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Lakota Moons

January

Wiótheñika: *Moon of the Terrible*

February

Thiyóñeyuka wi: *Moon When There Is Frost
inside the Lodge*

March

Šyóištóñcapi wi: *Moon When the Frost Covers
the Prairie Chickens' Eyes*

April

Mağáksica aglí wi: *Moon When the Geese Return*

May

Chawápatho wi: *Moon When the Leaves Turn Green*

June

Wípazuka wašté wi: *Moon When the Berries Are Ripe*

July

Chaphásapa wi: *Moon When the Chokecherries Are Ripe*

August

Kháta waštéšte wi: *Moon When All Things Ripen*

September

Chawápeği wi: *Moon When the Leaves Turn Yellow*

October

Chawápekasna wi: *Moon When the Leaves Blow Off*

November

Waníyetu wi: *Moon When Winter Sets In*

December

Thahécapšun wi: *Moon When Deer Shed Their Antlers*

“Lori, follow me,” Lana ordered. “Step in my tracks!”

She led me around the fence, cut kitty-corner from the garage to the house, moved along the fence again to the other corner, and walked back to the porch. We stepped in the same footprints we’d already made, so it looked like only one person had made a circle of tracks in the snow.

The first snow of the year fell in soft, fluffy flakes, making a thick curtain that muffled all sounds. We stuck out our tongues to catch them, but they melted with no taste.

Lana opened the gate but I stopped. “Grandma said to stay in the backyard,” I reminded her.

But she didn’t hear me over the roar of the snowblower that Grandpa was using. Or maybe she ignored me, as she often did. Instantly the blower smothered her in snow.

“Yow!” she yelled, and Grandpa heard her.

He turned off the machine. “What the—?” he yelled at Lana, who was bent over holding her hand to her face.

I rushed to brush away the snow and saw bright red spots of blood. “Ooh,” I said. “Lana’s cut.”

Grandpa pulled Lana’s hand away to reveal a gash on her cheek. He grabbed her hand and led her into the house.

She wasn’t hurt badly. The snow machine had sucked up a gravel chip or twig and blown it out to the side, hitting Lana on the cheek.

Grandma cleaned the cut, put a Band-Aid over it, and then made hot chocolate for us.

Grandpa fussed until he knew Lana was okay. “I should have told you girls to stay away from the snowblower. What if that chip had hit your eye?” He shook his head and put on his gloves.

Lana put her arms around his waist. “I’m sorry, Grandpa,” she whispered. He patted her arm and went out to finish removing the snow.

That's the way Lana was—quick to do something that got her in trouble, then quick to be sorry in order to get out of trouble.

The snow fell all day, and Grandma made us stay indoors after lunch. We didn't take naps anymore, so she made sure that we kept busy and quiet while Grandpa slept.

"What month is it?" she asked.

"I think it's November, because Mom was talking about getting a turkey," Lana said.

Grandma nodded. "That is what's printed on the calendar, but the Lakota call it 'Moon When Winter Sets In.' Why do you suppose that is?"

We both thought for a while. "I know," I said, "because that's when we get the first snow."

"That's not always so," Lana said. "Last year it snowed on Halloween."

"But most times it doesn't," I objected.

"Shh," Grandma cautioned as our voices grew loud.

We sat quietly before Lana asked, "Do the other months have Lakota names?"

"Yes," Grandma explained. "Before we had a calendar, the Indians named the time of the year after things that happened in nature."

She pulled a sheet of paper out of a drawer. "Here," she said, pointing to three columns on the page, "are the English names of the months, then the Lakota Moons written in Lakota, and what they mean in English."

She took the calendar off of the kitchen wall and turned the pages back to January. "I'll write the Lakota name on each month," she said. "Then you can copy them and the English meaning on next year's new calendar."

"Why did they call them 'moons'?" I asked.

“They knew the phases of the moon lasted for many days. It is sort of what is now known as a month.”

She wrote, “January—Moon of the Terrible,” and explained, “It was so named because of the terrible cold that caused many deaths.

