

Snagging

By Rose Po
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Author's note: The events in this story take place soon after those in Wowacintanka. While it is not imperative to read the first story, it will make some things clearer. And, like Wowacintanka, it assumes that by 1980 LA County was using standing orders.

This story can be found here:

<http://www.geocities.com/toddf2002/Wowacintankaweb.htm>

1980

John Gage curled his bare toes around the edge of a scrap of 2 x 4 planted in the middle of the mud puddle and concentrated on keeping his balance. In the pale pre-dawn light, the huge, round water tanks sitting on the back of a flatbed truck at the edge of the campgrounds loomed ghostlike over the slippery mess. He stooped beneath the leaking spigot, turned the handle and gasped as the cold water streamed over his ears. Jerking shut the valve and straightening, he rubbed shampoo into his wet hair.

The second day of the Intertribal Friendship Center Benefit Powwow was starting slowly, with only a few yet awake -- a couple children intent on some game, a pair of scrawny yellow mutts, and him. The song from the birds in the pine trees covering the hills surrounding the powwow grounds filled the air, drowning out all other sounds in the still sleeping camp. The daybreak wind stirred the streamers on the poles of the occasional tipi dotting the field of pickups, tents and campers, and blew yellow dust from the road in a low cloud through the campground.

Tipping back his head, Gage slowly massaged the shampoo into a lather and studied the dark scrub that blanketed the hillside, savoring his escape from the closeness of the city and his own concerns. Although he'd been back on the job for over three months and was giving a convincing performance of normalcy, something more critical than just his shirt had burned away in the fire that had flashed through the dark hole where he had been working. Nothing but the persistent nightmares reached through his emotional exhaustion. Some days he expected to look down and see that he no longer cast a familiar shadow.

The breeze plastered the icy, wet fabric of Gage's T-shirt against his ribs, and blew a trickle of soapy water into his eye. He bent and wiped the suds from his face with the hem of his shirt. Straightening, he looked right into the eyes of a tall, broad shouldered woman walking toward the other tank, her strong brown hands clutching a pair of empty gallon jugs. Her hair was drawn into the scalp hugging, French braids of a shawl dancer. She had muscular hips, small firm breasts, and a wide pleasant face -- nothing special by the anorexic, blond-haired and suntanned standards of LA, yet she held his attention. Unthinking, Gage stared.

Lately, he found himself obsessed with women. He had always had a healthy interest in the opposite sex, but now he had become acutely aware of their presence. One glance would set him imagining the weight of the soft mound of a breast in his hand, the warm expanse of a belly against his, sweet smelling hair spilling between his fingers, or smooth skin under his lips.... Heart racing in the aftermath of yet another nightmare, he would lie awake at night and yearn for the warmth of a body against his, driving away the chill, distracting him, reassuring him. John sighed, half in longing, half in frustration.

Gage blushed, suddenly aware of the woman's eyes on him and his own disheveled appearance. He was shivering and soaking wet -- not his best look. Damp shorts and a sodden shirt clung to him like a pair of ferocious wild animals. The cold had blanched his skin several shades lighter. He stood awkwardly twisted, with his scarred arm thrust self-consciously behind his back and the fingers of his other hand curled in an imaginary embrace. And worst of all, he knew his all too expressive features were revealing his thoughts.

The woman chuckled as she filled her water containers.

Gage's face burned. Eyes stinging from the shampoo, he ducked his head and focused on pouring water over his hair. When he looked up she was gone.

Gage watched the bleeding forearm wave in the air in front of his face. The wounded limb wove first one way then the other in mesmerizing zigzags. The owner of the arm -- a stolid man dressed in the ribbon shirt, buckskin leggings, and otter trailer of a Southern Straight dancer -- was so engrossed in his storytelling that he was seemingly oblivious to the injury. The dancer stopped his gesturing only when blood threatened to drip on his dark blue dance apron, which was adorned with beaded replicas of the Los Angeles Fire Department and the 101st Airborne insignias.

John's eyes followed the arc of the arm through the air. He grabbed, catching the man's thick wrist. "Sonny," he hissed, pressing a dressing in place and fumbling for the adhesive tape inside the trauma bag.

"...We pry the roof off the doghouse and there was the two of them, starin' up at us like: 'What the hell?'" L.A. City firefighter Sonny Gwahega mimed the wide-eyed, startled expression of one of the characters in his story. "Weirdest thing I ever saw," he declared sweepingly, leaning back in the folding chair and spreading his arms wide.

The tape flew from Gage's grasp, thrown by Gwahega's unexpected movement. Glancing briefly and pleadingly at the canvas awning covering the first-aid station, John stifled a sigh of frustration and flexed his stiffening right hand. He scrambled through the grass chasing after the errant roll.

"So, the woman pipes up, 'We were -- uh -- just looking for the dog,' " continued Gwahega.

"Sonny, will you give me a break?" beseeched John, recapturing Gwahega's arm and pinning it against the table.

Gwahega ignored Gage and focused instead on the pretty woman seated at the far end of the table. "...The Cap looks down at them -- they're buck-naked, mind you." Gwahega waggled his thin black eyebrows at the woman, imitating the infamous facial expressions of City 15's station officer. "And Cap says: 'Next time, you might bring a leash.'"

Perched on the folding chair that had been positioned to form a makeshift barrier between the first aid area and the ambulance parked next to the tent, nurse Vera McGinnis hid a grin, refusing to be charmed by Gwahega's performance. Avoiding his flirtatious gaze, she stared down at her chest and brushed lint from the black words 'American Indian Free Clinic -- Staff' emblazoning the front of her red tee shirt. "It's always good to hear my tax dollars are being well spent," she said, her voice heavy with the loam of the Mississippi Choctaw reservation.

Gage snorted, having years ago received the same polite brush-off from the attractive but very unattainable nurse. "She's on to you, Sonny." He wrapped a fresh strip of tape around Gwahega's arm, securing one end of the bandage.

Gwahega grimaced at the paramedic. "There are some strange people out there," he asserted, shrugging, yanking the tape from Gage's damaged hand, and sending it spiraling to the ground, to land sticky side down. "Reminds me of the time..."

"Not only do you city guys dress funny, you're stupid too," Gage interrupted, fishing for the roll. Gage held it in front of the fireman's face, wisps of grass dangling dispiritedly from the strip of tape. "Will you hold still, so I can take care of this?" he asked, nodding toward the other man's arm.

McGinnis chuckled. "Let me do that. It's what he wants," she suggested, standing and motioning for Gage to let her take his place.

John felt a wave of heat roll through his belly as her jeans-clad hip brushed his leg as she jostled past him in the narrow space. He cleared his throat and concentrated on re-positioning Vera's abandoned chair in a patch of shade, all the time aware of the blood-warmth of the metal that had been in contact with the woman's skin. He retrieved his soda can and stared into the cool depths, avoiding Gwahega's too knowing gaze.

Gwahega smiled as the woman took his arm. "Don't be such an old lady, Johnny. I've been hurt worse testing hose."

John watched the nurse easily dress Gwahega's wound, yet again reminded of the lingering effects of his accident. Frowning, he spread the fingers of his right hand and placed them over his left hand, comparing the span of the two sets of digits and remembering. The bright August sun cast a harsh glare over the purplish scars on his hand and arm. Rolling his eyes over his own vanity, he dropped his arms to his sides. "So have I." He failed to achieve just the right joking tone.

Sonny cringed at his mistake. A flash of shame clouding his face, he lowered his gaze, turning away from the paramedic.

McGinnis shot the city firefighter a dark look. "Come to think of it," she said, looking at her watch, "this afternoon is the weirdest thing I've ever seen." She stood up and shaded her eyes, squinting at the arena and the vendors' booths beyond. "It's two o'clock and we still haven't had a cotton candy and hot dog overdose throw-up on either of us yet."

"Shh," whispered Gage, still shaken by the reminder of the past months. He forced a smile.

"That's like saying the q-word."

Chuckling, McGinnis shook her head.

Gwahega stood, stretched his newly bandaged arm, and lightly slapped Gage's shoulder. "When you get a break, come watch the dancing. There are some real pretty ladies out there -- none of whom know anything about you." He winked. "So you stand a chance."

Gage twitched his lips. "Maybe later," he replied noncommittally, feeling McGinnis' gaze burning at his back.

"Johnny?" started McGinnis, watching Gwahega walk away.

Gage shook his head and smiled weakly. "I'm fine, Vera." Closing his eyes, he straightened his long slender legs, leaned back in the chair, and listened to the MC's voice drift over the PA, shutting out the nurse and her concern.

"I've got to stretch my legs," said McGinnis after a few minutes. She stood and lifted an HT from the table. "I'll be back in a few."

"K." Gage turned his face toward the sun, the bright light seeping through his closed eyelids, staining the darkness beyond with the tint of blood. Frowning, he wondered why he was here at all. He had come to escape the loneliness of his apartment, Roy's furtive glances -- pregnant with unspoken worry -- and the nightmarish images that disrupted his sleep. Instead, he seemed to be confronting different faces with the same concerned expressions, and the same demons still plagued his nights.

"Excuse me..."

John opened his eyes and again found himself looking into the eyes of the woman he had seen at the water tanks. He took a deep breath and stared, studying the tiny variations in her dark brown irises, imagining them peering back at him, wide and molten. Unbidden his gaze slid down the soft brown skin of her face, falling toward her waist. Her words rose and fell around him in gentle, uncomprehended swoops. He started to speak but his tongue promptly knotted, instead he gaped open-mouthed.

