

Snake Dance

OUR OLD ONES ARE DYING. Their parents restrained every syllable, the children floated away from their homes to boarding schools, graveyards, and war zones. It is my fifth day in the hospital. Outside for the first time. I hold my medicine bag in my pocket, and I think about Granny Marie. A dandelion stands out amidst a patch of grass. I tear it from the ground and lift it up to the sky. The sun shines through every part of it. Granny was taken with other Choctaw girls to Wheelock Academy in Millerton, Oklahoma. Her mouth closed for two generations. I open mine and blow the seeds into the air. The wind blows one back onto me. I look down at my chest, the seed hanging on my dark green shirt between the white R and T letters spelling out Dartmouth. Eleazar Wheelock, the same man Granny Marie's school was named after, tricked a Mohegan preacher, Samson Occom, into helping start a school to educate Indians. It ended up only educating Englishmen. They called it Dartmouth. *Vox clamantis in deserto*: A voice crying out in the wilderness.

I turn to look at the other patients. Tina has joined Joyce and smokes a cigarette. Geoffrey is standing next to Curtis, his right hand grasping his chin. Maybe they are talking about sports or family, or what Geoffrey will do when he gets out today. I walk further into the field and find another dandelion. How did they pop up here? Through all the cold and rain. Everything is out of place. What will *I* do when I get out? What if the clouds start burning, what if my tongue catches fire? And the Choctaw world twists and turns so that it aligns again. Allows this world to unburn itself, allows our mounds to regrow themselves. Allows removal to rewind itself to a new forward: stomp dance and iksa, corn stalks and raccoons. New time religion. I pick up the dandelion. In every seed there is power and healing. There is communication with the other side and directions on which way to go. So I put it up to my mouth and consume it. The seeds, the stem, and the roots. I swallow it whole.

Before I can turn around, I hear, "Preston, what did you just put in your mouth?"

Everything is so bitter.

“HALITO! MAFO, MAFO!” I hear the shouting first and now realize it is coming from my own mouth. I am standing in dark woods, on ground that feels so low to the earth the trees are almost touching the sky. “I am your grandson,” I yell into the crisp, winter air in Choctaw hoping he will hear me. “Ant si ahuachi!” Come find me! But I can’t hear any response. Instead, I hear feet running across the hard earth. People. Soldiers are shouting and dogs are barking. I know somehow that they are hunting me.

The moon is full and there is just enough opening between the trees to light my path. I start to run, through the brush, over the small hills, trying to keep my footsteps as quiet as possible. I look down and see the moccasins on my feet.

They are getting closer; they are going to catch and kill me, or worse, take me to the new land. I look up into the trees and see dark brown bodies hiding, hugging branches tight and shivering from the cold.

I run faster. I can’t feel my hands and it’s becoming harder to breathe. I go down a slope in the ground and trip on tree roots. My body is rolling until a tree stump stops me. Raising my head off the ground, I see beneath the base of it a small opening covered with mud and leaves. A hiding hole. I slide and crawl into it. And this is when Granddad blesses me, *micha a holhpokunna ya is sa nowa*, and visits my dream.

“Katimma ish ia tuk?” Where did you go? I ask him. Mad he left me alone in the forest, mad he hadn’t given me the language, the ceremonies, mad that our stories are disappearing.

“I have been here waiting for you,” Granddad says. I try to catch my breath. I hear the dogs getting closer, barking louder. I feel the cold sweat running down my face and my chest pumping. Mafo lowers his hand, telling me to be quiet.

“Come out now, son! We’re not going to hurt you. We’re here to help you!” the soldiers proclaim into the night air, one or two of them laughing. They’ve stopped running and the barking has ceased. They are stepping just above our heads; I can hear the leaves crunching. I slow my breathing. I look over to my great-grandpa and notice he is closer to my age than an old man. He looks just like the picture hanging on my wall. The one I brought with me to college, where he’s sitting next to his wife, my great-grandma, and holding Granny Marie in his arms. The one with the stories in his eyes. His baby would be

forced into boarding school, like all his kids. He was trying as hard as he could to fit into a life that wasn't made for him. And now I know, as I look into his eyes and he stares back into mine, he can see I am afraid of everything. That the soldiers will find me, my family will lose our ways, afraid that we'll all go extinct.

