

The Road of the Tsimshian

“She looks like a seal in heat! No one could pick a better picture than this?” Gam Betty was scoping the memorial at the front of the parlor. I was standing behind her and heard a few gasps and whispers from the back of the room. It must’ve been friends of Rhoda because if anyone knew anything about Gam Betty they wouldn’t be surprised. A few aunties and uncles snickered; that was more appropriate. I looked at the picture of Rhoda. She looked just like me, light copper skin and high cheek bones that highlighted our eyes when we smiled. I felt out of place, standing around in a funeral parlor for my sister who we hadn’t found. No one was expecting to either. Someone found her car abandoned on Highway 16, and everyone knew that meant we would probably never see her again.

Gam Betty was clutching my arm. Her age bitten hands were trembling, trying to keep herself upright as she fought with her legs.

“Let’s sit down Gam Betty,” I suggested and turned, guiding her to a chair. She moved slow and creaked like boughs in the wind.

“Thank you Lena,” Gam Betty said, slowly lowering herself into a multi-stained chair. She repositioned a bun of long silver hair, pulling it tight on the back of her head. “That picture of your sister is all wrong. We should have used that nice one of you two in front of the Skeena River.”

“Gam, no one could tell us apart if we used a picture with me in it.”

“Well then too bad for them. I’d imagine they’d guess well enough since you’re standing right here.”

I looked back at the head of the room. There had been a picture I wanted to use instead. It was an old photo of Rhoda and me when we were ten years old. In tattered secondhand jeans we were holding a frog. Our grins were still missing teeth. That was how I remembered Rhoda. To me we were still little ten-year-olds, skipping stones and stealing candy from Gam's cupboard.

I must have looked dazed. Gam turned to me and asked if I'd get her some water. She always knew what I was thinking. Rhoda called her the third wheel on our tricycle.

"Of course Gam," I said and crossed the room to the water cooler. My shoulders sagged as I let the recent sleepless nights catch up to me. They had been filled with spotty dreams of a warping road, moving trees, and what I think was my sister's voice. I watched a deep crack form in the concrete, growing and spreading. It swallowed trees, animals, the very earth itself as it spread. The scar grew and grew, cutting across the country. It spread all the way from me in Prince Rupert over to McBride British Columbia.

I jerked my hand away from the cooler. The water was overflowing, and the cold sting sunk into my digits. Going back to Gam Betty I could tell she knew something was up. As much as I love Gam, I wasn't ready to talk about Rhoda. I decided to dodge her.

"Gam, I'm going to go get some fresh air. I'll be right back." I told her, handing over the Dixie cup. She nodded with understanding.

I hurried across the parking lot. I don't know why I was starting to run, but by the time I got to my car I was panting and kicking off my heels and tossing them into the back seat. I climbed into the front and slammed the door; my head dropped forward hitting the silent horn on my steering wheel. Long dark hair tangled in my hands as I clutched the wheel, knuckles white and stiff.

Unconsciously, I started the car. As if I were on a pre-planned course I drove away from the funeral home, heading for the highway that swallowed everything. It didn't take long for me to get onto 16, and before I knew it I was driving out of town. I drove until there were no more buildings, no more cars, only the balsams and cedars standing clustered next to one another as the asphalt behemoth cut through them. I stopped the car and sat there. I waited, challenging the road to do something. I could still hear Rhoda complaining about the busted radio in my car. I had been saving money to replace it, but instead I bought a gun that was sitting in the glove box waiting as impatiently as I was.

I don't know exactly how long I was parked in the middle of the road, but sooner or later I heard a car horn blaring behind me. The violent screech set me off. I let out a long scream and shook myself against the steering wheel as though I were trying to rip it out of the car. The offending Ford passed me, making a rude gesture that I didn't care enough about to pay attention to. I was trembling as I watched the truck disappear over the horizon; it too was swallowed by the highway. A little frog caught my eye as it hopped across the road, heading for the Skeena. I turned the key in the ignition and headed back into town.

Gam Betty was waiting for me outside of the funeral home. I pulled up to her and got out of the car.

"There you are. Let's go home, seeing all these people dressed up in black makes me think we're at a funeral or something." Gam was never one to mope about when someone passed on. She always said we'd see them again. I vaguely remembered a story Gam had told Rhoda and me once about walking on. We never listened too well though, and when we stopped listening Gam stopped telling stories.

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Rhoda and I were playing at the Skeena. The banks were muddy, and the air tasted like fish and ice. Gam Betty told us not to get too close to the river. We were busy making mud pies and knew how sharp Gam was so we didn't dare venture close to the water's edge. I stood there watching us play. I looked down and there was a rattle in my hand, I started to shake it and the sound bounced off the trees and skipped across the lake. I looked back at Rhoda and me playing in the mud. Rhoda was wearing a frog mask, one that Gam had shown us a long time ago. Gam Betty was no longer near us and a deep threatening groan resonated through the woods. A sickening crack sent ravens flying as the concrete beast tore through the land and headed toward us. I lurched forward to grab the little Rhoda but Highway 16 grabbed her first, swallowing her into a crack in the earth.

I was brewing coffee, sitting at the kitchen table with three legs. The morning had not been kind to me. I woke up early and could not stop revisiting my dream. It had once been a memory, but something had happened that blurred the distinction between dream and reality.

Gam Betty shuffled into the kitchen, her fluffy pink bunny slippers slid across the yellowed linoleum tile. "You're burning the coffee." Gam tsked, turning off the machine. She eased into the chair across from me, "You are Tsimshian Lena. You will dream, and you will see things. What you do about it will either help you heal, or give you a burden to carry."

I watched Gam Betty across the table. She was not usually awake before the sun rose. I wouldn't have put it past her to know already my dream, in detail. My legs were crossed tightly over one another, and my hands clenched in my lap. "I lost my twin sister. Gam, I lost Rhoda.

How are dreams supposed to heal that?" I was defiant, unwilling to listen. But Gam Betty was persistent.

"Rhoda is still somewhere inside you Lena, all you need to do is receive. When you dream, listen for Rhoda," she told me, her eyes pleading. Her aged copper face hid things well, but I was able to see it for once: the pain behind all those years. Twenty-four years raising us, and now one of us gone. It wasn't sadness for herself, or even for Rhoda. It was for me.

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Highway 16 was the most dangerous place of all for a Tsimshian woman at night. Yet there I was, sitting in my car alone at some ungodly hour. I watched the road, waiting for it to curl back on itself, to roll right up like a rug and sweep me and my car away with it. My headlights cut into the darkness of the road; they revealed all the scars and blemishes that made 16 look so gnarled and dangerous.

Rhoda had told me something. I had seen the little ten year old sister of mine in a dream that night. I watched her mouth form careful words and sentences, but I could not remember what they were. I focused on her mouth, remembering the shapes she made. My eyes glazed over receded into my thoughts. I thought about what Gam Betty had told me the day before. As I tried to remember I felt like the road was breathing, growing and shrinking with every breath.

Words finally started to form in my mind. Rhoda had told me one sentence, "Keep living sister; you are Tsimshian." It sounded like words straight from Gam Betty's mouth, but I remember it was told by the spirit of my sister, the way I remembered my sister.

The highway stopped breathing. A frog sat in the headlights in front of my car. I opened the glove box and pulled out the picture of Rhoda and me at the Skeena when we were young. We were two young Tsimshian girls. Now I had to learn just what that meant, for both of us.