"Are you deaf or something?" asked a voice from beside the woman.

With difficulty he tore his eyes from the woman to look at her companion, a short, stocky southern buckskin dancer who held the long white fringes of her dress away from her bleeding elbow.

"Yes," he stammered, uncomfortably aware he had been gawking like a pubescent teenager. "I mean, no.... I'm not. I was just looki..." He grimaced briefly, then pasted on his most charming smile, forcing his eyes to remain front and center and on his patient. "I was just a little distracted."

"My friend tripped on the bleachers and skinned her elbow," explained the woman, her voice rich and full. She motioned toward the buckskin dancer's arm.

Her hand came into Johnny's field of view as she gestured, a motion that was all long, strong fingers moving in a sharp declarative stroke. A delicately beaded band holding a watch encircled her wrist. Gage felt his eyes begin to drift off his patient and up the other woman's arm. "That's horrible," he murmured.

"Can you help her?" she asked.

Gage compelled himself to return his attention to the woman's friend's elbow. He rotated the limb slightly and studied the wound; the scrape slowly oozed blood. "Yes, a little disinfectant and a

Band-Aid, and she'll be as good as new." Gage beamed at the woman, then reluctantly turned to get a bandage.

"Agnes, he's kinda cute," stage-whispered the buckskin dancer, looking up from her bleeding elbow.

Silently, Gage repeated the woman's name.

"...Even if he's slow," she finished, giggling.

Gage felt his ears start to burn. Ducking his head, he dug deeper in the trauma bag.

"Slow can be good," commented Agnes, dryly.

Gage choked and dropped the bandage.

"Not when you're bleeding to death," remarked the dancer.

Blushing furiously, John retrieved the dressing if not his composure. Straightening, he turned toward the two women. "They really need to do something about those bleachers." Gently he took the buckskin dancer's arm in his hands and began to clean the wound, determined not to give the two women any more excuses to tease him. "We've had a bunch of people hurt falling on them," he babbled, conscious of Agnes watching him as he worked.

Balancing a paper plate sagging under the weight of a hot, honey-soaked slab of fry bread, Gage stood in the eastern aisle between stands of bleachers and gazed into the circular dance arena. On the packed earth in front of the announcer's stand, a dozen women dancers whirled and stepped, the long fringes on their shawls snapping. John searched their faces looking for Agnes. After a moment he found her, head thrown back and face locked in rapt concentration. Gage froze, studying her. Agnes's

outspread arms stretched a bright yellow shawl, decorated with ranks of stacked triangles in graduated shades of blue, over her shoulders and a rich blue, beaded yoke floated beneath her chin. A satiny yellow skirt encircled her hips and muscular legs. Her moccasin-clad feet seemed to hover above the ground, crossing and uncrossing in a rapid, intricate pattern, touching the earth only on the drumbeats.

John remembered one of the stories told to nosy tourists about the origin of the shawl dance. A butterfly, mourning the death of her mate, had created the special dance. Smiling slightly, he imagined Agnes wrapping him in the wings of her shawl and pulling him close. Suddenly, he felt the fry bread burning his skin through the grease soaked paper. Drawing a sharp breath between his teeth, Gage quickly shifted the thin plate to his other hand and shook his reddened fingers, banging them against the portable radio clipped to his belt.

A final accented drumbeat ended the song. In the arena all the dancers stopped on the last beat, the butterflies transforming back into women. For a brief moment silence and stillness reigned; the only movement was the rapid breathing of the dancers. Then the spell was broken. "Ladies, line up and show your numbers," instructed the MC. The women ambled toward the space in front of the announcer's stand, their energies seemingly spent.

Agnes stepped purposefully into place in the end of the line; her head was a hand's width higher than those of the other women. Elbow crooked, she displayed the hand-numbered paper pinned to her shawl.

John watched the judges walk down the ragged line. Gage spotted Gwahega, clipboard in hand, moving slowly past the dancers and making swift notations next to the names. Apparently the city fireman had been pressed into service judging the competition and was using his official glance at the

dancers' numbers to disguise some unofficial girl watching. Committing Agnes's number to memory, Gage drifted toward the edge of the dance circle nearest Gwahega.

Handing the clipboard to the head ladies' judge, Sonny smiled at John as he walked over. "Should have known a desperate bastard like you'd be unable to resist the ladies," teased Gwahega, winking.

"You should talk," replied Gage. "You weren't exactly adverse to taking a look."

"One takes advantage of what opportunities present themselves," asserted Sonny, peering knowingly over the dark lenses of his sunglasses.

"Speaking of opportunities," started Gage, leaning a little closer, "One eighty-seven..."

"Ahh, I should have guessed." Gwahega's smile got even wider. "She's a looker. Too good for a sorry f..."

"Sonny," interrupted John loudly.

"..like you," finished the fireman. "One eighty-seven: Agnes Peuse, Kalispel, from Oakland." He grinned wolfishly at Johnny. "She's a long way from home, and needs a big strong paramedic to show her," he paused and leered at Gage, "the sights."

Scowling, Gage shot Gwahega a dirty look. Shaking his head, he turned and headed for the bleachers.

"Hey, Band-Aid Man!"

Turning, Gage scanned the crowd. Agnes's friend stood in the first row, shading her eyes with a red-tail hawk feather fan and waving to him. Behind her an old woman, her face settled in the deep creases of extreme old age, frowned and muttered over what she obviously considered the forward and

impolite behavior of the young woman. John swallowed a sympathetic grimace; the too familiar generation gap between the reservation-born elderly and their more Anglicized, city-bred grandchildren brought to mind the comments of his older relatives over his own behavior.

Ignoring the elder's disapproval, the friend gestured toward a section of the bleachers covered with a thin Mexican blanket. "You can sit with us," she called, pointing to an empty space next to Agnes.

Agnes nodded at the paramedic. The other young woman bent and whispered in her ear, causing Agnes to laugh.

"Hello, ladies" said Gage, forcing himself not to gawk at Peuse.

"Band-Aid Man," greeted the friend, patting the bench between the two women.

"Johnny," he corrected, sitting. "Johnny Gage." In the bleachers behind him, the elderly woman stood and shooed her grandchildren away to different seats.

"Shirley Doyebi." The short woman gestured toward herself as she spoke.

"I remember," declared Gage sharply, jolted from his contemplation of Peuse's proximity by the other woman's introduction. "I filled out all the forms for your Band-Aid, remember?" he said softly, while using his empty hand to sketch a mountain of paperwork in the air. He winked and smiled broadly at Doyebi, trying to negate his abruptness.

Charmed, Doyebi beamed. "And Agnes Peuse," she continued, pointing to her companion with her chin.

"I know."

"He knows," mouthed Doyebi, sharing a conspiratorial glance with Peuse.

John twitched, both cheered and unnerved by Agnes's apparent interest. He pretended to watch the teenage men's traditional dancers, trying to figure out how to open the conversation.

"What tribe are you, Band-Aid Man..." At Gage's mock glower, Doyebi cleared her throat. "Uh -- Johnny?"

"Oglala."

"You're a long way from home," observed Doyebi.

"I live in Los Angeles," said Gage.

"Do you know," asked Shirley, beginning to question Johnny, searching for mutual acquaintances in relatively small urban Native world.

Gage answered distractedly, only half listening to Doyebi. Instead he hungrily watched Agnes watch the dancing, following her movements with his eyes.

"What do you do for a living?" asked Shirley, suddenly.

"I'm a firefighter-paramedic with the L.A. County Fire Department." John considered the smooth curve of Agnes's neck, while rapidly searching his memory for a fire story he could use to impress her. He opened his mouth.

"Married?" continued Shirley.

Gage closed his mouth, choking back his tale. "No."

"Engaged, going steady?" Doyebi's voice wavered as Peuse reached behind Gage and poked her in the ribs. "Making heavy alimony payments, or otherwise encumbered?" she continued, ignoring her friend's glare.

"No," repeated Gage, his voice tightening, knowing Peuse was listening intently.

"Kids?"

Shocked Gage turned. "What?" he finally squeaked.

"My last snag had an ex and a kid or two tucked away in every state." For a second Doyebi's lighthearted tone faltered. "A real father of the year," she concluded sourly.

"No. No kids -- anywhere," he stated flatly. Agnes shifted, moving closer.

"Are you..."

"Would you like to see my teeth?" asked Gage, losing patience with the young woman's incessant questioning. He opened his mouth for inspection.

Doyebi looked slightly abashed. "I was just going to ask if you plan to eat that." She pointed with her lips toward the plate and the cooling round of fry bread.

"Oh, yeah." John tore off a wedge. A drop of honey rolled down his thumb.

"It smells wonderful," commented Peuse, looking into Gage's eyes.

Still holding the fragment of bread, John thrust the plate toward the woman. "Have some," he offered quickly.

Ignoring the plate, Agnes took hold of the paramedic's hand and pulled the torn piece from his fingers. "Umm." She popped the fry bread in her mouth.

A wave of longing washed down Gage's arm from the warm spots where her fingers had touched his.

"Not as good as mine, but not too bad," Agnes concluded, releasing his hand.

Absently, John licked the stray honey from his thumb, imagining he could taste the salty sweetness of her skin. "I'd love to taste yours."

"Hey," said Doyebi. "What about me?"

Hastily, Gage dug in his pocket, fished out a crumpled dollar bill, and pressed it into her hand.

"Here's a dollar, go get yourself some."

"Well," objected Doyebi, making a show of scrunching her face into a theatrical pout.

