

Reservation Jobs

The alarm beeped from across the room. Reggie bundled deeper into the covers.

Somebody patted his head. "Is that you?"

The patting turned into rhythmic slaps. "Anybody there?" she said, again and again.

"Knock it off," Reggie yelled. He yanked the covers off and almost slapped back before he recognized her.

"Grandma, I'm up," he said.

She wore a droopy nightgown that said: Tribal elders do it without reservations.

She pointed at the alarm. "Why is it doing that?"

Reggie crossed the room to switch it off. If he kept it by the bed he would turn it off in his sleep. He jumped when he saw the time. "Mom was supposed to make sure I was up."

"I'm ready for my something," Grandma said. She left the room in slow, lurching steps.

"Where's your cane?" Reggie called as he threw on his clothes from the night before. He checked the back bedroom. No Mom. That meant no car.

He hurried to the kitchen. "You want your egg?"

"This is my house," the old woman said. She gripped the back of a wobbling chair.

Reggie took her cane from its spot by the door and handed it to her. He pulled two breakfast sandwiches from the freezer.

"Those are mine," she said.

Reggie threw them in the microwave. "No one is arguing with you."

"Where's ol' what's her name?" she asked.

"Reno," Reggie said. He sifted through a drawer stuffed with bills, coupons and saved scraps of supposedly helpful information.

Grandma snorted, "She's run off, again."

"She needed a break," he said. He dialed the number for tribal administration. Eight rings, then a recording: Try back after 8:00 a.m.

He pulled on his work boots.

"Where do you think you're going?" Grandma asked.

"I got a job," Reggie said.

She scowled. "Another one?"

"This one could lead to something," he said. "I have to leave you on your own for a little while."

"Get on with you then," she said.

Reggie wanted to tell her to stay inside, to not touch the oven, to be careful in the shower. But he knew this would provoke her to do the opposite.

"I won't be gone long," he said.

"It's never long enough," Grandma said.

Reggie smiled. He put one steaming sandwich on a plate for her. He wrapped the other in a paper towel and rushed for the door.

"I guess I'll get my own coffee," Grandma was saying as he left. He would have worried if she hadn't already wrecked the coffee maker. He could trust her with instant.

He ran down the muddy driveway, finishing the sandwich in four messy bites. A cold, damp mist tangled in the trees. The mountains were steep in this part of the world and the tops were lost in the gray. Already his ears ached with cold. He should have worn the hooded sweatshirt.

He reached the two-lane highway and headed for town. A couple of cars sped by, but no one he knew. He recognized a blue pick-up with a dead headlight and jumped into the road waving his arms. The truck skidded to a stop.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" the driver hollered.

"I thought you was Tom," Reggie said.

A distant relative, June Allen, sat at the wheel. "And you throw yourself in the road like a crazy person?" June wasn't much older than his mom but her face was hard lines.

Reggie shrugged.

"You need a ride," June said.

Reggie crawled into the passenger seat. He was suddenly conscious of his uncombed hair. He smoothed one side with his hand.

A country crooner sang a few bits before she ejected the cassette. "Haven't seen your Mom around much."

"She helps my Grandma," Reggie said.

"How is your Grandma?"

"Old," Reggie said. June chuckled but he could tell she understood.

"Why aren't you driving?" she asked.

Reggie wasn't sure which version of the truth was easiest. Finally he said, "No license. I owe on child support."

June nodded in a way that he knew she'd seen him driving around town.

"But I'm going to pay up," Reggie said. "And I got a guy who's gonna sell me a car."

"I get it," June said.

"Tribal employment office got me on that bridge project downriver. They said if I do okay, I could maybe apprentice with the contractor." A paper sack sat on the seat between them. Reggie thought he smelled something baked. He wished he had another sandwich.

"How are you supposed to get to work?" June asked.

"TERO van," he said. "Mom was going to take me to their office. I'm late."

