

Freezing

"Gert! We haven't seen you in a long time."

The Chairwoman leaned close until her round face and big bosom filled Gert's view. Bernadette spoke with a thudding enunciation, like lots of folks who assumed Gert was deaf and slow. A decent argument could be made for both, but at ninety-two, Gert didn't see the need to apologize for such short-comings.

"We like to have tribal elders at our meetings," Bernadette added.

"I like to stay home," Gert said. She'd forgotten her cane and she grabbed one of the folks already seated to steady herself.

"I told you to wait, Granny," Riley said, thumping into the Council chambers and taking her arm. He panted from his run from the parking lot.

"You don't tell me what to do," Gert said, but she didn't mind holding on to him.

"Councilman," Bernadette said, giving Riley a formal nod. She turned back to Gert. "I wanted our young people involved in tribal government, but this one's nothing but trouble."

Gert patted Riley's arm.

"Aw, Bernadette," Riley said. "I'm not trouble. I'm trying to make things happen. The Tribe needs to do modern stuff."

"Every time we bring modern stuff onto our lands--" Bernadette started.

"Gran knows about the machine," Riley said. "Her Dad did it."

Gert looked up in time to see Bernadette's surprised expression.

"I don't remember your Dad," Bernadette said. "Did he die like the machine predicted?"

The memory of it made Gert's knees dip. She adjusted her grip on Riley's arm.

"Settle down, Bernadette," Riley said, using the woman's favorite expression.

"She's going to tell us."

"I look forward to hearing it," Bernadette said.

Gert looked for an empty chair. My how these people could talk.

"I got you," Riley said, leading her to the front. He settled her in before taking his seat at the dais where the rest of the Council sat. They all looked like young people to Gert.

"Order!" Bernadette called.

Gert remembered her as a girl, bossy and organizational even then.

Bernadette smacked a tiny gavel against the plastic table top. "This is a special meeting called to discuss one item: The Machine of Death."

When she said the words "Machine of Death" Gert felt as if a cold hand had clamped the back of her skull.

"A long time ago, and for good reason, the tribal leaders decided that the machine would be forbidden on tribal lands," Bernadette said.

"That's not true," Riley said.

"Wait your turn," Bernadette said.

"We have rights, Bernie," someone in the audience called.

"No one is trying to deny anyone their rights," Bernadette said. "And next one interrupts is going to get thrown out. I've made my feelings about this known. There's reasons we keep gadgets like that away from our people. That's not our way."

A rumble of dissatisfaction traveled through the room.

"We got young leaders now." Bernadette's voice cracked although it wasn't clear what bothered her. "We'll hear what they have to say." Bernadette gestured at Riley.

"Imagine knowing how you're going to die." Riley stood and lifted his arms as if offering a prayer. Gert hadn't realized how much the kid looked like her father.

"Wouldn't you live differently? Our ancestors may have had good reason to ban the machine. But we've changed so much. Don't you think we should bring this opportunity to our lands?"

A half dozen people got up and clapped. These same kids helped Riley get elected. Riley shushed them.

"I found out my great-granddad visited the machine when my Grandma Gert was a little girl. I convinced her to come to the meeting and tell us about it."

A long forgotten feeling of dread draped over Gert's shoulders. She wished she'd never told Riley about her Dad. Riley brought her a microphone.

"Go ahead, Gran," he said. "Tell us."



My Dad was called Big Bill. He's the one that came home with the news:

"Tribal Council says no Machine of Death allowed on tribal lands."

My brother was called Little Bill.

"We can't do it?" he said. He was thirteen and for months he'd been counting the days until the machine arrived.

Our Mom, Dot, was relieved the thing had been banned. "Not our business," she said. She went twitchy at the mention of the thing, like it was a curse she preferred to forget.

I was only nine but hearing my big brother talk about it got me excited, too. "Why isn't it allowed?" I asked.

"They said it was against our ways to challenge the Creator with knowledge that should not be ours." Big Bill stood up straight and held his hand over his heart when he said it, like it was a joke, but he was serious.

Dot grabbed Bill's hand and twirled around him around like a dance.

"Council has a point," she said.

Big Bill kept the dance going until they bumped into the TV stand and almost knocked the TV to the floor.

"Council don't know nothing," he said.

"Creator let people invent the machine, right?" Little Bill said.

"Access to special knowledge," Bill said. "Think how we could live different. The decisions we would make."

Big Bill made terrible decisions. Maybe he thought the machine could cure his shiftless nature.