"If you don't want any." Gage pretended to take the bill from Doyebi.

Shirley tightened her grip on the money. "I get the message."

"Have a soda too," suggested John.

"You kids enjoy yourselves," said Doyebi, stepping lightly from the bleachers.

John watched Shirley disappear into the crowd around the food stands and crafts booths ringing the arena and bleachers. "I thought she'd never leave."

Chuckling, Agnes nodded and looked at the group of parents and judges trying to wrangle a half-a-dozen tiny-tot dancers into a line in front of the announcer's stand. "Folks, these little ones are learnin' our ways; they're our future! Give 'em a hand," drawled the MC. The crowd began to clap. A toddler, wearing an oversized roach and a bustle of battered turkey feathers, panicked at the noise of the crowd's applause. He broke away from the gentle grip of the arena director's guiding hand, ran to the edge of the circle, and buried himself inextricably in the fringes of his father's outfit, clutching the man's leg. The father limped toward the line, the frightened child standing on his moccasined foot.

"Don't let Shirley get to you. She thinks I need a man in my life," said Peuse.

"You don't have one, a pretty woman like you?"

"Nope."

Straightening, John studied Agnes. "So, what brings you all the way down here from Oakland?" he inquired, sliding slightly closer, moving into her warmth.

"Shirley has a big mouth."

John shook his head and grinned. "I did my homework. It helps to have friends in high places." He flicked his eyes toward Gwahega who stood beside the announcer's stand.

"Ahh." Agnes smiled.

John imagined the smooth fullness of her lips beneath his. "So why are you here? To meet me?" he ventured.

Peuse thought for a long moment and then shrugged. "I don't know. Are you worth meeting?" She glanced impishly at Gage.

"I think so." Tipping his head slightly, Johnny raised his eyebrows and grinned.

"So why are you here?" asked Agnes.

"To meet you."

"And how many women have you tried that line on?"

Gage frowned and pressed his hand against his chest in righteous indignation. "You're the first," pleaded John.

Agnes turned. "I doubt that." She chuckled, her voice trailing off as she met his gaze. "So, you run into burning buildings."

Holding his breath, John stared into her eyes. "Yeah," he replied softly.

"You've gotta be brave to do that," she breathed, the pupils of her eyes dilating slightly.

John swallowed his stock, smug affirmation; the genuine awe in her voice touched him.

Suddenly shy, he bowed his head and shrugged.

"John? Johnny?" Vera's voice crackled over the radio.

Johnny groaned. "Excuse me," he said to Agnes, setting down the plate and pulling the HT from his belt. "Gage, here. Go ahead, Vera."

"I need your help back at the first aid tent. I'm swamped."

Gage frowned. "10-4. I'm on my way.

"Duty calls," murmured Peuse.

Reluctantly, Gage stood. "I bet Shirley wants another Band-Aid."

Agnes laughed.

"The Stands in Sight family is providing tonight's meal. Dinner'll be served in the campground at five. Please, allow the Drums, Head Staff and Elders to be served first." The distant sound of the MC's amplified voice floated across the dusty, trampled expanse surrounding the dance arena and twined among the parked vehicles. "Gourd dancing starts at six, grand entry's at seven...." A gust of wind carried off the rest of the announcement and lifted a cloud of eye-stinging grit from the dry ground. The scent of barbecued beef and hot grease followed the breeze, setting Gage's stomach growling. He walked down a loose row of cars, vans, and pickups, and headed for the source of the mouthwatering smell.

A handful of college-age youths -- some in regalia, some in street clothes -- milled around the open door of a blue pickup, watching a young man adjust the radio. He struggled to tune in the broken

crackling of a popular top forties station. After a few moments of knob twisting, he shrugged and settled for the clearer signal of an oldies station. The sound of Creedence Clearwater Revival singing about liking the way Suzy Q walked mixed with the noise of the crowd. A lanky young woman, with full kinky hair that hinted at African as well as North American tribal origins, wearing a bright Miccosukee patchwork jacket, slid from the hood of the truck and began to dance. She turned her lovely dark face to the sky and closed her eyes. Her steps, the latest dance trend, were incongruous with the music of Gage's youth, but her easy grace captivated him, stopping him in his tracks.

A grass dancer, the stiff porcupine and deer hair crest of his roach replaced with a tightly tied yellow bandana, joined her. His acne-pocked face took on a strangely transcendent expression as he abandoned himself to the guitar riffs and the young Miccosukee woman. The long yarn fringes of his cape and apron, rippled and flowed with his movements. Their bodies bent and swayed, mirroring one another.

Johnny watched and remembered being the youth's age and dancing with his own woman....

1969

Johnny crouched lower, reciting the numbers -- 1200F at the ceiling, 800F three feet above the floor.... Eyes straining, he peered into the blackness, unable to see beyond the faceplate of his SCBA. Deadened, sound faded and fell away. He was alone.

Then through the darkness, Gage could sense a presence, growing, swelling, devouring. The hot breath of the unseen entity caressed him. John's blood hummed and sang, responding to its call. Sweat

streamed down his sides and thighs, soaking the tee shirt under his turnout coat and pooling in his boots. Gage felt lightheaded and giddy. He inched closer.

A hand firmly gripped his shoulder, disrupting the forces stretching through the blackness, drawing him back. "This is fire," intoned Captain Marcus Hodges, his words distorted by the air mask. He gently pulled John toward the door of the 'hot house' at the Los Angeles County Fire Department Training Academy. "The enemy, the lover."

Johnny followed the hose line to the door.

"Gage..."

"Gage," repeated Keith Whittier, elbowing Gage in the ribs.

John jumped. Startled he opened his eyes and studied the dark green walls, the forest of empty Chianti bottles dangling from the ceiling, and the brown-painted lattice caging the booth. The air was heavy with the odors of oregano, tomatoes, and hot cheese. He shivered, the warm embrace of the fire retreating until only its smell lingered, clinging to his hair. Gage looked across the table at his fellow recruits.

Dale Stockton, a muscular former construction worker, chuckled around a mouthful of pizza. Grinning, Sal Graziano pressed his beer bottle to his lips and tipped back his head, downing the last dregs.

"Earth to Gage," said Keith, a low rumble of laughter shaking his belly. He pulled a slice from the pie, twirled the strings of melted cheese around his fingers, and sucked them clean.

"Next round of firewater's on you," ordered Dale, thumping the empty on the table.

Johnny grimaced at the recruit's choice of words, lifted his half-full bottle, and gestured to the waitress. She nodded.

"Will you look at that," whispered Graziano, his normally loud, gravel-washed voice breaking with the strain of the unaccustomed softness. He nodded toward the door.

John turned. A half-a-dozen young people stood in the door: two men and four women. All were longhaired -- one man's blond locks were gathered into a narrow ponytail, the other's dark curls fell in an unruly mass around his shoulders -- and dressed in outlandish outfits. Even after three years of living off the reservation, Gage still found himself fascinated by these children of white America who rebelled against the same society that the government Indian schools had taught was the very pinnacle of human development. Each cradled an armload of college textbooks, symbols of the education that their parents' wealth and privileged class had provided.

Aware of the stares of the other patrons, the youths clustered warily. A young woman peered over the shoulder of the bushy-haired man, her blue eyes wide and defiant. A portion of her waist-length golden hair, along with a dozen silky green and blue ribbons, was worked into an intricate plait that held back the remainder of her thick tresses. Amid the careful grunge of her companions, her smooth, white face gleamed like a pearl. Gage drew a sharp breath as she met his gaze.

"Well, shit," drawled Dale, "it's the hippie dippies."

Graziano and Whittier chuckled. Gage forced his attention back to the food on his plate, afraid his more conservative colleagues would detect his interest.

A short waiter, his hair growing out of a military buzz cut, stopped in front of the group. His lip curled in undisguised disgust. Stiffly, he held a handful of menus like a shield as he led the students through the restaurant.

Stockton fixed his eyes on the oddly patterned leather bag slung over the shoulder of one of the men. "Nice purse... man," he hooted, mocking the youth.

The two hippies glared coldly at the older man; the bushy-haired youth leaned toward his compatriot. "Ignorant redneck," he breathed.

Across the table from Gage, Stockton stiffened. John rapidly swallowed his mouthful of pizza and tensed, readying for trouble. Graziano shook his head and put a calming hand on the burly man's arm. "It's not worth it, Dale."

Grimacing sympathetically at Stockton, the waiter quickly herded the group by the recruits' table. Johnny glanced up feeling eyes on him as they passed. The blonde woman was studying him intently, her eyes both guarded and curious. Gage's breathing quickened under her gaze and he could not turn away. She slowed and smiled shyly. Another woman in a loose peasant blouse and full gauzy skirt frowned, turned, took the blonde's arm, and pulled her along, hissing warningly in her ear.

Whittier grinned slyly, watching Gage out the corner of his eye. "I think Johnny here sees something he likes."

Graziano laughed. "Can't say much for the company she keeps."

Stockton snickered divisively. "Dirty tramp," he hissed. He glared at Johnny, his voice dripping venom. "Just your type, Gage. You never know what a girl like that has been..." His words trailed off as the waitress reappeared with a fresh round of beer.

Gage opened his mouth, starting to speak.

Whittier cleared his throat nervously and leaned back to allow the waitress access to the empties. "What did you think of that drill today?" he asked, desperate to change the subject. He looked pleadingly at Gage.

