn’t hear me, since she didn’t say anything about the name. But when I said to Artie, “Hey, Blimp Head, you wanna sit next to each other in lunch?” he said, “My hair might have a funny shape, but at least I wash it every day. I don’t want your dandruff in my soup, so no thanks.” They both stopped talking to me shortly after that. Clearly, the only plan I had for forming friendships had been a spectacular failure. Maybe I needed a new nickname myself, something like “the Invisible Boy.”

And then it got worse. For most of sixth grade, it was like I had a force field around me, like one of those Martian war machines in *War of the Worlds*, with a death ray waiting to blast the other kids if they made any sudden move in my direction. They just pretended I wasn’t there as much as they

possibly could. During lunch, we were required to sit with our class at two long tables. In every other section, the Indians gravitated to one another like atoms in some science experiment, but I sank to the bottom of my particular beaker, alone. Still, I had to eat, so I'd go to one end of our assigned tables, decide who was least likely to resist when I set my tray down, and inch myself onto the bench next to my reluctant seatmate, who usually gave up one butt cheek of room, sometimes even both. The force field kept me inside and everyone else out. I'd given up trying to make friends by Christmas break.

This year, I was going to make another shot at it. Thanks to my *zero* social distractions, I'd kept my grades up, so I remained among the brainiacs for seventh grade. I was hoping someone from a lower track had done well enough in sixth that they'd be bumped up to my class and might offer a new door to a friend. I wasn't crazy enough to think it would be someone from the reservation, so I thought the more I looked like everyone else in the class, the better chance I might have with someone who didn't know about my force field. I'd find out in a couple days.

Even though I'd turned on to Dog Street, I still had a long walk to my house, so I started eyeing whatever cars were going my way. One awesome thing about being from a tiny place where everyone knows everyone, and where everyone knows your family doesn't own transportation, is that you can usually snag a ride by just sticking your thumb out to hitchhike. Two vehicles later, I was climbing in a car's open trunk, already stuffed full of kids heading for a late-summer swim in the dike.

"What happened to your hair?" all of them asked me, shouting over one another.

“I bet it was lice,” Floyd Page said, and they all backed away, exaggerating, pretending they were going to climb out of the trunk.

“Impossible,” I said. “I wasn’t using *your* comb.”

Floyd rubbed my bristles as we laughed. In this way, we communicated in the language we knew best — hassling one another.

“You’re in luck,” my uncle Albert said when I got home. “She’s not back yet, so you’re not officially late.”

He didn’t seem to notice that my head looked like post-tornado TV footage. At that moment, my brother Zach’s car pulled in the driveway to drop off my ma. The engine shut off, which meant he was coming in, probably helping with groceries.

“What the hell happened to your hair?” was the first thing Zach said. “You look like David Bowie on a bad night.”

“I’nit tho,” Albert said, laughing, registering my hair for the first time.

“Who’s David Bowie?” I asked.

“That’s a little later in your musical education,” Albert said.

“So spill it. What happened?” Zach was not going to let me off.

“I cut it.”

“It *looks* like you cut it,” he said, sticking his fingers in my hair. “With a blindfold on.”

Just then, my ma walked in, carrying a couple bags of groceries.

“What is this?” she said, staring at my hair.

“I cut my hair,” I said. “I’m tired of not fitting in with my

class. That two-foot braid just shouted, ‘Reservation Kid Here,’ so I got rid of it.”

“Go get the buzzer,” she said.

“What?”

“Either you’re going to get it or I’m going to get it, but before we eat, we’re cleaning that hair up,” she said, grabbing a towel to pin around my neck. “You look like a Welfare Indian.”

“I *am* a Welfare Indian,” I said.

“You don’t need to look the part,” she said.

The buzzer was a garage sale purchase — a hair clipper that made more noise than it should have, grabbed your hair like it was mad at you, and sometimes gave off a burning odor while it did its job. She came at me. Five minutes later, the longest hairs on my head were in my eyebrows, and *they* survived only because they were behind my glasses.

“The next time you think about caving in to how you believe white people want to see you,” she said, sheathing the buzzer in its holster, “you remember this.”

She took the towel off me and I dunked my head in the washing pan. The water was cold, but I didn’t want all those tiny hairs drifting down my shirt like a million little bugs.

“Nice look, G.I. Joe,” Zach said from across the room, finishing the last of the spaghetti in the serving bowl before I had the chance to get any. “Too bad you don’t have that patented Kung Fu Grip or you wouldn’t need to worry about fitting in. You could just do a Bruce Lee on your enemies.”