"They're not going to get you," he whispers. "And if they do, we'll just keep coming back again and again and again." His nickname was Sinti. He was a snake.

I SLITHER INTO the day room.

"It's time for our group," Lois greets us as we walk back in.

"What we doing today, Miss Lois?" Geoffrey asks.

"It's share time, but we're going to switch it up a little bit." Everyone cycles back into the day room. The tables and chairs, I count five, are the same as yesterday, and the day before that. It has been my day room and night room. The drugs are still not helping me to sleep that well. The TV is looking at me from the corner. We can't watch anything with violence or "too much" vulgarity for fear it may trigger one or all of us.

"Today, you all are going to present something to the group," Lois says.

"What are we supposed to present on?" Richie asks.

"You get to decide. But I want you to think about something that we can all learn from. A lesson, a story, a motto you live by. Anything that has taught you something. You're the teacher and everyone in this circle is your student. What do you want to teach us?" she asks with pride.

"It can be anything?" I ask.

"Well, so long as it's appropriate and something we can understand. You can use the papers and pens sitting on the tables. I'll give you a couple of minutes to think and write out what you want to share." I grab a piece of paper and pen. I am learning everything so fast. I look up at the dry-erase board. My Choctaw symbol from a few days ago has been erased, leaving just the day's schedule.

"Can you give us an example?" someone asks.

"Okay, I'll help y'all out a little bit," Lois adjusts herself in the chair and holds her hands in her lap. "I take this lesson with me everywhere I go. When I was little, I always wanted to be grown. Wanted to have a car, a job, have a degree. I couldn't wait to have a family. When I started to get older," she motions with her hands, "I never was satisfied with

what I had or where I was at in life. I wanted to press the fast forward button, just keep moving forward. But then when I turned sixteen or eighteen, I still wasn't happy. When I turned twenty-one, twenty-three, I wasn't happy." Lois holds her gaze for a moment, looking off in the distance. "But then my granny told me something. She said, 'Lolo,' cause that was the nickname she gave me. 'Lolo, if you're always trying to get to something in the future, you are never going to enjoy the present.' She told me the cycle I was in was just gonna make me a bitter old woman. You see, it wasn't about getting a car or getting a job, it was about living in the moment, and realizing that everything happens in its proper timing. We can't worry about how long it takes to get to us, we just have to be ready for it when it arrives."

"I'll go," Kelsey says. She just arrived yesterday, a white girl, with blonde hair in a ponytail and just graduated high school last year.

"Okay, sure," Lois says.

"Mine is a bible verse. Philippians 4:13: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

"That's a good one," Joyce, the old white grandma, adds a little bit under her breath.

"And what does that mean to you?" Lois asks. She is now leaning into the group more than before, with her hands clasped on her knees.

"It's just like, no matter how bad things are, I know I can, like, do anything as long as I pray. Like, God is always there. I don't know. I even have it," she lifts her white T-shirt up just below her chest, "tattooed on me."

Lois motions with her hand for Kelsey to put down her shirt. "Okay, okay. Thank you, Kelsey. Bible verses are something a lot of people try and live by. Who's up next?"

"I can go," Richie says, with his hand half raised. He is wearing the same navy shirt he had on the day I was checked in, same blue sweat-pants, same oily hair. But the color in his face looks brighter today.

"Okay, Richie."

"I don't know if it's a motto or whatever. But I just always believed that if you do good in the world, that that good is going to come back into your life somehow."

"Like you'll be rewarded for your good works?" Joyce asks.

"I guess. Kind of like good karma. There's bad karma, but there's also good karma, too."

"I like that," Lois adds. Richie scratches his head, and the grease

holds up his hair. “And how has good karma come back to you?”

