

The Devil's Reservation

He clutched the knife in his chest with his bloodied hands. His lungs filled slowly. A warm crimson red surrounded him and seeped into his brown work shirt. The last sound he heard was the small waves of Devils Lake hitting the sandy shore.

Emmy sat at her desk in her tiny Upper Manhattan apartment on Saint Nicholas Avenue. She finished writing an article about a controversial women's fertility clinic that promised babies to women over 50. *Chasing dreams of motherhood*, she thought.

Some patients called the doctor a quack while others touted him as a god. A warm summer breeze danced through the open window near her desk and ruffled her long blonde hair. Emmy leaned back in her chair. *It's all about perception*, she thought.

The call was unexpected.

"Hello child, it's Ivy Iron Rain."

Emmy rolled her eyes. Her grandmother always gave her full name at the beginning of every phone conversation, like they were strangers and not family.

"Hi, Grandma Ivy."

There was a silence on the line. "I know I owe you and Dad a phone call. I've been busy working on an article," Emmy said attempting to fill it.

"I, I don't know how to tell you this...he's dead," the old woman repeated through heavy sobs. "He is dead. How could this happen?"

Her grandmother's question lingered long after she hung up with her. Emmy curled herself in her bed with the lights off. Her grandmother's words bellowed in the silence of her apartment engulfing her. *How did this happen?*

"My father is dead," Emmy whispered in the darkness.

Emmy called her mother in Seattle. She could hear the sadness laced in her mother's distant voice after receiving the news of his death.

"I can meet you at the reservation for his services," she offered.

"I'm not going," Emmy said.

“You will regret not having a final moment with him.”

Emmy nibbled on her top lip. Tears stung the corners of her eyes. His eyes. “I have deadlines here. People are counting on me.”

After a few more minutes filled with awkward silences and attempts at comforting each other Emmy tried to end the conversation. Her mother wasn't ready yet.

“I loved him once,” she said. Her words felt empty to Emmy. “I know it is hard for you to believe, Em. For a moment your father and I were very happy.”

“Do you still love him?” Emmy quietly asked.

“No.” She paused. “Maybe. He gave me you.”

He is not an easy man to love, Emmy thought as she hung up with her mother.

Between the doctor at the clinic claiming to offer improbable life and the improbable death of her father she was exhausted. Despite the warm evening Emmy felt chilled. She pulled to her chin the lightweight yellow and green quilt Grandma Ivy had made for her 10th birthday. It was worn but well loved. She ached to feel something, anything. Her world was quiet again as she drifted to sleep.

He touched her hand with his callused fingertips. His skin was tanned and his lips thin. The deep wrinkles etched around his eyes and on his forehead were from years of worrying about the life he lived in once and the life he chose to stay in. His black hair was slicked back into a long braid down his back. Black rimmed glasses framed his eyes. He wore his khaki work shirt from the Sioux Manufacturing Corporation tucked into a pair of jeans and work boots.

“Emiko,” he whispered.

“Dad?”

A swirling mist of pinks and reds twisted around him. His glasses were gone. He yelled in a frightened voice that he couldn't see her.

“Go,” he yelled to Emmy.

“Go where?”

He breathed heavily. “Find the answer.”

“What is the question? Dad?”

His khaki work shirt, once clean and crisp, was drenched in crimson red. He breathed heavily. He dropped his fingertips from her hand and grasped at his chest and throat. White light radiated from his eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Emmy looked away from him until she was engulfed in darkness. She searched frantically for him. She ached for his familiarity. For his love. For his protection. Within the shadows of the moon she reached for him as he turned to black dust.

Her eyes fluttered open. She was alone in her tiny bedroom wrapped in Grandma Ivy's quilt. A humid rain pelted the bedroom window in rhythm with the moving world on the streets below. Her hand tingled. She rolled onto her side. She was damp from a cold sweat. On her desk she could see the flashing green power light from her laptop. She wiggled her fingers. She didn't owe her father anything. Nothing. There was no need to see Grandma Ivy or say goodbye to a father she only saw once a year. He didn't even attend her college graduation 6 years earlier. Then she remembered his crimson red shirt. His gasping for breath. The fear in his eyes. How did he die? Grandma Ivy never answered that question. Answers. She crawled from the security of her bed to her laptop. She searched flights to North Dakota. There was a daily flight from New

York to Denver that connected to Devils Lakes Regional Airport. She booked the flight.

