

## Oh Little Indian Princess

By Neela Samayoa

Hug your mother. Hug your sister. Hug your daughter. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2017 women and girls made up 71% of the 24.9 million individuals added to the growing list of human trafficking victims. That means roughly 7 out of every 10 individuals who were human trafficked were female. What if that was your mother? If it was your sister? Your daughter? As women we are trained from a young age to be on high alert at all times. Never have a first date at a private place. Never take a drink you didn't see being poured. Never park your vehicle in unlit lots at night. Tell me, what peace can a female feel with all these rules swirling in our heads? Tell me, what freedom can a female have when every step must be thoroughly calculated? Yes, human trafficking is a gigantic industry. Yes, there are many, many organizations who are trying to tackle this vile industry. Be that as it may, has anyone ever thought that there might be a particular group in the world who fears this industry the most? That there might be a particular group that is so incredibly plagued by human trafficking that they themselves alone make up a quarter of 2021's individuals who were human trafficked? What if I told you the particular group only makes up 2% of the general population? The numbers seem impossible and yet they're the reality. These numbers are the reality for Indigenous women.

Over the summer I found myself visiting home for the first time. My family and I are descendents from an Oglala Lakota Reservation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. To travel 26 hours straight in a car is a challenge itself; driving across middle-America in a fifteen passenger van with so much luggage it seemed to almost burst at the seams. Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Nebraska, and South Dakota. Stopping every couple of hours, each gas station and little diner seemed to slowly become more awkward than the next. Something you should know, I'm relatively pale for an Indigenous female. While yes, I do have some melanin, I am nothing compared to my relatives with caramel stained complexions. However, at each stop I felt more and more like a red dot on a white piece of paper than the last. Both the men and the women seemed to stare a little longer than they should. Walking into gas stations with indigenous jewelry and t-shirts with Native slogans, some political such as "Free Leonard Peltier" and others

with Reservation Slang written across, I knew what all those stares really meant. The stares would read “Oh little Indian Princess, I wonder how much you would sell for?”

Visiting your own homelands for the first time is lifechanging. Seeing where you’ve come from, seeing where your grandfather walked, where his father walked, and where his fathers father walked. It makes you want to run up the hills and roll down the mountains and just explore everywhere and anywhere you can. But you can’t. Not if you're a woman or young girl on the Pine Ridge Resevation. Not if you’re a woman or a young girl on any reservation.

I was home. I cannot stress this enough. These women were home. And yet, we can never feel at home. We can never run up the hills and roll down the mountains and explore everywhere and anywhere. Not without a male presence. Because they’re everywhere and anywhere. The vans. The men trying to get you in the vans. The women trying to get you in the vans. The men following you to your car. The women following you to your car. You think the buddy system is only for elementary kids? No. No it is not. It is our golden rule. Never go anywhere by yourself. Does not matter if it’s to your car. Does not matter if it’s to the bathroom. Are you a woman? Are you Indigenous? Live by the buddy system that was meant for children. The buddy system lives because, well, “Oh little Indian Princess, I wonder how much you would sell for?”

Tens of thousands of Native American women and children went missing in 2016. Where do you think they went? In the trees? Behind a rock? Lost in the Badlands? If we ask the National Crime Information Center, there were only 6,000 missing cases recorded that year. After that, all cases are to be reported to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. Unfortunately, NamUs, as they are referred to, only logged 116 of those cases. The number is 98.1%. 98.1% of the 6,000 initial cases were never logged. 98.1% of my community's cases slid through the cracks. 98.1% of my community’s cases were buried under a pile of non-indigenous missing women and childrens cases.

I ask you, how would you feel if your mother was a part of the 98.1%? Your sister? Your daughter? Maybe we wouldn’t turn a blind eye. Maybe we wouldn’t deny the original peoples of this land the right to walk peacefully without being preyed upon. Maybe we would take a moment to take a closer look of who really makes up 2017’s 71% of women and girls of the human trafficking industry. Maybe we would provide adequate resources and ensure that no person's missing mother, sister, or daughter's case gets buried under a pile of paperwork. Maybe,

we would no longer ignore the people who say, “Oh little Indian Princess, I wonder how much you would sell for?”