Richie rubs his hand against his mouth and chin, then rests his face there. “Well, it’s just that before I got here, I had to meet with a judge, and he could’ve sent me back to prison. But I had done good when I was in jail and when I got out for a little while I made sure to do everything they asked me to do. So instead of sending me to prison, I was given a second chance. I got to come here, and I feel like I’m on my way to being clean and getting on the right meds.”

The group talk continues, and I sink deeper into my chair, trying to reach something to share. What message do I revere? What lesson can I tell? What is there for me to be proud of? What will people back home think when they learn I am Two-Spirit? That I am in a mental hospital? All the church I have gone to, going down all the right paths, good decisions, and end up crazy and Queer. How can they see me as the person to come back and help start the rebirth? They won’t know. Most of my people have forgotten where we come from. But what if they see me as the enemy?

Down at my side, I hear, now see Tina’s hand tapping against the metal leg of her chair. A twitch, or maybe something to distract her from a headache. A diamond ring wraps around her finger. *Diamonds*. That’s what links us. I remember going to a community gathering when I was in high school, and there were Choctaws bringing back our dances. They said, “This is the snake dance.” Men came to the front and the women behind them, they formed a line. They said, “Choctaws revere the snake because we were farmers. Especially the diamondback rattlesnake. It would slither through our gardens and kill off any enemies that would harm our crops. We honor it by putting its diamonds on our clothing and doing this dance.”

Granddad was a snake. When he was born, his eyes were dark and cloudy, sharp and cunning. Sinti traveled to Indian Territory by way of cattle car with just enough space to breathe. Language strained leaving its home, became foreign. As allotment thins blood lines, community ties, extinguishes language. Ain’t got no one to talk to.

Tied to a land sold and uprooted. His hair cut. Told to find God. Told to adapt. Forget the old ways, This is the new Indian, This is America. He married a white woman.

He tried to live up to his name. Tell the old stories and speak in the language to his kids. He tried to hunt the enemies that preyed on everything that descended from him.

But it was an army.

And he was just one snake.

“Preston? Preston,” I look up and notice Lois staring at me. “Would you like to share something with the group?”

“I have a dance I can show you.”

“And is this dance something that we can all learn from?” she asks.

“I mean, you’ll learn how to do the dance.”

I tell them the story of where the dance comes from. About how my granddad was a snake. I line them up, men first and women behind them. “Hold your arm behind your back, and the person behind you is going to grab on to that.” We are all linking together. I am going to teach them something. I start to sing.

Wò he oh, yo halina. Wò he oh, yo halina.

“That’s how the song goes, and then Richie, since you’re the tallest and in front, you’re going to walk around like this,” I demonstrate for him. “And so I’m going to sing. And then at one point, you’ll say yoh yoh, way ha. Well, the guys say that part, and the women sing . . .”

“Slow down, Preston. Give one direction at a time,” Lois says.

“Well, there’s not enough room. We’re going to have to move these tables and chairs. The snake has to slither and wind around the room.” I try to move them out of the way, but the tables are locked in position. When I pull them across the floor, they drag and screech.

“Preston, stop,” I hear them say.

“No, I’m the rabbit. I sing. You’re the snake. You wrap around me, tightening your grip. It’s like you’re suffocating me. That’s how the dance goes. That’s how they taught it to me.” I grab Richie’s hand and pull him out. “Like this, watch my feet.” But he won’t follow.

Lois walks toward me. “Preston, sit down for a minute. You need to slow down.”

“This is what’s gonna save us. My people don’t remember the meaning behind this.” My eyes widen.

“What’s he talking about?” someone asks.

“They know the dance but forgot our stories. Forgot I am trickster. They think I’m the enemy. But I’m hattak iklana, half man. Chokfi micha sinti sia, I’m the rabbit and the snake.”

I’ll teach them the rest of the dance, so that they can find the healing, too. But I feel hands on me, large hands pulling me away from the day room. I thought everything was fine. I don’t know what I’ve done. I can’t tell if I fell or if they pushed me down.

“Just let them take you, Preston. It’s okay,” I hear Lois say in the background.

