

Take AIM

Barbara Richardson



Take AIM

Eddie watched them arrive. Seven men emerging from two snowy cars in front of Building One with the grey mountains pocked white behind them. Six wore Levi jackets and aviator sunglasses, the young ones, with hair down their backs, hair in braids wrapped with leather, hair bound with bandanas and beaded headbands. They looked cool as a hippie militia from *Life Magazine*. Eddie stood there holding the school's front door, feeling like a chump in his small orange parka and pleated khakis: football star, Diné student, your average junior, gawking.

The seventh man, the elder of the AIM pack, wore no coat at all. He simply stepped out of the sedan with his calico shirt open at the neck, the feathers dangling from his braids whomping his chest hard in the breeze. Like they were living. Like something was about to take off. Like it wasn't even winter. The gray hairs threading his head tethered the frantic

birds in place. He had a wide face, did not smile. He could have led a hundred-horse outfit into battle, he seemed that invincible.

Eddie straightened his spine. Here was a leader to watch. He had told his mom about the Mormon Bishop and his tight bristle of blond hair. His brood of kids. His short-sleeved shirts and suet belly and tender voice and high school football stories. But surely Eddie's mom hadn't meant to only watch the white leaders in and around Intermountain Indian School. Here was an Indian clearly in charge. Try as he might, Eddie could not see what the two headmen—the Bishop and the American Indian Movement leader—had in common, what traits they might share. Certainly not bellbottoms and cigarettes. He spent a few focused moments trying to see what his mother wanted him to see—why she'd sent him off the rez to Utah to study the leaders.

Royetta, in her tiered skirt and velvet blouse, met the delegates carrying a small bouquet of sage and the grace of time. *Dressed just like home*, Eddie thought, his heart pounding soft as a rabbit's deep in his chest. Royetta was his sweetheart, his *bich'áayaa í'áhí*, and he was proud of the way she introduced herself to the AIM men: "Royetta Yazzie, born to the *Tó'ahedliinii*, the Water Flow Together Clan; born for the *Tótsohnii*, the Big Water Clan." Royetta's lead wasn't even leading. It was being. It was the Diné way. No study required.

"Tom Martin," the elder said, without blinking.

Eddie wanted to step forward and shake his hand. The two senior boys who flanked Royetta did nothing. The chumps. Eddie stood off behind them, waiting for liftoff. He hadn't been asked to join the tour. He had heard from Royetta how hard the Superintendent fought to get AIM here, how Miss Victor had resisted all warnings from the Navajo Tribal Council and the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the outraged Brigham City mayor who stomped into her office calling AIM "communistic rabble-rousers." She was Choctaw and given to candor. She welcomed all comers to her school. Much as Eddie trusted Royetta, he knew nothing about these AIM men, these traveling strangers. He wasn't going to leave her side. For five hours, they had her as their guide, and he would be there.

The hallways and classrooms of the Navajo boarding school jumped into relief when toured with visitors. The radiators wheezed. The fluorescent lights flicked and buzzed. The 1971 calendars swung on tacks at the foot of every staircase. The close air and colorless rooms made Eddie feel a little sick. He held his parka squashed under his arm and wished for a gulp or ten of snowy air. Royetta led them quickly through a half-dozen yellow brick buildings to the Honors Dorm, where the furnishings were newer and the smell of fry bread warmed the small kitchen. She offered them bread made with Bluebird flour, as precious as letters from home. She showed off the Student Center and the gift shop where the tallest of the AIM crew donned a pair of pink crocheted slippers on his ears and hopped a few times. Eddie saw Royetta blush as laughter erupted; she had crocheted those slippers herself to sell for the benefit of the school.

After that, she let the two senior boys lead the tour across campus. Eddie walked beside her, grinning. AIM had bumped him out of his comfort zone, too, for the better. He felt jogged loose from this place. As they passed the new auditorium with the painted eagle up on high, he wondered what an eagle would think of these odd two-leggeds traipsing through snow to the gym and then on to the swimming pool where two dozen Navajos practiced the art of the butterfly. Steam dripped from the windows sealing out the cold. Sealing out the eagles and crows and dirt and the sagebrush and breezes. Eddie had to lean against a

wall to keep his thoughts upright. His eyes stung, not from chlorine fumes, but the incongruity. Diné. Deep water. Closed box. Short hair. Fake light. Whistles and chlorine and a big scoreboard that read Intermountain Eagles.

Eagles never lived in boxes.

The People wearing Speedos was a social crime.

Who was Eddie in the greater scheme? How much did he have to abide?

*

Hit the road, Jack! The tune came to Eddie in a jolt, when they stepped outside, and the boundaries of his world wobbled. Eddie took Royetta's hand to ground himself. To remember his roots back in Chinle, Arizona. To reestablish the okayness of this temporary Utah life.

