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FICTION

Chitty Harjo

**CHARLES BRASHEAR**

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*[Editor's Note: This story contains language that may offend some people; it is retained as written in the interest of verisimilitude.]*

Jake Backturn scuffed his shoes twice across the linoleum and knocked on the door to the teachers' lounge, as the note in his hand directed him to do.

Almost at once the door opened, and Miss Cheryl Hochfleur, the social science teacher at Okemah High, invited him in. She directed him to sit in one of the easy chairs and took a seat right across from him.

"Uh. What's this all about, Ma'am?" asked Jake. "Have I done something wrong?" He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he stuffed them under his knees. He couldn't help but notice her chest. God! She had a great figure!

"No, not at all," said Cheryl. "I wanted to congratulate you on breaking the scoring record last Friday. Twenty-two goals and four free throws! You've got something to be proud of."

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Jake blushed. "Why, thank you, Ma'am. I was hot, I admit that. But I wouldn't have made half the points I did, if Chitty Harjo hadn't kept feeding me good set-ups, shots he could have made himself. Didja see that time in the third quarter when he faked the whole Okmulgee team out of their shorts and shoved the ball into my hands? That shot was like dropping a puffball in a lake; I couldn't miss."

"Yes, I almost jumped out of my pants when I saw that play. Such a display of teamwork. And your shot swished through the net like a whisper. Didn't even touch the hoop."

Jake looked quickly at the floor between his feet, imagining Miss Hochfleur jumping out of her pants. All the guys in the locker room made raw jokes about Cheryl Hochfleur's pants and chest. He scuffed his shoes uncomfortably on the linoleum and waited.

"What do you think of Chitty Harjo?" she asked.

Jake was baffled. He looked up at Miss Hochfleur, but he didn't see any mockery or criticism in her eyes. "Why, uh—he's okay. Great basketball player, and he can throw a baseball faster than anybody I've ever seen." He smiled thinking he had satisfied her question, but she sat waiting.

"Uh—he's a star in his own way, you know. Did you go on the road trip to the Henryetta game? He was the high-point man that night. Thirty-two points! I didn't think anybody'd ever get that many again."

"I want you to make friends with Chitty Harjo," said Cheryl.

Jake recoiled, knowing what she meant, but recovered at once. "Oh, we are friends. Greatest of friends on the court. We're like brothers. This team is a little band of brothers. We don't even have to signal to know what each other is about to do. Sometimes, I think he knows what I'm going to do even before I know it."

"I want you to be friends with him off the court."

Jake was caught by surprise and could only mutter, "Uh—"

Then, because she said nothing but only sat waiting, he added, "I always say hi to him when I meet him in the hall. I mean, I try not to be mean to any of them, the way some of the guys are, a lot of the guys are."

"I want you to do more. I want you to quit treating him like an alien. I want you to invite him down to the Dairy Queen and have a shake together. I want you and your girlfriend to go on double dates with him and Betty Spanalghée. I want you to make him a part of your life."

Jake straightened up, folded his arms across his chest, and looked at her directly. So that was what this was all about. Another lesson in social science. It made him a little angry. "What the fu—what the hell do you think the guys would think of me if I did things like that?"

"It doesn't matter what the other guys think," she said. "You're strong. You're popular. You don't have to worry about what the other guys think of you. You can tell the other guys what to think of themselves. You could lead them into making friends more with our Creek students."

"La-de-dah," he said, sprawling backwards in his chair. "Wake me when this is over."

"I'm serious, Jake," she said, leaning forward toward him so that the upper part of her breasts showed. "Life should be played like a good basketball game. We, all of us, ought to be looking constantly for ways to feed each other good set-ups. We ought to make it our business to make our fellow men look good."

"Yeah?" he scoffed. "Whatta you get out of this? What's in it for you?"

Cheryl flinched, pulling her feet back under her chair, folding her hands in her lap, and stared at her knees. "I admit, I have an ulterior motive," she said slowly. "Perhaps you know that I am a Quaker, a member of the Society of Friends."