“Don’t kill me. I have the message. I have the message. I’m not ready to die.”

IT’S A CLOSET LIGHT, just the lone bulb shining through slats in the wooden sliding door. I’m sitting in front of it with just my boxers on. Someone has pulled open the door just enough so that the small 13-inch TV screen can be seen. I’ve been here before, lived in this tiny room all my life. Maybe I pried open the door, slowly, so as to not wake anyone.

The air conditioner on the other side of the window turns on. I turn my head to hear it. The humming drowns out my worries and fears. The TV turns itself on to a changing, fuzzy screen. A GameCube sits just below the TV on a shelf, I look down and realize I am holding the controller in my hand. But there is no game playing.

The channel becomes a little clearer, it’s one of those old softcore porn movies that they show late at night. I lean my body over to peek outside my bedroom doorway. I hear nothing. I grab on to my cock and look back at the screen. A white man with a big nose and wavy, long hair is fucking a white woman with blonde hair and huge boobs. It’s fake, I know it’s fake.

I let go of the controller and sit it to the side, but once I do, I get this feeling that God is telling me to stop. That if I can resist this, everything will be okay. I’ll be good and normal and never have to worry. I won’t end up in hell.

I hear someone walking, maybe running down the hallway just outside my room. I rush to find the remote to change the channel. The controller bangs up against the closet door. I decide to press the off button on the TV itself. I lean forward and the screen turns off. I hear someone breathing hard just behind me.

I turn and see a little boy, no older than nine. He’s dressed like a bunny, for Halloween, I guess. He’s out of breath, but there’s a big smile across his face.

“What level did you make it to?” He pulls out a carrot from his pocket and bites down.

“What?”

“The boss, Preston, who was it? Who did it end up being? Were you scared? I’ve never made it that far.”

“I don’t know who it was,” I say.

“Was it just another monster behind the door? Did he make you do anything?”

“I . . . I . . . I don’t know,” I answer and stare into the black screen.

I’M NOT SURE where I am. Groggy, lying in bed. My body is spiraling into itself. I open my eyes and see a wall. The room is completely white. I try to get up. They must’ve drugged me, they had to. I lie back down.

I must be in the room Richie told me about, the one for the bad people. I’m not meant to be in here. I gotta get out. They’re going to kill me, and no one will know. They’ll say I was some delusional Indian, or some white kid who thinks he was Indian. That I was violent. That I attacked one of them. There has to be a passageway or an unlocked door that will get me outside. And then once I am out, I will run. All the way back to the Choctaw Nation. I’ll be a hero, the one who escaped the prison who comes back to help his people.

“Help!” I yell from the bed. Maybe Richie will hear me and come break me free. But the room is quiet, it doesn’t bother to carry my sound, I know it. I start looking around the room. All that’s in here is the bed I’m lying on. I see one of those sphere cameras in the middle of the ceiling. I wave my arms, point to the door, and now back to me. Maybe a security guard or somebody will see and understand the message I’m sending. I think as hard as I can for help: Tina, Joyce, Tim, Angelina, Lois. I send signals to all of them with my mind. I cup my hand around my ear to see if I can hear anyone coming, but there’s nothing. The air comes on.

Maybe no one can help me. It’s not them that I’m looking for, they can’t save me.

I realize now what it is called. I am looking for the master key. The one that unlocks every door and security clearance. The master key solves all the riddles, the pain, what has been keeping me and everyone here. If they know I know about it, they’ll know I am ready to leave. I just don’t know if it’s an actual key. Maybe it is a phrase, or a disguise. Maybe I have to transform into something else. I’m going to find it. It’s going to get me out of Shiloh for good.

I rise up again and swing my legs onto the floor, lift them a bit with my hands. I’m trying to stand up, but I am too drugged. Don’t have enough energy. Maybe if I can hold on to the frame of my bed, I can push my weight up against the wall and hold my body there long enough to grab the handle of the door.

With the bedframe, I push my body up, shuffling onto the short span of wall that separates the door from the bed. It feels like I'm in basketball offseason again, and I need to hold my arms out and count to thirty. I feel my energy coming back and push everything I have against the wall.