The road had narrowed at the winding section on the bluffs. June accelerated, gliding back and forth, sometimes driving over the centerline to smooth out the truck's path.

"You a flagger?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"At the job site. Flagging?"

"Never did the training. TERO signed me up but I ended up helping a friend move." He had signed up a second time and was supposed to get a ride with Betsy Big Rock. But Betsy's boyfriend had been in the car and they ended up partying at the campground at Slate Creek, instead.

"You see your kids?" June asked.

Reggie sat up straighter. "Kid, a girl, and no. The mom moved to the Bay Area. Doesn't want me to visit if I'm not paying."

"I'm at the tribal court now," June said. "Have you talked to someone about custody? We can--"

"I know," Reggie said. "First I need a job, money ... you know."

At last, they reached the tribal administrative offices. The TERO van was parked out front.

Reggie jumped out of the truck before it was fully stopped. "Thanks June," he called.

"Good luck," she said.

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Jeffrey, the foreman, was broad-shouldered, his work shirt clean. He was cordial but humorless, like every off-reservation foreman Reggie had ever met.

"Another one from the TERO?" he said with an expression that showed teeth but wasn't really a smile.

Reggie was going to ask him about the apprenticeship but Jeffrey looked at his watch and frowned.

"Sorry," Reggie said. "Transportation mix-up. Won't happen again."

Jeffrey nodded. "The rest are over there."

Most of the crew was non-Indian brought in with the contractor. Reggie easily found the others. One was an older woman who lived upriver. The other was Betsy Big Rock. She was wearing a safety vest and holding a sort of broomstick with a stop sign fastened to the top.

"You did the training?" Reggie asked.

"That's my Aunt who drives the van," Betsy said. "Took me herself. Said if I didn't do it, it was like leaving money on the table."

"I'm going for the apprenticeship," Reggie said.

Betsy yawned. She looked like she'd slept in her clothes. "Still looking for a car?"

"Still looking for a lot of things," Reggie said.

Betsy laughed.

Jeffrey told him where to go. Near as Reggie could tell his job was sweeping gravel from one side of the road to the other. He worked in a plume of dust while a loader scraped back and forth next to him. Reggie wondered how much the operator made. He stopped to watch while the loader pivoted in his direction. The operator waved. Reggie waved back, then realized the man wanted him to get out of the way.

At midmorning a white van with the tribal logo came through and pulled over. Reggie was keeping the gravel swept with a precision that he hoped Jeffrey would notice. The van driver gestured him over.

"Hey Earl," Reggie said. The van was filled with elders. Reggie estimated Earl was only a few years away from needing to be driven around himself.

"June told me to look in on your Grandma," Earl said.

"Oh no," Reggie said. He'd forgotten about Grandma. Thank heaven for June. "Everything okay?"

"Not sure," Earl said. "She's not there."

Reggie swallowed and looked down the road, past the piles of gravel that needed to be swept, beyond the trucks and earth movers, as if he would be able to see the house from where he stood.

"You go inside or just knock?" Reggie asked. "She doesn't pay attention sometimes."

One of the guys on the crew gestured unkindly for Reggie to return to work. Reggie waved back. He'd been away from the sweeping for two minutes. That wasn't going to ruin the bridge.

"Door standing open," Earl said. "She wasn't in the house."

"Damn," Reggie said. "You didn't look around?"

"Couldn't," Earl said. "Got old folks needing teeth and stuff."

"Reggie?" Jeffrey appeared seemingly out of nowhere. "You working or not?"

"Thanks Earl," Reggie said.

Jeffrey walked him back to his abandoned post. "You're lucky to have the TERO," Jeffrey said. "You should take advantage of the opportunity."

Reggie picked up the broom. "Your grandma in a home?"

"I'm sorry?" Jeffrey said.

"Nothing," Reggie said.

Reggie tried not to picture the worst. Grandma lost in the woods. Grandma with a broken hip. Grandma stalked by the cougar that Mom had seen up the road. She was probably getting along fine. Reggie focused on conveying his eagerness to be selected for machine operator training.