I peeked in the mirror. I looked exactly like what he said. My hair was buzzed to maybe a quarter of an inch, and it stood up straight, like dandelion fuzz that had been spray painted black.

When I went to bed that night, I grabbed the latest copy of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Albert periodically supplied me with comics when he picked up his magazines, and I always hoped for Spider-Man. I was glad somebody's world was more complicated and lonely than mine, even if he was a comic book character in a blue-and-red bodysuit.

I reached behind me to pull my braid forward, as I had every night for years, but my fingers touched nothing but stubbly hair and skin. I shared a room with Albert, who lay a few feet away in his bed, thumbing through a magazine. He noticed my automatic gesture.

"Feels funny, isn't it? Like maybe a piece of you is missing?" he said. "You get used to it after a while." He closed his magazine. "Besides, if you don't like it, it grows back. They buzzed mine when I got drafted and shipped off to Vietnam. Now look at it." He flipped his long hair like he was in a shampoo commercial. "But you're gonna have to live with it for a while anyway. Hope it was worth it," he said, shutting off his light.



Man, We Was Lonely

When I got to class on the first day of seventh grade, home-room was filled with most of the people I'd spent the previous year with. Despite my haircut, they were just as friendly to me as they'd been when I last saw them, which was about as friendly as strangers thrown together in a hospital emergency room late on a Saturday night.

I did register one new face, and a couple missing ones. The new guy looked like he was one of the kids off the local air force base. He was big, broad, probably buying his clothes in the men's department instead of the boys'. If we weren't smart kids, I might have suspected he'd failed a few times. As the only new person, he was my one potential shot at a friend.

We heard our Welcome Back to the School Year, a reminder about getting our personal business done in the five minutes allotted between classes, a politeness reminder, a suggestion about bus area safety, and the announcement of the various sports tryouts and the first activities night. Our new home-room teacher, Mr. Franz, reaffirmed that the top three sections were more academically challenging than the other sections, but that the three were *equally* academically challenging; the

three sections were organized around smart kids in chorus, smart kids in band, and nonmusical smart kids. Mr. Franz also stressed that the sections between four and eleven were all the same level too, and beyond eleven, those were kids who needed more support than the rest of us did. Then the bell rang for change of classes.

It turned out the new kid's locker was near mine. Before I could say hi, Artie Critcher was there. "George," he said to the new kid, "you see that girl there, the one who looks like an opera singer?"

"Summer?" I asked, to make sure. Summer Barnes was currently leaning over a desk in the hallway, gesticulating and telling someone else a story from her fabulous vacation.

"She's the one. Stay away from her. She's the vice principal's daughter, and she thinks her dad's power extends to her. Just means trouble."

"Thanks," George said.

Steven Lockheed suddenly appeared next to us. "And this kid?" he butted in, pointing to me. "Don't be fooled by the army haircut. This kid's an Indian. Stay away from him too. More trouble." He shook his head and then moved on down to his locker.

"So, you're the one, a real live Indian. I was wondering." George was suddenly shaking my hand.

"As opposed to a dead one?" I said. I understood enough about our history to get that a lot of people had preferred us dead, but I was kind of hoping that era was over.

"No, no. Of course not," George said. "My dad grew up around Indians, but I never had the chance to meet . . . Anyway, I met Artie here a couple weeks ago when my family relocated. When we discovered we were in the same section,

he told me about some of the other kids, and said you'd probably still be in our class."

"Guy here likes the Wacky Packages too," Artie said. "He's got some on his folders, usually."

"So which ones do you have?" George asked.

Most kids I knew loved Wacky Packages — stickers that parodied popular household products. I named off a few, like Crust toothpaste, which seemed to show up in almost every pack; Ratz Crackers, a pretty rare one, pulled for the rat on it; Neveready batteries, where the cat has used up its nine lives; and *Playbug*, insect entertainment, featuring a bug in a skimpy bikini. "I put some *Yellow Submarine* stickers on my ma's vanity mirror a couple years ago," I said. "I didn't hear the end of that for months and months. So these days, any stickers I get wind up mounted on the headboard on my bed."

George nodded and gestured to Artie. "He stuck some Wackies in his room too, so I had to visit him to see his. Maybe I could come over to your place and see yours sometime."

