

Honor Dance

By Rose Po

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Author's note: This was my first fanfic, originally posted in the mists of pre-history. It is very rough. But my take on Gage is not in the same place and if I tried to fix it, it would end up a very different story.

Honor Dance

Feb. 28, 1973

Sometimes, latrine duty has its pluses, thought paramedic John Gage, shoving the brush around the toilet bowl.

From the dayroom, leaked the drone of Walter Cronkite's voice. The rest of the crew were watching the news, while Marco Lopez put the finishing touches on his famous Irish stew. Ever since Johnny had heard about the occupation of Wounded Knee on the radio this morning, he had been gripped by a formless dread. If he didn't hear about it he wouldn't have to think about it. "Get a grip, Gage," he whispered, "This isn't 1890."

"Johnny!" called Captain Stanley from the squad room, his voice echoing in the apparatus bay. "You got a visitor."

Gage tossed the brush into the bucket and turned on the sink faucet. "Coming, Cap," he called, quickly washing his hands. He hurried past the engine and squad. What he saw as he came through the dayroom door brought him to a sudden stop.

Standing next to table shouldering a worn duffel bag was his cousin, Dwayne. The last time Johnny had seen him was when Dwayne came back from 'Nam with his eyes dulled and unsmiling. He had allowed his hair to grow since then, now it hung in thin braids well below his shoulders. Dwayne had become a wanderer. The latest John had heard was that he was using his GI benefits to study sociology at San Jose State.

"Misun," said Dwayne, extending his hand in a stylized fingers up handshake.

"Dwayne," said Johnny, awkwardly grasping his hand. He hadn't heard Lakota in years. Neither he nor Dwayne had learned it as kids; their parents had wanted them to speak perfect English.

"How are you, man?" asked Dwayne.

Glancing out the corner of his eye, Gage could see most of the rest of the crew pretending to be discretely uninterested in the bit of family drama unfolding before them. *Beats the evening news*, he thought, disgustedly. Chet, however, wasn't even feigning disinterest. He was instead taking in Dwayne's braids, the torn army jacket with the Vietnam campaign ribbon, and the red windband.

“What are you doing here, Dwayne?” John asked.

“Johnny,” interrupted Captain Stanley, standing up. “Aren't you going to introduce us to your guest?”

“My cousin, Dwayne Baptiste,” mumbled Gage. “Dwayne, the guys.” He waved toward the group on the couch.

“Would you like join us for dinner?” asked the Cap.

“No, thanks. Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry.” Dwayne gave John an ‘I need to talk to you in private’ look. “Johnny, can I have a word with you?”

“’Cuse us.” Gage turned on his heel and headed past the squad. Dwayne followed.

Dwayne turned to the paramedic, his eyes holding a dim flicker of the sparkle they had had when he and Johnny were kids. “Misun, I'm going to the Knee.”

“Wounded Knee!” exploded Johnny. He felt like a pound of ice had dropped into his gut.

“Shh,” Dwayne said, glancing toward the door. “The fuzz...”

“We're not cops. We're firemen...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“You'll get arrested.” Johnny looked into his cousin's eyes. “You saw all those Fed's and those guns on the news. Do you think they're just going to let you walk in there? You could get hurt,” he swallowed hard, “or killed.” The word hung in the air between them. Gage could feel his heart pounding.

Dwayne paused for a moment, straightening. “If I die to make better life for our people then it is a good day to die...”

“Cut the noble redman crap,” interrupted John.

“Johnny,” Dwayne said putting his hand on his cousin's shoulder, “Are you coming?”

“What?!” he exclaimed, pushing away Dwayne's hand. “This is crazy. You're crazy. I can't go. Hell, you can't go!” He took a few deep breaths trying to calm down. *You've got to quit shouting*, he thought. *It will not help.*

Dwayne looked at him sadly. "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Leaning back against the squad, Johnny sighed, "Dwayne, what do you expect to do up there?"

"Help our people."

"By going to jail? Don't you think we have enough martyrs?"