Johnny bit back his angry reply, instead silently echoing the hippie's comment. He picked up his half-empty beer bottle, feeling Stockton's bitterness and hostility radiating like a halo across the table. The man's thinly veiled antagonism toward the newly admitted minority recruits again reminded Gage of the narrow but deep gap that separated him from the rest of the men in his class. The too familiar chill of subtle exclusion settled like a cold, wet blanket on his shoulders. Gage slumped, leaning his head against the high back of the booth and letting the sound of their discussion wash over him.

"I got to take a leak," announced Stockton. The table lurched as the big man pushed to his feet. He headed for the toilets.

"Johnny," began Garziano, shifting awkwardly, the vinyl upholstery crackling beneath him. He paused, waiting for the noise to subside. "Dale's a jerk. Don't let him get you down." The trainee bowed his head.

"It's OK," Gage whispered, uncomfortable with this moment when everyone acknowledged the unspoken difference. "I've dealt with his kind before."

"He doesn't speak for all of us," added Whittier, softly.

Johnny nodded.

Abruptly Gage became conscious that the blonde hippie woman was surreptitiously studying him. One of the longhaired men sitting with the young woman noticed her interest. He glared in the

direction of the firemen and spoke sharply to her, his lips twisting in derision. Frowning defiantly, she rejoined the conversation, her slender hands moving as she talked, fluttering whimsically then darting in unspoken exclamation points. The knee-length macramé purple, orange, and green vest she wore over a skin-tight shirt shifted and pulled against her breasts when she moved. Gage's face grew hot, as he imagined his fingers tracing the pattern of the intricate knotted fabric. Unnerved, he grabbed another slice of pizza and tried to avoid her gaze, hoping no one else would notice the woman's interest.

Garziano chuckled. "Doesn't seem to have affected your appetite none."

Whittier gave a relieved snort. "Nothin' affects his appetite."

"I can't help it," protested Gage, around a mouthful of pizza. "I'm hungry."

"And not just for pizza," said Whittier, grabbing another slice.

"I just wish you'd learn to chew with your mouth closed," replied Garziano, saluting Gage with his fresh bottle of beer. "Were you raised by wolves, boy?"

"No," began Gage, hotly. His retort tumbled to a stop, as he again caught the eyes of the blonde woman and found himself wishing that he was dining with her, rather than with a bunch of sweaty trainee firefighters. As if responding to his thoughts, she stood and walked toward the table. John swallowed hard as the woman approached.

"Now, he closes his mouth," teased Whittier.

John struggled not to stare, but his eyes ignored his command. She smiled at him. As she came abreast of the table, Gage found himself grinning stupidly back, not caring what his colleagues thought.

She tripped. For a half a second she teetered before regaining her balance. Her purse tumbled to the floor, spilling its contents across the floor.

John slid from the booth and knelt, helping her gather her scattered belongings. Her hand touched his as they both reached for a hairbrush. Involuntarily, Johnny gasped.

"Thanks," she said softly.

"No problem," stammered Gage, holding out the brush. "Glad to be of help." He grinned.

The woman took the brush, her fingers wrapping around his hand.

Gage froze, savoring the warm softness of her skin. A shadow fell across him. Stockton stood over the pair.

Glancing up nervously, the woman covertly pressed a small scrap of paper into John's palm and released his hand. "Thanks again," she said, rising and scurrying away.

Hurriedly Johnny stood.

Stockton squeezed into the booth. "Great technique, Gage," he rumbled. "Knock 'em off their feet."

"Some guys got it, some don't." Garziano smirked at Stockton.

Shielded by the edge of the table, John unfolded the paper. 'Michelle Blaine, 555-8399,' he read.

John followed Michelle up the narrow metal stairs running up the outside of the small stucco and brick apartment building. The earthy blues wailing of Janis Joplin and the faint smell of marijuana leaked from an open window at the far end of the structure. The dark fronds of a stubby palm tree scratched on the curved red clay roof tiles. The perfume, from the bougainvillea plant climbing the iron grillwork on the porch below, filled the night air.

Michelle stopped, with her fingers still clutching the key she had just slid into the lock. "I had a wonderful time," she said, turning toward John. Her eyes glittered with the reflections of the streetlights.

Taking her chin in his hand, Gage nodded as he remembered being squeezed into a tight booth next to her in the dark smoky interior of the coffeehouse, listening to the odd-looking folk singer and savoring being in the presence of the woman. John smiled slightly, imagining Stockton's reaction if his colleague could have seen him in the Scarab, an infamous hippie hangout. "So did I," said John, risking leaning closer. Slowly he kissed her.

Michelle shifted beneath his lips, drawing nearer, kissing him hungrily. Her hands ran down his back stroking the lean muscles stretching over his ribs.

John sank into her embrace, letting his fingers caress the rich textures of her clothing and the soft curves of her flanks. In the apartment with the open window, the Byrds replaced Joplin on the record player, filling the night with lyrics about women, dreams, and the smell of spices.

Pulling away from him, she tipped her head and gazed into his eyes, her lips twisting with a wistful smile. "Oh, I love this song."

"What?" murmured Gage, bewildered by the sudden shift in Michelle's mood. Silently he cursed the unknown occupant who had changed the record. He tried to pull Blaine back into his arms and pick up where he had been interrupted. Instead she pirouetted away, bending with the rhythms of the song.

"Dance with me."

"Here? I can't... I don't," stammered Gage, as she wrapped her hands around his waist, guiding him in the unfamiliar movements. Slowly, she relaxed against him, resting her cheek on his shoulder,

the crests of her hipbones rubbing in slow arcs against his thighs. John let himself flow with her motions. He drew a deep breath, swallowing the faint fragrance of patchouli and sweat that rose from her hair.

The music wound to a finish. Still swaying slightly, Michelle broke the embrace and reached back to turn the key.

Clearing his throat, Gage straightened, his blood pounding in his ears. "Guess I'd better go," he faltered, stepping back. "Good night."

Blaine held open the door. "Don't you want to come in?" she asked.

John grinned. "Sure."

1980

"Shall we show them how it's done?"

Startled, Gage turned. Peuse stood beside him, the corners of her eyes pulled into soft creases by a broad grin. "I'm not much of a dancer," warned Gage.

"Don't worry. I am," said Peuse.

"Well..." Abruptly, John stopped. Agnes had seized his injured arm. Her fingers stroked the ridges of scar tissue, moving down his forearm to circle his wrist. He waited for her hand to pause and her face to freeze into an embarrassed expression of revulsion. Instead she positioned his hand on her hip. "Sure," he acquiesced after a moment.

Awkwardly, John stepped and swayed, following Agnes's movements. She placed her arms on his shoulders, the soft skin of her wrists brushing his neck. Slowing, he closed his eyes. The music stopped.

Agnes let her arms drop. "No, you're not much of a dancer. I hope you're a better fireman," she teased, smiling slyly.

Reluctantly, Gage opened his eyes. "Yes, I'm a much better fireman. " He drew a breath and smiled slightly. "I'm much better at a lot of things."

Johnny watched the young gourd dancer walk slowly by the old man. As the dancer bent slightly to add a crumpled one to the pile of bills lying at the elder's feet, the ends of the yellow ribbons binding the edge of the narrow red and blue scarf-like shawl hanging from his shoulders brushed the ground. The yellow, green, and red bars of a Vietnam campaign ribbon, a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart adorned the young man's shawl. The old man, himself a veteran of the First World War, trembled with age and emotion while he faced the drum. A teenage granddaughter, her very long black hair mingling with the fringes of her pale pink shawl, stood half a pace behind the old man and held his elbow, steadying him. A bead of moisture gathered at the corner of the elder's eye and leaked down his stroke-damaged cheek as the song rose and fell.

The song ended. The ring of gourd dancers stepped a few paces back from the drum. A loose line of men filed past the old man shaking his hand. At the drum, the heavysset lead singer, his face glistening, alternated between smoking a cigarette and mopping his brow. The arena director walked behind the singers, offering a bucket and dipper. The lead singer took a final deep drag, slowly exhaled

the smoke, then nodded and leaned forward. The rest of the men seated at the drum lifted their drumsticks.

The portable radio clipped to Gage's belt sprang to life. "Medics report to the east entrance of the campground," buzzed the voice of one of the security guards.

"10-4," acknowledged Gage.

"Over here!" A young man in a green t-shirt with the words 'Event Security' emblazoned across the back waved frantically to Gage and McGinnis. "Somebody says a kid is choking in the campground." He gestured toward the ragged rows of tents and vans separated from the dance arena by a broad walkway lined with concession stands.

"Where?" demanded Gage. The hard green case holding the bottle of oxygen banged painfully against his thigh as he trotted over to the youth.

"I'm not sure."

Frowning, Gage scanned the area. Lights on the vendors' trucks made bright pools in the deepening darkness. Groups of teenage boys and girls walked past each other, parents led children through the crowd, and a cluster of men smoked and laughed at the end the improvised promenade. Suddenly a wave of turning heads and concerned cries spread through the crowd, rippling toward a gap between two tents. "Over there," Gage pointed.

The nurse squinted, her eyes following Gage's finger. Readjusting the strap of the trauma bag she began to run.

A woman, clutching a child who was almost too tall and heavy for her to carry, emerged from between the tents and staggered toward the security guard. Breaking away from the crowd surrounding one of the concession stands, a tall broad-shouldered man snatched the boy from her arms and ran toward Gage.

"Vera," called Johnny, sprinting to meet the pair.

"He can't breathe," panted the woman.

