

Nightmares of the Lakota

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Lakota Translations:

Uŋč́í --- Grandma

Iná --- Mom

Wanáǵi --- spirit

Lalá --- Grandpa

Uŋč́í Maka --- Grandmother Earth

Just a sliver of sunset remained as I turned off I-90 onto Highway 73. The small town of Kadoka provided a sense of security – no reason to be afraid, but during the remaining three hours of my trip home, civilization was scarce with each tiny town that did appear run-down and ghost-like. During the day, this route is scenic and full of beauty as the rolling hills turn to tanned buttes carved by the wind and rain. Driving these winding roads is serenity. A breath of fresh air. But, as the sun fades beyond the horizon, this enchanting vision mutates into scarlet knives jutting out of the surface and the canyons become abysses. *A fireless Hell.* These are the Bad Lands. A place I grew up to admire and fear. A place filled with secrets and haunting tales of the past hidden behind thick blankets of shadows.

Tonight, the shadows have conquered the moon, casting the entire area in raven-colored darkness save for the few feet of highway the dim yellow beams of my suburban illuminate. It's silly to be afraid. I know that, but the stories I was told as a child have my heart racing like the prized thoroughbreds at the Kentucky Derby. Their hooves pound the dirt track just as my heart pounds heavily against my chest. I am the jockey with a tight grip on the reins, willing the engine to go faster. Yet, if I were to go faster around the winding roads, I would lose control, ultimately, landing in

a ditch – stranded in a nightmare. Instead, I settle for the speed limit and the antagonizing long drive. The low growl of the engine and the soulful energy of the Beatles bring a small amount of comfort but the screaming howls of the wind rip that peace away.

With each shriek, I am yanked to the shoulder of the road and reminded of the horror stories of a banshee that is said to haunt the canyons of the Badlands. My uŋčǐ's raspy voice floods my brain as another howl echoes throughout the car. *Her cries chill the blood of all who encounter it and would not have at the sight of a mountain lion or rattlesnake.* A chill crawls up my spine, causing a shiver. *She rests on a hill with her hair billowing around her in a hypnotizing trance, daring her victims to ask a question.* The fact that my iná is usually a skeptic of my uŋčǐ's stories makes this tale even more terrifying, for she has witnessed the horrid shriek while pulled over at one of the buttes.

Turning up the radio in an attempt to drown my nerves, my voice mirrors Ritchie Valens singing La Bamba as the terrifying countryside passes by in a blur. The melodious repetition of roughly 75 beats per minute lulls my anxious brain into a carefree trance, synchronized with the beat. Soon my only concern is the road ahead of me.

Suddenly, the flash of a shadowed figure along the highway breaks my relaxed stupor, and I am reminded of the many ghost hitchhiker stories. Ghostly figures – some faceless – suddenly appearing in the car even though the vehicle never stopped. Quickly glancing at the rearview mirror and finding the figure gone, tension fills my chest. I'm afraid to look in the backseat or even next to me in fear of finding a ghostly passenger. *Lost souls are what they are. Wanáŋi. Some good and others with bad intentions.* Relax. Just relax. But I can't because I know these are more than ghost stories.

It was late at night, and I was just getting off my shift. There was this section of the road that passed by a graveyard. It was always real spooky 'cause no cars were on the road that late. But as I passed that graveyard, I felt the car move like someone jumped in real fast. Another shadow on the shoulder. I never stopped

though. Gone as fast as it appeared. The air got real cold and chills just ran through my body. I blasted the heat, but it was still freezing. More chills ran through my body. I could feel the back moving like someone was trying to get comfortable. I was scared 'cause I could just tell it was bad. Don't look. I just started praying, shouting for the Holy Spirit to remove this Wanáǵi. It didn't leave though. It stayed there for 'bout four miles until I came up on the other graveyard. I felt the car lift like it had left. Probably needed a ride to visit his friends.