"We will finally get the government's attention. Even if they have to kill us all, they will eventually be forced to honor the treaties."

"There are legal ways...."

"And they haven't worked," Dwayne interrupted, angrily. "Johnny, I thought you cared about what happened to your people." He lifted his duffel, pushing past Gage. "I guess your cozy wasichu lifestyle is more important to you, brother." He walked down the driveway toward a battered old car.

"Dwayne!" Gage called as the car door slammed. He pressed his forehead against the side of the squad and pounded his fist on the rail. In the squad room he could hear Marco putting dinner on the table.

"Gage," called the Cap, "It's getting cold." Johnny walked into the squad room and sat down.

"Did Dwayne leave?" he asked, completely missing John's mood.

"Yeah," he answered.

Chet set down his spoon. "So, Johnny, are you going on the warpath with your brother?"

"Chet!" exclaimed Marco and Mike simultaneously.

"What?! They weren't exactly whispering." Kelly turned his attention back to baiting Gage. "It's crazy," he said twirling his finger next to his temple. "But Gage, you know, you'll look good in stripes."

"Shut up, Chet. You don't know anything about it."

"What's to know?"

"Chet, you're an IDIOT!" exploded Johnny. He rose from the table so fast he spilled his stew.

For half a second he debated slugging Kelly.

“Gage, Kelly, both of you settle down,” commanded the Cap. “Now!”

John turned and stalked into the dorm.

A good half hour later, Roy found Johnny scrubbing the sinks. There is more to this than just Chef's teasing, he decided. He stood behind Gage, studying the reflection of his partner's face in the mirror over the sink. “Whoa Johnny, leave some of the porcelain behind.”

“Roy, leave it alone.”

DeSoto stood quietly for a few minutes. “You never mentioned Dwayne,” he said, sitting on the locker room bench.

Johnny shrugged. “He's my mother's sister's youngest. Dwayne's dad started drinking after his oldest boy killed himself. He kinda pulled my aunt down with him.” Johnny dropped the sponge in the sink, straightening to stretch his back. “Anyway, Dwayne came to live with us. In our culture she was his mother so he moved in.” Johnny stopped.

Roy nodded, waiting.

Gage sank on the bench beside DeSoto. “After Dwayne was in the service he wandered around for a few years, then he went to college.” John took a deep breath. “Mom used to tell me all he could talk about was fish-ins, treaty rights and Alcatraz.”

Johnny slumped awkwardly against the locker. “Dwayne got into these red-power organizations. Now AIM has taken over Wounded Knee and Dwayne wants us to go out there. He's going to get himself killed.”

“Johnny, the police will resolve the situation peacefully...”

“It isn't the police. On the rez it'll be the Feds,” interrupted Gage.

Roy continued, “Whoever, it will be handled professionally. No one will get hurt.”

John closed his eyes. His voice dropped to a whisper, “My head knows you're right but, my heart keeps saying this is Wounded Knee.”

Roy studied his partner's face. *He is really freaked out over this*, he thought. Roy knew in a

vague way that there had been a terrible massacre at Wounded Knee. “Johnny, that was a long time ago.” He didn't really understand the grip these long past events had on his partner, but maybe ‘forgive and forget’ was a European attitude and not the Indian attitude.

“I know. But, the sons and daughters of the victims are alive and they still tell their parents’ stories. I've heard them. You don't -- you can't forget.” Johnny turned his head toward Roy, opening his eyes. “I know that white -- uh -- non-Indian people today don't think of Indians the same way as they did back then. But, I've been in the service, Roy. I know how easy it is to objectify a person on the other side of a gun. Those fed's will have my cousin on the wrong side of the gun.”

Roy nodded. “Johnny, don't worry about Dwayne. The whole thing will probably be over before he even gets there.”

Gage sighed wearily, “Particularly, in that old car of his.”

The dark mask of old grief that remained fixed over Johnny's features worried Roy. His partner's demeanor was usually an impulsive, cheery openness. Roy tried to draw him out. “What did he call you? Me-son.”