"Give him here," instructed Johnny, dropping the equipment and prying the boy from the man's grip. The child's head lolled against John's chest. The boy's chest heaved rapidly, each shallow inhalation marked by a high whistle. Clear mucus streamed from the child's nose and mouth. "Make sure an ambulance has been called," instructed Gage, glancing at the security guard.

"k," nodded the guard, lifting the HT to his mouth.

John eased the boy down onto the ground. "We'll take good care of you," he soothed.

McGinnis dropped to her knees beside Gage. She flipped open the latches on the oxygen. Deftly she unrolled the tubing and slid the mask over the child's bluish lips.

Gage placed his hand on the child's chest and counted while looking at his watch. "Respirations 30 and labored; pulse..." He grabbed the boy's wrist. "128," Gage reported.

Nodding, McGinnis scribbled the numbers in his notebook.

Gage wrapped the blood pressure cuff around the boy's arm. "102 over 60," he said. He placed the stethoscope on the child's chest and listened for a moment. "Rhonchi and wheezing."

McGinnis rolled the child on his side and pulled up his shirt. His back was flushed, angry red welts marred the otherwise smooth skin. "Anaphylaxis?"

"Ma'am, " asked Gage, "is he allergic to anything?"

The mother stared at her child, her face ashen. She trembled violently.

"Ma'am," repeated Johnny.

"Peanuts." The mother forced her eyes away from her child. "But he knows better than to eat anything with them."

"Half a cc epinephrine 1 to 1,000, sub-Q," ordered McGinnis, digging in the drug bag. She passed the syringe to Gage.

Johnny squeezed the excess medication from the prefill, swabbed the boy's arm, pulled the skin taut and administered the drug. "Epi's in." Gage squatted on his heels, waiting. A minute later, he pressed his stethoscope against the child's chest. "Better." In the distance he could hear the wail of the ambulance siren. He sighed in relief.

"He knows better," repeated the mother, sinking to her knees behind Gage.

McGinnis lifted the boy's hand, and looked at his nails. "Pinking up." She again fished in the drug bag, retrieving an IV set-up and tape. She handed the set-up kit to Gage and began cutting a few strips of tape.

Gage inflated the cuff. As his eyes slid to the set-up kit, his mind returned to the endless practice sessions with Bill Wallace during his recovery. Unbidden and unwelcome the now familiar panic rose. He flexed his fingers. Despite DeSoto's insistence that he hadn't noticed any changes, Gage still felt as clumsy as a green trainee. Focusing, he bent over the boy's thin arm. The narrow vein fluttered beneath his finger. The needle wavered for an instant. Holding his breath, he pushed. After an endless second, blood finally blossomed, red and rich, in the flashback chamber. "I'm in," he announced, forcing his voice into its normal register. He secured the line and attached the tubing.

The child's eyes fluttered open. He groaned.

Sighing Gage rocked back on his heels and looked up. Shame over his continued uncertainty burned in his belly.

The ambulance was weaving slowly through the crowd. The young security guard and a short man dressed in the fringed apron and cape, beaded harness, and long angora goat hide leggings of a fancy dancer formed a makeshift barrier with their outstretched arms, pushing the crowd back. The vehicle braked to stop and the attendants unloaded the gurney. "Over here," called Gage, gesturing.

"Honey," started McGinnis, sliding her arms behind the boy's torso. "We're goin' to take you to the hospital." One of the attendants squatted next to the nurse. "On three," she instructed.

The child shifted slightly in McGinnis's arms. "Mom," he croaked.

"Right here." The mother gathered herself. Gage eased his hand beneath her armpit, helping her to her feet.

"...Three," said McGinnis, lifting the child on to the gurney. "I'll ride in with him, Johnny."

"OK." Gage guided the mother to the ambulance. "They'll take good care of him," he comforted. As he closed the doors and walked back to retrieve the supplies, he saw Agnes in the crowd. She stared at him in undisguised awe.

Gage forgot his discomfort. Suddenly shy, he ducked his head and bent gathering the discarded wrappers littering the ground. When he looked up, Peuse was gone.

1969

John woke to early morning sunlight streaming across his face. He opened his eyes. A slash of rainbow colored light bled through the panel of tie-dyed fabric tacked over the bedroom window and fell across the pillows. Gage rolled on his side, the still damp sheets wrapping around his bare hips.

Content, he watched the colored beams move slowly across Michelle's sleeping form, painting her pale cheeks, flowing over her full breasts, and catching on the fair curves of her lashes.

Grudgingly, he lifted his watch from the painted nightstand and studied the face. Stifling a groan, he gingerly slid from the bed, trying not to wake the slumbering woman. Gage retrieved his underwear and jeans from the floor and leaned against the window frame, balancing as he pulled on the wrinkled material.

"Johnny?" Michelle gazed groggily up at him. She sat, pulling the bed linens tight around her chest.

"Morning," he grinned.

"Trying to sneak off on me?"

John bent and kissed her. "Never," he whispered into her mouth, her fragrance filling his nostrils. For a moment he contemplated climbing back into the bed. "But," he said straightening reluctantly, "it's after five. I gotta go back to my apartment, shower, shave, and get in uniform. I need to be at the Academy by eight."

"Uniform," repeated Michelle, wrinkling her nose. She wrapped her hand around one of the bedposts.

Buttoning his shirt, Gage nodded.

"Why do you put up with all that paramilitary bullshit?"

John blinked, startled by Michelle's crudeness and her objections. "Its just part of the routine." His smiled faded.

"It's so unnecessary."

"Not really. It's part of being a fireman." Gage shrugged.

A dark frown twisted Michelle's lips. "Uniforms, titles, short hair cuts... What does that have to do with putting out fires?"

John sat on the edge of the bed and lifted his hiking boots. "Your buddies have to be able to depend on you to do your job the right way. Discipline and teamwork are part of being a fireman." His voice trailed off as he bent and tied the laces. Standing John turned and looked over his shoulder, meeting Michelle's eyes. "The uniforms are just an outward sign of that..."

"And of the oppressive authority of the state," she said. Her fingers tightened around the bedpost, burying themselves in the ascending layers of bright tasseled fringe that covered the wood.

"After what the government did to your people, I'm surprised you can put on their uniform."

John laughed. "I'm training to be a fireman, not scouting for Custer." He stood. "And, I want to be a fireman," he concluded quietly.

Michelle's expression softened at the sound of his voice; she leaned back against the headboard, her chin coming to rest on her chest. Her fingers slowly relaxed and her arm slipped down onto the sheets where they had made love.

John let his eyes drop from her face to smooth curves of her breasts. He felt his breathing accelerate as he recalled last night. Biting his lip, he looked away.

She sighed. "I guess, we'll just agree to disagree."

Nodding Gage leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "K."

"Angry artists painting angry signs," sang Michelle's friend, her sweet and sultry voice echoing the Phil Ochs record playing on the radio. With sharp taps, she nailed a sheet of painted poster board to a strip of wood. Outside the December rain beat harder on the tile roof, threatening to drown out the radio. "Turn it up, Jonah." she called to the longhaired man in the kitchen, fussing over a pile of vegetables and a strangely shaped Chinese cooking pot.

" 'k Susan," he called. A knife clanged against the cutting board and a second later the radio volume increased.

Returning to her task, Susan squatted next to the protest sign and rocked back on the heels of her moccasined feet to admire her work. Her long gauzy skirt settled into soft curves resting on the scarred wooden floor. "This'll be a good one for you, Jonah." She lifted the sign and tilted it toward the kitchen door.

"Right on!"

The words, emblazoned in vivid blue poster paint sprang out at Gage. 'I don't give a damn for Uncle Sam. I ain't going to Vietnam,' he read silently, recalling the day his cousin Dwayne had proudly told his grandfather he had enlisted to avoid being drafted....

Peter Gage sat on the weathered wooden bench in the shade of the arbor in front of the old log house on Sage Creek. The wind moved the twigs of the cottonwood branches spread on the pole roof. The shifting shadows of the brittle leaves moved across his wrinkled face, as he watched Dwayne and Johnny climb from the truck.

Dwayne slammed the door. He tugged at his shirttail, before striding confidently across the yellow grass. His boots raised small puffs of dust. He held the letter from the Army ordering him to report to Fort Polk.

Johnny followed slowly. He inhaled the smell of the dry grass, the dust, and the bread his grandmother was baking in the house. He closed his eyes, trying to freeze the moment. The butterflies flapping in his stomach warned him that everything was about fall apart.

Dwayne had reached his grandfather. He squatted on the hardened earth and silently handed the letter to the old man.

Peter read. Portentously he nodded, rocked stiffly to his feet, and started to hobble toward the house. Dwayne rose and followed his grandfather, his head still bowed. "Johnny," Peter called, pointing with his lips.

Blinking in the sudden darkness of the house, Johnny pushed aside the old quilt covering the door to his grand parent's bedroom.

Peter bent over the heavy blue-painted wooden blanket chest at the foot of the bed. For a second his hand lingered on the darker blue design bordering the edges before lifting the lid. Leaning forward, he dug deep amid the quilts and coverlets. As he hunted, his dark face moved into the shafts of light filtering into the room through the small panes of glass in the single window. Johnny could see his grandfather's lips moving.

"Kola, taku yakapi kin," half murmured, half sang Peter, his voice nearly inaudible. He pulled a drab green pile of fabric from the chest. As he laid the stack on the bed and slowly unfolded the material, Johnny recognized his grandfather's old army uniform. From amid the rough folds, the old man pulled a bead-edged, nearly bald weasel skin. "Wakan," cautioned his grandfather handing him the skin.

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. Johnny could feel whatever mysteries the bundle held shift under his fingers. A faint musty, herbal smell rose from the ancient skin.