He squirmed in his chair.

She went on, "When honesty lives for a moment, I am paid. When truth is served and made a part of someone's life, I am rewarded."

"Yeah? And what do I get out of it?"

"Nothing," she admitted. "The same nothing that Chitty Harjo got out of feeding you all those set-ups last Friday night. The nothing you get for knowing that you've done something right, and done it well."

Jake stood up. "Is that all, Ma'am? Can I go now?"

"Yes, you may go. Congratulations on scoring sixteen points more than anyone at Okemah High has ever scored. No one is likely to come near that ever again."

Jake stomped out and slammed the door. Fucking do-gooders! It would be a cold day in hell before he gave Miss Cheryl Hochfleur the time of day again, tits or no tits. Fuck! Make friends with a friggin' Indian! He paid her no more attention than his grandfathers had paid the Quaker Indian agents at Fort Cobb and Fort Sill.

Corporal Jake Backturn was awakened by a ruckus in the Quonset two bunks down. A pair of Georgia and Alabama rednecks were picking a fight with a new guy, a replacement for the boy from Minneapolis who had bought it when he stepped on one of Charlie's land mines. Jake yelled, "Hey, you fuckers! Shut up! Can't a guy get a few winks?" He pulled the sheet tighter around his ears. Through the fog of his sleepiness, he heard a voice say, "Jake? Is that you, Jake?"

He recognized the voice, though he hadn't heard it in years. He swung out of his bunk, stalked down the aisle in his G.I. shorts, and peered between the shoulders of the Looky Lou's. Sure as shit, it was Chitty Harjo.

Jake peeled open the ring of shoulders and stepped in, grabbing both the Georgia and the Alabama rednecks by the scruff of their T-shirts. "Hey, you cocksuckers! Go out and shoot up a bunch of commies if you just have to get your rocks off, but leave this guy alone; he's my friend."

"A friggin' red nigger?!" exclaimed the Georgia redneck.

"Red nigger or not, he's okay," said Jake. "He just may save your lousy ass, someday. He fed me twenty-four set-ups in one game a couple of years ago, but I only made about half of 'em. Go beat the meat in your own shorts, if you just gotta have some home entertainment, but you leave me and my buddy alone. Unless you want a set of dishpan hands."

"Hey, Corporal, can you put me on K.P.?" rang several voices almost at once, and Jake realized that the threats and punishments of basic training didn't work in Nam. If you were on K.P., you couldn't be out in the bush tripping Charlie's booby traps, or stopping a sniper's bullet, or taking a bamboo sliver up the asshole all the way to your brain. K.P. was a positive choice.

"I'll put you both on point for a whole month."

Several of the guys scoffed, "Ha." That was one thing about Jake—he was absolutely fair when it came to point and swing. He assigned the duties on a rotation basis, taking his turn like everyone else, even though both the lieutenant and captain told him repeatedly that a good squad leader always walked drag.

"Okay, break it up," Jake said, shoving the rednecks toward the circle of onlookers. "Party's over. Go on home."

Disgruntled, but recognizing that the fray was finished, the crowd began to disperse. Jake turned back to Chitty and offered a handshake. "What the fuck is a nice guy like you doing in an oven like this, Chitty?"

Chitty returned the peace handshake, saying, "Same thing I've always done, Jake: whatever Uncle Sam tells me to do."

"Shit, Chitty," said Jake. "That's no way to have grandkids."

Chitty, Jake, and several others sat in the PX, drinking Japanese beer to celebrate Jake's promotion to sergeant. A big near-giant of a mixed blood from Fort Huachuca who called himself Josie had joined the squad several weeks before. He was six-foot-six and so big through the shoulders that the Army had to make his shirts for him special. No one ever thought of calling him an Indian or kidding him about his feminine name, for, although he had a few small wounds from knife fights, everyone was convinced his opponents did not survive.