That seemed really fast moving to me. I wanted school friends, but the idea of this kid coming to my crumbling house almost made my head explode. "So you just moved here?" I said, bringing the subject back to him. "Where from?"

"The island of Guam. That's where my dad was stationed the last couple years."

"Guam? Never heard of it," I said.

"Probably no reason you would, unless you're in the air force. It's in the South Pacific. I've got a scrapbook at home in Red-Tail Manor, if you'd like to see it."

"Could be cool." We lived between two Great Lakes, so it was cloudy nine months out of the year. I couldn't imagine living on a tropical island one day and then here in this gray,

chronically dingy part of the world the next. “Are you in chorus?” I asked George.

“Yeah, I think they told me almost everyone in here was. What part do you sing?”

“First tenor,” I said.

He sang the same part, so we sat together in class. It seemed like maybe my haircut was working after all, as this kid, who seemed cool, if a little bit pushy, actually wanted to hang out with me. Mrs. Thatcher, the seventh-grade chorus teacher, told us we’d be working through the lame songs from *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Music Man*, and *The Sound of Music* that the school could afford sheet music for. But toward the end of the day, she peeked out into the hall, and ran back in to rock us out to choruses of the Beatles’ “Hey Jude,” promising we’d do that every so often to break up our bland diet of show tunes.

She also said we would spend the week before Christmas break listening to a taped radio program called “Paul McCartney is Alive and Well . . . Maybe,” which was about the best news I’d ever heard in a classroom. When I was little, every time I asked about a song on the radio, it had been a Beatles tune, or one of their solos. Albert liked them, and knew all kinds of trivia, so he fed my interest. Paul McCartney had been one of the Beatles’ lead singers and songwriters, and I knew of some crazy rumors that he’d been killed in a car accident and replaced by a look-alike to keep the band going for a few more years. Mrs. Thatcher told us there were all sorts of clues to this substitution in their albums, like McCartney’s blood-stained, abandoned shoes in the *Magical Mystery Tour* album booklet and his bare feet on *Abbey Road*’s front cover. Then the bell rang, and we returned to homeroom for end-of-the-day announcements.

“That Paul McCartney thing sounds cool,” I said to George. “I mean, I know he’s not *really* dead, since he’s in Wings now, but I always like conspiracies anyway.”

“Yeah, even though it’s clear he’s still alive, you see this stuff all the time. Makes my dad laugh. He says he remembers it from the first time around.”

“You like the Beatles?” I said. “We had pretty much all of their albums, but when my brother moved out, he took most of the later ones with him.”

“We have them all,” George said. “My dad’s a huge Beatles fan. When we lived in Germany, he took me down to the Reeperbahn in Hamburg, because that’s where they got their start. My *Mutti* about busted a blood vessel.”

“‘*Mutti*’?”

“Sorry, German, it’s like ‘mom.’”

“Why was she mad?” It was nice to know I wasn’t the only one with a sometimes-grouchy ma.

“Those blocks didn’t just have music clubs. They were also the place where all the hookers hung out.”

“Hookers?” I asked, picturing a group of people with prosthetic arms.

He shook his head. “Did you grow up in a shoe box?”

“More or less. Wait a minute. I thought you came from ‘the island of Guam,’” I said, imitating the formal tone he’d used to describe his old home.

“Germany was before Guam. Hey, you want to come over and listen to my dad’s records? And then I could come to your place sometime and check out your Wackies.”

“Aren’t you going to take Steven’s warning?” I asked. “Avoid the scary Indian?”

“Maybe Artie’s right about that Summer girl,” he said. “But I make my own decisions about who I hang out with.”

We walked out to the bus platform together, saying good-bye when we reached his bus. The day seemed like a pretty decent beginning to my second year of junior high. As soon as I got on the bus, though, Carson and Tami jumped across the aisle from me.

“Who was that you were walking with?” Carson asked.

“Dunno. A guy from off the rez,” I said.

“Duh! You think your magic haircut worked? Yeah, right,” Tami said, laughing.

“He ever sees your house?” Carson added. “He’ll be running for the border. And if I ever see you bringing some white kid home to visit?” I hated when Carson read my mind. “You and me? We’re not friends anymore. I ain’t having that oo(t)-gwheh-rheh stuck to my shoe.”

