

each other tight; she is why our fear refuses naming. She is the fancydancer; she is forgiveness.

The television was always loud, too loud, until every emotion was measured by the half hour. We hid our faces behind masks that suggested other histories; we touched hands accidentally and our skin sparked like a personal revolution. We stared across the room at each other, waited for the conversation and the conversion, watched wasps and flies battering against the windows. We were children; we were open mouths. Open in hunger, in anger, in laughter, in prayer.

Jesus, we all want to survive.

## SOMEBODY KEPT SAYING POWWOW

I knew Norma before she ever met her husband-to-be, James Many Horses. I knew her back when there was good fry bread to be eaten at the powwow, before the old women died and took their recipes with them. That's how it's going. Sometimes it feels like our tribe is dying a piece of bread at a time. But Norma, she was always trying to save it, she was a cultural lifeguard, watching out for those of us that were so close to drowning.

She was really young, too, not all that much older than me, but everybody called her grandmother anyway, as a sign of respect.

"Hey, grandmother," I said when she walked by me as I sat at another terrible fry bread stand.

"Hi, Junior," she said and walked over to me. She shook my hand, loosely, like Indians do, using only her fingers. Not like those tight grips that white people use to prove something. She touched my hand like she was glad to see me, not like she wanted to break bones.

"Are you dancing this year?" I asked.

"Of course. Haven't you been down to the dance hall?"

"Not yet."

"Well, you should go watch the dancing. It's important."

We talked for a while longer, told some stories, and then she went on about her powwow agenda. Everybody wanted to talk to Norma, to share some time with her. I just liked to sit with her, put my reservation antennas up and adjust my reception. Didn't you know that Indians are born with two antennas that rise up and field emotional signals? Norma always said that Indians are the most sensitive people on the planet. For that matter, Indians are more sensitive than animals, too. We don't just watch things happen. Watching automatically makes the watcher part of the happening. That's what Norma taught me.

"Everything matters," she said. "Even the little things."

But it was more than just some bullshit Native religion, some fodder for the crystal-happy. Norma lived her life like we should all do. She didn't drink or smoke. But she could spend a night in the Powwow Tavern and dance hard. She could dance Indian and white. And that's a mean feat, since the two methods of dancing are mutually exclusive. I've seen Indians who are champion fancydancers trip all over themselves when Paula

Abdul is on the jukebox in the bar. And I've seen Indians who could do all this MTV Club dancing, electric slides and shit, all over the place and then look like a white person stumbling through the sawdust of a powwow.

One night I was in the Powwow Tavern and Norma asked me to dance. I'd never danced with her before, hadn't really danced much at all, Indian or white.

"Move your ass," she said. "This ain't Browning, Montana. It's Las Vegas."

So I moved my ass, shook my skinny brown butt until the whole bar was laughing, which was good. Even if I was the one being laughed at. And Norma and I laughed all night long and danced together all night long. Most nights, before James Many Horses showed up, Norma would dance with everybody, not choosing any favorites. She was a diplomat. But she only danced with me that night. Believe me, it was an honor. After the bar closed, she even drove me home since everybody else was headed to parties and I wanted to go to sleep.

"Hey," she said on the way home. "You can't dance very good but you got the heart of a dancer."

"Heart of the dancer," I said. "And feet like the buffalo."

And we laughed.

She dropped me at home, gave me a good night hug, and then drove on to her own HUD house. I went into my house and dreamed about her. Not like you think. I dreamed her a hundred years ago, riding bareback down on Little Falls Flats. Her hair was unbraided and she was yelling something to me as she rode closer to where I stood. I couldn't understand what she was saying, though. But it was a dream and I listen to my dreams.



"I dreamed about you the other night," I said to Norma the next time I saw her. I told her about the dream.

"I don't know what that means," she said. "I hope it's nothing bad."

"Maybe it just means I have a crush on you."

"No way," she said and laughed. "I've seen you hanging around with that Nadine Moses woman. You must have been dreaming about her."

"Nadine don't know how to ride a horse," I said.

"Who said anything about horses?" Norma said, and we both laughed for a good long time.

Norma could ride horses like she did live one hundred years ago. She was a rodeo queen, but not one of those rhinestone women. She was a roper, a breaker of wild ponies. She wrestled steers down to the ground and did that goofy old three-legged knot dance. Norma just wasn't quite as fast as some of the other Indian cowboys, though. I think, in the end, she was just having a good time. She'd hang with the cowboys and they'd sing songs for her, 49er songs that echoed beyond the evening's last campfire.

*Norma, I want to marry you*

*Norma, I want to make you mine*

*And we'll go dancing, dancing, dancing  
until the sun starts to shine.*

*Way yah hi yo, Way yah hi yo!*

Some nights Norma took an Indian cowboy or a cowboy Indian back to her tipi. And that was good. Some people would have you believe it's wrong, but it was two people sharing some

body medicine. It wasn't like Norma was out snagging for men all the time. Most nights she just went home alone and sang herself to sleep.