“Misun. Little brother.”

“I didn't know you spoke -- uh -- Indian.”

“I don't.” Johnny gave Roy a wry smile. “Neither does -- did -- Dwayne. At least, he didn't when we were kids. We were mixed-bloods, living the same lifestyle as the non-Indian ranch families leasing the reservation land around us. My folks didn't teach us to speak Lakota. Mom had always been teased about her accent and Dad's teachers put lye soap in his mouth when he spoke Indian. I guess they figured if we spoke perfect English we could at least get served at the restaurants in town.” He stood back up and began pacing nervously.

Roy nodded, inwardly startled. Johnny's Indian background was an area Roy knew very little about. He had always imagined it filled with the activities he used to pretend while playing cowboys and Indians as a kid: horse riding, communing with nature, dancing, hunting, and fishing. This matter of fact statement of cultural oppression didn't fit with his mental images.

“Anyway, Dwayne became a born-again Indian and started going to powwows, community

meetings and ceremonies.” Gage turned kicking the trash can, suddenly angry again. “I guess, he thinks that gives him the right to come back here to give me a guilt trip about not doing enough to help out the tribe.”

“Johnny, you spend every working day helping people.”

“I know. But all Dwayne sees is that the people I help are ‘dominant culture’.”

“That is his problem not yours.”

"He's right, Roy." John swallowed hard. "In the Indian way, you have an obligation to use your talents to help out your tribe. And in case you haven't noticed, this isn't the rez."

January 6, 1975

Joanne is going to kill me, thought Roy, looking at his watch. For the past two hours, he and Hank Stanley had been watching Johnny get silently and methodically drunk. All day his partner had been withdrawn and distant. Chet had tried to tease him out of his brooding, almost earning himself a black eye. At the end of the shift when Gage had announced he was going to get a drink, he and Stanley had decided they had better go along. Now, after spending two hours sitting in a rundown hellhole of a bar watching Johnny drink, Roy still had no idea why they were there. John opened his seventh beer. DeSoto caught the Cap's eyes across table and shrugged.

"Pal, time to talk," said Stanley.

Johnny met Hank's gaze taking a long sip of his beer. "No." He stood, overturning his chair and lurched away from the table still clutching the bottle.

"You have to get this off your chest," said Stanley, standing up.

“No!” John yelled. “You just don't get it, do you?” he asked, taking another sip.

Captain Stanley flinched as the beer bottle hit the far wall, smashing into little pieces.

“It's all my fault,” Johnny whispered, sliding down the wall to sit on the floor. "I should have been there."

The room fell silent, or as silent as a crowded bar on Friday night can get. The bartender was headed around the bar toward Gage. "Get him out of here before I call the cops."

Roy stood, moving defensively toward his partner. "Come on, Johnny," he said taking one arm, while Hank took the other. "Time to get some air," he said pulling the paramedic upright.

Outside a cold winter rain fell softly upon them. Stanley leaned Gage against the side of the DeSoto's car. Johnny's knees folded and crying he collapsed on the pavement. Roy knelt down beside John, pulling him into a sitting position. "Johnny, talk to me."

Johnny drew a shuttering breath. "I should have been there. I could of saved him." He pounded his fists on the asphalt, raking his hands across the rough surface.

Roy winced as the sharp gravel drew blood.

"All he needed was a damned IV. A one dollar bag of Ringer's." He turned facing Roy, who grabbed his shoulders to keep him from falling. "Anyone with the training and supplies could of saved him. Instead, he died in the back seat of a car on his way to the hospital."

John's shoulders shook beneath Roy's hands. "Who?"

"My cousin," sobbed Johnny.

Roy and Hank exchanged shocked looks. "Dwayne?" asked the Cap.

Gage nodded.

Roy hadn't heard any news about Dwayne since shortly after Wounded Knee. He hadn't made it to the occupation after all. Johnny's words had proved prophetic. Dwayne's car blew a something or other in Nevada and by the time he'd earned enough money to have it fixed, the occupation was almost over. He had gone to the reservation anyway and found himself a girlfriend who was in the process of settling him down. The last John had told him was that Dwayne had gotten a job with a tribal social service organization.