Answers. The tingling in her hand disappeared.

The lights of the fading Sioux Manufacturing Plant in his rearview mirror was the only sign of civilization as he drove along desolate Route 57 along Devils Lake towards St. Michael. The thick clouds from the evening storm separated so the silver light of the full moon exposed the dark ripples of the lake. He drove the eight miles between work and the home he shared with his mother in St. Michael thousands of times over the past twenty years. He knew intimately the curves of the road, the bumps to avoid. On this night, as the lights of the Sioux Manufacturing Plant faded long ago, his car's oil light illuminated the dashboard. The car sputtered to a stop. Cursing under his breath he popped the hood of his car and poked around checking the dipstick in the moonlit night. The car revved but wouldn't turn over. The chance of seeing another car or truck for a lift to town after midnight was slim. He started the four mile trek home along the shoulder of Route 57. As he neared the last curve leading into St. Michael the silent night was shattered by the high pitched screaming of a woman. Without an instant of hesitation he sprinted across the road and slid down a slight embankment to the edge of Devils Lake. Not far in the distance he saw them in the moonlight.

Emmy navigated the maze of poorly marked roads that curved over hills and through flat prairies using her fuzzy memory of Spirit Lake Reservation and her grandmother's vague directions rather than her cell phone that went in and out of service. *I could turn around right now and no one would even know I was here*, she thought. It was early evening and the sky

flickered from the heat of the day in an array of pinks, purples and blues streaked against white wispy clouds. *It's beautiful here in an unscarred way not like me.*

She rolled the car to a slow stop in front of a squat ranch, with its grey aluminum siding flapping in the warm breeze. It was more run down than she remembered. The grass needed a mow. Its curtain drawn windows were covered with plastic wrap leftover from the frigid winter filled with arctic winds and seven-degree highs. The weathered front door opened a crack.

“Emiko? Child, is that you?” She opened the front door wide and stepped out on the entryway. Her long hair, pulled back in a tight bun, was flecked with streaks of silver and black. Her face, beautiful once with dark eyes and full lips, exposed the effects of age and years of stress. “You came,” she whispered.

Emmy embraced her grandmother. Her arms engulfed the frail old woman. “I’m here, Grandma Ivy.” The old woman crumpled into Emmy’s arms and heaved heavy sobs.

“I’m so sorry, child...I’m so sorry...” the woman sobbed.

Two boys, one bouncing a basketball, walked slowly past the house. Emmy felt their stares. She wondered if they were wide-eyed at the old woman sobbing or at the sight of a blonde-haired white woman on the reservation. Maybe both. One whispered and elbowed the one bouncing the basketball. He picked up the ball and cradled it between the crook of his arm and hip.

“Hey lady, why ya makin’ Old Lady Iron Rain cry? Ain’t she been through enough?” he shouted.

The old woman pulled her face from Emmy's damp shoulder and wiped the stray tears rolling down her moist cheeks with the back of her wrinkled hands.

"Boys, I'm fine," she said with a forced smile. "This is my granddaughter."

The boy still holding the basketball tilted his head, his shaggy hair falling into his dark eyes. He seemed to be taking in Emmy. "You Danny's daughter?" His question surprised her.

"Danny is my Dad," Emmy stammered

"Was," he responded.

"What?"

"Danny's dead." The boy bounced the ball to the other boy. "Murdered."

Emmy's grandmother let out a quiet moan. Emmy put her arm around her grandmother's shoulders. "I need to sit down," her grandmother whispered.

"My old man said he had it comin' for messin' in other people's crap," the boy with the ball said to his friend.

Emmy followed her grandmother into the house, but glanced over her shoulder once more at the boys as they walked passed the house.

Emmy's grandmother sat with a long sigh on a worn chair. Emmy went to the small kitchen and brought her grandmother a glass of water.