Her voice would always lighten at the end of the story like she was trying to break the tension — or her fear — with a joke. I never dared to ask my unčǐ how they became lost souls. Maybe they wandered too far into the Badlands in search of the Stronghold, or some other dark force got a hold of them? Whatever it was, I knew I didn't want any part of it for fear of becoming just like them — lost. No direction for my life. Just stuck adrift, forced to wander around hopelessly.

My fears can't be relinquished with some joke. The sharp air remains, as does the feeling of being watched. *Don't look.* I couldn't even if I wanted to; I'm too scared. Knowing that I'm only a few miles from Martin calms a few of my nerves. There's security with the artificial light provided by the small town. Even if it's only a brief interruption from my fears, I welcome it with open arms. Then 12 miles to the Nebraska border — my finish line. Crossing it would mean I outraced my fears, that they couldn't reach me since I wouldn't be on the reservation any longer.

Your lalá was on his way back from visiting relatives in Omaha late at night, eating sunflower seeds to help keep him up. Driving down highway 83 was dangerous, even during the day with all the potholes and small shoulders. You couldn't take your eyes off the road without wrecking. Focus on the road. Well, he dropped the bag, and when he reached down to grab 'em, he took his eyes off the road. In that briefest second, your lalá said he almost hit this man walking along the shoulder. Another shadow in the rear-view mirror. It was weird cause he said the man just appeared outa

nowhere, but he pulled over to ask if the man was okay and if he needed a ride.

The hooded man got in the pickup, and grandpa asked if he was headed towards the rez. The stranger only responded with a yes-like grunt. Lalá started driving, trying to ask the man 'bout himself, but he never spoke. Just stared out the window. Don't look beyond the road. A real uneasy feeling came over lalá like something wasn't right. Little while later the man finally spoke, telling your grandpa to stop. His voice was low and husky, scraping like nails on a chalkboard. The unsettling feeling seems to be my second skin. They were in front of a dirt road leading to one of those old boarded-up houses outside Valentine, NE. I can't escape. The stranger got out, turning to shake lalá's hand and that's when he saw his face. Parts of it were missing like his flesh were torn apart, except for his menacing grin. Faster than hell, your lalá sped off, shaking with fear. Even when I get off the rez, I know the fear will stay with me for the remainder of the trip. Fear knows no boundaries, and neither does discrimination.

Worn homes with boarded windows, old Dorito bags in the gutters, and copper-skinned relatives come to mind. Images of my reservation. Home of a tribe that used to stand as tall as Black Elk Peak before their land was stripped from them, and they were condemned to live on reservations. Instead of being known as a great, noble and prosperous nation, they are now only known for the issues that plague the Pine Ridge Reservation: being one of the poorest counties in the nation, heightened suicide and homicide rates, missing people, poor housing conditions, lack of healthcare, a high unemployment rate, substance abuse, and poverty. My people have been cursed. Cursed to endure an eternity of wandering, like Wanáǵi, searching for our Lakota identity that was poached from us, turning the culture into a sin. A one-liner for crude comedians.

It all started with land. The colonizers' incessant need to dominate everything Uŋćí Maka blessed the Lakota people with. *There's an old rusted 1950's Plymouth roaming the reservation backroads. A ghost car with no driver just appears out of nowhere with blinding headlights. It's determined to run travelers*

off the road to their demise – equivalent to the colonizers instituting treaties that limited my people's rights to their sacred land, forcing them to live lives filled with cultural depreciation.

I'm not a little girl anymore. I see that these stories are more than ghost stories. They are an anthem for the Lakota people. Each narrative conveys their pain and hesitation about the future, for each promise made to them was broken. The Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868 are proof of such. I now recognize that my fears are greater than mere ghost stories; I'm afraid. Afraid that it is too late. Afraid we have evolved too far from the true Lakota virtues to ever implement them back into the culture. Afraid that the culture is lost forever, and so are we.

Third place winner, 2023 Anita (Sarkees) Bahr Prize for Student Creative Writing