

White Noise

noun: noise containing many frequencies with equal intensities.

I head over to Uncle Stanley's and rap a bit on his screen door before walking around the house to his chain link dog run. It breaks my heart seeing Stanley Raven kneeling next to a clothes dryer, repurposed into a doghouse, crying tears over his old mama dog.

"Chalk," he says, as that is my nickname on account of a patch of white hair on the side of my head. "Younger Crookshank busted in here and stole my Betty and her little ones. He used 'em to train his fighting dog over to the junkyard. Now poor Betty is more dead than alive. Mo and Pony don't look so good, neither. That thief's lucky he didn't lay a finger on Big Dog—who knows what that would a triggered."

"Uncle, you sure it was Younger done this? His family's been thrown off the rez for drinking and drugging. None of them are welcome here, excepting his auntie—the one working in the tribal office."

“It was the Crookshank boy, all right. I hooked Big Dog to a double-coupled lead and trailed that miserable young’un all the way to his daddy’s wrecking yard in Mexican Dam. They got them a black Shepherd-mix running loose, meaner than a pissed-off grizzly. That mongrel had ol’ Betty’s ear half chewed off. When he come for me I turned Big Dog loose and grabbed my bitch from where she was staked out. Mo and Pony crawled from under a truck chassis and the four of us struggled ourselves under a woven wire fence to safety”

“What happened to Big Dog?”

“He fixed an evil eye on that Shepherd and backed him into a pile of scrap iron. Then the old man come out of his office and tried to put grab on him. Big flattened his ears and lunged at Crookshank—he nearly got him by the throat. Soon as I yelled quit, the old man picked up a chunk of pipe and belted him across the ribcage. Big Dog turned coyote and vanished.”

Just then, a reservation deputy pulls his vehicle into Uncle Stanley’s back yard. The officer and a portly fellow I’ve never before seen on the rez climb out of the police cruiser. The cop’s my cousin, Kenny Whitehead, he nods my way then tells Uncle he’s come to talk about fighting dogs.

Kenny says, “This here’s Mister Bodensteiner, he’s a veterinarian with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.”

Uncle Stanley goes, “Get him the hell off’n this property. He’s trespassing on Indian Trust Land and the U.S. of A.’s got no damn jurisdiction.” Uncle no more than spits out his words when a black Crown Victoria with government plates pulls in behind the police car.

“Stanley, this trouble *is* covered under federal statute. Now *let* Mister Bodensteiner check the condition of your animals or I’ll cuff you.”

Uncle Stanley holds out his wrists and Kenny shakes his head, then slaps on the hardware, after which he deposits Uncle in the back seat of his car.

As the arrest is going down, the veterinarian kneels and checks the condition of Betty, Mo, and Pony. “These dogs are not going to make it. The humane thing to do is to put them down.”

Unbelievably, in front of me and Uncle Stanley, Kenny Whitehead unholsters his weapon and fires a round into the back of each animal’s head.

As the echo of the last shot ricochets across the reservation, a great howl of sorrow carries with the wind. I know in my heart Big Dog’s anguish is accompanying Betty, Mo, and Pony on their final sojourn.

Mister Bodensteiner huddles a moment with Kenny then leans toward the rear window and addresses Uncle Stanley. “According to a secretary in the tribal office, you are known to harbor a rather large canine. Where is it?” Uncle shakes his head side to side; great swells are gliding down his cheeks.

It’s then I relate my first lie since vowing, after a three-day sweat, to always tell the truth. “I believe you’re looking for a Shepherd-mix, a black one, he’s roaming the grounds of Crookshank’s wrecking yard in Mexican Dam.”

Kenny pipes up, “That sure ain’t in my jurisdiction.”

The USDA man goes back to speak with his associates in the Crown Vic, then climbs through the vehicle’s rear doorway. A sweep of orange dust swirls over their departure. As soon as they’re gone, my cousin uncuffs Uncle Stanley and the three of us set to spading graves in the sun-broiled chirt. When we finish Kenny says, “Stanley, I know you ain’t mixed up in this dog-fighting business, make yourself scarce the next couple of days.”

After Kenny leaves, Uncle loads me down with a water jug and a couple of surplus bedrolls. He fills his own rucksack with commodity cheese, beans, and cookware. With him leading the way, we climb across the crumbling ruins of the reservation's main irrigation ditch and make our way toward rim-rock country. Just after sundown Uncle stops walking and turns to me.

“Chalk, gather a handful of sage. We need to light a smudge.”

“Why?”

“We both lied, you spoke out of both corners of your mouth and me by my silence. We need to grow strong; the smoke will make us whole.”

“Uncle, we did no wrong. Those government pricks came traipsing onto the rez like it was their birthright. I can't believe Kenny allowed this shit to happen, much less take part in it.” As I finish speaking, an airplane flies low overhead; a blue-white beam illuminates Uncle's face and the ground on which we stand. Moments later, the light erratically flits across high desert and suddenly disappears. The sound of the airplane's engine grows faint as a whisper.

“What do you hear?” Uncle asks. We are both peering into the night sky, trying to follow the fading sound of the aircraft.

“White noise.” I reply.

“Once treaties got signed, settler's wagon wheels never stopped squeaking. Remember—to survive as a people we must become strong and listen to this.” Uncle makes a fist and thumps his chest, near his heart.

“Uncle, traditions and the old way don't always work. Burning sage isn't going to take back the lie I told—which is insignificant compared to the injustice done today.

You don't need to atone for your silence, either. Out of respect for you as an elder, I will gather sage—but don't expect me to participate in your ceremony.”

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The moon casts little more than a splash of illumination as I drift in and out of a fitful sleep. More often than not, nocturnal sounds tug me awake while Uncle snores softly, his breathing reminding me of the whoosh of nighthawks when their curved wings swoop in flight, Uncle calls it their big whoop-de-do.

Sometime before dawn the raspy clatter of a chain dragging across gravel rattles me awake. I listen intently—the sound does not repeat. A south-wind ruffles a wisp of burnt sage that still gives off its unique odor. I hear an annoying creak emanating from a windmill off to my left. Finally, I fall back asleep and dream of wagon trains, the clop of oxen, and the squeaking of harnesses.

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Uncle nudges me awake with the toe of his boot. Chanting softly he squints at a sudden flare-up of flame as he works to rekindle our fire. “Big Dog come through last night.” He says, turning directly toward me. “He was dragging a chain—nothing keeps him bound.”

“I heard it. Uncle, the Raven Clan speaks often of Big Dog—I've never seen him.”

Uncle turns his back to me while murmuring, “Few of us earn the right.”