"We need to talk," Emmy said.

"There will be time for all of that."

"He came to me," Emmy said.

“When?”

“The night you called me. He looked scared.”

The old woman sighed. “His spirit is restless.”

“Was he murdered? What is going on? I need...”

“Answers?” the old woman said with a faint smile.

“Do you have any?”

“No.”

He took off running down the beach towards them. With each stride he took his boots felt like heavy weights as they sunk into the sandy beach. Her screams were muffled as a large figure loomed over the top of her. He ran faster. When he reached the man straddling her he heaved his shoulder into him like he was back on the high school football team. The man rolled hard into the ground with a thud. The woman, realizing her freedom, scurried backwards pulling at her torn dress. She wiped her bare forearm over the blood trickling from her bottom lip smearing red across her chin. He could see her swelling eye in the moonlight. She was young and scared.

He reached out to her with his hands. “It’s going to be OK,” he said before a blunt hit to the back of his head knocked off his black framed glasses into the sand. The world, already dark, became a blur. He felt the first stab. It burned. Then the second and third stabs came quickly. He fell to his knees.

She sobbed. “Don’t do this, Travis!”

“Jesus, shut up, Destiny,” the man shouted.

Another stab this time near his shoulder blade. His glasses shattered beneath the man's heavy feet. The man stood above him and yelled, “Ya messed with the wrong dude tonight.”

“Go,” he gasped to the woman.

“She ain't goin' nowhere,” the man blocked the blurry moon above him. “Time for ya to take a swim, old man.”

The coolness of the water surrounded him and he felt nothing. His blurry world went black.

Emmy sat in a long wooden pew next to her grandmother in the modest St. Michael's Indian Catholic Mission Church. A framed photograph of her father was on the altar flanked between two flower arrangements sent by the Sioux Manufacturing Corporation. There was no coffin. There was no body. Her father turned to black dust at her grandmother's request.

“We have gathered together this morning wrapped in the arms of the Lord to remember Daniel Iron Rain,” Father Mitchell boomed from behind the lectern. “He was a good man. Everyone in this church knows this to be true.”

The small church appeared full with the 29 people scattered throughout the pews. *Everyone in this church knows this to be true?* She heard her grandmother's snuffles.

“He was a family man,” Father Mitchell continued. “A father. A son.”

Emmy closed her eyes. The priest's words cut sharply like a knife. A hand squeezed hers. The hand her father held as a child. A woman Emmy barely knew but together they shared a bond in unbearable grief.

After the service, Emmy and her grandmother sat on two folding chairs in the community room receiving people at the nearby St. Michael Elderly Center.

"It feels like just yesterday I watched the boy graduate from high school and join the Navy," said an older man.

Emmy's grandmother forced a half-hearted smile. "He is with his daddy," she said. Her face crumbled and she wept in her hands.

The older man instinctively patted her shoulder making a *shushing* sound. His sad gaze fell on Emmy.

"He talked so proudly of ya, Emiko," he said.

"Really?" Emmy questioned.

"He was always talkin' about ya writin'. He was so proud to watch ya graduate."

"He didn't come to my graduation."

"He did," the man said. "Fordham."

"He lied to you."

"Ya accepted your diploma as Emiko Iron Rain," her grandmother quietly said.

"I never told him that," Emmy said.

"Child, he wouldn't have missed ya graduation for anything in this world."

“Why didn't he tell me he was there...”

Her grandmother sighed. “He was there.”

He was there. She felt like the walls were closing in on her. She was suffocating. “I need some air.”

She leaned up against the wall. Did her mother know he was at her graduation? *He was there.*

“I didn't know he had a daughter.”

“If you'd like to pay respects his mother is receiving people inside,” Emmy said.

The young woman stood in the shadows. Her stringy dark hair hung in her face. Her left cheek was bruised. “I wish he never came that night.”

“Who are you?” Emmy asked with narrowed eyes.

“It don't matter.”

“I think it might.”

“He tried to save me. I didn't know he had a daughter.”

“What happened?” Emmy took a step closer to the young woman.

“I got to go.”