At lunch, the contractor's crew went one way and the TERO workers another. Bringing a lunch was another thing Reggie had forgotten about. He was surprised to see June drive up.

"Thought you could use this." She handed him a plastic bag like the kind he used to bring home tangerines from the grocery store. Grandma liked to have one with her lunch. Inside he found two sandwiches and a can of Coke.

June taking the time to bring him something to eat made him faintly ashamed. "Thanks," he said. "Thinking about running home."

"Giving up after a half day?" June asked.

Reggie told her what Earl had said. He tried to sound casual about it.

"She wander off before?" June asked.

"Usually one of us is around," Reggie said.

"I won't have time to bring you back," June said.

Jeffrey sat with his crew in the shade. Someone said something and they broke into comfortable laughter. Jeffrey leaned forward offering cookies, all formality gone.

"Not the best situation either way," Reggie said.

On the drive back Reggie ate the sandwiches in big bites, grateful June didn't ask a lot of questions.

"You saved the day," Reggie said. "Again."

"You ever think about a bike?"

Reggie nodded. Many times he'd pictured himself on a bike, not even a fancy one. A low-end sports bike. In real life he'd wear a helmet, he didn't have a death wish. But on his imaginary rides, his hair would be whipping about his face while he leaned into the turns, the road dry, the air cool and refreshing, the motor humming under him.

"Someone left one at the court," June said. "Probably needs a little TLC but would get you around."

"Really?" he said, not sure whether she was making a joke.

"Should check it out before you thank me. Looks like something a college professor would ride in a black-and-white movie."

Reggie took a moment to process this. "You mean a bicycle?"

"You thought I meant a motorcycle?" June said. "Your Mom would kill me."

"I'll think about it," Reggie said, knowing he sounded ungrateful.

June pulled up to the house. "I'll have TERO call the contractor."

"That guy won't give me a another chance," Reggie said.

"You won't know unless you ask," June said.

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Reggie checked the back bedroom, the small bedroom, his tiny room. Once, she'd fallen in the narrow doorway between her bedroom and the bathroom. He and Mom had managed to get her back on her feet. Grandma had blamed them for the massive bruise on her butt.

Her cane wasn't by the door, or on the worn green carpet next to her chair. Reggie wasn't sure whether this made things better or worse.

He walked around the outside of the house. Sometimes Grandma sat on the laundry porch steps. Years ago, she'd been a smoker and this was the spot where she slipped out to enjoy her smoke and a moment of quiet. These days she had a hard time getting up and down the steps by herself. More than once Reggie had found her out there, cussing about how someone had changed the stairs without telling her.

Grandma's house sat on a couple of acres set in a notch in the mountains. The back half of the property was rugged slopes thick with pine and scrub. When he was a kid she'd hike with him to the highest point on the fence line to show him how far back it went. Now she could barely navigate level ground with her bad hip and weak knees. Reggie headed for the orchard in case she'd gone looking for apples. He'd found her out there once, beginning of summer, a canvas tote bag dangling from her arm. "They're all gone," she said, furious. "They took every one."

The biggest, oldest shed, the one Grandma referred to as the barn, couldn't be seen from the house. When he got close enough, he could see the barn door ajar and something that was probably her cane on the ground in front of it.

"Grandma?" He sprinted across the grass. Maybe she fell, maybe something worse. He knew that day would come and he hoped he wouldn't be by himself when it happened.

He pulled the doors open to reveal rusted rakes, dented buckets and spider webs. And a big empty space where the ride-on mower was supposed to be. Grandma hated mowing. She hadn't even driven a car in years. She said the damn logging trucks would run you off the road. Reggie suspected she also enjoyed yelling while someone else drove.

The gas can was empty. Reggie had to admit, he was impressed. She'd gassed the thing up. Which way would she go? He wished he had the car. Why hadn't Mom come back?