My feet. I look down at them. Even if I can't walk, my feet are going to get me out of here. I only have socks on, I need something to separate myself from the ground to keep me clean. Something that with every step will tell the earth who I am, where I come from and where I am going. I reach out for the door handle and twist it. Immediately, the door swings open. I fall onto the hallway floor.

Turning my head to the end of the hallway, toward my room, the chair where Sherry or one of the other techs sit is empty. It's nighttime. I look back the other way and notice just to the left of me is a chair. I will myself up and sit down in it. I start to move backward in the chair, toward the day room. About fifteen yards of hallway separate me from the day room and the door to leave. I scooch as fast as I can, passing by a few patient rooms. I think about waving, but everyone must be sleeping. No time for goodbyes.

I make it to the linoleum floor, where the hallway ends and the floor opens to the phone area, the nurse's station, and then the day room. I'll make a call. Dialing the number, I hear the ring and wait for her to answer.

"Son, are you okay?"

"They tried to lock me up, Mama!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I got out, it's fine. I'm all right. I probably can't talk for long. So I just gotta tell you something first."

"What's going on, Preston?"

"I'm coming home."

"What do you mean? Did the doctor release you?"

"Not exactly. But I'm getting out of here. I'm leaving tonight."

"Preston, you can't do that. You have to wait till they give you the okay. You can't come home yet, son."

"Just listen. That's not what all I have to tell you. I need you to tell Aunt Sherry to make some moccasins for me. And paint them red, Mama. I want you to paint them for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just write this down. Paint my moccasins red."

“Okay, hold on. I’m getting a pen.” I hear her shuffling around, and now I hear Daddy say something in the background.

“Shut up, Craig. It’s your son. He’s on the phone.” She picks the phone back up. “Okay, I got a pen. I’m putting down the moccasins thing.”

“Okay. Now I want you to tell everyone I’m coming home. Tell all our family. Tell the Tribal Council. I want you to tell my friends, too. Tell everybody, I’m leaving this place the same way I went in.” I stop to listen to her repeat the words back to me.

“Anything else?”

“You don’t have to write this down, but I wanted to tell you that I want a new name.”

“What do you mean, a new name?”

“An Indian name. I’m a new person. People will need to know that I’ve changed. That I carry new medicine with me. I don’t want them to think I’m the same ol’ Preston.”

“Well, how’re you going to get a new name?”

“I don’t know. That’s what you have to figure out. But I have to go now.”

“Preston, don’t you do anything to get yourself in trouble. You hear me?”

“I’m fine. It’s all gonna be okay. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I hang up and scooch to the nurse’s station, but they have the door locked.

“I know you drugged me!” I yell.

“We’ll be with you in a minute. Just wait out there,” they say through the small window in the door.

I will wait till the sun comes up if I have to. I will file a complaint, a lawsuit.

“Trying to drug me, huh. They don’t know me. They got another thing coming.” I scoot my chair to their large window that borders the day room.

“I’m a snake! A Choctaw snake. Y’all know what that is?” I turn around to see if the nurses can hear me, but their eyes are looking down at the papers scattered across their desks. It looks like they are trying not to laugh. “I’m a new patient. When I get out of here, there’s gonna be a new code, new treatment for people like me.” I turn back toward the day room, “See, they don’t know. They think I’m just

white. But I'm red on the inside. Like red velvet cake. Red on the inside, white on the outside. Hah, red velvet. That's what they'll call me. I'm a preacher and a traditionalist. It's like my Uncle Tyrus said, Jesus was an Indian. But y'all don't know that. The Word hasn't gotten to you yet, huh?"

I knock on the window of the nurse's station, but pull too much of my weight to the side of my chair. I fall flat onto the ground.

"Help, I fell," I whisper, "I can't get up!" I yell, trying to push my body upward.

"Preston!" I hear a voice from down the hall.

"Y'all tried to kill me, but I'm gonna rise again!"

"Preston!" The person yells even louder.