Josie was one of the first to admire Chitty for his quick eye and fast trigger. Having grown up with guns, Chitty was a sure shot, and he had saved the squad a couple of times from a sniper that no one else suspected.

"Did you see that Chitty?" Josie asked the others in the squad. "Chitty, bang, bang." So members of the squad started calling him Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang. Chitty always lowered his eyes and became silent when the others were talking about him.

In the PX, Chitty got the attention of the others and said, "I think we ought to drink a gulp to our squad leader. I know you all hate it when he calls us out to do drills, or when he takes the dope away from you so you can't smoke, but maybe you've noticed also that we haven't lost a man since Josie joined us, and all the other squads have been coming back bloody. And, shit, we been out more days than a calendar has on it. He's made us into a team that takes care of each other. Nobody ever deserved his promotion more. Congratulations, Sergeant!"

Jake smiled modestly and said, "Thank you, Ma'am," before he realized he was thinking of Miss Cheryl Hochfleur. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he put them under his knees.

"Thank you, Ma'am!" echoed Josie, laughing. "You got that right. Mama's going to take care of us. Not very many of us, girls. Few, but we're a tight little band of sisters. Nobody gets to fuck with us." He laughed and drank, spilling beer out the side of his mouth.

The others laughed, too, and drank from their beers.

Suddenly, Josie started singing one of their basic training songs:

The biscuits in the Army, they say are mighty fine,  
But one fell off the table and killed a pal of mine,

Oh, I don't want no more of Army life—  
Gee, Mom, I wanta go—  
Oh, Mom, I wanta go—  
Hey, Mom, I wanta go—  
Home.

The others had joined in the song, but being finished, all became silent and gazed at their beer. About the only way they had seen anybody go home was in a body bag. Charlie's shit was never very far away, and just waiting to hit you in the face.

Jake Backturn walked up the gravel walk to the Big Quarsity Baptist Church. The wound in his right arm had healed—a freak wound in which an exploding round had plowed the flesh away for ten inches, but missed the bone—healed, the doctors said, but it still hurt. They couldn't explain why it still hurt. He had to use his left hand to open the door.

Inside, he met a man whose skin was the color of a walnut. "Yes?" said the man. "Can I help you?" His voice was full of hostility, as if he really wanted to say, 'Why are you whites always invading our territory?'

"I'm looking for the Rev—" Jake's throat caught, so he had to start over. "I'm looking for the Reverend Billy Harjo."

"I am Reverend Harjo," the man said coldly. Then, remembering his Christian principles, he repeated more warmly. "I am Billy Harjo."

Jake offered his left hand to shake, saying, "I'm Jake Backturn. I was with Chitty in—" Again, his throat stopped up. He couldn't make himself say 'Viet Nam.'

Reverend Harjo went pale. He still had not taken Jake's hand to shake, but now noticed the wound in Jake's right arm. He backed away softly and sat on the end of a pew.

"I'm sorry about Chitty," Jake went on, his voice wavering with the tears that were trying to break through. "I was with him when he bought—when he got killed."

Reverend Harjo was refusing to look at Jake.

"Chitty saw it coming before any of us did," said Jake. "He hit me like a ten pound hammer and drove my face into the mud. But that left him standing there as big as a bulldozer. He took a whole volley in the chest. Six of the squad—" his throat gurgled. He cleared it and tried to go on. "Six of the squad caught it at the same time. I only got this." He held up his right

arm. He saw Josie holding up a stump of an arm that hadn't started to bleed yet and saying, "Shit! That was my knife hand!"

"I remember you, now," said Reverend Harjo. "You're Jake Backturn. You're the one that made Chitty look so good in the Henryetta game, the year Okemah went to the state championship. You kept feeding him set-ups that he couldn't miss."

Jake sank onto the pew across the aisle from Billy Harjo and let the tears start. He hadn't realized. He had been interested only in the team; he always fed the ball to the teammate who was in the best position to do the best job. A pain like an exploding shell ripped through his right arm. Chitty always knew who he was setting up, and whose life he was saving.