Peter straightened and lightly put his hand on Dwayne's shoulder. "It kept me safe over there -- in France."

Dwane nodded. Carefully, he took the bundle from Gage's hand.

Johnny leaned back on the bleachers in the gym, resting his elbows and back on the seat behind him. His cousin Selo Black Crow, sitting a row above Gage, extended his foot and nudged Gage's shoulder. "Ow!" Johnny snatched at Selo's ankle.

Jerking away, Selo wrapped his arm around his girlfriend's shoulder. "Sit up, you're in everyone's way."

"Leave 'im be," the girlfriend giggled, nuzzling Selo's hair. She started to kiss Black Crow.

Turning his gaze back to the family spreading quilts, yard goods and other gifts on the arena floor, Johnny tried to ignore the sounds the couple made. But, the giveaway preparations failed to hold his attention. Instead, Johnny found himself imagining the girlfriend showering her affections on him rather than his cousin. He visualized her long fingers on the buttons of his shirt, her hands dropping to his pants. Abruptly the fantasy came to an end with an image of Selo breaking Johnny's jaw with a single blow from one of his huge fists. "Get a room!" snapped Gage.

Laughing, Selo gently planted his boot against the back of Johnny's head and slowly forced Gage's chin into his chest.

Between kisses, the girlfriend giggled.

Angrily Gage sat up, moving out of this cousin's reach. "Freaks." He turned to watch the giveaway.

In front of the folding school cafeteria table where the MC straddled the bench, Old-man Ghost Dog stood, his hand on the shoulder of Henry Good Voice Hawk, who listed precariously on his newly fitted artificial leg. Voice suddenly strong, the old man raised a prayer in Lakota. The phrase 'the boys in Vietnam' peppered his speech. "Mitakuye oyasin," intoned the old man. Turning, he handed the Good Voice Hawk boy an eagle feather that had been dyed red, the emblem of a warrior wounded in defense of his people. Solemnly, he shook the boy's hand.

Henry's father gestured to the eyapaya. The Good Voice Hawk relatives lined up, forming a loose reception line and the eyapaya began to call names. One by one, the recipients bent selecting their gift and filed slowly along the line, shaking hands as they went.

"Johnny," said Selo, pointing toward the parking lot with his lips, "we're going to get outta here."

....Gage looked up. Susan was studying his face closely, her green eyes widening as she tried to interpret the nuances of his expression. Ducking, John struggled to keep his face still. He felt his distrust of the woman rise again. He was certain the feeling was mutual. The very first time he had laid eyes on Michelle, Susan had been beside her, whispering warnings in her ear, pulling her away.

Gage lifted his head. Susan was still watching him. She frowned; clearly his face had revealed something not to her liking. "One-legged veterans will greet the dawn," she sang. "And they're whistling marches as they mow the lawn...."

Jonah came from the kitchen, carrying a large serving bowl and a handful of plates. He exchanged knowing glances with Susan. In a seemingly causal move, he dropped to his knees between Gage and Blaine. "Dig in," he offered, passing the stack of plates. "That's tofu, Johnny. It's Chinese."

"Yeah, I know," replied Gage from behind gritted teeth. "Homestyle bean curd?"

Jonah's eyebrows quirked upward in surprise. "Yeah."

Gage was rapidly finding himself empathizing with Stockton's disdain. He helped himself to the steaming mass and took a bite. The dish was only fair; Sal Graziano made a far better version using his Chinese mother-in-law's recipe.

"In a minute, Jonah. I want to finish this one." Michelle dipped her brush into a jar of red paint. For a moment she held the brush over the clean expanse of cardboard. A shaft of sunlight from the window fell across her hand and on to her breasts.

Johnny felt his breathing accelerate, remembering the smell of the woman's skin.

The paint on the brush was exactly the same color as Michelle's loose blouse. Deftly she painted thirteen stripes in the shape of a top hat. She exchanged the red paint for black. Under the brim of the hat she outlined a skull, its eyes staring hollowly upwards. Instead of teeth she painted the word 'Vietnam'.

"Michelle, add a gun or something military," urged Susan.

Johnny heard the venom in the woman's voice and remembered listening to her spit a vile insult at a uniformed ROTC cadet as Gage had walked the two women across the campus. The young cadet had pretended to ignore her, but his neck had flushed angrily at the woman's words.

"Johnny, did you vote for Nixon?" asked the woman slyly.

Jonah leaned forward, as though scenting blood.

Gage's eyes narrowed. He had no intention of discussing his election choices, for one party or the other, with this woman. He cleared his throat.

"Johnny, we're nearly out of paint, " Michelle quickly interrupted, her words tumbling breathlessly over one another in her haste to change the subject. "Would you be a sweetheart and run down to the drug store for more."

Johnny bit back his reply, instead nodding. The last had been incontestably delivered as an order not a question. "Sure," he said stiffly. He set down his plate, stood and retrieved his jacket from the chair.

"Here's some money," offered Jonah, his tone anything but generous.

"That's OK," said Gage, pulling the apartment door shut behind him. He stood on the rain soaked ironwork stairs, pulling the windbreaker's hood over his head. Through the thin door he could hear the voices.

"Michelle, what do you see that country-bumpkin square?" asked Susan.

The silence stretched a few seconds too long. "Johnny's a good man."

"You can't even have a conversation about politics or anything important with him. He's so..."

The friend paused, hunting for the right words. "Plebian," she declared.

Again, Michelle's reply came a fraction of the second too late. "I thought you were the one who said bourgeoisie white society was nothing but a materialistic, pretentious facade, hiding naked cannibals."

"Well this one is definitely one of the proletariat," commented Susan.

"Lumpenproletariat," offered Jonah, chortling over his own obscure joke.

"He's not riff-raff," snapped Michelle, her voice a mix of anger and shame.

Susan laughed. "He must be really good in bed."

A sudden change in the wind blew the cold rain into Gage's face. As he started down the steps he felt the chill seep into his heart.

1980

"Watch him, he's good," commented Agnes pointing with her lips at the barrel-chested Crow man kneeling in the middle of the row of hand-game players.

Johnny looked. The Crow's eyes twinkled merrily as he gazed across the narrow aisle at the opposing team. Behind him a half a dozen men started singing a gambling song, beating hand drums in accompaniment. Two loose rows of sisters, wives and nieces arrayed in folding lawn chairs sat in back of the men.

"It's almost over," said Gage, noting the one remaining painted counter stick thrust into the ground in front of the opposing team.

Peuse nodded. "Look at the guesser."

Behind the last counter knelt a thin Paiute man, with a pockmarked face and wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose. Despite the evening chill, a thin film of sweat gathered on his forehead, as he stared intently at his opponents

For a split second, the Crow man and his fellow hider revealed the two sets of white marked and unmarked bones lying in their open hands. The women sounded a high-pitched trilling, encouraging the men. In a rapid series of flourishes, the hidiers moved the bones from hand to hand. Suddenly, the Crow team's captain stood and shook an open hand at the opposing team's guesser. A thin strip of weasel fur

studded with a cluster of old-fashioned brass hawk bells encircling his wrist, trembled with his movement.

Agnes leaned forward to get a better view. Her arm brushed Gage, warm in the cool night. He caught a whiff of her perfume. His eyes were pulled from the hand game players to her face. The light from the naked bulbs in pavilion outlined her profile and carved deep shadows beneath her checks. He imagined his hands busy with her tight braids, freeing the tresses to fall warm and fragrant over his skin. His pulse accelerated. Hand game forgotten, John inhaled sharply.

"He's missed it," she said.

John forced his attention away from his daydream and back to the game. The Paiute slashed his hand downward, palm held perpendicular to ground. The men holding the bones opened their palms and a groan rose from the guesser's team. He had guessed wrong. The women on the Crow team trilled and cheered as the Paiute threw the final counting stick across the narrow alley.

Gage took Peuse's elbow. "Let's get some air." Smiling, he drew her out of the crowd, into the shadows outside the pavilion. He slid his hands beneath her thin windbreaker and wrapped them around her waist, pulling her close.

Leaning into his embrace, Agnes lightly touched the HandieTalkie on his hip. "Is your girlfriend going to bother us?" she teased.

"I hope not," murmured Johnny. He sank into the halo of her warmth. Closing his eyes, he let his hand trace the curve of her back. He kissed her hungrily.

Agnes responded, taking his breath away.

Reluctantly, Johnny pulled away. "I've got to get back. I'm off at nine," he said.

"Uh hunh," she replied, her eyes still closed.

"I'll meet you after the dance ends." Johnny risked leaning forward and whispered into her ear.

"I have something I want to show you."

"...Thank you Haystack Ramblers for closing out this session," called the MC. The dancers pulled back toward the edges of the arena, clearing a space for the veteran selected to carry out the eagle staff. Gage watched Peuse fall into step next to Doyebi. The moonlight glittered seductively on Agnes's hair and yet again John imagined himself slowly undoing the woman's tight braids. His eyes met hers and Agnes bowed her head to whisper to Shirley, who lifted the dark feathers of her fan in front of her face to conceal her giggling.

"Everybody please stand," crackled the voice of the MC over the PA system. "Ironwood, you have the honors!" An answering drum roll sounded from the southern end of the circle. The audience stood.

As the singer pushed up the song, Agnes looked away from Gage and began to bob in place in time to beat. The veteran lifted the staff from its stand. Behind him gathered the elders, the head staff, and the other veterans. Slowly, they began to dance toward the eastern entrance of the circle, leading the other dancers out.

