

The disappearing backseat passenger

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
Friday, 04 November 2022 05:42



Former police officer tells a scary story

Halloween originates from the Celtic people. Over 2,000 years ago, they would don costumes to ward off bad spirits, believing that the ghosts of the dead would roam about among the living on this day.

Today, children dress up in costumes not to scare off the boogeyman, but to scare up as much candy as possible. As for adults, the whole macabre and thrill of trying to scare others or enjoying a good scare themselves is their Halloween.

Nothing beats a classic horror film, a spooky campfire story, or perhaps a honest to goodness true tale of encountering a “bad spirit.”

In the spirit of Halloween, the *Sun* searched about for such encounterings of true apparitions of ghosts, hobgoblins, or bad spirits.

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Unlike any other ghost stories told by those for the mere fun of striking fear in their listener, the proprietor of this story spoke with fear.

Backseat passenger

Aiden Watchtower worked for the Shiprock Police Department in 2005. For Watchtower, aspirations of becoming a police officer began as a kid. In an interview with the *Sun*, he said he wanted to “catch bad guys.”

Watchtower recalled watching the police direct traffic during the Shiprock fair when he was a little boy, and how one officer smiled at him and gave Watchtower a sticker. That little encounter lit a passion in him to want to be an officer, and the excitement of watching the police units whisk by with their red and blue lights flashing only intensified it. As time rolled on, his dream of becoming an officer came true. Watchtower remembers the day he became a police officer in part because his family threw a celebration for him.

“I couldn’t believe the day had come and yet it was so real and numbing too,” he said.

Immediately there was training and more training to do, and traveling all around the Shiprock reservation. He soon realized how big his reservation really was, and how desperately the Diné people needed the help of the police. The Shiprock Agency covers over 2.7 million acres. Watchtower was called out to domestic situations, drug/alcohol related incidents, and to people who just simply needed help.

“I remember we got this one call about someone’s sheep that had strayed away from the flock and the grandmother was in a state of frenzy,” Watchtower said. “I know there were some more

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important pressing calls, but I remember why I wanted to become an officer, so I helped this little old grandma find her sheep.”

What was supposed to be 40-48 hours on duty soon turned into overtime quickly, but Watchtower took it with stride. Days seemed to come and go and blend into each other. Often exhausted, he realized the need of officers never seemed to stop as the 911 calls kept coming in.

Some of the calls Watchtower was dispatched out to tested his spirituality.

“I remember my wife would tell me before I go out to make sure I pray and bless myself with cedar as well as carrying my medicine pouch,” Watchtower said.

His wife would often state that there were a lot of bad people who could “witch” him or even put a black curse on him and his family. Following the traditional ways and practicing them was the key to keeping Watchtower safe while patrolling the reservation, even at night.

“Never did I go out my front door without doing my daily ritual, until that one day in September 2005,” Watchtower said.

That day in September 2005 was the last day for Watchtower, as he turned in his badge and quit the Shiprock Police Department without a word later that day.

When asked if he was ready to tell the *Sun*, why he quit, Watchtower could be seen holding his medicine pouch tightly.

He recalls he had been assigned the graveyard shift and mainly watching for speeders along Highway 491 from Littlewater to the Colorado state line. Other than the usual semi-trucks and nightly traffic, all was well until he was dispatched out to the Colorado state line on reports of a stranded vehicle.

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Watchtower said it was about 1 am and the weather was cold and breezy.

In the Diné tradition, it is believed that when the wind is howling and blowing like it was that night, it meant that “skinwalkers” (people of witchcraft transformed into animals) were roaming around.

“I’ve never seen one but I’ve often heard from friends and relatives who have seen them,” Watchtower said.

Often, he would get calls about stranded vehicles and usually find a motorist out of gas or a possible intoxicated individual. Watchtower echoed back into dispatch indicating he was on his way and asked if there was any other information on the stranded vehicle.

Dispatch announced that a small gray two-door possible Ford or Chevy car was on the side of the road with a woman in the vehicle.

Watchtower headed down the highway and turned on his spotlight as he began looking for the vehicle. Dust and tumbleweeds flew by his unit as he headed north looking for the vehicle. Watchtower stated a few cars passed by but none of them matched the description of the vehicle, and he began thinking the woman might have started on her way home.

Often he would slow down, but he still hadn’t see anything, until he soon realized he was getting closer to the Colorado state line. He radioed in and indicated he was turning back around heading back into Shiprock.

About two miles into New Mexico, Watchtower spotted the small gray vehicle off to the right of the road in a small ravine. He quickly turned on his lights and radioed back to dispatch about the vehicle. With his high beams on the vehicle he stated he could only make out one occupant in the vehicle and saw that the person was moving around.

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He got out of his vehicle and slowly approached the vehicle as his training indicated he should do. Watchtower knocked on the driver window while holding his flashlight and stated his name and that he was with the Shiprock Police Department.

According to Watchman, the person in the car was a Native American woman about 45 to 55 years old, wearing a black hoodie, and as he recalls, she was just sitting in the driver's seat staring ahead.

Once again Watchtower knocked on the window and asked if she was okay and restated everything he'd already said in the Diné language as well. He recalls nothing was out of the ordinary, nor did he have any bad feelings at the time. He asked the woman if she was okay once more, and the woman turned to him and said that she was lost and needed help getting back home. Watchtower recalled the woman opening the driver door and stepping out, while the wind picked up and almost knocked her over.

"I asked her where home was and she just stated it was over by Shiprock and if I could give her a lift," Watchtower said.

Watchtower then looked her over and stated he would and proceeded to pat her down for any weapons before putting her into his unit.

"I remember patting her down and helping her into my unit and closing the door, all the while she remained calm," he said.

He then went back to her vehicle, did a quick look over, and locked it up. He radioed dispatch and told them he was en route with a female occupant and stated where the vehicle was.

Once he got confirmation from dispatch, Watchtower got back on the road and headed back into Shiprock. He remembered making small talk with the woman, wondering if he knew her family or perhaps where she lived. She would make simple yes no answers and remained quiet

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as they were headed back into Shiprock. Watchtower noticed that she was remaining quiet and attributed it to her ordeal and the time of the night, so he figured she simply fell asleep in the back of his unit.

As they came into the Shiprock boundaries and passed the first street light, Watchtower told his backseat passenger that they had arrived and asked where she lived. Thinking she was asleep he raised his voice a little louder.

Not hearing a sound, he pulled over by the Shiprock hospital parking lot. He quickly got out of the car, thinking she might have harmed herself, and approached the rear passenger door.

Watchtower opened the door and fear struck him – there was no female to be found in the backseat of his unit.

“I clearly remember patting her down; I mean she was real and I knew I put her in the backseat,” Watchtower said. “I saw her with my own eyes and I know she was there. The doors cannot be opened unless from the outside. That’s when I got a very bad sick feeling and a fear that just came over me.”

Watchtower vividly remembers that day and the woman he put into his police unit on the Shiprock reservation. The very next day, he turned in his badge.

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