The men stood in a circle in the high gray fog to smoke. They laughed and talked among themselves. The wind tugged their jackets. Eddie asked Royetta if she wanted his coat. She shook her head and stood on tiptoe and said, in Eddie's ear, "They are rude." Eddie nibbled the sweet curve of her earlobe. He brushed his lips along her cheekbone, soft as a cloud even when she was not smiling. She was not smiling now.

"The world is a lot bigger than this dinky campus," he said with admiration. "And they've seen it."

"You think they're smart?" she asked, stepping back.

Eddie felt another type of wobble. Royetta had a storm cloud hidden in her words. He felt the winds picking up. He looked into her narrowed eyes. He tried smiling at her. His goofball grin.

She jutted out her chin. *Answer me*, it said.

"I think," he said, "I think they live like eagles."

"More like hungry coyotes traveling in a pack."

Her anger shocked him. He'd never heard Royetta say a critical word. He started to ask what had sparked her when one of the young men called out. "Hey, parka—"

Eddie looked over.

The tall one, with his arms mashed to his sides for warmth, grimaced and said, "What do you do for fun?"

Eddie inhaled. Was this a test? Or a question for real? He thought of telling them he helped the football team pound rivals into dust. Thought about mentioning how good he was at welding, how he could weld better than anyone in Vo-tech. Would not ever tell them how he took Royetta to Mormon potlucks on dates, how the Bishop said the best fun was the Lord's fun, and no petting below the neck. Eddie's bishop had never touched Royetta's neck.

Eddie pushed off from the wall and motioned them to follow.

*

They played pool in the back room of the Student Center until it was time for lunch. Four men to a table. Royetta on a stool stoic as a clock. Eddie showing off his cue acumen. The two senior boys hanging back, sipping Cokes, tame as caged parakeets.

The rhythm of the game and two baskets of French fries set their different worlds in sync—a rural Navajo and these urban agitators. Or at least, Eddie thought so. His roommate Leroy had said AIM guys came from cities back east, from Minnehaha or someplace big. Said they wouldn't know a sheep from a stick of firewood. *Minniesoda? Mini-something.* Eddie hummed "Draggin' the Line" as he lined up a tough bank shot and danced a little when it fell right in. He tiptoed a circle in his soaked deck shoes. Then he stopped, realizing he was not actually among friends. He looked at the leader who held his gaze.

"You want to know what I think of your school?" the elder asked him.

Tom. Tom Martin. What kind of Indian name is that? Warm from working the table, Eddie said, "Sure, man."

"Speak up and be proud of your culture," Tom said.

Which bypassed Intermountain altogether. Which really was AIM's aim. Eddie leaned on his stick, taking this in. The words sank like an eight ball into just the right corner of his mind. Like a trick play in football where you dump the QB and use your foot soldiers and fool the hell out of the defense. Tom's words struck Eddie's heart. No BIA-hired leader. No intermediaries. No boarding schools could stop you. *Speak up and be proud of your culture.*

Watchusay?

*

At the assembly at the end of the day, AIM kept the message simple.

The abuse of Mother Earth and all things Native would not go on forever.

Retaliation was assured.

The Earth would retaliate. The environment would retaliate.

Indians had to speak up now, find spirit, stand with the Earth, and carry their cultures with pride. "Join us!" Tom said from the edge of the stage. "Tour some reservations with us, come see how other tribes live."

Then the AIM men set their small drum down and pulled their chairs in tight and sang high and drummed to call the spirits. The singing shot up like mesa walls in the new auditorium. Eddie felt, for the first time ever, how drums might carry prayers to heaven. He'd mouthed a hello to Grandfather Sky a thousand times in Chinle but this time his prayer went up: *Let us rise.*

A surge of adrenalin throbbed in him like a fast scrimmage, like every time Royetta touched Eddie's chest. The screaming carried and the pulse of Tom Martin's braids took flight: *Hit the road, hit the road, Jack.*

Eddie's hair would meet his collar again. He'd find a pair of bellbottoms. Maybe they'd call him Catfish or Dinky. That would be cool. Royetta would see.

Liftoff.

He felt the future of his people opening ripe.

"Take AIM" comes from Richardson's unpublished novel, Innermountain, which tracks the 1970-71 school year at the "world's largest boarding school."

Barbara Richardson lets her curiosity lead when it comes to writing. That curiosity generally revolves in and around dirt, trees, kids, and the West. She has an MFA in poetry from EWU and a deep devotion to novel writing. Her novel *Tributary* won the 2013 Utah Book Award and was a VILLA Award finalist. Her anthology *Dirt: A Love Story* won a 2016 Silver Nautilus Award. Richardson designs landscapes, edits books, and breathes freely in the Wasatch Back. www.barbarakrichardson.com