“Please. I need to know. His mother needs to know.”

“He will kill me,” the young woman hissed.

“Who?” Emmy stepped closer. “Come with me to the police.”

The young woman laughed softly exposing two missing top teeth. "The police? They are the problem," she said. "They don't like people poking around here."

The young woman handed Emmy a pair of busted black framed glasses. Emmy swallowed a sob. She closed her eyes as she held her father's glasses to her cheek. "Dad," she whispered.

"I'm sorry..." she heard the young woman say. When she opened her eyes the woman was gone.

Emmy sat on the sofa in the front room of her grandmother's home with her father's broken glasses in her lap. She was still wearing her black dress from the funeral.

"Who is she?"

"She could be any girl on the reservation," her grandmother replied.

"Her face was swollen."

"Our women suffer," her grandmother said matter of fact, "but we are survivors."

"Dad saved her."

The old woman nodded. "Doesn't surprise me at all."

"Don't you want to know what happened to him?"

Her grandmother shrugged. "It don't matter. Nothin' is bringin' him back."

"I'm going to the police station. These glasses are evidence."

"Child, it won't do you no good. This ain't New York City. It's different here."

"I keep hearing that."

"Go home, Emiko. Tomorrow just go home."

Emmy threw her arms up in frustration. "Why would anyone want to live here?"

"Devils Lake pulsed through ya daddy's veins."

"I'm going for a drive."

She weaved through the unmarked streets of St. Michael down Route 57 along Devils Lake. *Drowning in a lake after being stabbed multiple times doesn't mean it is in your blood. It means it is in your lungs*, she thought, as she glanced out the car's open window at the deep blue lake. The small waves splashed on the beach down a slight embankment. The afternoon sun sparkled off the lake like a prism of crystals. *For it being the Devil's lake it is beautiful*. She unknowingly drove the same commute her father made for twenty years to Fort Totten, home of the Sioux Manufacturing Corporation. Fort Totten was a carbon copy of St. Michael, except Fort Totten was home to the *Spirit Lake Tribune*.

When Emmy studied journalism at Fordham University she took a semester long internship in the newsroom of the *New York Times*. It was intense. Computers were always humming and keyboards always clicking. The only humming in the *Spirit Lake Tribune* newsroom was from the overhead fluorescent lights. A man with slender fingers typed on a keyboard behind a desktop computer. "Just a second," he said without looking up.

He hit the period key with authority. "OK. What can I do for you?" he said turning in his chair. His dark eyes narrowed a bit at the sight of Emmy. "You aren't from around here."

"You must be an investigative reporter," Emmy said lightly followed by a smile.

He smirked. "It's just we don't get many outsider reporters. Are you from the *Herald* or the *Devils Lake Journal*?"

"I freelance."

He raised his eyebrows.

Emmy walked to the chair at the vacant desk. "May I?"

He nodded.

"Murder in a small town," Emmy began.

"Not uncommon here."

"I'm looking for the article the *Tribune* did for Daniel Iron Rain."

"We didn't run an article. Only the obituary his mother sent in."

"Why no article?"

"Are you interviewing me?"

"Only if you have anything good to say."

"News gets out slowly here if at all. The man's death was just police blotter stuff."

"He wasn't just a man. Not to me."

The man, still sitting on the office chair, wheeled it closer to Emmy. He stuck out his hand. "Rod Shaw."

"Emiko Creighton," she said, surprising herself by using her formal name.

"Danny Iron Rain's daughter."

“So, you are the investigative reporter?”

He smiled. “I remember your name from the obit.” Rod walked to a filing cabinet and pulled out a newspaper. He handed it to Emmy. There was a picture of her father, his black framed glasses framing his eyes, smiling on the front page.

“I met your father last summer at the Sioux Manufacturing employee recognition picnic. Nice guy.”

“So, Rod, let me ask you: who kills a nice man?”

Rod sighed. “The tribal police and the Indian Bureau Affairs are strict about their investigations.”

“I can play the out of town card.” Emmy glanced around. “Where is the rest of the staff?”