He picked up the cane and headed back to the house, taking his time, straining to hear the mower. The stuttering sound of compression brakes drifted from across river. And something else. A low wail, like an injured dog.

He scanned the property again, checking for something he might have missed. A trail led to the lower field with the garden. He followed the trail. Beyond the tomatoes, squash, and weeds was a brush-filled gulch. During heavy rain it filled with muddy water that rushed downhill and went under the road via a culvert.

"I'm waiting," a voice hollered from the ditch. The words might have suggested impatience but the tone was pure distress.

Reggie ran. The mower was tilted down in the ditch. He side-stepped down the slope and found Grandma sprawled in the dirt, looking more fragile than he could remember.

"Took you long enough," she said.

Reggie took a moment to catch his breath.

"You took that," she said, pointing at the cane.

"What were you doing?" Reggie said, his relief mixed with irritation.

"There used to be a road here," she said.

"That's not entirely correct. Are you hurt?"

Grandma patted the bottom of the mower. "This thing needs gas."

"What about the can?" Reggie asked.

"What?"

"That red can in the shed? It was empty."

"That's what that was?" Grandma said.

Reggie sat next to her and gave her a hug. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Wish I was more than okay," she said.

Reggie gave her the cane and asked her to grab onto him. Grandma didn't want to move.

"Get that thing running," she repeated, gesturing at the mower.

"That's going to take some work and I need to get you home," Reggie said.

A car crept by down on the road. He recognized the Ford Taurus, long rusted scrape along the driver's side.

"Mom," he shouted. To Grandma, he said: "I'll be right back."

"I'm coming with you." Grandma held on to his sleeve and tried to pull herself up.

"Sure, now you want to move," Reggie said. "Let me get Mom."

Grandma nodded but didn't let go.

The car had already driven past. Reggie peeled Grandma's puffy fingers off his arm. "It's okay," he said. He made his way down to the road. The car made a slow U-turn.

Mom was all puffy eyes and exhaustion. "Damn car broke down. I left Reno ahead by \$227 and now I got nothing." She sagged back into the seat. "Is it asking too much for something to look forward to? To feel like I'm ahead for more than twenty-four hours?" Her voice was tight like she was about to cry. "June told me what happened. Sorry."

"Not going so great for any of us, I suppose," Reggie said. "Help me get her?"

Grandma smiled when she saw her daughter. "They said you were visiting."

"It's like I never left," Mom said.

It took some effort but they coaxed Grandma down the hill and into the back seat.

"What about the mower?" Mom asked.

"I'll come back for it later," Grandma said.

"That's what I was going to say," Reggie said.

"Don't you want to get back to the job?" Mom asked.

"Not really," Reggie said. At this point he just wanted to get home and stop worrying about what to do next.

"Nonsense," Grandma said. "We'll get it fixed up and you can use my car."

"June thought you should go back," Mom said. "Explain what happened."

Reggie tried to imagine how that conversation might go. Jeffrey's grim expression. His crew pretending not to notice him humiliating himself. Gravel strewn across the roadway, broom tossed aside.

Grandma leaned forward and patted Reggie's shoulder. "I can write you a note," she said.

Reggie glanced back at her, sitting there with a regal smile on her face. He couldn't help laughing. "Thanks Grandma," he said.

"You should keep trying," Mom said. "I hate to see you give up." She waited for him to say something.

"Could someone take me home, please?" Grandma asked.

"I'm not giving up," Reggie said.

"Good," Mom said. She turned the key and the car hiccuped a couple of times before the motor turned over. "June's a busybody but she makes things happen."

"She might have a bike," Reggie said. As predicted Mom gave him a look that would wither a winter storm.

"Bicycle," he said, enunciating each syllable. "She had other ideas, too."

"At least someone does," Mom said.

"Excuse me," Grandma said.

"We're going, Ma." Mom put the car into drive and finally they were moving forward.