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Peyote Spirit

When I first arrived on the rez I tried to out-Indian all the other Indians in Window Rock. I told the most jokes, grew my hair long, and let the desert sun darken my skin until I was damn near the same shade as the Navajos I ran with. I don't know if I drank the most beer, but I sure tried.

A buddy of mine from the Army – a broad-shouldered, 6'5 Navajo we all called Shorty – got me a job working with him at the BIA. I easily fell in with him and his friends, and a few nights a week we'd pile in Shorty's beat-up 1966 Impala, headed for the bars in Gallup. There was a strip along the highway that led into town and served, along with an assortment of bikers and Mexicans, Indians fleeing dry reservations.

That night began like all the others. We had settled in at one of our favorites, a bar lit up with a flashing neon cactus in the front window and the name "PJ's" spray-painted over the door. By early evening we were stumbling drunk and had retold our war stories at least two times each. With every retelling, our combat bravery grew greater, and the enemies killed quadrupled in number. You would have thought that the four of us stopped the spread of Communism all by ourselves.

Then something different happened: a half-dozen college kids walked in. The three girls were pretty and blonde, and the one that wasn't already drunk looked scared to be in PJ's. The four boys were dressed preppy and walked with the kind of arrogance that follows two decades of being told you're special.

"Are these balaanga lost or something?" Shorty asked. His eyes and lips pointed to the white college kids, who were now at the bar ordering drinks.

"I don't know about that," Roland said. "But I do know that I'm gonna get me a coed tonight. Turn one of these blondes into a chief chaser." Roland was as big around as he was tall and never had any luck with women, even the ones as drunk as he was.

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars you can't," Ervin said. Tall and skinny, Ervin's face was scarred from teenage acne. For some reason, girls still liked him and, at age thirty, he already had four kids by two different women.

"Shit, Ervin, you don't even have a hundred dollars," I said. "Listen to this broke Indian making bets."

"Oh, I guess you think you're a rich man with your B-I-A job," Ervin retorted, emphasizing each letter

"You know what I don't like?" Shorty's easy smile broke into a scowl. He was like that when he'd been drinking, turning from happy and easygoing to dark and mean with or without explanation. "I don't like all these goddamn frat boys drinking in our bar."

"Who cares about them?" I said, handing the waitress a ten-dollar bill to cover the next round of beers.

"They shouldn't be here," Shorty said. He slammed his fist into the table, shaking the empty Budweiser bottles. One of them tipped over and rolled across the table, where I caught it before it hit the floor.

"How come you're not out there stealing somebody's land," Shorty shouted at the college kids.

What Roland and Ervin didn't know was that Shorty's favorite auntie had been removed from her land that week. She'd been one of the holdouts to the Navajo-Hopi Settlement, fighting against the transfer of her land to the coal company and the relocation of her home to another part of the state.

"You give your life to this country, and that's how they repay you and your family." Shorty's chair loudly scraped the floor as he stood up.

"Where are you going?" I asked him.

"I'm going to win some money." He pointed with his beer towards the pool table in the corner of the bar where the group of college kids stood.

"Half-breed," he said to me, "you want to come with me?"

"Oh, hell. Roland will get laid before you'll shark anyone at pool," Ervin teased him. "Come on, man, let's just have another beer."

"Maybe later," I told Shorty. "Be cool. Don't start any shit tonight."

Shorty ignored me and weaved his way over to the pool tables. Then someone played Hank Williams on the jukebox, and Ervin, Roland and I went back to drinking beer. Soon I was drunk enough not to worry about Shorty.

Five beers later, I was headed to the bathroom to take a leak, when I heard a commotion near the back of the bar. Those three white girls were huddled behind the pool table, holding each other like they were terrified. The white boys were lined up like soccer players about to defend a penalty shot against their goal. Shorty pointed a threatening finger at one of those white guys' chests.

"You like to steal land from elders? Make an old woman move from her home?" Shorty spit on the guy directly in front of him.

Shorty towered over those boys and must have outweighed them by forty pounds, but one of them, the one who got spit on, was stupid enough to take a swing at Shorty.