They sat in silence for a while, both crying and not looking at each other.

"Something else I didn't know until too late," said Jake. "In Nam, Chitty was closer to me than any brother ever could be."

Reverend Harjo looked up at Jake, wide-eyed, with horror and hatred in his eyes, thought Jake.

"Anyway," Jake went on, having to go on, "if you have a service—" he forced his throat to go on. "When you have a memorial service, I want—I've got to come."

Reverend Harjo stood up, screamed, "My son! My son!" and, falling on his knees, embraced Jake's legs. Jake did not know if he were screaming in protest to the gods about the loss of his son, or if he were adopting Jake.

The drums had been beating insistently since a half-hour after dark and the bonfire had been replenished at least a dozen times, but Jake still sat in his wheelchair at the side of the dance circle at the Big Quarsity stomp ground, like an alien. The nurse, Betty Spanalgee, had negotiated Jake's temporary furlough from the VA Hospital where the psychiatrists were trying to talk him out of the pain in his arm, saying it was all in his head. The doctor's condition was that Jake be under Betty's supervision constantly.

In the afternoon, they had sat in the little Creek Baptist Church, separated from the stomp ground by a row of cedars, an orchard, the cemetery, and the pastor's garden, and listened to Reverend Billy Harjo preach a memorial sermon over the box the Army said was his son. The sermon had disturbed Jake terribly. Reverend Billy came to a conclusion almost of ecstasy, an exuberant joy because Chitty no longer had to deal with the cruelties of the white world and had gone on to his reward, a bet-



ter life. Jake's arm hurt so badly that the tears started streaming from his eyes. He begged Betty for a shot of morphine, which she refused; she did, however, allow him a codeine tablet. Betty was crying, too, but it was from grief for Chitty.

Jake had managed to walk to the cemetery where the squad from the National Guard fired a salute over the grave and the whole community participated in covering the box with dirt. Jake stood a short distance away from the grave, feeling awkward and inadequate. When there was a break in the stream of people, he moved up to the grave, lay his own pocketknife on the mound (Chitty always carried a good pocketknife), and covered it with dirt. In a daze he turned away, not looking at anyone and blinking the tears out of his eyes.

Since the dancing had begun, Betty had alternated between crying for Chitty and translating for Jake what was happening. The *micco*, or stomp leader, was Alexander Harjo, Billy's brother. He had called for a number of friendship and social dances, between the ceremonial dances for Chitty. He would announce to the gathering that the following dance was in memory of some aspect of Chitty's personality, or of some event in Chitty's life. And then most of the crowd would fall in behind the leaders and dance a shuffle-stomp for a half-hour or more.

"The Dance of the Warriors, Going" had been full of courage and bravado, but it made Jake weep again, for he kept seeing Chitty's chest, shredded like sausage in a senseless war, a war everyone lied about, was still lying about. His own arm bent backward upon itself, drawn by a tension Jake had no control over. Betty had to give him morphine to get the arm to release.

Billy Harjo had taken off all signs of his ministry and dressed in a breech clout, leggings, and an Indian blanket. He sat, half-hidden by the women of his family. Alexander announced a Giveaway Dance. Betty explained to Jake that the introduction to the dance included references to Jake and Chitty's experiences at Okemah High and in Viet Nam. Jake was astonished when the first gift of the dance was an Indian blanket, which Chitty's youngest sister brought across the dance ground and lay in Jake's lap.

She stood in front of Jake a long moment, as if deciding if she would speak or not. Finally, she said, "Dad and Uncle Alexander forgive you and want you to have this blanket." Jake felt unworthy of the gift and tried to refuse it, but Betty whispered in his ear that it would be impossibly impolite to decline. Gifts went to dozens of the assembly, each gift dimin-

ishing in importance according to the recipient's degree of removal from Chitty's life.