“Then,” Grandma went on, “the people had to spend most of the time in their tipis. Their breathing made the walls frosty. So, February was named Moon When There Is Frost inside the Lodge.

“March—Moon When the Frost Covers the Prairie Chickens’ Eyes. The weather gets warm, then it gets cold again, and the poor prairie chickens wake up with frost on their eyelids.

“April—Moon When the Geese Return. The people were glad to have the geese come back because they were hungry after a long winter.

“May—Moon When the Leaves Turn Green.

“June—Moon When the Berries Are Ripe.

“July—Moon When the Choke Cherries Are Ripe.

“August—Moon When All Things Ripen.

“September—Moon When the Leaves Turn Yellow.

“October—Moon When the Leaves Blow Off.

“November—Moon When Winter Sets In. You already know this.

“December—Moon When Deer Shed Their Antlers.

“Now,” Grandma continued as she handed each of us a new calendar, “you copy the names for next year. I’m going to rest for a bit. We’ll bake cookies later—if you’re quiet.”

We wrote quietly until suddenly Lana shoved her chair back. “I’ll finish later,” she yawned. “Let’s watch tv.”

“I don’t want to,” I replied. “I want to copy the Moons so that I can show the calendar to Mom. You better do it now, or you won’t ever do it.”

"How do you know?" Lana asked.

"'Cause that's your usual lazy way."

"Well, I started. See," she said, handing me her calendar. In big letters on January's page she had printed MOON OF. Under the large words she'd written "terrible" in small letters. The rest of the months didn't have "moon of," only the descriptive words. She'd stopped at "leaves green."

"That's a lazy way," I smirked.

"I can't waste time writing 'moon of' twelve times. I think I'll draw pictures instead."

"It's not a waste of time—it's good practice to improve your handwriting."

"Oh, you think you're so smart," Lana yelled. "You always try to do everything better than me." She threw the calendar on the table.

"Shush," I said. "You'll wake them up, and then we'll be in trouble."

"And you'll tell them it's my fault!"

"It is!"

"Oh, be quiet!" she yelled.

"SHUSH!" I warned again.

"What's going on? I heard your yells in the bedroom!" Grandma said wearily.

"She's the one—" Lana sobbed and pointed at me.

"Hah!" I was glad to see her tears. I wouldn't cry. Lana always made me cry, but not this time!

"Time out!" Grandma ordered. "Lana, go to your room . . ."

"It's my room, too!" I said, taking a deep breath.

"You can have it!" Lana choked. "I don't ever want to be around you again!"

"That's fine with me!" I stormed.

“Lori, you go into the bedroom. Lana, you go to the kitchen.”

I turned and stomped to the bedroom. My eyes burned, and I tried not to blink, because if I did, the tears would come. I wasn't going to cry! I was tired of Lana bossing me around and always having to have her way!

I remember staring wide-eyed out the window at the thickly falling snow. It was peaceful, unlike the way things were between Lana and me.

In the Lakota way Lana and I were not first cousins but sisters. This was because my mom, Marie, and Lana's mother, Martha, were sisters. I'm six months older than her, and the eldest child in a Lakota family is supposed to watch over and help care for younger children.

Doing things in the Lakota way was important to my family even though we didn't live in tipis. Grandpa believed that our values helped us get along as a family and with the rest of the world.

But sometimes I didn't follow the old way. I was older than Lana, but in no way did I watch over and care for her.

Lana was loud, adventurous, and willing to try anything. When she thought of something to play, we did it. She decided what cartoon show we'd watch or what story Grandpa should tell. When she got into trouble, I did too. I was the quiet, timid, and obedient child.

Grandma and Grandpa High Elk were our moms' parents, and we were a close family. We would have spent a lot of time with our grandparents even if none of our parents worked because that was also the Lakota way.

Grandma fixed up a room for Lana and me. Grandpa made a toy box and bookshelves for us. We had our own beds and

a dresser drawer with clothes and pajamas for when we stayed over, like we had to this night. Our parents couldn't come for us because the streets were so clogged with heavy snow.

