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Michael Anthony
Silence

"How is he?" I ask while charging up the corridor to the doctor standing in the doorway of Room 383.

The resident, who looks all of twenty, peers up from the cryptic chart he holds propped against his waist. "The CVA, oh sorry, stroke appears massive," he says nonchalantly, as though it is a frequent occurrence, which for him it may be. His obvious disinterest in the patient changes when he asks, "Does he have any instructions about organ donation?"

"What?" I say in disbelief.

The heart inside that deeply bronzed chest still beats; still pumping blood to a brain that is alive; and this man, no, boy, probably less than a third of Nelson Shaatohi's age, already asks for his eyes, his kidneys, his liver. Is there anything else? What about his skin, a hide so tough that it endured the goring of a plains buffalo, and his heart so strong it weathered the death of his wife and all six of his children?

I study the closed eyes of this man atop the bed. Eyes that saw so much in their eighty-six years: the passage of a simple life in harmony with mother earth; the racism of the white man's society that forcibly relocated his people to an inhospitable patch of desert; the self-determination of the young ones who ventured far beyond the reservation; and, the dwindling prosperity of the remaining few as unscrupulous attorneys transferred oil rights to multi-national corporations.

"Are you a family member? You know, organ transplants?" the doctor repeats.

"No," I sigh heavily. "He has no family." As those words drift across the green antiseptic hospital room, I add, "None alive that is."

"Oh. Do you know if he left any instructions?"

I snap at the doctor's dogged insistence, "No! No instructions! No will! Nothing! Now, please..." I have no suitable finish for the sentence born of anger. With little more than a shrug, the doctor scrawls an illegible line across a blue form and turns to leave. I ask, "Can he speak? Understand?"

"Not really. Drifts in and out. And when he's awake he's just incoherent."

"Can I stay?"

"Sure." With that, the young but already-hardened physician disappears down the hallway.

Alone with Nelson in the final hours as his body prepares to release his unbroken spirit, I realize how much this man has influenced my life. I first met him when I was a naïve grad student assisting Anthropology Professor Pena document the lost tribes of the Four Corners region. The Navajo, Hopi, Zuni and Cochise had all been studied, but the smaller tribes, sub-tribes as Professor Pena called them were of greater interest. With his head

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buried in the nineteenth century notes of missionaries and traders, he would say, "Far less has been written of them and yet, they have so much more to say."

Several days in New Mexico, still more in Utah, then a week in Arizona; we roamed constantly, following the elusive trail of one Nelson Shaatohi. No matter how current the information, we always seemed to arrive only hours, sometimes minutes after he had departed the location where we were told he would be. One particularly hot day, I stood at the rim of an arroyo and yelled across the dry ocher gulch, "I don't think there even is a Nelson Shaatohi!"

"Marilyn," Professor Pena replied calmly, "You've never seen the wind, yet you know it is there, so why question the existence of one man?"

"I can feel the wind," I snapped. "I can see what it does to snow and sand. But, I haven't seen anything proving this Nelson Shaatohi exists. Not once!" I squatted on a boulder like a defiant child throwing a tantrum.

"You are very perceptive, young lady," a voice other than Professor Pena's cut through the arid desert air. "But, you give me too much credit. I simply move around a lot." I spun to see a square shouldered man emerge from nowhere and walk directly to me, his hand extended in greeting. "Nelson Shaatohi. I am told you are looking for me?"

Even Professor Pena sat stunned at the man's sudden appearance.

"Mr. Shaatohi, I am Ramiro Pena from the University of Colorado. My students and I have been trying to find you. We had just about given up."

"I don't avoid you; just follow my path, as you follow yours," the man said with a wry smile.

At the moment we shook hands, I sensed our paths would not only cross but intertwine. Now sitting next to the dying Nelson Shaatohi in a hospital room, some twenty-six years later, I was right.

"Halchiitah....Halchiitah"

I fix my eyes on Nelson's mouth, slightly agape; and await another sound. Only shallow breathing comes. In the darkened room, I recite words from my early years at Saint Agnes School: Hail Mary, Our Father, Glory Be, all of which seem as cryptic as those uttered by Nelson.

Long ago I concluded that my god is but a face I conjure, while Nelson's is perhaps the same deity with a face he knows. The Buddhist, the Muslim, the Jew, all see faces they know, yet behind each, a single universal force guides their lives. My god knows Nelson well, for he has heard me speak of him over the years.

"Halchiitah?"

This time, I see Nelson's parched lips move.

"Nelson? Can you hear me?" He cannot because I do not exist in the netherworld through which he now travels.

