

"Have I ever told anybody your secrets?" Rowdy asked.

"No."

"Okay, then, I won't tell anybody you cried over a dumb girl."

And he didn't tell anybody. Rowdy was my secret-keeper.

Halloween



At school today, I went dressed as a homeless dude. It was a pretty easy costume for me. There's not much difference between my good and bad clothes, so I pretty much look half-homeless anyway.

And Penelope went dressed as a homeless woman. Of course, she was the most beautiful homeless woman who ever lived.

We made a cute couple.

Of course, we weren't a couple at all, but I still found the need to comment on our common taste.

"Hey," I said. "We have the same costume."

I thought she was just going to sniff at me again, but she almost smiled.

"You have a good costume," Penelope said. "You look really homeless."

"Thank you," I said. "You look really cute."

"I'm not trying to be cute," she said. "I'm wearing this to protest the treatment of homeless people in this country. I'm going to ask for only spare change tonight, instead of candy, and I'm going to give it all to the homeless."

I didn't understand how wearing a Halloween costume could become a political statement, but I admired her commitment. I wanted her to admire my commitment, too. So I lied.

"Well," I said. "I'm wearing this to protest the treatment of homeless Native Americans in this country."

"Oh," she said. "I guess that's pretty cool."

"Yeah, that spare change thing is a good idea. I think I might do that, too."

Of course, after school, I'd be trick-or-treating on the rez, so I wouldn't collect as much spare change as Penelope would in Reardan.

"Hey," I said. "Why don't we pool our money tomorrow and send it together? We'd be able to give twice as much."

Penelope stared at me. She studied me. I think she was trying to figure out if I was serious.

"Are you for real?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, okay," she said. "It's a deal."

"Cool, cool, cool," I said.

So, later that night, I went out trick-or-treating on the rez. It was a pretty stupid idea, I guess. I was probably too old to

be trick-or-treating, even if I was asking for spare change for the homeless.

Oh, plenty of people were happy to give me spare change. And more than a few of them gave me candy *and* spare change.

And my dad was home and sober, and he gave me a dollar. He was almost always home and sober and generous on Halloween.

A few folks, especially the grandmothers, thought I was a brave little dude for going to a white school.

But there were a lot more people who just called me names and slammed the door in my face.

And I didn't even consider what other kids might do to me.

About ten o'clock, as I was walking home, three guys jumped me. I couldn't tell who they were. They all wore Frankenstein masks. And they shoved me to the ground and kicked me a few times.

And spit on me.

I could handle the kicks.

But the spit made me feel like an insect.

Like a slug.

Like a slug burning to death from salty spit.

They didn't beat me up too bad. I could tell they didn't want to put me in the hospital or anything. Mostly they just wanted to remind me that I was a traitor. And they wanted to steal my candy and the money.

It wasn't much. Maybe ten bucks in coins and dollar bills.

But that money, and the idea of giving it to poor people, had made me feel pretty good about myself.

I was a poor kid raising money for other poor people.

It made me feel almost honorable.

But I just felt stupid and naïve after those guys took off. I

lay there in the dirt and remembered how Rowdy and I used to trick-or-treat together. We'd always wear the same costume. And I knew that if I'd been with him, I never would have gotten assaulted.

And then I wondered if Rowdy was one of the guys who just beat me up. Damn, that would be awful. But I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it. No matter how much he hated me, Rowdy would never hurt me that way. Never.

At least, I hope he'd never hurt me.

The next morning, at school, I walked up to Penelope and showed her my empty hands.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Sorry for what?" she asked.

"I raised money last night, but then some guys attacked me and stole it."

"Oh, my God, are you okay?"

"Yeah, they just kicked me a few times."

"Oh, my God, where did they kick you?"

I lifted up my shirt and showed her the bruises on my belly and ribs and back.

"That's terrible. Did you see a doctor?"

"Oh, they're not so bad," I said.

"That one looks like it really hurts," she said and touched a fingertip to the huge purple bruise on my back.

I almost fainted.

Her touch felt so good.

"I'm sorry they did that to you," she said. "I'll still put your name on the money when I send it."

"Wow," I said. "That's really cool. Thank you."

"You're welcome," she said and walked away.

I was just going to let her go. But I had to say something memorable, something huge.

"Hey!" I called after her.

"What?" she asked.

"It feels good, doesn't it?"

"What feels good?"

"It feels good to help people, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it does."

She smiled.

Of course, after that little moment, I thought that Penelope and I would become closer. I thought that she'd start paying more attention to me and that everybody else would notice and then I'd become the most popular dude in the place. But nothing much changed. I was still a stranger in a strange land. And Penelope still treated me pretty much the same. She didn't really say much to me. And I didn't really say much to her.

I wanted to ask Rowdy for his advice.

"Hey, buddy," I would have said. "How do I make a beautiful white girl fall in love with me?"

"Well, buddy," he would have said. "The first thing you have to do is change the way you look, the way you talk, and the way you walk. And then she'll think you're her fricking Prince Charming."