Darkness came early, and the snow still fell when Grandma called us to set the table. Grandma had kept us apart all afternoon. Now, I wasn't as angry as I had been.

After Grandpa said grace he told us, "Your food will not digest well when you're angry. So you both say 'sorry' before we eat."

I peeked at Lana, who was smiling at Grandpa. She walked around the table to my side. "Lori," she said softly, "I'm sorry."

I almost didn't respond. This was Lana's way—she knew she'd get out of trouble by apologizing. I blinked, stared over her shoulder, and saw Grandma nodding at me to say the words.

"Me too," I choked.

We were hungry and didn't talk much during supper. After we helped Grandma clear the table, we had baths. Then in our pajamas we sat by Grandpa's chair.

"Tell us about Iktomi," Lana asked.

"Oh, he's told us so many Iktomi stories, you've become an Iktomi," I said to Lana.

Iktomi was a character from Lakota stories. He tricked animals and people into doing things he wanted, but then he'd end up in trouble. Yet he never learned.

Lana looked puzzled and angry that I didn't want an Iktomi story. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"You do things that get you in trouble, and you get me in trouble, too."

Grandpa chuckled. "Lana does get herself and you in trouble, but I don't think she does it on purpose like Iktomi does."

"See," Lana smirked at me.

"You still get in trouble," I said.

“Whoa,” Grandpa cautioned. He didn’t like to hear us bickering. “You’re both Iktomis—arguing about unimportant stuff. I think you’d better go to bed.”

In the bedroom Grandma said, “Grandpa’s tired from removing snow, and you are worn out from playing in it. Say your prayers.”

We knelt by our beds. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray thee Lord my soul to take.”

As I repeated the words, I felt a chill down my back.

“What’s ‘soul’?” I asked, “and where would the Lord take ours?”

“Our souls are what make us alive,” Grandma explained. “The soul is the spirit in us that lives forever.”

“Yeah,” Lana said. “So the Lord will take our souls to heaven.”

I shivered and wanted to ask where heaven was, but Grandma said, “You’re cold. Get into bed.” She tucked us in, kissed us, and turned out the lights. “Good night,” she whispered as she shut the door.

I woke during the night to the wind howling around the corners of the house. I pulled the covers up, glad to be warm and safe in bed.

Grandma wouldn’t let us out of the house the next morning. “It’s too cold—maybe this afternoon. It’s supposed to warm up. You don’t go out either,” she said to Grandpa.

“That darn wind drifted the snow over the driveway,” he complained.

“We can’t go anywhere until the street is plowed,” Grandma said. “Tim will do it for you. There’s no school today.”

Grandpa was not supposed to do heavy work since his heart

attack, so he hired Tim the neighbor boy to help him. But sometimes Grandpa got impatient and did the work himself.

Lana wanted to watch TV, but I told her I was going to read. I was still miffed at her.

“Okay,” she said. “Read me a story.” I knew she was trying to make up.

“Read your own book,” I said.

“I don’t want to,” she snapped.

“Well, I want to read to myself!”

“Girls,” warned Grandma. So I read while Lana watched TV.

We didn’t go outdoors until the afternoon. “Look,” cried Lana, “our tracks are gone.”

The wind had drifted snow over the driveway, covering our footsteps. There were also strange marks over our tracks.

Grandpa came to the backyard. “Now you girls stay back here while Tim runs the snowblower.”

He looked at the tracks. “Hey, we have rabbits. See where they hopped under the bush? Probably looking for nibbles. Oh, I’ll be! Here’s deer. One or two jumped over the fence. Oh, oh, they’ve been eating on the shrubs.”

We looked where he pointed. “All those animal tracks, and the wind covered the ones we made yesterday,” I said.

“Yeah, Grandpa,” Lana explained, “we made a circle, but it looked like just one person had walked in the snow.”

He chuckled and then pointed at a spot by the garage. “There.”

There were four footprints.

“They seem like they were made by one person, but look closer. See, here’s Lana’s boot, and Lori’s inside it. You can tell that your feet are smaller than Lana’s.”

We saw what he meant.