"You kids want to do it?" Bill asked.

"Yeah yeah!" Little Bill said. He pounded his fist into his open hand. "I want to know how I'm gonna die."

"Me too!" I said. "Please?"

Dot shook her head but the matter was settled.

She cheered up again when Big Bill came home growling mad because Indian Health Service wouldn't pay for it.

"They said, not a covered service," Bill raged. "We should get a lawyer. Government has a responsibility to give us health care."

"Not essential," Dot said. "You can't argue with that."

"Who's to say what's essential?" Bill asked.

"Why would any health care be essential if you're going to die anyway?" Little Bill added.

"I want the machine," I said.

"But what about Council's law?" Dot asked.

"Council can't tell us what to do when we're not on their land," Big Bill said.

"The machine's gonna be out at the coast at the medical center. We don't got to tell anyone."

My brother and I jumped up and down cheering but Dot didn't say anything. She knew we didn't have any money.

She didn't see Bill grab the coin jar from under the bed. He snuck over to the Lucky Acorn Casino. She would have stopped him, had she known. If we had needed the money for something vital, the coin jar might as well have been poured into the river. But when gambling for foolishness, our family's luck changed.

Bill returned home with a wad of bills. Enough for gas money to get to the coast and four visits to the Machine of Death. He told us there would be enough leftover for burgers, fries and chocolate shakes. Bill and I went crazy, squealing and jumping around, like kids do.

Big Bill drove the old Chevy and we sang along with a Johnny Cash cassette. Dot sang, too.

The medical center had erected a temporary structure, a huge white tent in the parking lot. They thought a lot of folks would come out for the machine and they didn't want it to disrupt the hospital. As it turned out, that wasn't a problem.

An unsmiling lady took the money. Dad's fanned out cash vanished as easily as it had appeared. She stuck it in a rusted metal cash box, like the one we used for tribal fundraisers at home.

She pointed to a split in the yellow plastic curtain that divided the tent in half. On the other side, a few people waited in folding chairs. None of them Indian, no one we knew.

Big Bill sat down between me and Little Bill. We poked at each other, giddy and breathless, like we waited for a trip to the moon. Dot walked back and forth with her eyes on the ground.

A tall man in blue scrubs came out and called Big Bill's name.

"Can we go as a family?" Bill asked.

The man didn't say anything but motioned for us to follow. He led us to a curtained booth and we took turns sitting in a plastic chair. The man swabbed Big Bill's left index finger and took his blood.

"No, you can't choose which finger," the man said when it was Little Bill's turn. Bill hid his left hand behind his back. "I don't have to give you the test," the man said. Little Bill let him nick the left.

Dot hung back. Her eyes looked like they floated in syrup.

"You don't have to do it, ma'am," the man said, in a voice that suggested she make up her mind quick.

Dot's hand flew out. She didn't even sit in the chair.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?" Bill said, but she wouldn't look at him.

Little Bill tore the bandage off and squeezed his finger until a spot of blood rose up. "What would happen if I did it again?" he asked.

"Once is enough," Dot said.

No one said anything until the man returned with four blue envelopes. "For privacy," he said.

Little Bill wanted to know right then but Dad made him wait until after we finished the burgers. The instant my brother swallowed the last bite, he ripped open his envelope and pulled out the results.

"Choke on Christmas Dinner?" Little Bill's eyes lit up. "Wow." He pretended to eat a giant mouthful, blowing his cheeks up and crossing his eyes.

I hoped I got a good one, too.

"Let me see that." Dot took the paper from his hand. "That's what it says." She smiled as if relieved.

"Bluffs," Big Bill said. He tossed his paper to the table shaking his head with disappointment. "Didn't need a machine to tell me that."

He waved that we should go on. Dot wanted me to go next but I shook my head. She tore open her envelope and frowned at the paper.

"Bad breath?" she said. She laughed.

Dad laughed, too. "Now we got to buy that mint mouthwash, all of us."

"Your turn," Little Bill said.

"I might save it," I said. Suddenly, I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"You can't," Little Bill said. He tried to grab the envelope from my hands. "Dad, tell her she can't."

Dot put a warm hand on my back. "It's hers to do as she pleases."

"We can look at it for you," Little Bill said. "We won't tell."

Big Bill shook his head. I waited for him to scold me for not speaking up earlier so he could have saved the money. But he didn't. He picked up the check and took his time counting the last bills from his wallet. I didn't want to disappoint him.