As the last dancer left the floor, John abandoned his spot between the tiers of the bleachers. The rough circular path, formed by the bleachers surrounding the dance arena and booths of food and crafts vendors, was already filled with spectators heading toward the campground and the parking lot beyond. Gage pushed against the flow, squeezing past the women pushing strollers, the teenage couples linked

arm in arm, and the men pulling heavy suitcases of regalia while carrying sleeping tots. The harsh glow from the generator-powered, portable light masts turned the crowd into bursts of bright colors, punctuated with heavy, black shadows.

Agnes and Shirley materialized from whirl of color.

"Band-Aid man... Johnny," greeted Doyebi.

"Ladies," he replied. Peuse took John's arm. Her fingers drew cryptic patterns on his skin. For a split second he recalled the mysterious designs, painstakingly pecked into the sandstone bluffs of some of the sacred places where the holy men back home went to pray. He gasped.

"Shirley, I'll catch up with you later," said Peuse to her companion.

Doyebi smirked. "You two have a good time." She started toward the camp but stopped abruptly. "You'll have to tell me everything, " she called over her shoulder, "in the morning." Her eyes twinkled wickedly at Peuse.

Peuse watched Doyebi disappear into the crowd. "You said you had something you wanted to show me."

Johnny bent closer to Agnes. "Yes, but you'll have to change."

Gage followed the dry creek bed through the steep fold between the two hills. The hardpan, rock studded surface gleamed softly in the moonlight, a pale ribbon amid the dark clumps of brush and shadowed stands of coastal live oak and willow. He wrapped his hand around a clump of long cheat grass and clambered up the bank. Pushing aside a stiff broom of red-topped buckwheat, he reached back, took the blankets from Agnes, and pulled her over the crumbling rim of the wash. She crouched

on all fours next to John, catching her breath. The warmth of her body seeped through the leg of his jeans. Gage resisted the urge to take her in his arms, knowing if he did now he was lost, so instead he focused on the slope above; they were still too close to camp.

"It's not too much further," he reassured, offering his hand.

"k," she panted, staggering to her feet.

John took her elbow and led her up the grassy incline. Near the crest of the hill, a dark slab of weathered granite broke the smooth curve of the hillside. Just under this outcrop, Gage stopped and spread the blanket over a soft, thick layer of fallen pine needles. Below he could see the light of flashlights and campfires, like fireflies in the valley meadow. In some of the tents and tipis the soft light of lanterns cast shadows on the canvas walls. Far in the distance John could hear the drums of the '49. The pulsations of crickets in the brush rose every time the song swelled in the night.

"Ahhh," she sighed, dropping onto the outstretched blanket. Still breathing hard, Agnes lay back and stared up at the sky. "I didn't know we were going to go mountain climbing in the dark," she accused after a few minutes, rolling into a sitting position.

"Sorry," whispered John, kneeling behind her. "I wanted to be alone with you." Bending, he kissed the soft nape of her neck, tasting her skin. He buried his face in her hair, smelling shampoo, wood smoke, sweat, horsemint, and something that made him homesick. "I figured Shirley couldn't find us here," he murmured, his lips moving over her skin.

"Shh," cautioned Agnes. "She might hear you and come a-runnin'."

Chuckling, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. Her shoulder blades felt like wings pressed against his chest and he again remembered the story of the shawl dancer. He curled his hand beneath her breast, her heart beating under his fingers.

Agnes looked up, the crown of her head pressing against his breastbone. She reached back for Gage, sketching the outline of his face from his eyebrow to his lips. "Has anyone ever told you that you have beautiful cheeks?"

The woman's dark eyes twinkled mischievously at John, leaving him wondering exactly which body parts she liked. Agnes lowered her arm, her elbow brushing his hip.

"I can't say that anyone has ever said that," he breathed, sagging against her back, sinking into her heat, her scent, her softness. He abandoned thought and surrendered to the moment.

She laughed softly and intertwined her fingers with his, admiring the pattern of light and dark formed by their palms. "Good," she whispered, releasing his hand and turning in his arms.

Still kneeling, Gage kissed her. He trembled as she slipped her fingers beneath his tee shirt, touching the scars on his back. All the pains, fears and petty vanities of the months following the accident came flooding back. Shaking, he waited for her to push him away.

"Cold?" asked Agnes, wrapping her arms more tightly around him.

Sighing, Johnny relaxed and concentrated on kissing the soft notch between her collarbones. One of Agnes's hands dropped from his back and tugged at the button securing his jeans, while the other slid over the hollow beneath his hip, lightly cupping his buttock.

Tenderly, he pushed her down on the blanket and traced a path from the silky pulsing of her carotid to the plain of her belly, hooking a finger beneath the collar of her blouse. The buttons pulled

free with a faint pop. Dimly he was aware of Agnes's hands descending his thighs, caressing the tense lines of his muscles and pushing aside the fabric of his jeans and briefs. Heart pounding, Johnny kissed her, slowly working his way up from the soft cleft between her breasts to her mouth. Her lips tasted like honey and cinnamon.

The cool night wind washed the smell of drying grass over them. And in the campground below a dog howled.

Gage inched forward, belly down in a mix of muck and splintered wood, face and hands coated with a thin slurry of mud. He was wrapped in the tight embrace of a dark narrow passage that extended beyond the limits of his vision. Straining, he glanced over his shoulder; a maze of collapsed walls and pancaked floors stretched endlessly behind him. Cold rain filtered in a fine mist through the wreckage and condensed on the broken lumber and drywall, making the debris treacherously slick.

"Hello," called John, pausing to listen.

"Help me!" A pained voice ricocheted off the fragments of the shattered building.

"Hang on, I'm coming," answered Gage, hitching along on his elbows. "Just hold on, we'll have you out soon."

His hand skidded on a scrap of wet linoleum, sending him sliding shoulder-first into a two-by-four. Grimacing in pain, he labored to his knees and tried to crawl faster. But the fabric of his turnout coat snagged on a curved shard of metal in the wreckage, yanking him off balance and again plunging him face down in the mud. Cursing under his breath, he wiggled backward, fighting to unhook himself. The collar twisted and pulled tight against his throat.

"Help me, please!"

"Coming!" Gage struggled, but the tough material refused to yield. "Damn it," he hissed, forcing his hands beneath his chest to fumble with the latches on his turnouts. Grunting, he wormed out of the coat, reached back and tugged, trying to pull it free but it remained stubbornly entangled.

"Coming!" repeated John, abandoning the turnout coat and resuming his clambering.

A sharp crackling swelled to fill the black tunnel. Orange flames blossomed in the darkness, roaring toward him. Desperate, he scrambled away from the fire. Choking, greasy black smoke rolled through the tunnel.

"Roy!" He coughed.

Only the flames' deafening wail answered. Yellow-orange light flickered briefly in the smoke filled blackness, sending rays of color shooting through the gloom. Gage's eyes burned and teared, refusing to stay open. Blinded, he frantically scuttled backwards through the passage. The rain-soaked debris conspired to send him tumbling back toward the expanding fire. Out of the rubble, a sharp fragment grabbed his leg and held tight. Panicked, he yanked free, tearing his skin.

Abruptly the fire burst free of its smoky confinement and washed over him. Numbly he slapped at his flaming uniform shirt. Searing gases pushed up his nose and down his throat, taking his breath and leaving only the remembered smell of burning wood, cloth, hair, and skin. Just as quickly as they had come, the flames passed.

John collapsed into the steaming, stiffening mud, the sound of his labored breathing the only noise in the now still wreckage. Forcing open his streaming eyes, he examined his arm laying inert

inches from his face. The skin was bubbling up between the charred shreds of his shirtsleeve in watery, angry blisters.

"Roy," he wheezed, his voice hoarse and broken.

He tried to push to his knees and drag himself to the entrance, but his arms and legs crumbled under his weight. The hot air made it nearly impossible to inhale and left him gasping. His breath whistled in his tortured throat. "Somebody help me," he moaned as pain and darkness swallowed him.

Panting, Gage stared into the night fully awake, his heart racing and cold sweat beading his upper lip. Next to him Peuse breathed evenly, undisturbed. The blanket had slid from John's hips and was now securely wound around Agnes, leaving his legs bare and cold. He groped for his jeans, shuddering as his hand touched the clammy, waded fabric. He fought with the damp material, trying not to wake his sleeping lover.

"Johnny?" whispered Agnes, blinking groggily at him. She lifted the edge of the blanket, draped it over his shivering body, and snuggled alongside his back.

He closed his eyes as the blanket enfolded him, fighting to quiet his breathing. Peuse wrapped her arm around his narrow waist and nuzzled the back of his neck.

"Are you ok?" she asked, kissing his shoulder.

John hesitated. The woman's lips moved evenly over both the scarred and unblemished flesh, her breath warm and alive on his skin. He relaxed, nestling deeper into her soft embrace. "Yes." Gage sighed and slowly drifted into a deep dreamless sleep.

"Michelle?" called Johnny. He walked to the edge of the narrow metal landing, leaned over the railing and tried to peer into the window. The dust covering the window kept him from seeing into the dark apartment. "Michelle!" he repeated more loudly.

He stood for a moment debating. The same Janis Joplin album was playing in the same downstairs apartment, as had been the night he had first followed Blaine up the stairs and into her bed. The music made up his mind.

Johnny slid the narrow blade of his pocketknife between the jamb and door, fishing. With a slight metallic click the flimsy lock sprung. He opened the door.

