

KANIEN'KEHÁ:KA

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Born and raised in the Kanien'kehá:ka territory of Kanehsatake, I have had the fortune to be surrounded by family, friends and community. Together, my husband Travis and I built our family home on a beautiful wooded parcel of land within our territory where we are raising our son Tehoniehtonkwen to be a proud and respectful young Onkwehon:we man. I am the daughter of an Indian Day School survivor, and my mother is my biggest hero. She has taught me to be proud, resilient, and to stand up for what I believe in. She has encouraged me to reach for the stars and never give up. Writing has always been a safe space for me to express myself and the feelings I was going through. I experienced great losses at a young age, and I found healing in writing fictional stories based on these events. As a teen, if I wasn't putting pen to paper, then I always had my nose buried in a book. I especially enjoy reading dystopian and fantasy style books. The act of getting lost in the story of a good book and the use of imagination to envision the writer's scenes provides an

often much-needed break from the everyday and has proven to be beneficial to my mind, body and soul.

AKON:WARA

I grew up in the small Mohawk community of Kanehsatake. Our parents would tell us stories of Akon:wara—Ugly Face. As we've been told, Akon:wara is a supernatural being believed to be so scary that you become frozen in fear when you meet it. They say it hides in the shadows waiting to take youth who are out late at night when they are supposed to be home.

Our parents would say that the paralyzing fear it invokes is what makes it easy to capture you without a trace, and you are never to be seen again. Of course, we never really believed these stories and dismissed them as old wives' tales concocted to get children to behave. It would be hard to find a teenager who actually believed this nonsense, but every now and then you will find a person who does believe the stories, and they usually have a good reason to.

I was seventeen when I realized all those warnings in my mother's stories were real...

It was Friday evening and I was getting ready to do what I did every Friday night: go hang out at Dan and Colleen's. They were two of my best friends and

they lived together in a house about a kilometre away from ours. I didn't have a car at the time, but luckily it wasn't a far walk to get to their place. The walk to their place was pretty safe. I lived on the main road that ran through the territory and they lived on a small street off that same road and I knew everyone that lived in every house along the way (the joys of living in a small community). The main road had houses almost the whole length with the exception of a wooded lot on the north side of the main road, which was about a quarter of a kilometre long and ended right around the same place as Dan and Colleen's street, on the south side of the main road.

Despite all the scary stories of Akon:wara that my mother told me, she considered me safe because I would leave for their place early in the evening and she knew that more often than not, I would end up crashing on their couch and come home in the morning. However, she never failed to give me her precautionary instruction before I left the house: "If you come home late tonight, make sure you don't walk alone!"

It was early Kenténha (October) and Kanenna'kè:ne (autumn) was at its peak, where the leaves had reached their full colour-changing potential and were beginning to drop in preparation for their long winter sleep. The evening was slightly crisp and just cold enough to see a bit of my breath as I walked. The neighbourhood yards were in various states of leaf raking, some were as pristine as if it were still summer and others were a complete blanket of fallen leaves and you could smell

the earthy smell of the leaves as they lay on the ground. Kanenna'kè:ne has always been my favourite season!

When I got to Dan and Colleen's, we spent the night pretty much the same way we did every week. We played video games, sat around talking, and we even played a few rounds of different card games. At some point, we began to talk about the various old tales our parents would tell us. We laughed as we recounted one of the old stories of how gambling was the devil's game, and that we were inviting him into the home by playing. Just another old wives' tale, we'd say.

As usual, time got the best of us and it was now just after one o'clock. I don't know why, but I told my friends that I needed to get home and didn't want to crash on their couch. Colleen was insistent that it was too late and that I should just sleep there like I usually did, but I said no. Dan tried scaring me, saying, "Well, it's after midnight, the witches and everything that goes bump in the night is awake and wandering out there, especially Akon:wara."

I maintained my decision to go home despite his scare tactics, so he then offered to walk with me, to which I said no. We all began to argue about Dan walking me home and I guess you could say it's because I have been known to be hard-headed, or maybe it's because I'm just a strong-willed Kanien'kehá:ka girl who feels she's got something to prove to the world, but I stood there in their doorway all stoic and said, "It's not a far walk, I'll be fine!" And with that, I walked out and headed home.

After all of that arguing it was now after two o'clock, and as I got out onto their street you could tell there wasn't a single person awake. Everything was eerily quiet. I began the walk up their street, looking at every house and seeing them all dark inside, picturing everyone tucked into their beds fast asleep. And at this point, nothing sounded better to me than falling asleep in my own bed instead of that damn lumpy couch.