I pull myself back onto the chair and start scooching backward down the hall again, arriving just outside the door of the office. Furniture blocks any path between me and Lois, who is sitting behind her desk. A bookcase stands in the doorway, behind it chest of drawers, and then a few office chairs are stacked in front of the desk. Like she has blocked herself in. Who is she hiding from?

"What are you doing?" Lois sits with her elbows resting there on her desk, her hands holding up her face. There's a Diet Dr Pepper can and some cheese and crackers sitting on a napkin next to her.

"They're not listening to me, Lois. They're trying to kill me."

"Who is?"

"The nurses. I don't know. They drugged me earlier."

"You mean at the group?"

"Yeah."

"Boy, you passed out. They caught you before you fell to the ground. You were so worked up from that dancing."

"No. They . . . I was fine. Then they started grabbing me."

"Just calm down. You're okay."

"Why'd they put me in the bad people room, then? I was locked up in there!"

"Preston, listen, that's just a holding room for when situations like this happen. Nobody locked you in there."

"I had to break out of there! I'm trying to leave tonight." I peek into the office to see if there's a way I can get inside, so I'm not just sitting in my chair in the hallway.

"Where are you gonna go?" she asks.

"I'm looking for the master key, do you have it?"

“The what?”

“The master key. The one that opens all the doors. I know you have it, Miss Lois, you’re a messenger.”

“We don’t have anything like that, Preston. You can’t leave right now; you’ve been doing so good.”

“My people need me. I need to be home. All my family’s expecting me.”

“It’s all gonna be there when you’re ready. But you’re not ready,” she holds up her finger, “yet.”

“I am. I’m ready. Can you tell them to let me out, Lois? They’ll listen to you.”

“What did I just say? You’re just starting a new cycle. You’re at the beginning of it all. There’s things happening to you right now, you probably don’t even notice. But give it some time, and you’re going to realize. And then it’s going to be crystal clear.”

“I’m gonna remember these people trying to kill me.”

“Why don’t you go in there and draw on the board again?”

“They erased what I put up there before.”

“Did *you* see it?” she asks.

“Yeah. I’m the one that drew it.”

“Well, that’s all that matters.”

She looks at me like she loves me. New directions, I think. A message that I have to follow. Have to draw on the board to continue on my path. I scoot backward to the dry erase board. I stand to my feet and lean one hand against the wall, reaching up with my other to grab the eraser. I clear the schedule from the board and grab a marker. Red. At the top of the board, I write out NEW MESSAGE. FROM PRESTON.

On the left side of the board I draw asteroids falling from the sky. Big rocks, with flames behind them. I draw stars, expanding and exploding, with lines that vibrate. *THE UNIVERSE IS ALIVE*. I draw all the planets, more stars, the sun. *BIG BANG THEORY*. I draw homelands. The outline of the Americas, from the north to the south, and back up again. *MEDICINE. OLD WAYS. KNOWLEDGE. LIFE. TRADITIONS*. I have half of the board covered, all on the left side.

To the right is all empty. I draw a line down the middle. *1492*. I draw ships, with sails floating over water toward the map of America. Stick-figure Indians, people dying. Little dots for disease. Bullets coming from guns. Homes, chukka, burning and Choctaws leaving them

by the thousands. Walking long distances. I draw out long lined roads. A boarding schoolhouse with Wheelock written across it. *THE NEW WORLD IS DEAD.*

There is all but a few inches, maybe a foot, left on the far right side of the board. I draw another line down the length of it. I stand back from it and watch it for a moment. Everything seems to be moving and circling around each other. I realize I have drawn two worlds. I rest my hand again on the wall. The last part is drawing the third world. The one that hasn't really started yet. The reaction, it is the revival. The rebirth. It is in front of the old world, but it is big bang too. There have been two big bangs. But this will be the third. In a small little space, with just the marker I hold, I draw a winding line that wraps around itself over and over again. So much that it fills the board from the middle to the bottom. And just at the top I separate the line, one head facing the left and one head facing the right.

It is the master key.

It is the snake.