

# White Noise

**Noun:** noise containing many frequencies with equal intensities.

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

"Chalk," he says, "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's more dead than alive. Mo and Pony don't look so good, either. That thief's lucky he didn't lay a hand on Big Dog—who knows what mayhem 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 whistled in Big Dog, grabbed a couple of leads, and together we cold trailed that miserable culprit 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 bear. That mongrel had ol' Betty's ear chewed off. When he come at me, I sent Big Dog after him before leashing my bitch. Mo and Pony straggled out from under a truck chassis and the four of us struggled our way over 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 scale shack and tried to put the grab on him. Big flattened his ears and lunged at Crookshank—he nearly got him by the throat. Soon’s 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 backyard. The officer and a portly guy I’ve never seen on the rez climb out of the police cruiser. The cop’s my cousin, Kenny Whitehead. Kenny nods my direction then tells Uncle he’s come to talk about fighting dogs.

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

“Get him the hell off this property. He’s trespassing on Indian Trust Land and has no damn jurisdiction,” Uncle responds. Soon after, a black Crown Victoria with government plates pulls in behind the police cruiser.

“Stanley, this trouble *is* covered under federal statute. Now *let* Doctor Bodensteiner check the condition of your animals or I’ll cuff you so he can do his job.”

Uncle Stanley holds out his wrists and Kenny shakes his head before slapping on the hardware, after which he deposits Uncle in the back seat of his squad car. With Uncle sequestered, 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.”

Kenny Whitehead unholsters his weapon and fires a round into the back of each animal’s head.

“Please, no!” Uncle cries, his shoulders racked by sobs. I walk to the squad car, reach through the open window and wipe the free flow of tears from Stanley’s cheeks with my shirtsleeve. 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.

The veterinarian huddles a moment with Kenny. He then lumbers toward the rear window of the police unit and addresses Uncle Stanley. “According to a secretary in the tribal office, you are said to harbor a rather large canine. Where is it?” Uncle shakes his head side to side. Great swells are still 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 vet goes back to speak with his associates in the Crown Vic, then stuffs himself through the vehicle’s rear doorway. A sweep of orange dust swirls in the wake of the automobile’s departure.

As soon as they’re gone, Kenny uncuffs Uncle Stanley and the three of us set to spading graves behind Uncle’s garden. When we finish Kenny says, “Stanley, I know you ain’t mixed up in this dog fighting business anymore but 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. That pompous government prick came rolling onto the rez like it was his birthright. I can't believe Kenny allowed this crap 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 flits high across the desert and disappears. The sound of the airplane's engine grows as 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.”

“Once treaties got signed, settlers' wagon wheels never stopped squeaking. Remember: to survive as a people we must stay 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 light as I drift in and out of a fitful sleep. 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 not-so-big whoop-de-do.

Sometime before dawn the raspy clatter of a chain dragging across gravel rattles me awake. I listen intently but the sound does not repeat. A south wind ruffles a wisp of burnt sage that still gives off its unique odor. I hear a creak emanating from a windmill off to the 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 tip of his boot. Chanting softly, he squints at a sudden flare up of flame as he works to rekindle the fire.

“Uncle, I’m bothered by something Kenny said yesterday; he implied you were involved in dog fighting.”

“I’m not proud of what I did for a living, but I’ve never participated in an actual fight.”

“Uncle, I’m confused.”

“When you were away in the military, I conditioned pit bulls for a wealthy business owner who couldn’t be bothered to exercise his own animals. Not many outsiders, including state authorities are allowed on the rez, so I was operating here on the down low. I figured what I was doing was okay. City dwellers hire dog walkers for chrisakes.”

“What made you stop?”

“The feds busted the fight ring and arrested nearly fifty people. To save his butt, the fella I worked for gave me up.”

“I bet he was a white guy.”

“What difference would that make? What we were doing was highly illegal.”

“You got nailed as an accessory?”

“I’m not proud of the fact I spent time in the pen and still have a year left on parole. My so-called business partner paid a fine, and received a suspended sentence.”

“That’s what I was referring to, white folk don’t do jail time. Didn’t your attorney bring up the fact this is a blatant case of discrimination?”

“I represented myself. I was involved and owned up to it. No need to waste government money on a court-appointed lawyer.”

“Uncle! You always need to seek counsel—you could have beaten this thing. By the way, I’m surprised you’re still allowed to own dogs.”

“I’m not, and I’ll soon be hearing from the authorities. It was probably their plane that flew over last night. The dogs I have . . . had . . . were rescue animals, out of a fight kennel in Louisiana. Helping socialize abused pit bulls is one way I can make amends for the wrong I’ve done.”

“Is Big Dog a rescue animal?”

“No, he’s special—you know he come through an hour before sun up.” Uncle looks at me. “Big Dog was dragging a chain—nothing on this earth can keep his spirit tethered.”

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

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