A breath of musty, dead air washed over him, carrying the odor of long ago cooking, dust and mildew -- the smell of closed, abandoned spaces. The tiny room was empty. Only a faint dust-free rectangle on the battered wooden floor remained.

His heart pounding, Gage stepped inside. Slowly he tiptoed to the bedroom. On the floor lay a lone maroon tassel, shed from the yards of silk trim Michelle had wrapped in a rainbow array around the bedpost. A faint shiny spot on the wall revealed where her head had repeatedly rested while she reclined on the bed. Closing his eye, Johnny replayed an image of her lounging against a mountain of mismatched pillows, her eyes post-coitally wide, while she used her finger to draw meaningless letters on his bare flesh as he drifted on the edge of sleep. Johnny's breath caught beneath his breastbone. He gasped. Slowly, he bent and picked up the discarded tassel.

"She's gone."

Johnny spun on the ball of his foot. Michelle's sign painting friend Susan stood framed in the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the door. Her face was completely hidden in shadows.

"You were so wrong for her."

"What?" asked Gage weakly.

"You heard me," she replied coldly.

Johnny struggled to push away the rising tide of anger. "Where is she?"

"Free," said the friend, turning.

Johnny dropped to the floor. He rolled the abandoned tassel between his fingers. One by one, the silk threads fell from the clump, dropping to the floor. He kept turning the bedraggled lump until it was gone and the threads were spread across the floor. Then he looked up. The door was dark

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"Keep it clean and covered," Johnny instructed the young mother standing in front of him, struggling to hold her wiggling son. "If there is any problem, see your family physician."

"Thanks," said the mother. The child squirmed violently as another young boy walked by, eager to show off his freshly bandaged elbow.

"You're welcome." The smile slid slowly from Gage's lips as the woman walked away. He settled back into his chair and initialed what he hoped was the last incident report. Setting down the pen, he closed his eyes and slowly inhaled the faint smell of the warn pine trees, trying to recapture the night before. The skin on his back tingled with the remembered caress.

Vera looked up from the box of first aid supplies she was re-packing. "Will I curse us if I try to complete the inventory sheet?"

Johnny chuckled. "Probably."

Sighing wearily, McGinnis sat beside Gage and fished in the ice chest beneath the table. She held out a can of Coke. "Last one."

Gage took the soda. "Thanks."

Raising an eyebrow, Vera studied the paramedic. "The girlfriend seems to be helping. You look more..."

"Vera," warned Gage.

"I was just going to say, it's good to see you rejoining us in the land of the livin'!"

"Everyone stand," thundered the MC. "Retreating our colors for the last time, are the Korean War veterans of the L.A. County Indian Veterans Association." The dancers edged back, clearing the area between the center of the arena and the row of flags in front of the announcer's booth. Four middle-aged men, wearing ill-fitting military fatigues lined up. "Haystack, a flag song and then a retreat song," instructed the MC.

Johnny stood at the edge of the gap between stands of bleachers that formed the eastern entrance to the arena, searching the crowd in the circle for Agnes. Dancers swirled past Gage, leaving the arena. A pair of northern traditional dancers, obviously father and son, broke stride as they passed Gage. Slowing to a walk, they both fanned their sweating faces with heavy eagle wing fans. A clump of straight dancers paused in front of Gage, exchanging final laughs and comments. He bounced on his toes trying to see past the mass of bodies.

Agnes and Shirley danced into view. Doyebi leaned toward Peuse, turning her ear to catch some whispered comment. Agnes looked up and her eyes met Gage's. She smiled. "Johnny," she mouthed.

"This concludes the Friendship Center Powwow for 1980!" called the MC.

Shirley exchanged a meaningful glance with Agnes. "I'm going to change and finish packing the car." Breaking away from the line of people filing from the stands, she started toward the campground. "Bye, Band-aid Man," she called over her shoulder.

"Bye," replied Gage. He reached out, and pulled Agnes out of the crush and into his embrace. The ridges of her beaded yoke pressed into his arm. He kissed her.

For a moment, Agnes pressed her lips harder against his, taking his breath away. Abruptly, she broke away.

"I thought we'd get some lunch." Johnny rested his forehead against hers, desperately trying to postpone her departure -- and his return to the everyday world.

Peuse frowned. "I can't." She looked down. "Shirley has to be at work at 6 am tomorrow."

Johnny closed his eyes, pursed his lips and exhaled slowly. Since he had seen her at the water tanks, he had known this moment would come. He nodded.

Agnes pulled his hands from her shoulders. Her fingers lingered his, holding him for a few more seconds. "My people don't say bye." She let go, leaving a slip of paper in his palm.

"Mine don't either."

"Toksa, Johnny," offered Peuse, butchering the pronunciation of the Lakhota word. "Be careful when you run into buildings." She gazed at him for a moment and then slipped away into the crowd.

Gage took a deep breath and after a long moment he started to walk back to the first aid station.

Gage sat in the empty locker room, his duffle bag in one hand, eyes closed. Unnoticed, the fingers of his other tapped out the rhythm of an old round dance song on the edge of the bench. He imagined Agnes stepping and whirling to the beat.

"Morning," greeted Roy DeSoto, pushing open the door.

Oblivious, John didn't respond.

"Good morning, Johnny," repeated DeSoto, while peering curiously at his partner.

Shaking his head slightly, John opened his eyes. "Huh? Oh, mornin', Roy." Sheepishly, he stopped drumming his fingers, stood, and began to transfer the contents of his bag to his locker.

"Those must have been some days off."

"Yeah," nodded Gage, smiling slightly. The vision of Peuse on the blanket beneath the stars floated before him.

"Oh?" inquired Roy.

"Yeah." Grinning broadly, John turned toward Roy. "I went to a..." He faltered as he heard Chet Kelly's voice echoing in the bay. "I went camping."

"...she was something, Marco." Kelly burst through the door. His hands sketched an hourglass shape in the air. "Built like that actress that plays Daisy Duke." He whistled appreciatively.

"Sue Gardner," supplied Marco Lopez, squeezing past Kelly.

"And eager. She was all ready for a nightcap," concluded Chet, smirking at John before throwing his overnighter on top of the bench. "Gage, here, has never seen the likes of this woman."

Roy sighed and shook his head.

John pressed his lips together and bowed his head, refusing to take the bait. Instead he positioned his sack of toiletries on the shelf.

Kelly stopped, his hand on his locker door. He stared at John.

"What happened?" asked Marco, winking at Chet.

"Wait a minute," demanded Kelly, studying the paramedic. "What gives, Gage?"

John looked up. "What are you talking about?"

"What did you do on vacation?"

"He went camping," offered Roy.

Canting his head, Kelly squinted at Gage. "See it Marco?"

"What?" John frowned.

"Yeah," chuckled Lopez, hanging his spare uniform shirts in the locker.

"He has that look," declared Chet.

"What are you talking about?" repeated Gage, straightening.

Chet stepped across the narrow aisle between the rows of wooden lockers. Leaning close to John, he sniffed loudly. "Aftershave."

Gage recoiled. "Get away from me. So, I'm wearing aftershave."

"A sure sign that you have found a woman."

"I want to smell good..."

"For the frequent flyers, drunks and junkies?" interrupted Kelly.

"Unlike some people," finished John, scowling at the firefighter.

Marco made a show of smelling the air near Chet. Grimacing he waved his hand in front of his face. "He's got a point."

Roy chuckled.

Kelly shook his head. "No, you only wear aftershave when you have something going." He grabbed a clean, folded undershirt from Gage's locker. "The rest of the time you don't care how you smell."

John snatched at the shirt. "Give me that."

Leaping on the bench and out of Gage's reach, Kelly pressed the shirt to his nose and inhaled. "No fabric softener, must not be serious."

"Get your face outta my clothes," ordered Gage.

"She's not doing his laundry yet." Kelly tossed the underwear in a high arc toward Lopez.

"Gimme that." Jumping, John intercepted the shirt in mid-air. Angrily he stuffed it into his locker. "Kelly..."

"Or he's got himself another women's libber," suggested Marco.

"Roll call in five," called Captain Hank Stanley from the locker room doorway. "Kelly, get your feet off the furniture. If your girlfriend sees that, you'll never see the inside of her apartment, let alone her bedroom," he called over his shoulder.

The joker's grin slid off Kelly's face. He scrambled down from the bench.

"Come on," ordered Marco, holding open the locker room door. "I stopped at La Esperanza and bought some empanadas. I want to get one before Mike eats all the calabaza."

"Did you get me a marranito?" asked Kelly.

"Two."

Roy watched the door swing shut. "There is something symbolic about Chet and his gingerbread pigs."

John snickered.

DeSoto observed Gage out of the corner of his eye. "Kelly's right," he said after a moment.

"You weren't camping -- at least not alone."

"Roll call!"

Surreptitiously Gage touched his wallet, imagining he could feel the thin slip of paper with Agnes's phone number. "Let's just say, I had a good vacation."

Translations and notes:

Kola, taku yakapi kin... -- Friend, whatever you advise.... This is the opening phrase of a very old

Tokala (Kit Fox) Warrior Society song. The Tokala were one of several warrior societies that in pre-reservation society protected the camps and acted as camp police during moves or hunts. The society is still existent today, although fulfilling a different function. You will occasionally see a dancer wearing a piece of the old society regalia.

Eyapaya -- camp crier. In the old days this was the man who walked the camp circle, calling out news and announcements. Nowadays, the term refers to a man appointed to speak on behalf of the family during a ceremonial event.

Snagging -- Native slang for hooking up.

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