"I'll do it." I tore the envelope and pulled the slip out. "Freezing."

Little Bill grabbed it from my hand. "She's right. Freezing." He put his face next to mine and chattered his teeth.

I didn't want to upset my parents but it scared me. I already felt cold. Mom put her arm around me and I pressed my face into her t-shirt and cried.

Walking back to the truck, Bill handed Dot the keys. "No way to avoid the bluffs on this trip."

"This is what we do with the special knowledge?" Dot said.

"Not with the kids in the car," Bill said in a way to prevent argument.

"Doesn't matter Dad," Little Bill said. "We already know how we're going to die. It's not like I'm going to be eating Christmas dinner in the truck. Gertie isn't going to freeze while you're driving the bluffs."

I couldn't stop thinking of ways a person might freeze. Locked in a freezer. Stuck in a snow storm. Falling into an icy creek.

"Doesn't work like that," Bill said. "The road could freeze--"

Dot swatted him on the shoulder.

After a moment he said, "You might not die but something worse might happen."

We were never the same. Before that, it was four of us with our whole life to look forward to. Then it was too late. We never told anyone. We never talked about it. That first Christmas Little Bill stuffed his face during dinner and then glanced at the ceiling as if daring his fate to come true. We laughed as much as we dared but didn't mention why. No one wanted to remember but we couldn't forget.

Bill made Dot teach us kids to drive. He wouldn't drive with anyone, no matter where he went. But he never stopped driving. He'd ride with a six pack in a paper sack on the seat next to him. He kept the old truck, even when the thing was held together with nothing but duct tape and prayers. He said to buy a new one would be a waste.

The truck went off the bluffs about five years later. We didn't even know he'd gone somewhere that would take him over that road. Maybe he wanted to get it over with.

He didn't come home one night or the next morning. Mom took us out that narrow and twisting road and we followed along until we found tire scuffs and a twisted guardrail. We peered down into the gorge, searching for a glimpse of the truck. The river ran far below, a distant hiss.

"Guess it was good he drove the old truck," Little Bill said.

Dot sobbed aloud. I punched his arm.

"What?" he said. "You know he would have made that joke." He was right but he still shouldn't have said it.

A few years later Dot came down with a never-ending cough and a wearying shortness of breath. By then I'd moved away to go to college but I came home for break. Mom stayed curled up in her chair, her skin pale gray. She looked so tired and lonely. By summer she was stuck in a hospital bed asking to be moved close to the window so she could see the sky. Little Bill worked in Colorado on a fire fighting crew so it was just me to sit with her.

One night she took my hand. "You remember that machine?" she asked.

I knew what she meant but I didn't see any reason to talk about it. "What machine, Mom?"

She smoothed the hair off my face. "Good girl."

And that was it, orphaned at nineteen. I left school and moved into my mother's house.

Little Bill went nine years later. Ruined a leg in a motorcycle accident and let himself get fat. His wife found him the day after Christmas, a heavy mound of flesh sunken into the recliner in front of the TV. He'd spent Christmas day eating plates of turkey and gravy and watching TV.

"His heart couldn't take it," the doctor said.

That's how you choke on Christmas dinner. My family was gone. We'd defied Tribal Council and left tribal lands to see the machine and look what it got us.



No one in the Council Chambers moved. A room full of Indians had never been so quiet.

"Wait a minute," Riley said. "You've known all this time?"

"Over eighty years," Gert said.

"And the bad breath was lung cancer?" Bernadette said. She seemed puzzled by Gert's story.

"You should have told us," Riley said. "You shouldn't ... freezing?" Riley scribbled onto a pad of paper.

"But you can't prevent it," Bernadette said. "Even if you know."

"No," Gert said.

"I'll get down to your place," Riley said. "We'll get lots of firewood stacked up."

"Let me ask you this," Bernadette said. "Did you live differently? Did your family live differently?"

"We need to look at all our elder housing programs," Riley said. He sounded like a boy, trying not to cry. "Let's make sure Grandma has solid housing."

"Yeah, you live different," Gert said. "You got a ghost floating over your head. You don't stop thinking about it."

"Don't worry, Gran," Riley said. "I'm going to look after you."

"We're all gonna die," Gert said. "Piece of paper isn't going to change that."

Riley looked like he needed a hug. "We'll take care of it," he said, without confidence. Now he could see the ghost too, poor kid.

"If you could do it again," Bernadette asked. "Would you want to know?"

"Can't do it again," Gert said. After eighty years, freezing was still out there. It would find her yet.