Some people said that Norma took a woman home with her once in a while, too. Years ago, homosexuals were given special status within the tribe. They had powerful medicine. I think it's even more true today, even though our tribe has assimilated into homophobia. I mean, a person has to have magic to assert their identity without regard to all the bullshit, right?

Anyhow, or as we say around here, anyhow, Norma held on to her status within the tribe despite all the rumors, the stories, the lies and jealous gossip. Even after she married that James Many Horses, who told so many jokes that he even made other Indians get tired of his joking.

The funny thing is that I always thought Norma would end up marrying Victor since she was so good at saving people and Victor needed more saving than most anybody besides Lester Falls Apart. But she and Victor never got along, much. Victor was kind of a bully in his younger days, and I don't think Norma ever forgave him. I doubt Victor ever forgave herself for it. I think he said *I'm sorry* more than any other human being alive.

I remember once when Norma and I were sitting in the Powwow Tavern and Victor walked in, drunker than drunk.

"Where's the powwow?" Victor yelled.

"You're in the Powwow," somebody yelled back.

"No, I don't mean this goddamn bar. I mean, where's the powwow?"

"In your pants," somebody else yelled and we all laughed.

Victor staggered up to our table.

"Junior," he asked. "Where's the powwow?"

"There ain't no powwow going on," I said.

"Well," Victor said. "Somebody out in the parking lot kept saying powwow. And you know I love a good goddamn powwow."

"We all love a good powwow," Norma said.

Victor smiled a drunk smile at her, one of those smiles only possible through intoxication. The lips fall at odd angles, the left side of the face is slightly paralyzed, and skin shines with alcohol sweat. Nothing remotely approaching beauty.

"I'm going to go find the goddamn powwow," Victor said then and staggered out the door. He's on the wagon now but he used to get so drunk.

"Good luck," Norma said. That's one of the strangest things about the tribal ties that still exists. A sober Indian has infinite patience with a drunk Indian, even most of the Indians who have completely quit drinking. There ain't many who do stay sober. Most spend time in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and everybody gets to know the routines and use them on all occasions, not just at A.A. meetings.

"Hi, my name is Junior," I usually say when I walk into a bar or party where Indians have congregated.

"Hi, Junior," all the others shout in an ironic unison.

A few of the really smart-asses about the whole A.A. thing carry around little medals indicating how long they've been continuously drunk.

"Hi, my name is Lester FallsApart, and I've been drunk for twenty-seven straight years."

Norma didn't much go for that kind of humor, though. She laughed when it was funny but she didn't start anything up. Norma, she knew all about Indian belly laughter, the kind of laughter that made Indians squeeze their eyes up so tight they looked Chinese. Maybe that's where those rumors about crossing the Bering Bridge started. Maybe some of us Indians just laughed our way over to China 25,000 years ago and jumpstarted that civilization. But whenever I started in on my crazy theories, Norma would put her finger to my lips really gently.

"Junior," she would say with gentleness and patience. "Shut the fuck up."

Norma always was a genius with words. She used to write stories for the tribal newspaper. She was even their sports reporter for a while. I still got the news clipping of a story she wrote about the basketball game I won back in high school. In fact, I keep it tucked in my wallet and if I get drunk enough, I'll pull it out and read from it aloud, like it was a goddamn poem or something. But the way Norma wrote, I guess it was something close to a poem:

### Junior's Jumpshot Just Enough for Redskin Win

With three seconds left on the clock last Saturday night and the Springdale Chargers in possession of the ball, it looked like even the Wellpinit Redskins might have to call in the United States Cavalry to help them win the first game of this just-a-baby basketball season.

But Junior Polatkin tipi-creeped the Chargers



by stealing the inbounds pass and then stealing the game away when he hit a three-thousand-foot jumper at the buzzer.

"I doubt we'll be filing any charges against Junior for theft," Tribal Chief of Police David WalksAlong said. "This was certainly a case of self-defense."

People were gossiping all around the rez about Junior's true identity.

"I think he was Crazy Horse for just a second," said an anonymous and maybe-just-a-little-crazy-themselves source.

This reporter thinks Junior happened to be a little lucky so his new Indian name will be Lucky Shot. Still, luck or not, Junior has earned a couple points more on the Warrior Scale.

Whenever I pull that clipping out with Norma around, she always threatens to tear it up. But she never does. She's proud of it, I can tell. I'd be proud, too. I mean, I'm proud I won that game. It was the only game we won that year. In fact, it was the only game the Wellpinit Redskins won in three years. It wasn't like we had bad teams. We always had two or three of the best players in the league, but winning wasn't always as important as getting drunk after the game for some and for going to the winter powwows for others. Some games, we'd only have five players.

I always wished we could have suited Norma up. She was taller than all of us and a better player than most of us. I don't

really remember her playing in high school, but people say she could have played college ball if she would've gone to college. Same old story. But the reservation people who say things like that have never been off the reservation.

"What's it like out there?" Norma asked me when I came back from college, from the city, from cable television and delivered pizza.