"His car was run off the road by a drunk driver near Potato Creek," said Johnny, his words beginning to slur. "He was bleeding internally. By the time the tribal police got him to the hospital in Pine Ridge, he was dead." He broke into jagged sobbing.

Roy tightened his grip on Johnny's shoulders. It was an old story. One he and Johnny had seen first-hand in Santa Rosa county. Distance and an absence of trained hands were killing people in rural areas -- people who didn't need to die.

"An EMT with the appropriate equipment could have saved him." Johnny tried to break Roy's hold on his shoulders. Icy rainwater ran from his hair and mixed with his tears. "If I had been on the rez and not here, I could have helped him." He succeeded in breaking away from his partner and slumped to pavement. "Leave me alone."

DeSoto looked up at Stanley's concerned face. "Cap, please, call Joanne. Tell her what happened and that I'm going to stay with Johnny tonight."

Johnny sat up suddenly, his heart racing. He had been dreaming: the bebop had been going off, but he hadn't been able to find the squad. Gage's stomach gave an acid heave. He kicked the twisted, clammy sheets away from his legs and stumbled to the bathroom.

John pulled himself up from the bathroom floor. "Serves you right...," he whispered to his reflection in the mirror. He slowly opened the bedroom door and tiptoed into the kitchen. He paused listening; from the living room he could hear Roy's heavy breathing. *Still asleep. I guess I managed to throw-up quietly after all*, he thought leaning against the kitchen sink. His head was throbbing in time to Roy's breathing and his mouth tasted like Henry smelled. Johnny slid a glass from the dish drainer and turned on the barest trickle of water, holding the rim of the glass against the spigot. As it filled, he watched a thin band of pink appear behind the gray outline of the hills and remembered:

"She's a witch," whispered Dwayne, dropping his school books and crawling behind the rusty old car.

John peeked past the crumpled bumper. An old woman in a black cotton dress set down a basket of wash. Her long white braids were safety pinned together behind her back. "No, she isn't," whispered Johnny.

"Yes, she is," Dwayne insisted. "A gopher medicine woman. She takes a porcupine quill and dips it in ghost turnip tea. Then..." Dwayne held his fist, like a blowgun, in front of his mouth. "Poof," he said, puffing up his cheeks. "Your neck swells up -- like a gopher."

"You're makin' it up."

"No, old man Holy Dance told me."

"Old man Holy Dance can't speak English."

"He said sica wakan," hissed Dwayne into Johnny's ear. "Bad medicine."

John peered past the bumper into the now empty yard, the old woman was gone. He turned back to tell his cousin, but he was gone, too. "Dwayne," hissed Johnny. Suddenly on the side of his ankle, he felt a sharp stinging. "She got me," he yelled, jumping up and running.

Running right into Dwayne, who was holding a handful of prickly, dried thistle flower heads.

"You didn't fool me," yelled Johnny.

Dwayne laughed.

"You got it wrong. Old man Holy Dance said sunkawakan, horse," he said pushing angrily past Dwayne.

"Yeah, and you're a horse's...", laughed Dwayne until the handful of horse manure hit his chest.

Johnny sat up from the pile of quilts on the floor of his parent's room. Grey early morning light and a cold draft were coming through the window. The storm pane lay on the floor and a chair was pushed up to the sill. One of the thin white drapes was flapping out the opening. He glanced over at the corner where Dwayne had been sleeping. He was gone. Johnny stuck his head out the window. Outside he could see Dwayne racing toward the barn.

Johnny slid quietly past the living room door carrying his tennis shoes. Just through the doorway, sat the star quilt draped coffin, holding what was left of Dwayne's father, resting on sawhorses in the middle of the room. Next to it, two old women sat in straight-backed kitchen chairs taking turns holding a baby. From the kitchen came the bustle of the women cooking for the feed after the funeral. The pounding of a hammerstone, powdering dried meat for wasna, kept time to an old woman's mourning song. Johnny walked down the hall and slowly opened the mudroom door.