That white boy missed, but it was all the motivation Shorty needed to give the boy everything he'd been wanting to do since they walked in. Shorty took a swing at the guy, connected, and sent that poor kid backward. He knocked over a table and landed on the floor of the bar, and didn't make any movement to get up.

Then all three of the white boys who were still standing began fighting Shorty. One of them rammed his head into Shorty's mid-section, while another fired rapid swings at Shorty's face. The third guy kicked with all he had at Shorty's legs.

I got to Shorty first, with Roland and Ervin not far behind. I can't recall who exactly did what – we were all yelling and punching and kicking, not bothering with questions. If I saw a nice pair of jeans or khakis, I kicked it; if I saw a white face, I punched it.

It was all a blur of swinging arms and blood and broken beer bottles until the bartender and bouncer grabbed my friends and me and threw us outside. "Go sober up, Chief," he said to Shorty. "We don't need no more trouble."

kinds of moods, but that night nothing worked, and so we climbed into his car for the thirty-minute drive back to the rez.

Shorty always drove fast, but that night he used the car and the dark, open road as an outlet for his leftover aggression. Roland was curled into a large ball in the backseat area, complaining about being carsick and threatening to throw up on Ervin if Shorty didn't drive straight. Shorty ignored him, weaving around imaginary obstacles on the road. Normally I would have laughed and egged on Shorty. He had a good history of driving us home while drunk. It was pretty much a straight shot on Highways 602 and 264 all the way back to the rez, and you had to do something to pass the time. But that night I could only watch with increasing fear as Shorty's cold, steady gaze sped us down the long stretches of highway lit only by the full moon and a sky full of stars.

When the beams of an approaching car cut through the darkness, Shorty got the idea to play chicken. "I'll take them bastards out, just like I took out those dinks in 'Nam," he said.

"Not a good idea," Ervin said.

Shorty sat up tall in his seat. He let loose an eerie laugh and then jerked his car into the lane for incoming traffic, daring the approaching driver to change lanes first. The driver of the approaching car honked and flashed his brights at us a few times, but Shorty made no move to pull his car back into our lane.

"Hey man," I shouted, "joke's over."

When the Honda was no more than 300 yards away, Shorty hit the accelerator. I looked back and forth between Shorty and the incoming car. The expression on his face scared me sober. I'd seen that look before, in war, when a fellow in my platoon had charged a gang of North Vietnamese soldiers who had taken over a small village. It was the emptiness in his eyes, matched with a sickening smile on his face, which communicated just how little Shorty felt he had to lose. I realized Shorty had no intention of pulling over, that he had a death wish, and he was willing to take us with him.

"Come on, Shorty!" Ervin yelled. "Woody, do something!"

I reached for the steering wheel, but Shorty leaned forward and blocked my hand with his elbow. The combination of the short, furious honks of a car horn, the screech of rubber tires breaking against asphalt, and Ervin's screaming from the backseat pierced the dark, silent desert air.

At the last moment, the Honda driver tried to swerve into what was supposed to be our lane, but the right front corners of the two vehicles still made impact. At the time of collision, Shorty's car was going at least sixty miles an hour. I shot headfirst through the front windshield, launched into the air like a human torpedo.

It's hard to know what parts of the crash come from what I remember seeing and what I know from the reports. I think I saw Shorty's Impala take two summersaults after colliding with the Honda Civic. The Impala landed upright in the wrong lane, facing in the direction of home. My body hit the highway less than twenty feet ahead of the Impala, where I bounced and skidded, the skin on my face and arms splattered with dozens of small pieces of windshield glass and burning against asphalt.

I'm not sure how long it was before I regained consciousness and found myself lying on the side of the road. It was dark and quiet except for the constant sound of Shorty's horn, from where his passed-out

body was pressed against the steering wheel and horn. I heard no other human sounds, not even a moan or a cry.

"Am I dead?" I asked the desert air. It didn't answer me, but the full moon shone brightly over our patch of the highway. I coughed and blood came out my mouth and pooled between my right cheek and the gravel. I'd been shot before, while patrolling the Cambodian border, and this pain was worse than that. Instead of a localized, sharp pain, my whole body hurt, like an explosion had gone off inside my body. I felt cold, so very cold, and wondered if I was going into shock or already dead.