“Your choice,” I said. Carson, in the seven years I had known him, had always been blunt, and most often, he turned out to be right too. But I’d gone all this length to finally get a friend at school, and I wasn’t letting these two hack my chance off like they had my braid. Anyone who would talk to me would have been good enough, but I genuinely *liked* George so far, with his strange European and tropical island history, and our both grooving on the Beatles. It was probably true that we’d be friends only at school, that it would take a natural disaster to crash around us all before he’d ever be able to come over to my house, but I didn’t care. For the first time in over a year, I looked forward to the next day of school.

That night, as we filled our plates for dinner, Zach asked

me, “Anyone talk to you at school today?” He lifted a sausage directly off my plate and ate it.

“Two kids, sort of.”

“Being told to shut up doesn’t count.”

Artie hadn’t exactly told me to shut up, but he had been his usual neutral self. “Okay, then one kid.”

“From Red-Tail Manor?” I nodded. “Typical,” he said.

“What’s Red-Tail Manor?” our ma asked, suddenly interested. She wanted very much for me to be as integrated into the outside world as I could. Zach had made connections by playing lacrosse for the school, which most of the Indian kids did, but lacrosse was not in my path.

“Air force housing,” Zach said.

“What’s the deal with that anyway?” I asked, truly wanting to know. “How come he’s the only person who might be interested in talking to me?”

“Can’t say *why* he’d be interested,” Zach said. “It is *you* we’re talking about, after all. But I’d guess he’s more *willing* because those military kids don’t know about the reservation.” He smiled. “All those others? Most of their parents have threatened them at some time or another with being dropped off here.”

“Zachary, that’s enough,” our ma said. “There’s more sausage here,” she added.

“No, what do you mean?” I asked again. “Come on, I’m the one who’s going to be dealing with this. What is it?”

“When some kids are bad in white families,” my ma said, sighing, “their mas and dads say they’ll dump them off among the wild Indians and let them find their own way home.”

“The wild Indians? We’re their punishment? You’re making this up,” I said. They were both sharp, and poking fun at each other is absolutely *the* way of life on the reservation, but

my ma's expression told me they were serious and not just busting my chops.

"White guys on the lacrosse team told me after we got to know each other," Zach said.

"And none of you thought to tell me all of last year, even though you knew no one talked to me? What am I supposed to do?" All this time, I thought *I* had been the problem, not my address.

"Well, everyone else from here usually gets placed with a couple other Indians," Zach said. "That's who they hang out with until high school."

"Maybe you'll get to know some of the other singers better this year," my ma suggested. "Like this guy you just mentioned. This air force kid."

"You're in chorus?" Zach said, laughing. "The dorkiest activity. No other options?"

"No," my ma said.

"Not exactly true," I said when she went back to the kitchen to grab something. "In fifth, I scored high on those music tests, so I could have joined either chorus or band. That letter said I'd be a good trombone player."

"With your stubby arms? No way," Zach said.

"Didn't matter anyway. At Heavenly Music, a student-model trombone was three hundred dollars."

"Reservation translation: exactly one hundred dollars more than Ma's entire monthly income," Zach added, as if I didn't know that.

"Yup. That salesman said they had rentals or rent-to-owns," I said, remembering the salesman trying to cut a deal with my ma, while I looked at my own broke welfare face, distorted into a long horsey portrait in the trombone's gleaming

brass, still playing my part in the dog and pony show. “But just like you said, that kind of money, even a rental price, wasn’t going to work for us. So I turned us around and walked us out the door.”

“Down to the budget again?” Zach said when I’d finished. “Glad my ass is out of here.”

“Watch your language when you’re home,” our ma said, returning.

“My home is a single-wide trailer with one bedroom and a sweet Dodge Challenger in the driveway,” he said, then looked at me. “Maybe you could fail some classes and get bumped down to the regular sections. Not the dummies, necessarily, just the average ones.”

“Don’t you even think of it,” Ma said. “Your name is going to be associated with section three for your entire time in junior high, and don’t you forget it. Get any homework?”

“Not on the first day,” I said, then thought aloud, “Does anyone here know where Guam is?”

“Geography homework?” she asked.

“No, just curious. The kid I met today, the one who talked to me, moved here from Guam, and I have no idea where that even is. He said the South Pacific, but I thought that was only a lame musical we sang songs from in chorus. I didn’t know it was a real place.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Albert said, speaking for the first time. “He’s a base kid, isn’t it? Your base might be in the middle of a bunch of different kinds of people — I mean *real* different, like *from Japan* kind of different — but all you see are other soldiers, and all the kids see are the kids of other soldiers. Kind of like living on a reservation.”

“Yeah,” Zach added, “a reservation with running water.”