Most people kept their porch lights on, which, little did they know, provided me with a sense of security as much as it did them. I knew one of their neighbours had dogs tied up outside, so I did my best to quietly tiptoe past their house so the dogs wouldn't bark and wake up the owners.

I was approaching the end of their street and it suddenly felt as though the temperature dropped, or at least that's what I told myself as I felt a chill creep down my back. As I got to the main road, I knew something wasn't right.

I was walking on the south side of the road parallel to the patch of woods when suddenly I heard the snap of a branch breaking. My heart began to race and I became alert to every sound. My sneakers barely made a sound on the pavement as I walked, yet with every step I took there was the distinct sound of someone or something else's footsteps. They sounded like they were walking through the crunch of fallen leaves. I looked behind me to see if someone happened to be walking home too, but there wasn't anyone. I scanned the woods real quick. There was nothing but darkness.

At this point every story my mother had told me when I was a kid and the stories we had laughed about tonight came rushing into my head. I was now terrified! It was a horrible feeling, I wanted to run toward home, yet I was so scared I couldn't move quicker than what I felt was a snail's pace. I somehow managed to quicken my pace and as I did, so did whatever was following me in the woods. At this point I couldn't bring myself to look toward the woods. I thought, If I don't look at Akon:wara, then it can't paralyze me and I have a better chance of surviving and seeing my mom if I stay focused on looking forward. *Just keep moving forward*, I kept saying to myself.

By this time, I had silent tears running down my face. I was too scared to even whimper. My legs were in agony from the cramps developing due to the adrenaline pumping through me and I felt like I wasn't going to be able to keep putting one foot in front of the other. My heart was ready to jump out of my chest, my cheeks were wet with tears, my legs cramping and my ears tuned to the sound of the thing that was just on the other side of the road from me and my mind going crazy with every scary story I've ever heard and how I was about to become another story in the series of legends parents would tell their kids.

I don't know why I had never noticed it in all my times walking this route but I now realized that there was only one streetlight along this whole section of road between our houses. And, of course, it wasn't where these woods were. It was just past the wooded lot where houses began on both sides of the road. That,

I decided, was my marker point on whether I got to live or die. If I can make it to the safety of light, I know Akon:wara can't get me, or at least that's what the legends say.

With that streetlight as my goal, I remembered that another one of my friends lived right around there and I knew they would understand if I showed up banging on their door at this hour. So now my mission was, get to the light and get to Wilson's house.

It felt like I had been walking forever, but that streetlight seemed to be getting closer. Unfortunately, Akon:wara also knew its opportunity was fading so it would have to make its move soon. And so the footsteps seemed as though they were getting closer and louder. Leaves were crunching, twigs were snapping and even a bird asleep in its nest high in the trees got startled awake and let out a sudden tweet that seemed out of place at this time of night. But I was almost in the light—another hundred paces or so and I would be okay, I just needed to keep pushing myself forward.

In what I hoped would be an unpredicted move, I decided that the best thing for me to do was just sprint to the safety of the light. Despite the cramps in my legs and the part of my brain that was telling me, *Are you crazy? You'll never make it!* I knew this was the only way, and I broke into a sprint and ran like I've never ran before. That light was getting closer and closer and I believed that safety was finally within reach! I just needed to keep ahead of Akon:wara. The sounds of leaves crunching and branches breaking was loud and

fast, Akon:wara was running too, trying to catch me in its last available opportunity.

I must have had the powers of my ancestors with me, because before I knew it, I was in the glow of the streetlight, and the next stop would be the safety of Wilson's house. My legs wouldn't let me keep running, and I let myself stop for a brief moment, basking in the streetlight as if it were a ray of sunshine. From the woods I could hear a huge ruckus. Branches, large branches were being broken and the sound of the leaves rustled was erratic, as though Akon:wara was having a fit knowing it had lost this race. A huge gust of wind suddenly whistled through the woods, and then everything went silent again.

I stood there for a moment, making sure the noises were indeed gone. I looked around and Wilson's house was the next house, but my house was literally five houses away. So with a newfound level of courage, I decided to just push for home.

I made it to the safety of my house! And as I collapsed on my bed, I looked at the time, thinking that whole ordeal must have lasted an hour or so, but in fact it had only been ten minutes since I left Dan and Colleen's. I am grateful for the stories that are passed from one generation to the next and I'm also grateful that I can say I have never actually seen Akon:wara. If I had, I don't think I'd be here to tell my story today.