On the porch, he paused to pull on his tennis shoes. The early spring rains had turned the gray earth into a slick gumbo clay. Last summer's grass, soggy and brown, formed a spongy mat beneath his feet as he ran. The air around the barn was heavy with the smell of old manure. On the roof Dwayne stood, silhouetted against the gray clouds, walking barefoot along the ridgepole, his arms outstretched and his shirt rippling in the wind.

Gage jerked the tap closed as the cold water poured over his hand stinging the fresh scratches on his palm. He swirled a gulp of water around his mouth, spitting it into the sink. He opened the drawer next to the fridge and pulled out a writing tablet.

Roy woke, tangled in a worn crocheted afghan. He listened for a repetition of the noise that had awakened him. The soft scrapping sound of a chair on the floor came from the kitchen -- Johnny. He sat up, slowly rotating his head trying to loosen the at least two cricks in his neck. *Gage's couch is better designed for sitting close to a pretty woman than for sleeping. I'm get too old for this*, he thought, standing up. The wall clock said 10:35. DeSoto groaned, he was to have driven Chris to his music lesson thirty minutes ago.

Roy stopped in the kitchen door. Dressed in shorts and undershirt his partner sat, back toward the door, busily writing. *It isn't fair, I think he feels better than me and he spent last night drunk*, thought Roy with a guilty start when he remembered why Johnny had gotten drunk.

"I made coffee," said Gage never looking up.

Roy rooted through the dish drainer looking for a coffee cup. He settled for a chipped mug advertising some pharmaceutical with which he was unfamiliar. The convoluted route by which one of the ER doctor's mugs had arrived in Johnny's kitchen didn't bear much consideration. "How are you doing, Johnny?" asked Roy leaning against the edge of the counter.

John closed his eyes and slowly tipped his head back. "OK."

Now that he could see the paramedic's pale and strained face, Roy knew John was far from OK. *I hope he is not going to be sick.* "Johnny," he said shaking his head.

"Roy, thanks for...," started Gage opening his eyes to meet DeSoto's concerned gaze. "Well, for being there last night. I do appreciate it. But, I'm all right now; I have to be."

Yeah, right Junior, thought Roy, taking a sip of the steaming coffee.

Johnny put down his pen. "The wake and funeral is Friday in Wambli. My Mom needs me." Johnny rose from the table and disappeared into the bedroom. "I'm going to call headquarters to arrange for a leave of absence."

DeSoto took a longer drink of the coffee; the caffeine was beginning to revive him. He looked down at the papers Johnny had been writing. Roy began to read -- surprised. Johnny was writing to the Indian Health Service pleading for a EMT program for rural reservations, so that no one else would lose a brother the way he had. Gage's writing style normally tended toward an abbreviated language suitable for MICU forms and logbooks. This, however, was downright eloquent. Roy looked up to meet John's questioning gaze. "It's very good. I hope it helps."

Feb. 28, 1976

"Gage," called Captain Stanley from his office door. "Can I have a word with you?"

Everyone in the apparatus bay stopped their cleaning and turned to look at Johnny. "Yeah, Cap," he replied. He slammed the equipment bay door shut and shot Roy a quick look. "I wonder what he wants?"

"What did you do?" asked DeSoto.

"Nothing."

"Busted", whispered Chet under his breath.

"Gage!" called Hank.

"Coming," said Gage, grimacing at Kelly, who ducked Johnny's abortive slap at the side of his head. He ran around the front of the squad, stopping at Stanley's office door.

"Come in," said Stanley, gesturing toward a chair. "Sit." He picked up a paper from his desk. "I understand you've been doing some letter writing."

John squirmed trying to remember if he had recently opted to share any of his suggestions for improving the fire service with the brass at headquarters. *No*, he decided. "Cap?"