"Halchiitah...Bis... dah...litsoh..."

Each of his words escapes on the wing of a single breath. They sound

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familiar. I know them. I have recorded them when he spoke into my tape recorder clearly and slowly. On thousands of hours of tape, cassette upon cassette, I captured the words of Nelson Shaatohi.

Long after Professor Pena returned to Boulder, I remained in Flagstaff, earning a Masters in Native Linguistic Studies and eventually a doctorate. Teaching at NAU allowed me time to travel on weekends and spend sabbaticals at Nelson's place just north of Kayenta.

My first husband, Tom, lasted three years but fell prey to the desire to travel beyond the state line. We never could reconcile my need to capture every word this now dying man uttered and Tom's craving for things European and Asian. Scott and I made it to our eleventh anniversary, but not our twelfth. I really couldn't blame him for the comfort he found in the arms of that catering manager at the Best Western. She probably did satisfy his needs better and more often than I.

Truth be told, I've come to accept that I do not make a good mate. Eleanor, on the other hand, is the only person who can keep me away from Nelson. She turns eleven next April and is my center. Though still a child, my daughter clearly knows when to warn that I'm obsessing and when it's all right to go out into the country. She too has come to love Nelson, calling him 'her special grandpa'.

"Halchiitah," Nelson gasps, his chest rising, then falling beneath the thin hospital gown.

That well-educated doctor heard the words of Nelson Shaatohi as incoherence. But, to me, each is a precious gift from a friend about to depart. I edge closer to the bed and cradle Nelson's IV-pricked hand. It rests placidly in my own trembling limb. We have held hands three times before, each at the passing of a loved one. First, when his wife Mildred's heart failed and he buried her out along a ridge on territorial land; and then, when the last two of his grown children died. They joined their mother and siblings in that same plot, which is the first on that mesa to greet the sun each day.

The grandchildren and whatever great-grandchildren there may be fled the Southwest long ago. Nelson once asked me to help locate them, but I could find nothing beyond an abandoned doublewide in Salinas and an expired forwarding address near Klamath Falls.

"Nayaaseesi....Ts'ah...bii...kin..."

I understand Nelson's private prayer. He asks the spirits to ready a place for him alongside his wife. Then, he begins speaking in a conjugation of words, each punctuated by a shallow breath. He names his children in the order of their birth and asks their forgiveness. He beseeches his ancestors to accept him into their world and whispers "Jadijaa," the name he gave me decades ago. I never understood why he chose 'antelope ears.' That simple word brings a smile to my face and a tear to my eye.

I stroke his hand hoping somehow to give him a few hours of my own lifetime, which I would gladly relinquish, could they keep him here longer. Nelson calls me again; then my daughter, "Dlo Neez," his 'tall prairie dog'. His fingers twitch against mine. I want to hope, but the slowing beep of machines and shrinking waves across blue screen monitors say otherwise.

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The sluggish cadence continues; breath, word, breath, word. Instinctively I reach into the purse I dropped on the linoleum floor and pull out that damned recorder that has sat between us for decades. A sense of shame washes over me. Is this, I wonder, what destroyed both my marriages? Why can't I just listen? Be? Instead, I press the red button and lay the whirring machine on the bed, trying to ignore the intrusion and ignominy.

Haltingly, Nelson recounts moments from his life: as a boy hunting with his father; learning the ancient ways from his uncle; running from a mob of drunken whites intent on having the buffalo hide jacket his mother stitched for him. Though I have heard these tales before, they now take on a new reverence, a true purity of spirit.

I sit enraptured by his telling of the wonder of his first-born; the hurtful pain of losing his young daughter to a fever; the morning he held my baby Eleanor and dubbed her 'tall prairie dog'. The only thing marking the passage of time in this hospital room is the tape recorder reversing and beginning the second side. I look away from Nelson's placid face and pray there is enough tape. He tells of his small clan's migration and in doing so a history that is a metaphor of all Native American journeys. My eyes flood as his words soften, become less distinct. His breathing is shallow, irregular.

After several minutes of unsettling stillness, Nelson urges Antelope Ears to care for Tall Prairie Dog. Then, in the final words ever uttered in a language that dies with him, Nelson Shaatohi greets his father. There is one last gasp followed by the discordant thrum of a hospital monitor no longer counting heartbeats. I turn off my recorder as an overpowering silence blankets the room, the hospital, the city, the earth. All sound is gone, replaced by a dark impenetrable void.

This night in a lonely hospital room in Northern Arizona, I lose a friend and the world a language, neither to be heard again.