The *micco* announced an Honor Dance to Jake. After two or three times around the dance ground, individuals began leaving the dance to come in front of Jake and drop some gift on his blanket—sometimes a dollar bill so tightly folded that he had no idea it was in their hand until they opened it above the blanket, sometimes a bit of beadwork or a piece of tooled leather. Some of Chitty's relatives gave Jake little mementos of Chitty's life—a pen he had used in high school, a feather that Chitty had wound with colored yarn in elementary school. He knew enough now not to try to reject the gifts, but he could not keep his eyes dry or his arm from hurting. He looked at Betty, pleading for relief.

"They are honoring you," she said, "because you were a warrior who fought at Chitty's side, and because you had the courage to come here and tell us that Chitty died with honor."

"It's a stupid, senseless war," said Jake. After a moment, he added, "We both knew they lied to us. The generals, the president, everybody lied to us; it wasn't a holy war."

"Yes, it was stupid and senseless," Betty admitted, "but Chitty did what he was called on to do. And he did it with courage and dedication. You did the same thing. You both earned the honor we give you."

Jake's arm bent backward involuntarily, until he thought it would break.

No one announced the beginning of the *ohkalga*, or washing ceremony; the medicine man simply appeared on the dance ground, and Billy Harjo started a line in front of him. The medicine man poured a red root medicine over Billy's head four times. Then the next person in line stepped up to be washed.

"It gets all the gunk out of your eyes and throat from the grief," Betty explained. "It's really refreshing. C'mon, I think we both need some." She walked away, adjusting her shawl across her shoulders and not looking back.

Jake didn't know what to do amid so many strangers. Betty was his guide and his security as well as his nurse. Before she disappeared from sight, he followed after her, like a child following his mother.

He stood to the side of the line, keeping Betty in sight. When she was washed, she circled around and took one of Jake's arms. Someone else tugged at his other arm, and, before he knew it the medicine man was pouring red root medicine over

his forehead. He sputtered with surprise and the sting in his eyes, but Betty was right: it was refreshing.

Dripping, he and Betty went back to their side of the stomp ground and sat on a wooden bench near his wheelchair.

At the "Dance for the Warrior Fallen in Battle," Jake struggled to his feet, took Betty by the hand, and said, "Come on. Show me what to do. I want—I have to dance this one."

Adjusting her shawl across her shoulders, she showed him the point-hold-stomp movement, and Jake began. After a couple of times around the dance ground, Jake stopped in front of Billy Harjo.

"I know it's too late to be sorry now," he said, "but I am. I didn't mean to be mean to him. But I was. From the time I was born, till we got to Viet Nam. Why, I never even sat down to a milk shake with him at Dairy Queen." He stopped and looked down. "But it wasn't the same in Viet Nam; I swear it wasn't." He scuffed his shoes twice across the stomp ground. "All those years, I didn't even know I was being mean, but I was." He stopped again, confused, at a loss for further words. He didn't know how to say what had to be said.

Billy Harjo stood up, put his hand on Jake's shoulder, and gazed at him for a long time. "*Mongas chay*," he said at last and sort of pushed Jake and Betty back into the dance.

"What did he say?" Jake asked Betty.

"It was a kind of blessing," she said. "It means everything is right with the world. Everything is as it should be. He thinks you're a white man worth saving." She smiled and looked into his eyes, then added, "So do I."

Betty leaned toward him and touched his shoulder with her forehead. Jake noticed the upper part of her breasts. He had never noticed before that Betty had such a great figure and was really kind of cute, with the red root medicine still dripping from her hair. He reached for her hand, but she withdrew it and hid it under her shawl.

After all the dances were done, except the final farewell, they were sitting again on the wooden bench near Jake's wheelchair. Betty shivered from the late night chill. Jake picked up his blanket, draped it across her shoulders, and pulled it across his own. She blushed, and then allowed him to fold the blanket around her as they sat, waiting for what was next. The dancers had gone twice around the stomp ground before Jake realized he was holding the blanket around Betty's shoulder with his right hand. And the wound in his arm didn't hurt.