“Mack Blackwater retired two years ago. Never found a replacement. I gave up trying. It's just me.”

Emmy's eyebrows raised.

“Are you impressed?”

“What's your lead next week?”

He pointed to the computer screen. “The expansion of the Spirit Lake Recreation Center.”

“Next week's lead is the Daniel Iron Rain murder.” She started out the office. “Are you coming?”

The tribal police was housed in an unassuming gray building in Fort Totten not far from the *Spirit Lake Tribune* office. An older man wearing a blue uniform sat behind the front desk. His graying hair was cropped short and his oval face was clean shaven. He smelled of coffee and cigarettes.

“Bobby, nice to see ya,” Rod said. “Did ya see that game last night?”

“Nah, wasn’t on TV anywhere. Radio was scratchy and comin’ in an out cuz of the storm.”

The officer looked past Rod and nodded at Emmy and murmured an uncomfortable hello.

“Bobby, this is a reporter from the *Herald* looking for some information on the Danny Iron Rain case.”

Bobby stiffened. “Ah Rod, ya know I can’t give some lady reporter any information on stuff like that. Hell, I can’t even give ya anything.”

Rod held up his hand. “I know that, Bob.” Rod looked at Emmy. “Could you give us a minute?”

Emmy sat on a bench and watched as Rod effortlessly chatted with the officer. He laughed easily. He leaned in and talked to the officer quietly. The officer nodded and smiled. The two men seemed downright chummy. The officer glanced at Emmy before disappearing behind the closed door leading into the precinct. Rod nodded for Emmy to join him.

“What was that all about?” she whispered.

“Access to the Cubs goes a long way around here.”

Emmy looked at him quizzically as he scribbled on a scrap piece of paper.

The officer returned with a grin on his face. "It's a beat cop, Rod. New kid. Officer Travis McCoy from Sisseton."

"I appreciate it Bob. I left my password for my Major League Baseball account on the desk. Use it whenever ya want."

Bob opened the door. Two men wearing ties sat behind computers typing. A young man in a blue uniform, like the one Bob was wearing, poured himself a cup of coffee. He acknowledged them with a nod and pointed to a desk near the window.

When they met at the desk Rod stuck out his hand. "Hey, Rod Shaw from the *Spirit Tribune*. This is Ms. Creighton."

"Nice to meet ya both," the officer said. "Bob said ya two were friends."

Rod nodded. "Looking for some information on the Iron Rain case."

"Not sure what I can tell ya."

"Bob said you found him the other morning along Route 57?" Rod asked.

Emmy perked up.

"Off the record?" Officer McCoy asked.

"Of course," Emmy said.

"Guy been stabbed. Blood everywhere. Shame. Heard he was a veteran and stuff."

"Served in the U.S. Navy," Emmy volunteered.

Officer McCoy looked at her blankly. "Sure, Navy. Strange he drowned."

Emmy tightened the grip on her pen. "Officer McCoy, the man was murdered."

He put his hands up. "Whoa, it was a botched robbery."

"Are there witnesses?"

The officer glanced at Rod with raised eyebrows. "Where did ya get this one?"

Rod scoffed. "*Herald* sent her." He gave Emmy a wide-eyed warning glance.

The officer shuffled folders on his desk. "Sorry I don't have anythin' else for ya. I'm busy here."

"Thanks for your time," Rod said. The men shook hands.

"Not gonna find ya award winnin' article here," the officer said to Emmy. He knocked over a framed photograph with the pile of folders. The frame fell to the linoleum floor with a clatter.

Emmy recognized the sad eyes staring up at her. It was her.

"Officer McCoy, she is lovely," she said as she handed him the framed photograph.

"My girlfriend."

Emmy forced a smile. "We need to let you get to work."

When Emmy and Rod were outside of the police station she stopped him in the parking lot. "You know Mack's desk?"

Rod nodded. "Ya."

"Clean it off. I'm going to need it."

The cool water took her breath away as it rose from her toes to her knees. The sky was dark and the full moon bright. She held the urn in her hands. In the light of the moon the wind swirled the black dust across Devils Lake. "Go, Dad," she whispered. "I am here."