"Seems you made quite an eloquent case for a reservation EMT program," he said handing Johnny the paper. "The department has been requested to grant time off for you to testify before a Public Health Service fact finding committee."

The letter I wrote after Dwayne's death, thought Gage. *Someone finally listened.*

"It seems you're going to Santa Fe."

When John got home he found a notice from the post office about a certified letter. *Santa Fe*, he thought bitterly, *somebody must be trying to get out the Indian vote. Still it was a worthwhile cause and maybe - just maybe - someone would do something.* It had been almost two years since Dwayne's death and perhaps he would be able to bring some good from his family's loss. By drawing on indigenous talent, an EMT program held so much promise for the folks back on the reservation by extending emergency medical services to the outlying districts.

Nov. 6, 1977

Gage parked the Land Rover next to a beat-up old pick-up. He reached for the blurry mimeographed flyer on the seat next to him. 'Powwow. Good times dance,' it read, 'Saint Francis de Sales school gym.' He crumpled the paper and tossed it into passenger side foot well. He didn't know why he was here. As a kid he had always hated these things, they left him feeling out of place among the full-bloods who always seem to know what to do. *I guess, I've had Dwayne on my mind lately*, he thought, opening the door.

He nodded to a couple sharing a cigarette in the doorway. The man was big, rawboned and speaking in an unfamiliar language with a heavy-set woman in a startling electric blue velvet dress. "Yatahey, man," he said to Johnny.

"Hi," replied Johnny.

Inside the air was heavy with the smell of hot grease, leather, horsemint and a touch -- just a hint -- of dirty tennis shoes. *Yeah*, he thought as he inhaled, *it's another powwow in a school gym*. John slid carefully past two middle-aged men in eagle feather bustles, on his way to the bleachers. On the floor, a handful of fancy shawl dancers whirled and dipped in time to a fast Southern song. On the last drumbeat they stopped, allowing Johnny to check out their shining young faces. A group brushed by him on the way to their seats, two of the young women favoring him with giggly glances. *Look at all the Indians*, he thought with a start. *I've forgotten what it is like not to be the only one in the room*.

On the floor, a family carried out laundry baskets of blankets and yard goods, in preparation for a giveaway. A rustle spread through the audience as people began drifting outside for a smoke or toward the refreshment stand. *A Navajo taco would hit the spot right about now*, Johnny decided, climbing down from the bleachers.

Below him, the MC battled squealing feedback in the sound system into silence and began to read the family's statement. "The Kills Good family would like to honor their son, Vernon's, graduation from the emergency medical technician training program. He will be starting a new job with the Cheyenne River Sioux's department of Public Safety."

Johnny stopped climbing down and tried to pick out Vernon from the crowd of relatives. He was a young man in fancy dance regalia, standing at the head of the gathering receiving line. Johnny watched his face as the MC called out the names of the people to whom the family made gifts. *He is so young. I was never that young. So much of that innocence will be shaken from him by this job, particularly out on the plains with it's hundred mile runs to hospitals.*

On the floor the MC continued, calling for an honor dance song. "Montana Boys, you have the honors." An answering drum roll sounded. "Everybody stand!" he roared. The singers pushed up the song and Vernon circled the floor once, alone. On his second circuit people spilled onto the floor, shaking Vernon's hand and pressing crumpled dollar bills into his palm. Women donned their shawls and wished him good fortune. Men filed past, hats in their hands, giving Vernon a quick single handshake. Johnny found himself shuffling slowly into the line of well-wishers. The drumbeat pounded in his chest. "Good luck," he whispered, falling into step at the back of the swelling, circling group of dancers.

Authors notes: Sorry, if I stepped on anyone else's reality. I had always imagined Johnny as a urban i'eska, traveling the cycle back and forth between the Indian realities of the rez and in the city. He was, to borrow a phrase from Gerald Vizenor, earthdiver recreating tribalism in an English speaking pan-Indian world.

This is dedicated to the men and women who work so that -- "hechel lena oyate kin nipi kte" (that these people may live).