"It's like a bad dream you never wake up from," I said, and it's true. Sometimes I still feel like half of me is lost in the city, with its foot wedged into a steam grate or something. Stuck in one of those revolving doors, going round and round while all the white people are laughing. Standing completely still on an escalator that will not move, but I didn't have the courage to climb the stairs by myself. Stuck in an elevator between floors with a white woman who keeps wanting to touch my hair.

There are some things that Indians would've never invented if given the chance.

"But the city gave you a son," Norma said, and that was true enough. Sometimes, though, it felt like half a son because the city had him during the week and every other weekend. The reservation only got him for six days a month. Visitation rights. That's how the court defined them. Visitation rights.

"Do you ever want kids?" I asked Norma.

"Yeah, of course," she said. "I want a dozen. I want my own tribe."

"You're kidding."

"Kind of. Don't know if I want to raise kids in this world. It's getting uglier by the second. And not just on the reservation."

"I know what you mean," I said. "You see where two people got shot in the bus station in Spokane last week? In Spokane! It's getting to be like New York City."

"New York City enough."

Norma was the kind of person who made you honest. She was so completely honest herself that you couldn't help it. Pretty soon I'd be telling her all my secrets, the bad and good.

"What's the worst thing you ever did?" she asked me.

"Probably that time I watched Victor beat the shit out of Thomas Builds-the-Fire."

"I remember that. I'm the one who broke it up. But you were just a kid. Must be something worse than that."

I thought about it awhile, but it didn't take me long to figure out what the worst thing I ever did was.

It was at a basketball game when I was in college. I was with a bunch of guys from my dormitory, all white guys, and we were drunk, really drunk. The other team had this player who just got out of prison. I mean, this guy was about twenty-eight and had a tough life. Grew up in inner-city Los Angeles and finally made it out, made it to college and was playing and studying hard. If you think about it, he and I had a whole lot in common. Much more in common than I had with those white boys I was drunk with.

Anyway, when that player comes out, I don't even remember his name or maybe I don't want to remember it, we all start chanting at him. Really awful shit. Hateful. We all had these big cards we made to look like those GET OUT OF JAIL FREE cards in Monopoly. One guy was running around in a black-and-white convict shirt with a fake ball-and-chain. It was a really bad scene. The local newspaper had a big write-up. We even made it into

a *People* Magazine article. It was about that player and how much he'd gone through and how he still had to fight so much ignorance and hate. When they asked him how it felt during that game where we all went crazy, he said, *It hurt*.

After I told Norma that story, she was quiet for a long time. A long time.

"If I drank," she said, "I would be getting drunk right about now because of that one."

"I've gotten drunk on it a few times."

"And if it still bothers you this much now," Norma said, "then think how bad that guy feels about it."

"I think about him all the time."

After I told Norma that story, she treated me differently for about a year. She wasn't mean or distant. Just different. But I understood. People can do things completely against their nature, completely. It's like some tiny earthquake comes roaring through your body and soul, and it's the only earthquake you'll ever feel. But it damages so much, cracks the foundations of your life forever.

So I just figured Norma wouldn't ever forgive me. She was like that. She was probably the most compassionate person on the reservation but she was also the most passionate. Then one day in the Trading Post she walked up to me and smiled.

"Pete Rose," she said.

"What?" I asked, completely confused.

"Pete Rose," she repeated.

"What?" I asked again, even more confused.

"That's your new Indian name," she said. "Pete Rose."

"Why?"

"Because you two got a whole lot in common."



"How?"

"Listen," Norma said. "Pete Rose played major league baseball in four different decades, has more hits than anybody in history. Hell, think about it. Going back to Little League and high school and all that, he's probably been smacking the ball around forever. Noah probably pitched him a few on the Ark. But after all that, all that greatness, he's only remembered for the bad stuff."

"Gambling," I said.

"That ain't right," she said.

"Not at all."

After that, Norma treated me the same as she did before she found out what I did in college. She made me try to find that basketball player, but I didn't have any luck. What would I have told him if I did find him? Would I just tell him that I was Pete Rose? Would he have understood that?

Then, on one strange, strange day when a plane had to emergency land on the reservation highway, and the cooler in the Trading Post broke down and they were giving away ice cream because it would've been wasted, and a bear fell asleep on the roof of the Catholic church, Norma ran up to me, nearly breathless.

"Pete Rose," she said. "They just voted to keep you out of the Hall of Fame. I'm sorry. But I still love you."

"Yeah, I know, Norma. I love you, too."

## WITNESSES, SECRET AND NOT

**I**n 1979 I was just learning how to be thirteen. I didn't know that I'd have to keep thinking about it until I was twenty-five. I thought that once I figured out thirteen, then it was history, junk for the archaeologists to find years later. I thought it would keep working that way, figuring out each year as it came, then discarding it when the new one came along. But there's much more to the whole thing. I mean, I had to figure out what it meant to be a boy, a man, too. Most of all, I had to find out what it meant to be Indian, and there ain't no self-help manuals for that last one.