

The Dreamcatcher

By Jadeliah (Jade) Dahl

It's winter and I'm sitting in a dark room with three cousins. The wind is blowing harshly outside, pounding against the window as if to want to come in. I am wrapped in a brown blanket with my younger cousin next to me. I am holding onto my little blue flashlight that my grandma bought me from the local store. My eldest cousin, Jasey, is much older and knowledgeable about horror stories. She's old enough to watch horror movies and talk about them because she doesn't get nightmares anymore like we do. Jasey holds her flashlight under her chin and looks me in the eyes. Her eyes are much darker in this lighting, shifting her appearance to be ghoulish and dark. The dark brown of her eyes turning black and the silhouette of her eyelashes and nose create a shadow on her face. I listen and wrap the blanket tighter around my body as Jasey continues with the story about the ghost girl who haunts our small Alaskan town. The wind outside creates an ominous song as she speaks. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand as she explains the ghost girl who roams and cries in the night. I continue to keep my stoic face as she finishes her story. The story finally ends, and I look at my younger cousin and see that she is as terrified as I am. As if my prayers have been answered, my grandma comes up the stairs and tells me through the door that my parents have called me home. I put on my little pink boots and blue winter jacket as I run home in the snow. The only light is from the moon and stars. I hear loud sounds, quickly jerking my neck from side to side to make sure the ghost girl isn't right behind me. It is only the wind. I finally reach my house just a quick walk from my grandmother's and run upstairs before I can say anything to my parents. I get into my bed and under my Hello Kitty blanket. I look up at that dreamcatcher and put my hands together to pray that it keeps that ghost girl away from my dreams.

This dreamcatcher has moved place-to-place with me as I grew older and always sits above my bed. The dreamcatcher was once crafted from my grandmother's hand. A technique she learned from her mother and passed on to my mother. The dreamcatcher was created to catch the bad forces and let the good ones through. It is a symbol of protection among those who have it, a marker that reminds me that I am a native woman who comes from a series of native women before me. Generations of women just like me have made me who I am today, from my mother to my great-great-grandmother, I come from strong women. Teaching young women to craft is a tradition passed through many indigenous women before me. The sweat of their palms and fingers staining the hide and the burn marks from lighters to cut the string on the web.

Now I am much older and have realized I must worry for something much bigger than a scary story. There is a hidden issue among Indigenous communities. A violence against native women that plagues many villages and reservations. Countless women are taken from their homes and families. Many of them are killed and assaulted. This issue is devastatingly unknown to many people, even though it's prominent and voiced by many communities. Countless families are searching for their girls without much help or recognition from anyone else. Those who aren't directly affected are preparing their little girls on what to do in these situations and pray that their daughters, nieces, and mothers don't have to face this kind of violence. There is very little outside help and voice to express the fear and anguish that native women and families face daily. The very real fear that women face while walking down the street, scoping out the area to hope that they won't be the next. They struggle to not question every stranger that comes into their life. They constantly share their location with their friends so they can have some sort of solace as they leave their house alone. It's a harsh reality that mothers must face as they sit their daughters down and give them a set of rules to follow.

“Don’t walk alone at night.”

“Always know your surroundings.”

“Only leave with trusted individuals.”

“Do not trust an angry man.”

“Always tell someone who you’re leaving with.”

“Always make sure you have something to protect yourself with.”

Like a song, their daughters repeat this as they get ready for school. They repeat it as they look around a crowded room. This genuine fear that one day they might become another statistic for other girls to look at in horror.

A ghost is something that follows you around. Whether you know it or not, it’s always there. Lingering in the back of your mind, like an itch you can’t scratch. Whether you know it or not, it hides in the shadows, following you around with such persistence. A ghost is something that is screaming to be seen. A ghost is Abigail Ootoova, a 54-year-old woman from Ottawa. A ghost is Adrienne Amikons, a 14-year-old girl from Peterborough. A ghost is Delta Makanak, a 6-year-old girl from Kasabonika Lake. A ghost is 10-year-old Ashley Johnson-Barr from Kotzebue, Alaska. A ghost is the hundreds and thousands of girls who are victims of this. A ghost can also be the daughter of a mother who wraps herself in her dark hoodie while she walks home from school because she doesn’t want to be spotted by lingering eyes. A ghost is the feeling the native girl in your class feels as she sinks into her seat in school because they can’t find her auntie. A ghost is all the girls who have fallen victim to this violence and clings to every single girl, to follow them around, begging to be known and found. The names of those girls live in the back of every native girl’s head, hoping they don’t become the next. A ghost is not something to turn away from; these girls are not something to be hidden away from the light.

These ghosts need to be voiced so the native women in your life don't feel fear for who they are and bring justice to those who continue to struggle with violence against native women.

My dreamcatcher wasn't just a gift from my grandmother to keep those bad dreams away as I slept. The dreamcatcher is something that ties me to the proud, inspirational strong women who have come before me and who will come after. My dreamcatcher holds the love my grandmother has for her heritage and culture. It displays the pride my mother has for her skin color and craft as she walks outside with her beaded earrings, head held up high. My dreamcatcher is a reminder that the only way for me to not be haunted by ghosts anymore is to let their names be heard and be proud of my cultural identity. To let the world know that native women don't cower in fear, they shine in adversity and pride for who they are, just like the women before us. Just like the women who have become victims of this violence would have wanted. For the world to hear this pain and know that this will not shake the strength out of native women. This dreamcatcher is for the little girl who once huddled under her Hello Kitty blanket. For the little girl who was so naïve to the truth and will one day be afraid of the world. This dreamcatcher is to remind that little girl that she is strong and resilient and that these ghosts will not be in the shadows anymore.