"Ervin? Roland?" I called out.

I wanted to lift my head and look around, but I couldn't move any part of my body. I felt sleepy,

Sometime later, a chorus of beautiful voices woke me. Shorty's horn was still sounding off, but it was more like soft background music than a shrieking scream into the night. The chorus of voices blended into a single sound, coming together as the sweetest relief I'd ever known, like a drink of cold, clean water on a hot, humid day. I found the strength within me to crawl towards the sound of the voice.

In the light of the moon, I saw the cactus. If I blinked, it disappeared back into the desert land. But like a mole popping in and out of the ground, it would reappear the next time I blinked and opened my eyes.

"Who are you?" I asked, coming onto my elbows, so that I could better see around me.

"We guide seekers on their way," the cactus told me.

"What?" I asked.

"Sing to us," the cactus replied.

"Us?" I asked. Then, as if my eyes were opened for the first time, I began to see dozens of cacti in the area, all humming the same beautiful song.

"Sing to us," the first cactus repeated.

I felt confused, and the confusion made my head hurt.

"Sing to us your peyote songs; sing to us all night long," the peyote cactus told me.

"But I don't know any peyote songs," I told them. I remembered Grandpa Willis and staying at his house in Anadarko and how he'd sit on the steps of his small front porch, shaking his rattle and tapping his foot and singing songs in Caddo, a language I didn't understand.

And then, as if he'd been summoned by my memory, Grandpa Willis appeared before me. He sat cross-legged on a pile of wool Pendleton blankets made in the most vibrant purples and blues I'd ever seen.

"Da-yah," he said. "Come here."

I somehow pulled myself upright and sat on the folded blankets that appeared opposite him.

"Now sit up straight, young man."

Grandpa Willis handed me a corn shuck and some tobacco. I watched him and copied his every move. We filled the corn husks with tobacco and then rolled them into cigar-sized tobacco rolls, licking the edges so they stuck together. Flames from the fire pit felt bright and warm on my face. Grandpa Willis pulled a stick from the fire and used the small flame on the end to light his tobacco. He handed me the stick and I followed his lead.

"Let's pray," he told me, bowing his head. I bowed my head and half-closed my eyes.

"A'-a' sa-ko," Grandpa's voice was soft but firm and I imagined his prayers lifting up towards the sky along with the fire smoke. He smoked the tobacco and prayed in Caddo, occasionally lifting his head and arms to the sky as if he was speaking to someone up there.

I let the unfamiliar words roll over me, calming my mind and my aching body. When he stopped speaking, I opened my eyes and saw he was looking directly at me.

“Da-wee-cha-sun,” he said. “It’s time for you to sit quietly. To listen and learn.”

“Listen to what?” I didn’t understand. “What is it, Grandpa?”

“To the peyote spirit,” he told me. He took a few puffs of his tobacco, and I said nothing. Finally, he spoke again.

“Think about the hummingbird. When you are quiet, and nothing is disturbing it, it will come to a flower and get the sweet flavor. But if it is disturbed, it goes away quickly.”

“The peyote spirit is like the hummingbird,” he told me. He finished smoking the tobacco and placed the cornhusk on the ground before the fire, as if in offering. Then he pulled cedar pieces from a small pouch and sprinkled them onto the flames, muttering a few words in Caddo to the fire.

I wanted to reach for him, to tell him how sorry I was. Somehow, by my mid-thirties, I’d managed to screw up everything: my marriage, my relationship with my only daughter, who I’d abandoned in Oklahoma, and now, this car accident. I wanted to ask Grandpa how to make everything right. Most importantly, I needed him to tell me who I was.

But my mind and my mouth weren’t working right and all I could do was sit mute before Grandpa, looking down at his old brown boots. Then, in the space of my silence, Grandpa disappeared into the desert night.

The next thing I remember, I was lying face down on the street, pain shooting through every inch of my body. My mouth was open and I could taste blood, beer and asphalt. A lone coyote called into the dry desert air. For a moment, I let myself imagine that my life was taking a turn, a hopeful one in which my life mattered to people, but at that moment, as I lay on the road, listening to the sound of Shorty’s horn, I prayed only that I would die.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR