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Coyote Mail

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COYOTE MAIL

by
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This thesis submitted by John R. Salter III in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.

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This thesis meets the standards for appearance and conforms to the style and format requirements of the Graduate School of the University of North Dakota, and is hereby approved.

J. William Johnson 5/3/88
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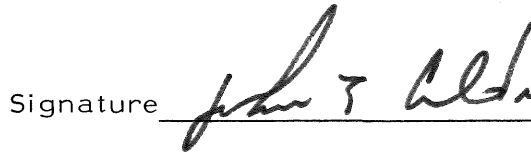
Signature 

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of four short stories. They are traditional in the sense that each involves a conflict, and resolution of a conflict. "Coyote Mail," the first story, deals with a grandfather who must face the fact that change is inevitable, and that he cannot interrupt it. "Ambush" involves a young man who, after being pushed to the limit by a bully, decides to take drastic action. The third story, "Every Blue in the Sky" concerns a law enforcement officer who finds himself forced to think about his racial heritage. The fourth story, "Big Rabbit Sets Me Free," concerns a man who overcomes great odds to succeed at a task given him by a mystical being.

The stories in this thesis offer variety in terms of point of view, subject matter, length, voice, and verb tense. They offer an interesting reading experience, but should also inspire the reader to consider his/her own conflicts and experiences.

COYOTE MAIL

Sometime during the night, when the moon was high and the owls were busy, Benson woke from a bad dream, that made him shiver even under the cover of his thick wool blanket.

In the dream someone was trapped somewhere. The someone was calling to him for help in a frightened, faraway voice. It was the voice that made Benson wake up, that made him shiver.

He lay in bed, listening to the night-wind rattling the metal spark catcher on the chimney. Then he sat, and in the blackness of the windowless cabin said, "Tell me where you are. Tell me, so I can help you."

He went back to sleep, hoping the dream would continue, that he'd be given a clue. But he heard only the same voice again and again until the sun rose, shining through the prism in his door, scattering pellets of light around the room.

Benson climbed from bed to begin his day, pulling on baggy green work pants and an oversize flannel shirt. He inspected his moccasins for spiders and slipped them over his bony feet, pausing to study the sewing job he'd given the sole months earlier. It still held firm, and he smiled at his handi-work. Then he stood and hobbled over to the door to go outside.

On his way back from the outhouse, Benson grabbed a

chunk of split pine from the stack under the eaves. It was getting low, and he decided to spend the morning adding to it. It was a good day for outdoor work--cool, windless and sunny. His eyes ran along the ridge towering above his home and he thought about deer hunting. "When it is cooler," he said, "I will walk along the base of the ridge. I will bring back a deer for winter." Then he nodded a sharp nod to the trees and the life within, and stepped into the cabin.

Benson opened the woodstove door and laid the pine on a bed of glowing coals. He watched as it heated up, darkening and hissing. Then he blew softly through puckered lips until it burst into bright orange flames. He smiled and shut the door, sliding a long nail through the latch. He straightened up, listening to the popping and cracking of his joints. When the noises began, just after his eightieth birthday, he did not like them. But lately he'd come to appreciate them, for they reminded him that he was still able to get around on his own, unlike his brother Nelson whose legs would not bend, and who spent his days wrapped in a blanket on a couch in a nursing home in the city.

Benson put the green coffee pot on the stove and sat on his chair to wait. The hissing of the water soothed him, and he drifted into a light nap, dreaming at once the same dream. The voice was louder but still unidentifiable, and when he snapped awake, he felt only sadness. He remembered a dream he'd had many years before. He'd seen his brother on fire, burning like a straw man, screaming through the flames. In those days, they

had horses, and Benson rode for two hours through the night. He found his brother not on fire but lying in a puddle of sweat, sick with the fever. Later, when he was well, Benson's brother said he wasn't surprised to see him burst through the door. It was just the way things went.

But his latest dream was not so specific, and Benson felt frustrated and helpless that he could not do anything. He stood and walked over to the fire and pressed the back of his hand against the pot. It was barely warm, but he filled a cup and went ouside to his woodpile, telling himself that he was doing all that he could for the someone in the dream.

He sat on his plank bench. It was already warming in the sun, and he closed his eyes, letting the heat travel up his spine. He sipped the coffee until it was half gone, then set the cup down. From his shirt pocket he took a wrinkled Pall Mall and a wooden blue tip match, which he struck on the bench, in a place grooved and blackened from thousands of strikes. He smoked carefully, enjoying each puff he took. He could not understand how people could go through a pack or even two packs a day, like children with a bag of candy. His son Bill had been like that, especially after he came home from the Korean war. One time, after he ran out, he asked Benson for a cigarette. Benson gave him one only after he promised to smoke it from start to finish in one sitting. Bill agreed, but after taking only a few puffs, he grabbed a wrench and went back to the engine he was working on. After that, Benson refused to give him

any more, and they did not speak for days.

After he finished his cigarette, Benson crushed out the butt and rolled it between his fingers until the tobacco fell to the ground. Then he balled up the paper, popped it into his mouth, and washed it down with the last of the coffee. He sat for a few more minutes, enjoying the morning sun, listening to a raven calling from high in a ponderosa pine. Then he stood, pried the axe from the chopping block, and went to work splitting the stove-sized logs he'd sawn earlier in the summer.

Later in the day, when Benson was hanging his blankets out to air, he heard the distant buzzing of a motorcycle engine. He smiled. It was his grandson, Anthony, bringing him supplies from town. Once a week or so, depending on the weather, Anthony loaded his saddlebags with groceries, checked Benson's box at the post office, and rode twenty miles over dirt roads and trails into the mountains. Benson looked forward to the days when Anthony came--not just because of the things he brought, but because his grandson was one of his few human friends who bothered to visit.

He hurried inside and pulled the coffee pot to the hot part of the stove. From the hook above the table he took Anthony's cup. He looked inside--a tiny spider web clung to the bottom, and the porcelain was coated with a layer of thin red dust. Benson remembered that his grandson did not like drinking from a dirty cup, so he spit lightly into it and wiped it clean with his shirt tail. He set the cup next to the coffee pot and went

outside, to the bench, to wait.

The buzzing grew louder, and before long Anthony pulled up to the woodpile, skidding to a stop in the mud. Benson made a face and stuck his fingers in his ears until the engine was turned off. Then he smiled and waved.

"Hey, Grampa," Anthony said, pulling off his helmet. "How are you doing?"

Benson shrugged and waggled his hand. "So-so. How about you?"

Anthony joined him on the bench. "I'm doing real good, Grampa. Real good. We got a new lift at the station so we can work on two cars at once."

Benson nodded. "That's good," he said. "And how is your yellow-haired wife?" He did not get along with Anthony's wife. She thought he was crazy to live alone in the mountains at his age, and was constantly sending him literature about nursing homes and senior apartment complexes. And too, she did not like the fact that Anthony closed his gas station once a week when he made the trip into the mountains.

Anthony ran his fingers through his crew cut. "Arlene is fine, Grampa. So are the kids." He started to go on about them but Benson held up his palm.

"Coffee is ready," he said. "Have a cup."

Anthony stood and went into the cabin, returning a moment later balancing a full cup. He took a sip, made a face, and spit it out. "Jesus, Grampa--is this yesterday's coffee, or what?"

Benson laughed. "Some of it is. Some of it is today's." He thought for a moment. "Some of it is last week's, too."

Anthony set the cup down and took out a can of chewing tobacco. He rapped the lid twice, peeled it off, and held it out to Benson, who waved it away and took out his mid-day cigarette. Anthony shrugged. "You ought to switch over, Grampa. Those trees you smoke will stunt your growth."

Benson smiled and blew a great cloud of smoke at his grandson.

They sat in silence for awhile. Occasionally Anthony spit, and when he did, Benson reached out his foot and flipped dirt over the brown liquid. He noticed that his grandson seemed anxious, almost nervous, like he wanted to leave. It bothered Benson--he remembered when Anthony would stay for hours, when they'd play checkers or cards on the bench. And in the fall, they'd hunt deer on the ridge. Those were the best times, because Anthony would bring his things and stay for several days, until they had gotten their deer, until the meat was butchered and made into hard jerky. Lately though, his visits were getting shorter and shorter, and Benson wondered if the day would come when he simply dropped off the supplies and rode away. Or if he'd stop coming altogether.

Benson searched his mind for something to talk about. He started to tell Anthony of the dream, but even as the words were coming out, his grandson stood and walked over to the motorcycle. He unfastened the saddlebags and began pulling things out--a

loaf of white bread, several cans of beans and soup, a small tin of coffee, a pack of cigarettes, and a tall bottle of strawberry soda. Benson took each item, inspecting labels, shaking cans, smelling wrappers. The bread he put on his lap, and when the saddlebags were empty, he took out a slice and started chewing off the crusts.

Anthony climbed onto the motorcycle and fiddled with the handbrakes. Benson turned away, still chewing the bread. He didn't like the goodbye part of the visits. "Well," Anthony said. "I guess I have to get moving."

Benson nodded, looking up at the sky. "Okay," he said.

Anthony began fastening his helmet strap. He stopped suddenly and reached in his jacket. "Hey--I almost forgot. You had mail this time."

Benson turned to face his grandson, wiping his hands on his pants. He took the envelope and studied it, holding it against the sun. It was bare white except for his name and post office box. He tapped it against the bench and opened it carefully with the small blade of his pocketknife. Inside the envelope was a crisp yellow letter. Benson unfolded it and moved it back and forth in front of his face, trombone style, until the words came into focus. He was disappointed--the mail was only a flyer, announcing a big sale at the new mall in the city. The word was new to him, though. "What's a mall?" he asked.

Anthony shrugged. "It's a building full of stores. A collection of stores."

"A collection of stores?" Benson tried to picture a mall. He couldn't. "Bigger than Fed Mart?"

Anthony threw back his head and laughed a long laugh. "Yes, Grampa. Much bigger. They have a whole movie theater in the place. And about fifty stores that sell only shoes."

Benson laughed too. He shook his head. "I'd like to see a place that big. Fifty shoe stores."

Anthony nodded. "It's something else, all right." He pulled the motorcycle off its kickstand. "You know, Grampa, Arlene and I are going into the city tomorrow. To the mall. You could ride along if you wanted."

Benson started to shake his head. He didn't like leaving the mountain, and almost never did. The last time had been a year earlier, for Christmas at Anthony's. It wasn't a good trip--Benson had a hard time sleeping, and grew tired of listening to Arlene talk about nursing homes. Anthony asked him to visit less often after that, and Benson sensed that his grandson was relieved every time he refused to go. He thought it had something to do with Arlene, but never asked. It was not the kind of thing he liked talking to Anthony about, especially with his visits getting so much shorter.

It was not the idea of seeing the mall that made Benson change his mind. It was the dream--it popped into his head when Anthony asked him to go with them to the city. Benson took it as a sign. He nodded. "Okay. I'd like to go. Let me get ready."

Anthony leaned back on the motorcycle. He looked shocked,

and Benson smiled at his expression. He stood and gathered his groceries and went into the cabin, humming a soft song. He had a feeling about the dream, that he was on his way to finding the someone who called so sadly to him. He felt good and hopeful.

Benson kept his eyes shut tightly for most of the ride down the mountain. Each time he opened them, the trees and ground rushing by made him feel sick. The motorcycle was big and powerful, equipped with heavy-duty shock absorbers, but even so, the ride was so rough Benson's insides shook. It reminded him of riding at full gallop. Except that on horseback, he could mold his body to the horse's back, eliminating most of the shock. He was ready to tap Anthony on the back and tell him to stop, that he would walk, when the wheels bit into pavement. The ride was suddenly smooth and quiet, and after a few minutes, Benson even began to enjoy the speed and the wind blowing in his face.

Anthony drove fast, and before long they pulled into town. Benson sat upright and looked around. Things had changed, even in the year since he'd been down from the mountain. They passed a new school, a sprawling yellow building with blue glass windows. Several teenaged boys were playing basketball behind a chain link fence. Benson waved, and one of them gave him the thumbs up sign.

They moved on through town, past the little stores and cafe, past the gas station that Anthony had inherited from his father, past the big Catholic church where both Anthony and his father were married. Benson had bad memories of the place, for

it was also where they had the funeral for his wife. He looked away.

When Anthony didn't slow down to enter the trailer court, Benson leaned forward. "Aren't we going to your home?"

Anthony nodded. "We moved, Grampa. Got a house now."

Benson nodded and leaned back. He didn't remember being told about it.

A few minutes later they turned onto a black asphalt road, and Anthony slowed the motorcycle. "This is all new road, Grampa," he said. He pointed at a cluster of homes in the distance. "We live over there. All new houses. They call it an addition. It's like a town away from town."

Benson nodded. "Do they have stores?"

"Not yet," Anthony said. "Maybe in a couple of years."

The houses grew closer, and soon they entered the addition. It was a totally different world from in town. All the houses were new and clean, and each had one or two shiny cars parked in the driveway. What surprised Benson most were the yards--they were green and plush. He leaned forward. "How do they get the grass to grow like that?"

Anthony laughed. "They don't. They brought it in on trucks, when they built the houses." He stopped the motorcycle in front of the last house, letting the engine idle. "This is it," he said. "What do you think?"

It was a wide, split-level house with white siding. Two new cars were parked in the driveway, gleaming in the sun. The

yard was as green as the others, and a long fence ran between it and the next house. Benson shook his head. Anthony's last home had been a run-down trailer with a dirt yard. There were no fences in the trailer court. He looked at his grandson. "Where did you get the money to buy a house like this?"

Anthony laughed. "Same place we got the money for the cars, Grampa. Credit. We get all these things now, but we pay just a little bit every month."

Benson nodded. "How many months?"

"Don't ask," Anthony said. "I don't even want to think about it." He put the motorcycle in gear and they rolled up the driveway, into the open garage. Benson waited until the engine was off, then he climbed down. His legs were still vibrating from the ride, and he walked in a little circle to get the blood going. Anthony opened the kitchen door. "Let me go in first, Grampa, and tell Arlene we're here."

"Okay," Benson said. He walked out to the driveway to look around. There were children playing in the yard across the street, running back and forth in front of a lawn sprinkler. "All that water," Benson whispered. His own supply came from a spring on the mountain. He walked three miles for it, once a week, carrying a metal five gallon can. He shook his head, looking at the sprinkler, and wondered how many cans it would fill in an hour. He could hear Arlene shouting in the kitchen, and he could hear Anthony's softer voice, trying to calm her. Then the door swung open and Anthony called out to him.

Benson went inside, feeling almost like he did when he walked as a child into dark places. Arlene was bent over the sink, peeling carrots. "Hello," she said, not bothering to turn around.

"Hello," Benson said. The kitchen was bright and clean and smelled of plastic. "How are you?"

"Oh, fine," she said. "Anthony, why don't you take him in to see the kids?"

Anthony nodded and led Benson into the living room. The kids, both of them, were stretched out in front of the television, watching cartoons. Anthony clapped his hands loudly. "Say hi to your great grampa," he said.

The kids turned and gave sloppy waves. The younger one, the girl, sat up. "Did you bring us presents?"

"No," Benson said. "No presents." Anthony gave her a dirty look and pointed to the sofa.

"Sit down, Grampa. I'll get some coffee."

Benson sat on the edge of the sofa and looked at the children. He could not remember their names. He didn't want to--they were rude, and spoiled by Arlene's parents. He looked at the walls instead. They were bare white, with no pictures or decorations. Benson leaned away from the sofa and looked at the wall behind him. It too was bare, and he wondered then where Anthony had put the coyote skull he'd given him years before. It was a special, important gift, meant to keep the home safe and happy. In the trailer, Anthony had it displayed in plain sight

over the sofa, and was proud to point it out to Benson when he visited.

He was reaching in his shirt pocket for a cigarette when Anthony came back, carrying two mugs of coffee. "Grampa," he said. "Why don't we sit out on the patio?"

"Why?" Benson asked. "This is nice."

Anthony made a face and jerked his head toward the kitchen. "Arlene doesn't really like people smoking in here. I mean, it's such a new house and all."

Benson stood, nodding. "Okay," he said.

From the patio in back, Benson had a good view of the mountain, and he leaned back in the chair to enjoy it. He rarely saw the mountain from a distance, and each time he did, he was surprised at how neat and orderly it seemed. He lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Anthony," he said. "What happened to the skull I gave you?"

Anthony didn't say anything for a moment. Then he smiled. "I keep it down at the shop now, Grampa. Where more people can see it."

"It doesn't matter how many people see it," Benson said. "It is supposed to be here, where you sleep."

"I know, Grampa," Anthony said. He did not let his eyes meet Benson's. "I know that. I'll bring it back here, too, just as soon as we get settled in. Arlene is afraid that if we drive nails in the walls, it'll make the place not as new."

Benson made a face, but didn't say anything. He sipped

his coffee and smoked, and thought about the dream. It was very much on his mind, and he wanted to share it with Anthony. But he was wary of telling him about it. There was a time when Anthony would have been interested, when he would have listened carefully, when he would have spent time trying to help Benson figure out who the trapped someone was. But Anthony seemed different lately, seemed jumpy and distant. Benson was afraid that if he brought up the dream, his grandson would just shrug, or laugh, or change the subject.

Benson spent most of the evening outside. When Arlene finished dinner, he didn't go inside, but instead, asked Anthony to bring his food out to the patio. They ate together at the mesh table and didn't talk. And when the family gathered in the living room to watch television, Benson stayed outside. He sipped coffee and looked at the mountain, letting the setting sun warm him. He felt very much that he was close to finding the trapped someone, felt that in the city, perhaps in the mall itself, he would be able to help and stop the dreams. He didn't question the way things worked. He had lived for eighty six years on the mountain, thirty of them alone. He knew this was only because he paid attention to the signs offered him. Out hunting once, he walked into a clearing and a bird--he never knew what kind--flew overhead and dropped a load of shit on his head. When he looked up, angry, he saw that the sky was clouding up fast, ready to blizzard. He hadn't been watching, and was far enough from home that he was in danger of being caught unprepared. If

asked to, Benson could rattle off hundreds of examples of when paying attention saved his life, or helped him in some way. And with that, he learned early on, came the obligation to return help, which was why he came down in the first place. He was homesick, looking at the mountain, but he told himself to be patient. To be gracious.

The evening passed quickly. Anthony came out to the patio when his favorite show was over, and they played checkers until it was time for bed. Benson won easily most of the time, because he was able to focus on the game. Anthony, he noticed, seemed bothered, and kept looking through the sliding door to where Arlene sat, eating potato chips and watching television. As soon as she turned off the set, Anthony stood up. "Well, Grampa, I guess it's time for bed."

Benson played with a checker, tracing his finger over the serrated edge. "Yes," he said. "Where do I sleep?"

Anthony opened the door. "We have a guest room now. A whole bedroom just for people who come to visit."

Benson laughed. "I should get one of those too."

The room was down the hall from Anthony and Arlene's, and as they passed, Benson looked in and saw her brushing her hair in front of a mirror that was ringed with lightbulbs. He averted his eyes and moved on to the room Anthony entered. It was almost as big as his cabin, with a queen-sized bed and matching dressers and night-stands. Benson sat on the edge of the bed and felt like he was sinking. He stood up. "When are we

leaving, tomorrow?"

Anthony shrugged. "Pretty early I guess. Maybe eight o'clock. It's a long drive, and we have a million things to do."

Benson nodded. "Are we still going to the mall?"

"Of course," Anthony said. He nodded toward the hallway. "We'll be there for hours, probably."

"Okay," Benson said.

"Good night Grampa," Anthony said.

Benson tried the bed, shifting positions for almost half an hour, but he could not get comfortable. His own bed was hard and narrow, and smelled of pine and smoke, not soap like the one he struggled on. Finally he gave up, carried blankets to the window, and stretched out on the floor. Even then, the smell of the new carpet nearly overwhelmed him, so he rolled up his shirt to use as a pillow.

He was drifting into a light sleep when he heard voices--arguing--from down the hall. He listened as it grew louder, then stopped as a door opened and footsteps came his way. His own door opened a crack. "Grampa," Anthony said, almost in a whisper. "Are you awake?"

Benson nodded, but realized he could not be seen in the darkness. "Yes," he said.

Anthony poked his head in. "Grampa. Arlene wanted me to ask if you were planning on smoking any more tonight."

Benson said nothing for a moment. Then he sat up. "No. No more smoking tonight, Anthony."

His grandson came into the room. "I know that, Grampa. But she wanted me to ask anyway. You know how wives are." He laughed a weak laugh. "Always worrying about everything."

Benson thought of his own wife, but after thirty years, the memory was painful, sad, and he pushed it from his head. "Tell her I won't smoke, Anthony," he said.

"Okay, Grampa. See you in the morning."

Benson nodded and lay back down. He heard more arguing, more footsteps--going the other way--and then silence. He turned onto his side and closed his eyes, anxious for morning to come. He felt more homesick than before, longing for his cabin, his bed, and the soft warmth of the overnight coals. "Please," he whispered. "Please guide me soon and fast."

He woke to the dream again, louder and more powerful than before. He was not sure how much time had passed since he'd gone to bed, but he assumed it was hours, since there was a silence--inside and out--that seemed more definite than before. He sat up. The voice was still in his head, growing fainter, but it did not leave, and for a moment he wasn't sure whether he was asleep or not. Then a car passed by outside, and the noise and light convinced him that he wasn't still dreaming. Benson stood up then, to shake off the sleepiness. He dug his fingers in his ears and pulled them out, listening intently. At first he heard nothing, and was relieved. But it started again, faint but steady, sending a shiver down his back. He froze, scared. Then, summoning his courage, he opened the door and stepped out.

Benson walked, eyes closed, down the hallway. He ran his fingers along the textured wall to find his way in the darkness. The voice grew louder with every step he took, and Benson more anxious about what he would find. He felt the same way he had when entering his brother's cabin so many years before.

He turned the corner at the end of the hall and looked into the living room. The television was on, but showed only gray static, with no noise. In the light of the set he saw Anthony, stretched out on the sofa with his feet on the arm. Benson moved toward him quickly, his mind filled with confusion, expecting the worst. But Anthony seemed all right. Benson touched his forehead lightly--it was cool. From his grandson's lips, though, came the same, mournful sounds that he'd been hearing in his dream. Benson looked around. He found himself wishing that his grandson were burning with fever, or that he was injured or bleeding, so that he'd have something to work on. Something to <u>do</u>.

He sat, feeling frustrated. Then, like a bolt of summer lightning, things fell into place. He thought of what he'd been witnessing lately--the shorter visits, the jumpiness, the arguing. The coyote skull being taken down by Arlene. Benson squeezed his eyes shut, feeling weak and tired. He stood up and bent over his grandson. "Anthony," he whispered, as quietly as he could. "I came, but I can't help you. I don't know what to do." He thought for a moment. "This is something I know nothing about, Anthony. This is not my world." He touched his grandson again, on the cheek, and moved away, stepping lightly.

Benson went back to the guest room and sat on the bed. But he stood almost right away, found his clothes in the darkness, and pulled them on. He left, and when he passed the other bedroom, where Arlene lay sleeping, he stared at the door for a full minute, wanting to barge in and shout at her. But he didn't. He knew he could not find the right words, that anything he said would make her more convinced that he was crazy.

Back in the living room, Benson stood by Anthony, watching him sleep fitfully, listening to the sounds coming from his lips. Benson shook his head. "I'm sorry," he whispered. Then he moved over to the sliding door, fumbled with the latch, and slipped outside.

It was a clear night, and the moon hung full in the sky, casting a warm light over the land. Benson walked away from the patio, feeling his feet sink lightly in the spongy grass. He could still hear the voice, but wasn't sure, again, whether or not it was in his head. He looked up at the sky, and traced the stars to the mountain. His feet hit the edge of the yard and he stumbled, but seconds later he was walking on rough and firm ground, back to his cabin.

AMBUSH

In Coreo all the houses face east, even the trailers in the mobile home court by the highway, where we live. Dad says it's because Navajos like to meet the sun each morning. I asked him once if it was the same way on the Penobscot reservation in Maine, where he was born. He said he couldn't remember, but thought it was. Since then, whenever we're driving across Navajo country, like to Gallup or Chinle, I look for homes that don't face east. It makes time pass faster. So far, I haven't found one, although there are some businesses that don't. I guess they don't count because nobody lives there. Someday, I will come back and build a hogan by the road and point it west or north, just to bug people.

My bedroom window faces east, but today I woke before the sun rose because I want to leave the trailer while it's still dark out. Last night, I set Dad's travel alarm for five a.m., but I was awake before it had a chance to buzz. I'm glad--I'd hate to have Mickey wake up and bother me. I like him, and he's a good brother, but I need to be alone today.

After I wake up I sit on the edge of my cot and try to shake the sleepiness away. I usually sleep hard, even though I don't have a soft bed. Right after we moved here, Dad and

Mickey and I drove ninety miles to Gallup for furniture and groceries. We wanted bunk beds, but Dad said we had to wait until we were settled in and had more money. That was two years ago and I'm still using the cot. I don't mind anymore. If I can sleep on a skinny canvas cot I can sleep anywhere. I'm going to join the Army as soon as I hit seventeen--or eighteen if Dad won't sign the papers--and it's good practice for boot camp.

Mickey is still asleep. He's jammed down into his orange mummy bag so that only a little bit of hair is showing. I should pull the bag down so he can breathe easier, since he has asthma. But if I do, he might wake up. And if he wakes up, he'll want to go along. He and Dad think I'm going hiking in the canyon. I am, but I have something else to do first. Something I haven't told anyone about, except for my dog Woody and the spirits. I can tell them anything, even how I want a girlfriend, and they won't blab or make me feel embarrassed.

I tiptoe into the bathroom and pee, being careful not to hit the water because it's so noisy. I don't flush when I'm done, either. Dad might be awake already, but I doubt it. Today is Saturday, and he doesn't have to work, so he's either sleeping or lying in bed thinking about his book. It's a novel about love, he told us, and it's about half way done. Sometimes he reads parts of it aloud, and asks us what we think. Last time he did, Mickey got mad about the name Dad picked for Mom. Dad was surprised, and said it had nothing to do with Mom. He said it was a fictional character, but we know it's about him and

Mom. She left us two and a half years ago with an artist friend of Dad's named Thomas. Pronounced toemoss. Dad is an artist too, and one of his paintings is hanging in the B.I.A. office in Washington, but he doesn't paint anymore. He teaches art at the community college here in Coreo. He told us he can't paint anymore, but that he might be able to when he finishes his book. He still has all his art stuff in boxes in the shed outside. Mickey keeps asking if he can use the paints, but Dad won't let him. That makes me think he'll paint again, and I tried to explain this to Mickey, but he doesn't understand. He's only eight years old.

After I pee, I look at myself in the medicine chest mirror. I have a new zit on my chin. That makes about seven total. They don't really bother me, because I don't have a girlfriend right now. Plus, I have more important things to worry about today than my face.

I go back to the bedroom and get dressed in camouflage pants and an olive drab tee-shirt. I don't have combat boots yet, but I'm saving for them. I only need twelve more dollars, including postage and handling. I do have green canvas sneakers that are probably better for stalking anyway. They are flexible and leave no tracks, since I ground off the treads with Dad's belt sander. I put them on, tie a red bandanna around my head, and go back to the bathroom. I look in the mirror again. I look tough. I am tough. I am a warrior, I am a man. I look like the guys who are in the Airborne Rangers.

In four or five years I'll be an Airborne Ranger. I have to be--it's in my blood. Dad says one of our ancestors was a great warrior who fought to keep the English headhunters from scalping our women and children. He drew me a sketch once, showing how our ancestor used a war club to kill three soldiers who were armed with swords and muskets. It's a great drawing, better than the paintings he used to sell for thousands of dollars. I keep it in a book where Dad can't find it. After Mom left us, he went through the house smashing and ripping up his paintings and drawings. He even got arrested for trying to break into the gallery in downtown Portland where they had some more. So I'm afraid he'll find the sketch and destroy that, too. I need it. It gives me power. When I look at it, I feel tough. I know that if my ancestor was alive today, he'd be going with me. He'd tell me I was doing the right thing. He's one of the spirits I talk to. Him and Geronimo and Crazy Horse and all those guys. They would all tell me I was doing the right thing. I know they would--I have studied them for two years.

It is time to go. I grab my .22 from the rack above my cot. It is a long-barrelled Marlin lever-action with peep sights. It's bulkier than an M-16 would be, but it's very accurate at long range. Dad bought it for me on my last birthday, along with a brick of five hundred shells. I've used most of them, practicing. I hunt, too, but I hardly ever get anything. Not because I am a bad shot--I can nail a pop can at two hundred yards, standing. It's because there's hardly any game around. I

saw more rabbits in our backyard in Oregon than I have here on the Navajo reservation, where there are hardly any people or buildings. I guess they've all been killed off, or maybe they are too smart.

I also grab my backpack from under the cot. It's a Hungarian Army rucksack. I ordered it from the same place I got my pants and shirt from. In it I have matches and my knife, a compass, a hank of rope--for climbing--and a C-Ration. I used to have three, but one night me and Mickey each ate one to see what they were like. Mine was okay--meatballs in tomato sauce, crackers and jam, and cake. There was even a packet of toilet paper. Mickey had one bite of his meal, and gave the rest to me. I didn't mind--when I am an Airborne Ranger I'll be eating C-Rations all the time.

I stop near Dad's room and listen. I can hear papers shuffling, which means he's reading part of his book. I step very quietly to the kitchen, and take a fresh pack of Winstons from the open carton on the counter. Dad will never know--he's absent minded. I take my G.I. canteen from the sink. I keep it there because it leaks. Then I slip out the back door, into the darkness.

Woody comes running up to me. He wants to come along, but he can't. He isn't trained well enough to sit still in an ambush. Woody is part German shepherd, and he looks tough. But he's not, really. A couple months ago I was walking home from the post office at the college, and Tommy Yazzie tried to pick a fight with me. I told him to leave me alone or I'd sick Woody on him.

Tommy Yazzie just laughed his crazy laugh and picked up a stick, and shook it at Woody. I thought for sure Woody would jump on him, and rip his ugly adam's apple from his throat, but he didn't. He just rolled over on the sidewalk and peed. I was disappointed, but it gave me time to run away.

I tell Woody to stay, and give him a light kick in the ribs to let him know I mean it. Then I walk casually between the trailers until I reach the tree-line. I start running fast, breathing through my nose, holding the rifle in front of me to protect my face from branches. I don't follow a path. Instead, I move between the trees, trying not to make any sound at all. I trip a couple times on sage brush, but my reflexes are good so I recover before I fall.

After five minutes I am breathing hard, and my legs feel weak. I want to stop and rest, but I don't. Airborne Rangers have to run for miles. Warriors had to run for days, sometimes. In one of my books there is a story about a guy who ran one hundred miles to warn his people that the cavalry was coming. He ate jerky and sucked on pebbles to keep his saliva going. He hardly stopped at all, but it didn't matter--his people got raped and killed anyway. But the important thing was that he tried. I have to try, too. I think about the warrior in the book and run faster, for almost five more minutes before I have to stop. Then it's only a short walk before I reach the trail that runs from Tommy Yazzie's hogan to the community college.

I walk slowly on the trail. Last night I rode by on my

bike and left an empty beer can in the middle of it, at the point where I will break west for my destination. One of the books I ordered from the surplus store says to use trail markers which won't make people suspicious. That's why I used a beer can--it blends in.

I miss it though, and have to backtrack a couple times until I feel it crunch under my foot. I pick up the can and slip it into my backpack. Then I walk almost a hundred yards due west, using the luminous dial on my compass, until I reach my sniping pit. I built it a month ago today. I spent three hours gathering dead logs and brush from all over the woods. I piled them in a semi-circle, then threw dirt over everything. Now it looks like it's been here forever. The dirt has settled into the wood, and the trampled sage brush nearby has grown back straight. Anyone walking by would think it was a natural wood pile, and not a tight, solid bunker. I got the idea for it from the same book that told about trail markers. It cost me sixteen dollars, but it has everything in it that a soldier would need to know. It even tells how to make a poison using your own shit.

I climb behind the logs, take off my backpack, and settle down to wait. I can relax for a while--it is still fairly dark out, and I have at least an hour before Tommy Yazzie leaves his family's hogan to go to college. He's not a student there, but he washes dishes in the cafeteria every morning at seven. He is usually late. I know this because I have been watching him. Today, when he passes by on the trail, I'm going to put a

high-velocity hollow point into his ugly throat. I know I can do it. I am a warrior, and I'm going to be an Airborne Ranger, and then I'll have to kill many people. People I don't even know, people who haven't been beating up on me and trying to make my life miserable for two years. I'll have to kill total strangers.

I open the pack of Winstons and light one, and smoke. Partly because it feels good, and partly because it's the best way to check the wind. If it's blowing too hard, I'll have to adjust for it when I shoot. Tommy Yazzie's throat is no wider than a tall-boy beer can, and at a hundred yards even a breeze could make me miss. I have to do it in one shot, like in The Deer Hunter, my favorite movie. Mickey says I look kind of like Nick, except my hair is darker and so is my skin.

Tommy Yazzie looks kind of like the Vietnamese soldiers in the movie. That's what I thought the first time I saw him up close, which was also the first time he punched me in the face, splitting my lower lip against my teeth. It was cut so deeply that it didn't heal for almost two months. Even now, a year and a half later, I have a hard bumpy scar that I can feel with my tongue. Every time I touch it I think of the day he hit me. Me and Mickey were in a field near the mobile home court, playing with his Nerf football. It was new and shiny because he'd just gotten it the day before, at T.G. & Y. in Gallup. Mickey wanted to get it scuffed up a little so that when he took it to school, nobody would try to steal it. That happens a lot at the grade

school he goes to, which is about a mile from our trailer. But it isn't as bad as what goes on at the junior high, and high schools at Chinle. That's where I'd be going if I went to school. Thirty five miles on the bus each way. I don't go because of what happens to some kids who aren't Navajo. They get beaten up. It doesn't matter if they are White or Black or Indian--if they aren't Navajo, they usually get beaten up. Right after we moved here, a guy at the college told Dad that the year before, a white kid was killed at the junior high at Chinle. It was the first day of school, and they jumped him as soon as he got off the bus. He fell and split his head open on the cement basketball court, and they kept kicking and punching him while he was down. When Dad heard that he said no way would he send me there. Besides, they say the teachers aren't so great.

That's why I don't go to school. Dad said he would teach me at home, like some parents here have done in the past. The first week, he gave me a long list of things to do. He brought home a math book, a science project workbook, and a book of stories. Every night, he'd look at them and plan my lesson for the next day. I'd have everything done by noon, then I'd mess around in the woods until he and Mickey got home. After the first month, though, Dad stopped the lessons. He asked me if I was learning anything and I said not really. He said I could stop the math, because I knew the basics from grade school, and because we use calculators for everything else. He said I should look at the science book once in a while, if I was interested.

Then he gave me twenty dollars and told me to go over to the college bookstore and buy any books I wanted. He said it didn't matter what they were about, as long as I read them. I went right over and got two Indian books, some stories by Ernest Hemingway, and a gun magazine. I also bought a can of Pepsi, and ended up with three dollars. But I read all the books, and when I was done Dad gave me more money. That's how I save for the Army stuff. I buy as many books as I can, and put the change in a coffee can in my room. It's not really dishonest.

I don't mind not going to school. I'm learning more from the books, plus I get plenty of free time. The only bad thing is that I don't have any friends my age to mess around with. It used to really bug me, but not anymore. I am a warrior. I like being alone. My friends are Dad and Mickey and the spirits, and Woody. That's enough for now. When I am an Airborne Ranger, I'll have tons of buddies and a girlfriend. I can wait a few years for that.

Tommy Yazzie was almost my friend. When me and Mickey were playing with the Nerf, he walked over from in the woods. I'd seen him around before. He's about seventeen maybe, really tall and thin. He wears thick glasses that make him look Chinese. So when he stepped over, I recognized him right away, even though I'd never met him. He was just one of those guys who wandered around Coreo doing nothing. He asked if he could play, and me and Mickey said sure. We set up goals and I kicked off to him, and he scored right away. Then he kicked off

to me, and I almost made it, but he tackled me really hard. He knocked the wind out of me, but I figured it was just the way they played here. I didn't mind--I was happy to be playing with a kid near my age for the first time in months.

After he tackled me we lined up for the scrimmage. We were really close to each other, and I could see the thin hair on his adam's apple. Then he called me a fucker. I thought he was joking, so I laughed and called him a fucker. Then something hit my face, and when I opened my eyes he was standing up straight, swearing softly at me, telling me to fight. I was surprised--I hadn't thought he was going to hit me. I thought he wanted to be my friend. Maybe I would have fought back if I was expecting trouble, but I didn't. I walked across the field, listening to him laughing, and went inside. I didn't even wait for Mickey, but I guess he grabbed the Nerf and took off running for a friend's house. I put gauze under my lip and laid on my cot reading for the rest of the day. I guess maybe I cried, too, but that's only because I wasn't tough yet. I was still only learning about being a warrior.

I didn't go out much after that, for almost two months. I didn't want to run into Tommy Yazzie again. But then Dad said he didn't want me spending so much time indoors. I was done with my last batch of books, so I got more money from him and me and Mickey walked over to the bookstore. I was nervous, and we stuck to back trails, but I didn't see Tommy Yazzie. I started to feel a little better. I bought some books and pop, and

me and Mickey played a few games of pinball in the student union building. I started feeling stupid for hiding in the trailer like a scared rabbit.

We left the college and started walking home, taking the main road because it is faster. Then a guy stepped out from the trees and started walking in front of us, very slowly. Of course, it was Tommy Yazzie. He didn't turn around, but I knew it was him. He had a long white rag and he was wrapping his right hand with it, like boxers do. He just kept wrapping it with his back to us, and the whole time I was wondering when he would turn around and come over to beat me up.

He didn't. When he got to the trail leading to his hogan, he turned off and kept going. He didn't look back. Mickey and I went our way. I was sweating. I had no idea why he didn't try anything, but I do now. He was using psychological warfare on me. I learned about it in one of my books. It's where you terrorize people instead of killing them. That's what Tommy Yazzie was doing to me.

All that happened about a year ago, but I still hate him. He did more things, like the time he shook the stick at Woody. He never hit me again after the time with the Nerf, but he used plenty of psychological warfare on me. One time when I was reading on my cot after dinner, he came right into the yard and pressed his ugly face against the window and laughed at me. I couldn't move--I just yelled for Dad, but by the time he came, Tommy was gone.

Dad kept saying not to worry about it. He said that sooner or later Tommy would get tired of picking on me. He said I should wait it out. So I tried, I really did. I still went out, but I snuck around like I was behind enemy lines. I got pretty good at it, but I felt stupid. I felt like a coward. I was ashamed to look at the sketch of my ancestor, because he was brave enough to fight.

That's when I started getting more interested in being a warrior and an Airborne Ranger, I guess. I read more books, and then one night I decided I was going to be brave and get rid of Tommy Yazzie. I did a ceremony that I learned about in one of my Indian books, and that's how I became a warrior. I started planning how I was going to kill him, and I didn't feel bad about it either. Tommy is the same thing as the English head-hunters. He's the same thing as the cavalry. He's the same thing as the guys who were torturing Nick in The Deer Hunter, and now I'm going to kill him like all those guys should have been killed.

It's getting lighter now. I don't have a watch, but I know how to tell time pretty well by looking at the sun, and I figure it's a little bit after six a.m. I take out my camouflage make-up kit and smear some on my face. I wish I had a mirror, because I bet I look really tough. I check my rifle, and lever a shell into the chamber. I lay it over the top of the bunker and light another Winston--the air is very still, perfect for shooting.

All I have to do now is wait and listen. I close my eyes. I can hear a truck in the distance, and dogs barking, and ravens

crying. That's a good omen--ravens are my bird sign. I picked them after I did my ceremony, and ever since then, I see them all over. They talk to me. They know what I am doing, and they know why, too. They have seen me training and getting ready. One time, a couple of months ago, I was practicing with my compass and a raven flew really low through the trees and croaked at me. I hid, and before long I saw Tommy Yazzie coming toward me. I was about to run, but he started moving the other way so I knew he hadn't seen me. I watched him look around, and then he squatted down by a big cedar tree and pulled his pants down to his knees. I thought he was going to pee, but he started jerking off right there. I couldn't believe it. I had my knife with me, and I thought about sneaking up behind him like a soldier. I imagined the way it would feel to reach around and slice his throat while he was playing with himself. But I didn't. I just waited until he finished, and then I watched him walk away like he was just out strolling. That's when I picked the raven as my bird sign. Now they are telling me I'm doing the right thing.

After I shoot Tommy Yazzie, I'm going to cut off his ears and put them in a bag I made out of a rabbit skin. I'm going to hide the bag in the canyon, up in the rocks, and someday I'll go back for it. Maybe in ten years I'll come back in my jeep and hike in for the ears. Maybe I'll have one of my Army buddies with me, and I'll just toss him the bag and tell him to look inside.

I finish the cigarette and put the butt in my pocket. I don't want to leave anything behind. After I kill Tommy Yazzie and cut off his ears, and maybe his scalp, I'm going to split for the canyon. I'll mess around there for a while, maybe until it starts to get dark out. I should do another ceremony, too. Maybe I'll use the ears. I have to thank the spirits for giving me the strength to shoot an enemy.

I turn around and look toward the trail. I pick up the rifle and aim it, picturing where Tommy Yazzie will be when I squeeze off the shot which will blow up his adam's apple like the shook-up can of Pepsi I blew up last week at the garbage dump where I practice. I am not worried about getting in trouble. When the Navajo Police find the body and see that the ears have been cut off, they'll think it's a witchcraft killing. They will stay away from it until a medicine man can be called in, and that could take a while. By then, I will be in the canyon, doing my ceremony. They may not even investigate once they see the ears are missing. Dad told me that once, a whole family was killed, and the police didn't do any more than have the bodies taken away. They are really scared of that stuff around here.

Plus, I'm leaving no evidence behind. The hollow point bullet will be so smashed up, they will never be able to match it with my rifle. And if they do come around asking questions, I'll just take off and live in the canyon until I'm old enough to join the Army. I have the address of a place in South Dakota

that can give you a whole new identity. But I don't think I'll need that. I don't think we'll ever hear about Tommy Yazzie again, after today.

I wait, holding the rifle, for a long time. Part of being a warrior is having the ability to sit still for a long, long time. In wars, snipers have to wait for hours just to get a shot at one person. I only have to wait a little while. When Tommy Yazzie walks by, I will yell his name. When he turns to look, a bullet will be heading his way, and before he even sees me, he'll be dead. Instantly.

I hear something on the trail, and I know right away that it is Tommy Yazzie. All the muscles in my body get tense, and my heart begins to pound so loudly I think he will hear me. It is something the Airborne Rangers feel every day. It's the best feeling in the world, just like they say in the books. It's adrenalin, but not the coward's adrenalin I've felt before. It is warrior adrenalin. I pull the hammer to the full-cock position, and curl my finger around the trigger. I am ready to kill.

Time seems to drag, but then I see Tommy Yazzie's head through the trees. He walks slowly, not looking around at all, like he doesn't care about anything except the trail. I could kill him now if I wanted, but I don't. I wait until he pops into what my books call the kill zone. I call his name, and my voice sounds weak and far away. I see him turn his head, see the thick glasses and the greasy hair. The adrenalin makes me aware of everything. I can practically smell him.

His adam's apple is in my sights. Clear as daylight. I know he doesn't see me--I am too well hidden. I start to pull the trigger, but my finger will not let me. I cannot blow up his throat like I want to, like I've been planning on for months. I summon my strength. I think of my ancestor, of the sketch. I think of Geronimo. I think of the man who ran for two days. I think of the Airborne Rangers. I touch my scar with my tongue and think about the time he beat me up. I think about the psychological warfare. But nothing works. I cannot pull the trigger. I set the rifle down, pointing away from him.

Tommy Yazzie is still looking my way. He takes a few steps toward me, mumbling. I don't think he has seen me, but then he laughs the crazy laugh. He starts moving closer, rubbing his hands together, and I know that he has seen me, that he has recognized me. That he is coming to get me. But I still have the adrenalin. And it is the adrenalin of a brave man. I stand up tall, and look him in the eye. My heart is going to explode. It is going to explode like a pineapple grenade. I raise my fist at him, and I can feel the power surging through my body, ten times stronger than when I was looking at him through the sights. I scream the loudest war cry ever, and charge him. I see him stop, see him turn like he wants to get away, but he can't. He is frozen for a moment, terrified like the soldiers in the sketch. And then he runs. He runs like a scared rabbit, but I am behind him. He takes off down the trail, long legs flying, but I am moving closer. I scream again and again, and each

time he jumps in his tracks and runs faster. I'm not worried, I have three miles of trail to chase him on before he reaches the college. And I know I will catch him before that. When I do, it will be <u>better</u> than shooting him. I am tough. I am a warrior, I am a man.

EVERY BLUE IN THE SKY

Fog. That's what I was looking at, through the big unblinded window in front of Sheriff Green's desk. It was the first one of the spring, all milky and sheer, like a cotton baby blanket. I guess the Indians looked at it as a good omen--a sign that the big whoever was paying a visit. But others just saw it as a hassle, because of the impaired driving vision and chilly wetness. To me, how I felt about the first spring fog all depended on whether I was working or not. Every year it was like people forgot, and not a week passed that some fool didn't drive into a parked car or a power pole. When that happened, of course, we had to go over and square things up. It was one of the worst parts of the job, almost as bad as cleaning dead animals off the road.

I was getting hypnotized by the fog, slipping into a nap, when the phone rang. Someone had turned the ringer all the way up and it nearly blasted me out of the chair. Too early for that--I'd hardly tasted my coffee, and my skull ached from too many half-price margueritas the night before.

It was Lee Lassiter, calling from the Pinetree Inn a few miles north of town. It was a tourist place, kind of expensive for a man like Lee, so I figured something was up. "Duane," he

said. "Guess who I just saw hitch-hiking north?" He was out of breath or drunk, or both.

"Who, Lee?" I asked. "Who did you see?"

"Johnny Doll. Johnny Doll, standing on the shoulder with his thumb out like a goddamn college kid."

That made me sit straighter. Johnny Doll had stabbed a man--a white man--in December. For three months he'd been hiding out, and we were beginning to think we'd never see him again. The day after the stabbing, a fox hunter spotted him going into the Mudanza Mountains on foot. We went up to look around, but the fox hunter couldn't find the exact spot again, and a bad storm was brewing, so we let it go. Carl Kennedy--the man Johnny stabbed--wasn't hurt badly enough, and wasn't <u>important</u> enough, to get a full-blown manhunt going. Especially in bad weather. We expected Johnny to come out on his own after a couple of days, and when he didn't, most people figured he was dead, frozen in a snowbank. My own theory was that he'd pushed north, maybe over the state line. And for awhile, there was a rumor floating around that he'd been shot by the Goodbears, a family of Indian hermits who supposedly lived high in the Mudanzas, hunting and fishing and ambushing campers.

I was wary of Lee's information, but I grabbed my notebook and started taking notes. "You're sure it was Johnny Doll?" I asked him.

"Goddamn right it was him. Plain as day." He sounded hurt that I'd doubt him.

"Okay," I said. "Where did you see him? Where exactly?"

He gave me about a minute of fuzzy static before answering. "God, Duane--ten, twelve miles from here. Maybe a little more."

"From the Pinetree?" Lee was a daytime drunk, and with people like that you had to be extra careful, and precise with your questions.

"Yeah," he said. "Say--I could ride along if you wanted, and show you where. That way if he's gone, we can scout out the woods."

I wanted to tell him no thanks, that it was against policy. I didn't like Lee, and didn't want him riding with me anywhere. But I knew that without a witness, if Johnny wasn't there, Lee would spread the rumor that I let him go. That I'd been preferential to Indians. And that kind of talk was no good, not when you were the only deputy on the staff with Indian blood, and certainly not if you hoped to someday run for the office of Sheriff of Hayden County. People like Lee thrived on mud-slinging.

It came down to choosing the lesser of two evils, so I told Lee to hang tight, that I'd pick him up in a few minutes. He was an old friend and pinochle buddy of Green's, so I figured it would be okay. In fact, I knew the only reason Lee called me with the information was because Green was out of town for the day, getting his weekly visit in with his mistress in Tandem.

After I got off the phone with Lee, I scribbled a note to Cindy--our dispatcher--and taped it to her phone. According to policy, I should have waited for her to come into the office, but

I didn't dare. Not much happened in our area, and bringing in a felon--any felon--would be a nice feather in my cap.

I drove north in the Blazer, slicing through the fog, and thought about Johnny Doll. We were related, in the same vague way that most Indian people on the reservation were related. Second or third cousins on my mother's side. She explained it once when I was too young to really understand, and by the time I was old enough, she had died of stomach cancer. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. By then, I'd been away for years--in and out of the Air Force, overseas, and even to college for awhile. When I moved back to town, for her funeral, and to sign on as a deputy under Green, the Indian stuff was more a memory than anything else--something there but not there.

Johnny and I were friends as small boys. Pretty good friends, too. In the summer we fished and swam from the banks of the Monroe, and in the fall we hunted rabbits in the sagebrush west of town. We did that, did all the usual small boy stuff also, like sneaking smokes and lifting six-packs of Pepsi from the service station on the reservation. All of that pretty much ended when I was eleven and my father moved us into town. It was a big move, and meant better schools and a nicer house, but it cut us off from my mother's family for good, which was probably what my father wanted in the first place. After that, I saw Johnny only once in a while--at the shopping center, at the Saturday monster matinee, or just on the street in town. And much later, I'd see him at basketball games, but we were

always with opposing schools, and couldn't really talk. He'd nod or wave, and sometimes I'd nod back, and that was about it.

I did a lot of catching up with Johnny, though, once I was hired by Green. Through his arrest record. It was pretty thick, mostly with alcohol related stuff--disorderly conduct, assault, drunk driving, and vagrancy. A month or so before I came back to town, he was released on parole from the work farm after spending a few months there for stealing a pickup truck and driving it through the plate glass doors of the new reservation grade school. All in all, he'd kept himself pretty busy during my years away. It made me sad, sort of, but I wasn't really surprised. He was just like most of the reservation Indians his age.

Lee was standing by his car when I whipped into the parking lot of the Pinetree. He was sliding shells into the magazine of a Winchester .30-30. "No way," I told him when I rolled down the window. "No guns."

He made a face. "Jesus Christ, Duane. I'm not going to shoot anyone. It's just in case."

I pointed to my riot shotgun. "This is for just in case. My revolver is for just in case. We don't need any other guns, okay?" I was getting steamed, and I thought about just taking off without him.

Lee shook his head. "Sorry, but I'm not going out there unarmed. I don't go anywhere without a gun. Ask the Sheriff. I take my rifle when we go fishing, for God's sake. He'll tell you."

I knew what he was getting at, in his own subtle way. And I wanted to punch him for it, but I was already on a tightrope of sorts, just by taking him along in the first place. So I dropped it. I unlocked the passenger door, he climbed in, and we headed north.

"Goddamn," Lee said after a few minutes. "I hope that bastard is still there. No telling what he'd do to whoever was stupid enough to pick him up."

"Well," I said. "You could have made a citizen's arrest."

He shot me a look that drilled right through me. "Maybe I could have, Duane. But without handcuffs I would have had to club him, like a trapped coyote." He thought for a second, and laughed aloud. "Or shoot him."

"Yeah," I said.

Lee started chattering then, about how important it was to get scum like Johnny off the streets, and about how the system had fouled up by not keeping him behind bars in the first place. I just concentrated on the driving, and nodded once in a while to make it look like I was paying attention.

With every mile marker we passed, I felt more and more unsure about the whole thing. I even began to hope that Lee was wrong--that he had spotted the wrong Indian. It had nothing to do with fear--Johnny, the last time I'd seen him, was rail-thin, alcoholic and weak. And the chances of him being armed with anything more than a knife were very slim. My uneasiness had more to do with a kind of messy feeling I had about something

that happened a month before the stabbing. Something I even felt a little guilty about.

It was at the Carousel Supper Club, where I was having a bite to eat before going on the outer-county patrol. Johnny came in, a little drunk and ragged-looking. He ignored the hostess and headed straight for the restrooms, weaving between tables and busboys. I had to laugh--only Johnny would wander into a family place during dinner rush, just to take a leak. I looked around--everyone in the place was staring at him. Old ladies were open mouthed and shocked, and small kids were clinging to their mommies like the boogeyman himself had walked in.

He came out a few minutes later, drying his hands on his pants, and moved toward the door. There was a moment of tension when he bumped a purse off a chair, and a kind of brittle electricity went around the room while everyone waited to see if he'd snatch it. But Johnny just picked it up and held it out to its owner, who took it with two dainty fingers and dropped it on her lap. Not so much as a thank-you, but I wasn't surprised. Then Johnny left the place, stopping only to pop a cigarette between his lips.

I went back to my meal, glad that nothing had happened and ready to forget about Johnny. But something made me look out the window. Johnny was in the parking lot, walking toward two guys who were climbing out of a bright red Camaro. He was saying something, and pointing to his cigarette. I couldn't hear, of course, but it looked like he was asking for a light. Then,

when he was standing next to the guys, one of them punched him. A short jab that looked like it had a lot of weight behind it. Johnny's head snapped back and he went down.

By the time I got outside, Johnny was curled in a ball between the Camaro and another car, trying to protect himself while the two guys kicked and hit him. I shouted and pulled them away, and helped Johnny to his feet. He was holding his ribs, and his nose was bloody and broken. One of his eyes was swelling shut, and there was a ring-cut on his cheekbone. I leaned him against the Camaro and turned to face the two guys. Up close, I recognized them as the Von Reuden brothers--sons of Rodney Von Reuden, who owned a big furniture store in town.

Right away they started claiming self-defense. The oldest one said that Johnny threw the first blow. He pointed to a bruise on his neck that looked at least a week old. I didn't buy it, and I was all ready to take them in when the younger one waved to somebody through the window. I turned, and found myself looking at an audience: six booths of chamber-of-commerce types. Powerful people. The kind of people who could make things happen. And they were looking at me, waiting to see what was going to happen. I looked at the Von Reuden boys, waiting for what they knew was going to happen. I put Johnny in the Blazer, chewed out the Von Reuden boys for ten minutes, and left.

Johnny was silent all the way to the hospital. He kept his face pressed to the window, and he didn't say a word, not even when I tried to talk. I told him it was for his own good, that

since he was on parole, any trouble could get him sent back to the work farm. It was all I could say, all I could think of to say, without telling him the real reason--that I was playing the game. The same kind of cover-your-butt game that I had played in the Air Force. The game that was getting me places in the world, places he could have been going to also, if he'd wanted. If he hadn't screwed up his life so badly.

He didn't say much at the hospital, either. When the emergency room doctor asked him questions, Johnny just mumbled the answers. He didn't flinch the whole hour we were there, while he got sewed up and taped up and cleaned up. I tried not to catch his eye, but once I did, and he turned away fast, like making eye contact with me was more painful than his wounds.

After we finished up, I asked him where he wanted to go. Where I could drop him off.

He shrugged. "I got a friend who lives in the trailer court west of town." He paused while I lit his cigarette. "I can go there, I guess."

We climbed in the Blazer and drove away from the hospital. I lit my own cigarette and we smoked in silence for almost ten minutes, until we pulled up to the entrance of the mobile home park. I stopped the Blazer. "You can walk from here, okay?"

He nodded and put his hand on the door handle, but didn't get out right away. "Cousin," he said. "You went to college, didn't you?"

"Yes I did," I told him. "For a couple of years."

"That's what I heard," he said. He leaned forward and looked up at the sky. "Did you take any science classes?"

"Some," I said. I told him I had to get going, that I had work to do.

He ignored me. "How come the sky is dark blue up there, and light blue over there, by the horizon?"

"I don't know," I said. "Does it matter?" I was starting to get antsy about being spotted playing taxi to a felon.

"No," he said. "I guess it doesn't. I mean--all blue is still blue, isn't it?"

"Yes it is, Johnny. Now come on--I have to move."

He leaned back and nodded. His voice rose. "It's like, we have light blue, and dark blue, and indigo blue, but it's all blue, right?"

"Right," I said. "It's all blue. Anything else?"

He looked at me for a long time. Then he shook his head. "Nope. Nothing else. Just think about it, okay?"

"Sure," I told him. He nodded again and climbed out, shutting the door lightly. I drove off, spinning my tires in the dirt. When I looked in the rear-view mirror, Johnny was standing in the middle of the road, hands at his sides, looking up at the sky.

That's why I felt uneasy, driving north with Lee rambling on about the system and the courts and what was wrong with the world. The Carousel Supper club scene was a loose end that I never tied up, a messy situation that I could have cleared up just by stopping in to talk with Johnny. Not to apologize, but

just to let him know that I felt a little bad about the whole thing. Maybe buy him a beer at the Wheel or something. I never got the chance, though, because I never saw him after that day. He kept his nose to himself until the stabbing.

I was lost in those thoughts when Lee suddenly jerked upright. "We're getting close, Duane," he said. "It's just around this curve that I saw him." He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "I hope he's still there."

I nodded and sped up, trying to push the Carousel memory out of my head. I glanced at the odometer--we'd gone almost twenty miles from the Pinetree. Lee was way off, and I was going to tell him so, but then he pointed. "It's him," he said, practically shouting. "We got him now."

I flicked on the lights and strained my eyes to see. Johnny was there, all right, hunkered down on the shoulder with his hands in his pockets. He didn't budge when he saw us, didn't move at all until I skidded to a stop only a few inches from him. Then he stood very slowly, stretching out to the full six feet listed on his record. All I could think of was how much taller he looked than the last time I saw him. I opened the door and started to jump out, and that's when he took off. He bolted like a surprised deer for the treeline. Lee was halfway out of the Blazer with his rifle, so I yanked him back inside and hit the gas, driving with both doors open and flapping like white wings.

There was fifty yards of mud to get through before the

trees got thick. We made it through thirty before sinking to the axles. Johnny was slipping between two pines as we jumped out of the Blazer. Right away, Lee tripped and fell on his face, but I didn't wait to help him up--I just ran, trying to keep my eye on Johnny while he disappeared in the darkness.

Once inside the trees, though, I lost sight of him. I stopped and listened, but the only sound was Lee's huffing and puffing behind me. He caught up and stood next to me, rocking on his feet. "Christ," he whispered. "Where is he?"

I shot him a nasty look and put my fingers to my lips. He nodded and spit. Then he jacked a shell into the chamber of his rifle. In the early morning quiet, it was as loud as if he'd fired it. I swung around and grabbed him by the collar. "Listen," I said. "I don't want to see you pointing that thing at Johnny. He's not dangerous, he's just a drunken fool. Understand?"

Lee stared at me through icy eyes, and for a moment I thought he was going to shoot me. "Get your fucking hands off me, deputy," he said.

I let him go and he stepped back a foot. "You listen. Whatever Johnny is, I'm not going into this kind of cover without an equalizer. For all we know, he's got friends with him."

"Like who?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe those Goodbear hermits. Those survivalists."

"Yeah, right," I said. "Maybe he's got the Lone Ranger and Tonto up there too."

Lee stomped his boot into the ground. "Goddammit, I'm not taking any chances, okay?"

"Yeah," I said. I looked in the trees. "Let's go--just be careful. Keep your head on straight."

He didn't answer. We moved in, spreading apart like we were hunting deer. But there was an eeriness hanging in the air like I'd never felt in the woods before. Maybe it was the fog.

We walked for several minutes, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. Then, just as we climbed out of a small dip, I heard a branch break ahead of us. We stopped in our tracks. Another sound--a cough--reached us. I didn't like the way things felt. "Johnny," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "Stop messing around and get over here. Don't make this harder than it has to be." I looked at Lee. He made a face and shook his head. "Come on, Johnny," I said, a little louder.

There was no answer. Lee took a step forward, and when I reached out to stop him he shook away and kept going. I jumped forward and we walked toward the sound. I put my hand on my revolver but didn't draw it. I was convinced I wouldn't need it, that Johnny was just playing games. I figured he was turning himself in without going through the humiliation of surrendering.

Twenty yards up, we broke into a little clearing and there was Johnny, standing in plain view. Waiting. I felt a wave of relief pass through me, until I saw Lee's rifle barrel go up. It was probably hunter's instinct. I reached out to push it down, heard a whipping sound, and watched as an arrow slid into

Lee's adam's apple. He dropped the rifle and walked backwards a few feet, trying to pull it out. Then he fell straight back. I couldn't take my eyes from him. It was unbelievable.

I snapped out of it when Johnny tackled me. I took one wild swing but he ducked under it and we went down. He landed on top, driving his elbow into my solar plexus, knocking the wind out of me. In a quick movement he unsnapped my holster and pulled out my revolver. He jammed it hard against my head. "Easy, cousin," he said. "Just take it easy." I didn't move. I couldn't move. Johnny reached around and took out my handcuffs. "Over," he said, pushing on my shoulder. I rolled, and he cuffed me. For the first time in my life, I knew what it was like to have that hard steel digging into my wrist. My face was pressed to the ground, and I could feel it give under my chin, like a sponge. Then Johnny stood up and stepped back. He stuck my revolver in his belt and lit a cigarette. It was my first good look at him. He'd put on some weight, and his hair was long, clean, and shiny-black, the way it had been when we were kids. And his eyes were clear, not watery and bloodshot. He was a different man.

"Cousin Duane," he said, shaking his head. "Nice to see you." He moved closer and pushed me onto my back. Two figures stepped out of the trees behind him. Big Indians with dark faces, wearing what looked like deerskin pants and shirts. One of them carried a short, curved bow. He walked over to Lee's body, yanked out the arrow, and wiped it against his thigh.

Then he slipped it into a back quiver and joined Johnny and the other guy. I don't know who they were. The Goodbears, maybe.

Johnny looked at me, almost sadly, for a few minutes. "Cousin," he said. "Do you remember when we talked the other day. About the blues in the sky?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Did you think about it, like I asked you to?"

"Sort of," I said. "I thought about everything that happened that day."

"Good," he said. He handed his cigarette to one of the big Indians. "Did you understand what I was talking about? What I meant?"

"I think so," I told him. "I think you meant us. That you and I are connected, like the blues in the sky." I watched his hand drift down to the butt of the revolver. His hand brushed across it lightly.

"Close, cousin," he said. "But it's bigger than that. It's not just you and me. It's all of us. We're all connected. Like every blue in the sky." Then he spun around and walked away. The two big Indians walked toward me, looking straight ahead. I knew then that I wasn't going to die. But I braced myself for what I knew was going to happen. The big Indians got on either side of me. One of them bent down, and I caught a glimpse of his big brown fist coming at me before it landed in my mouth. It was like a starting gun at a sports event, because the other one brought back his leg and drove a moccasined foot into my ribs. I

felt one crack, and then they went at it together, kicking and punching and slapping. Something like a flash of lightning zipped into my brain, and I slipped into blackness.

When I came to, I didn't open my eyes right away. I dug my fingers around, expecting to feel the ground, the mud, but I didn't. I felt blankets. I opened my eyes--I could only see through one, and things were hazy. Sheriff Green was sitting next to the hospital bed, watching television. With him was a thin faced man I recognized as being a state police investigator. I knew there were going to be questions. They'd want to know who killed Lee, and why we were there in the first place. I figured Lee had bragged to people at the Pinetree about seeing Johnny on the highway. They'd want to know if it <u>was</u> Johnny Doll.

I looked past them, at the crystal-clear window. The sky was bright, and I could see the peaks of the Mudanzas in the distance, standing against a turquoise sky. And I knew that I'd tell them I wasn't sure <u>who</u> it was. That I couldn't tell the difference, because they were all the same, like all the blues in the sky.

BIG RABBIT SETS ME FREE

Most of the time, people are too polite to say anything. They look down at where my leg used to be, and then they look away fast.

Sometimes, though, people do ask. Especially if they have been drinking, and feel close to me. When that happens, I make up stories. War wound, I say. Train accident. Ceremonial gone bad. I lie because when I do tell the truth, like if I'm the one who has been drinking, the people never believe me. They listen, nodding and smiling, until I'm through talking. Then they shake their heads. "Terry," they say. "Come on. Tell us the truth--tell us how you lost your leg."

When that happens I laugh, and make up another story. But the truth is still the truth.

* * *

The day after Grampa died, everybody went over to his place to take his things. Uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters, even friends. Everybody wanted something. I went myself, but as soon as I pulled over the red cattle guard and into the yard, I could tell it was a bad scene. Two of my cousins--Franklin and

Warren--were fighting in the dirt. Franklin's head was bloody and he was grabbing for his belt knife. I could hear people yelling in the trailer, and a lady I didn't know was pulling the screens off the windows and piling them in the bed of an El Camino. Half a dozen small kids were throwing rocks at the trailer wall, denting the brown metal.

Grampa wouldn't have been happy to see his people acting like that, like vultures flocking to a dead dog on the highway. I didn't want to have any part of it, so I just backed around and drove away fast, leaving a long trail of dust behind me.

I didn't go home. I went straight over to Luke's, the bar where Grampa used to sit everyday until the cancer in his stomach grew too big. I was with him when he took his old cavalry sword to Luke. "Luke," he said, "You can hang this antique in your bar if you give me a free drink now and then."

Luke took the sword and studied it for a long time. Then he looked around the bar. The walls were just bare pine paneling except for a few cowboy pictures and a crooked set of mule deer antlers. "Okay Hiram," he said. "I'll do you one better than that. I'll take this piece of junk off your hands for ten bucks." He started to reach in his pocket for the money, but Grampa held up his hand.

"No money. I want to keep it in the family. I want my grandson here to have it someday."

Luke glanced at me and made a face, and looked at the sword again. "Okay," he said. "It's a deal." He poured me and

Grampa each a whiskey, and we watched him climb up on a bar stool and drive two long nails into the wall above the bar mirror. While he worked, I leaned over to Grampa and thanked him for what he'd said. For thinking of me.

He just laughed his dry old man's laugh and rubbed my hair. "Terry," he said. "I was just fooling. If I took the money, it would be gone in a day. This way, I can get free drinks for a long time, just like the banks do with their loans. You understand, don't you?"

I nodded, but it didn't make sense to me until he showed me some math on the back of a coaster. He was right--it added up to hundreds of dollars a year, even if he had just two free whiskeys a week. I was proud of him for being so smart.

Later that day, when we were driving home, Grampa flicked off the radio and asked me if I was sad that I wasn't really the reason he didn't take the cash. I told him I was, a little bit. But I also told him it wasn't that big a deal since I had never seen the sword until that day.

"Good," he said. "Let Luke keep it on his wall forever. You don't want that old thing anyway."

When I got to Luke's, I ordered a beer and waited for him to tell me how sad he was about Grampa dying. "He was a good friend," he said. "A good friend, and a valued customer." He thought for a second. "And a good Indian--Hiram was a good Indian."

Then I told him I was there to get my sword. I reminded

him of what Grampa had said, about wanting to keep it in the family. About saving it for me. Luke listened, smiling and nodding, until I was through. Then he made a face that twisted his white eyebrows together. "Sorry, son," he said. "Hiram is dead and the sword is mine. I can't remember that far back, and you have nothing in writing. Sorry." He slapped me on the back and moved away to wait on somebody else.

I drank my beer and thought for awhile. I looked at the sword--it was still in its place, but it was dusty and almost hidden in the shadows. Right after he got it, Luke took good care of it. He brought it down almost every day to show to people, telling them it had been his grandfather's, in the civil war. He would even say that when Grampa and I were there, but Grampa never said anything. He'd just smile and nod slowly, like he believed it himself. I asked him why he didn't tell people that Luke was a liar, but he never gave me an answer.

I drained my beer and slammed the mug down on the counter. Luke came by and took it, and started to refill it from the tap. "Better make it quick," I told him. "I want to get out of here before Franklin and Warren show up."

Luke's back went stiff and he spilled beer on the floor. "What?" he asked. "What's that?"

"Franklin and Warren said they were coming by to get the sword tonight after work. I just wanted to beat them to it." I was going to lie more, but Luke was already climbing up on his stool. He took the sword down and handed it to me, blade first.

"Here you go, Terry," he said. "I was just kidding before." He looked kind of pale. Franklin and Warren came in handy like that once in awhile. They had reputations for breaking places up.

"Thanks, Luke," I said. "I'll go by the sawmill and tell them I got it already."

Luke said thanks, and I could tell he meant it. When I left, he was pulling out the nails with a claw hammer. I should have felt bad for scaring him, but I didn't. I was too happy to have the sword. The others were still at Grampa's, fighting over his dishes and tools, but I had something better. Something valuable. I knew that Grampa was proud of me for tricking Luke, and that made me feel good.

When I got home, my roommate Charley was gone, still at school in Tandem where he went twice a week to learn how to be a paralegal. I dug in his room until I found his toolbox. There was a can of WD-40 lying on top, so I grabbed that and a wire brush and went into the livingroom. Flintstones was on. I got a Pepsi and sat down on the sofa, and went to work on the sword. Under the dust and grime it was pitted and dull, but after some hard rubbing it started to look better. Almost shiny.

I'd never seen the sword up close before. I'd never seen it at all until the day I drove Grampa to Luke's. He held it across his lap and mumbled with his eyes closed. I didn't ask him what he was doing. It was about two weeks after the doctor at IHS told him he was going to die, so I figured he was just starting his crossing-over prayers early. Or that he was just mumbling,

like old men do sometimes, for no reason. But he did it all the way to Luke's, so I never got to hold the sword, or learn anything about it, until later on.

I was thinking about Grampa when Charley came home from school. He didn't notice the sword right away. He just plopped down on his big easy chair with his eyes closed. "Jeez," he said. "I think I'm flunking Torts again." He shifted to get more comfortable for his afternoon nap.

"Look at this," I said, holding up the sword. "Genuine cavalry."

Charley opened one eye, then the other. Then he jerked upright and pressed back against the cushions like I was poking a live rattlesnake at him. "What?" he asked.

I told him again. "Genuine cavalry. It was my Grampa's."

Charley jumped to his feet and took a step backward. "Shit, Terry," he said. "You can't be having that. That's no good. No good at all."

"Sure it is," I told him. "I didn't steal it or anything. It's a family treasure."

He shook his head. "No no no, that's not what I mean. That sword was used to kill our people. Babies, Terry--it was used to kill babies." He started pacing around the room, waving his hands in the air. "Jesus, Terry, that's nothing to mess with. You shouldn't have even touched it."

"Come on, Charley," I said. "You don't know that it killed anybody."

He wasn't listening. He ran into his room to get some of the medicine stuff he made after taking a class about it. "Terry," he said, "you have to get rid of it right away. Right now." He started sprinkling yellow powder on the carpet.

I offered to keep it in the shed, but there was no arguing with him. He was on his knees, drawing a design in the powder, and he straightened up and looked at me. "Terry. If you don't get that thing out of my house right now, you are moving out. Understand?" I started to say something, but he started jerking his finger back and forth at the door. "Out out out," he said, like a chant, until I pulled on my jacket and left.

I didn't really know why he was so upset. It was just a long piece of steel. Dull steel. I thought about hiding it somewhere, like in a tree, but I knew that if he found it he'd kill me. Charley was really into that traditional stuff, and was always getting Indian newspapers and mail from A.I.M. and places like that.

I sat in the truck and smoked a cigarette, and thought about what to do. The sword wasn't important enough to lose my home over. Charley had the power to kick me out. He'd done it before, over stupid things like the sword, and I knew he would do it again. Besides, it wasn't like Grampa had gotten it in a war or anything. He told me that he'd stolen it from the officer's club where he worked as a janitor during the war. I figured he'd rather I had a place to stay, and food in my stomach, than a sword that was probably going to rust into nothingness in a

few more years.

I took it to the Golden Nickel Pawnshop on Fourth Street. Kenny Kramer, the owner, was leaning back in his big leather chair when I went in. Two of his buddies were standing by the pistol counter, playing cards. When they heard the door bells jingle they turned to look at me. "Watch out, Kenny," one of them said. "This guy's on the warpath." Kenny and the other guy laughed, but I ignored them.

Kenny talked for a while longer before hanging up. "What do you got there, buddy?" he asked, still leaning back.

"Sword," I told him. "Genuine cavalry." I handed it over the counter and watched as he put on his wire rimmed glasses. Kenny studied the sword for what seemed like an hour, holding it under his flexible desk light.

"Where'd you get this, chief?" he asked, looking at me closely. The card players stopped what they were doing for a second.

"Grandfather." I looked down to avoid Kenny's mean blue eyes.

"Where did <u>he</u> get it?"

"Found it," I told him. "West of here."

Kenny looked at one of the men. "Blue's Massacre?"

The man raised his eyebrows. "Could be," he said.

Kenny stood and opened the till. He looked inside for a minute, then slammed it shut. "Chief," he said, "I'm low on cash. How about a trade?"

I looked around the room. It was packed full of radios and

trumpets and used clothes. I settled my eyes on the gun counter. "How about a rifle?" I asked him. "I'd trade for a rifle."

Kenny spun around and grabbed a lever action Winchester from the rack. He pointed it right at my face and said, "How about this one, buddy?"

One of the guys laughed when I took it from Kenny. It was pretty beat up. The stock was cracked and someone had wrapped it with baling wire. The barrel was rusty, and the front sight was bent. I gave it back to him. I pointed at a new-looking bolt action with a telescope sight. "That one," I said. "I'd trade for that one."

Kenny and the other guys laughed. Kenny pushed the sword back at me. "No way, chief. No way."

I shrugged. "Okay," I told him. "Antique store man said he'd give me a piano for it." I started walking away, half expecting to feel a bullet hit me in the back. A few years earlier, Kenny killed two Mexican guys he said were robbing him. The law believed him, but I talked to a lady who said they were only looking at electric guitars.

I was reaching for the door when Kenny told me to come back. "Okay, okay. You can have this rifle." He sounded mad. I went back to the counter and he gave me the gun. It wasn't as new as I thought it was, but it was in better shape than the Winchester. I paid Kenny for the pawn tax, bought a box of shells, and took off before he could change his mind.

I felt good about the whole thing. I had a feeling Grampa's

spirit was with me, smiling at how smart I was being. He always believed in me, even when I flunked so many grades in school. Outside the Golden Nickel Pawnshop, I held up the rifle to the sky to show him. "Look what I have, Grampa," I said. "Look what you gave me."

I started to drive home, but I had a feeling Charley would still be mad, or that he'd want me to dance. Whenever something good or bad happened, he wanted me to dance. I told him once that just saying thanks was enough, that the spirits would like that as much as a dance, but he never believed me. He had Indian books that he'd get out and show me when we argued about things.

It was still light out, so I decided to go hunting. I figured if I brought Charley some game, he wouldn't be mad anymore. He took a class in cooking wild animals once, and I knew a bundle of rabbits would change things for sure.

I went to the spot where Grampa and I used to go before he got sick. Fifteen miles from Tonk, just before the Mudanza Mountains started. In the low hills. We never came away without plenty of rabbits, and once in a while we even got a deer.

I parked on a hill and sat on the tailgate with the rifle. The day was coming to an end, and the air was good and still--smoke from my cigarette went straight up to the clouds. I looked more carefully at the rifle. It was a .270, kind of big for rabbits, but with the telescope sight I figured I could get head shots every time. That was good, because it would save me the

trouble of pulling the heads off myself.

I was scanning the area through the telescope when I spotted movement. I jerked the rifle back a few inches and the whole world seemed to jump around in the lenses. I wasn't used to using a telescope sight, and it took me a while to find the movement again.

Two, maybe two hundred and fifty yards away sat this big rabbit, munching on his dinner and looking as peaceful as could be. His whiskers were twitching, and his heart was beating slowly. He wasn't scared, and he didn't know I was studying him like we were only a few inches apart.

I had to raise my eyes to look for the safety catch, and when I peeked into the telescope again, the rabbit was looking my way. I set the crosswires on his head and pulled the trigger. A big chunk of dirt exploded just in front of him. Too low--the telescope was set too low. I worked the bolt action and aimed again. The rabbit was hopping toward me, fast. I shot again and missed. I looked up from the rifle and I could see the rabbit with my own eyes. He was getting closer every second. I shot one more time and then the gun was empty. I didn't know what was going on, but I thought about rabies and took off running as fast as I could, trying to get shells into the rifle.

I went maybe twenty yards, listening to his feet thumping on the hard ground behind me, before I managed to load the gun. I spun around, ready to stop things, but the rabbit was gone, out of sight. I figured he'd gone into one of the holes

scattered around the hill, so I stood and waited for him to pop his head out. My heart was pumping too fast and my body was covered with sweat.

Then something tapped my shoulder. I jumped in the air like the time I touched an electric fence, and turned around. It was the rabbit, but he was tall. Taller than me, and I stand five foot six inches. The rabbit was standing on his hind legs, like a man. Holding out his arms like he wanted to fight. Right away I figured he must have gotten into the same pond that gave all of Danny Bear's cattle a disease. Radiation water. I raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. The gun didn't shoot, and the rabbit smiled. Then he twitched his ear and it felt like a strong wind had blasted me in the face. I fell back, to the ground, and the rifle twirled in the air and landed a good fifty feet away, poking in the ground like a sapling. The rabbit came over and helped me up. His hand was strong, like Franklin's, and he squeezed me until my eyes watered.

I couldn't think of anything to say or do. I just kept my eyes on his long ear. I could feel his hot, wet, grassy-smelling breath on my face, and I thought about what it would be like to have his two front teeth close down on me. Then he spoke, very slowly, kind of like Clint Eastwood. "Get the sword back, Terry."

I still couldn't talk. The rabbit started squeezing my shoulder until I was hopping around in pain. "Get the sword," he said. "Bring me the sword." He let go of me then, and pointed to

the sky. I looked up and didn't see anything but clouds. When I looked down, the rabbit was gone. He had disappeared. I didn't wait around for him to come back--I yanked my rifle from the dirt, jumped in the truck, and drove away.

Get the sword back. Get the sword. That's all I could think of, doing about seventy on the dirt roads back to Tonk. My shoulders hurt and a chill was running up and down my back. A couple of times I almost went off the road, but all I could think about was the big rabbit. And how I had to get the sword back from Kenny. I didn't have time to think about why--just that I had to get it back.

Of course, when I got home, I didn't say anything. Charley went to an alcohol meeting so I stretched out on the couch to have a can of beer and watch television. It was night-time, and the Golden Nickel Pawnshop closed at five. I thought about breaking in when it got really late, but sometimes Kenny played poker in the back room, and I knew he'd shoot me.

I must have been more tired than I thought, because before I knew it, I was waking up from a dream. Charley was there, and when I sat up he asked if I'd gotten rid of the sword. I said I'd buried it ten miles from town, and I guess that was okay, because he didn't say anything. He went back to reading his textbook, and I went to my room and fell back asleep right away. I didn't want to think about the rabbit or the sword. It was strange, but I tried to remember what Grampa used to say. He'd tell me a story about something weird, and when I was doubt-

ful he'd shake his head and say, "Never be surprised by anything in this world, Terry. You'll never know enough about this world to get surprised."

"Never in my life?" I asked him once. "Never in my whole life?"

He just shook his head and smiled. "No, but don't worry about it. You're better off that way."

Thinking about that, I slept a little better. But I knew I had to get the sword. The rabbit didn't say what would happen if I didn't, but I figured it wouldn't be much fun.

I got up early the next day, even before Charley, and drove back to the Double Nickel Pawnshop. I had the rifle plus a hundred dollars from Charley's jar. He was saving for a huge canvas tipi from a mail order place in Utah. But the same hundred had been there for a year, so I didn't think he'd notice.

Kenny was in his chair again, but he was alone. I went right up to the counter and told him I wanted to buy the sword back from him.

"With what?" He gave me the cold blue eyes again.

"With this," I told him. I pulled out the money and laid it on the counter. "Plus the rifle." He grabbed the stack of bills and started flipping through them. His hands moved so fast I could hardly see them.

When he was done, he shook his head and pushed the pile back at me. "Sorry," he said. "This isn't nearly enough. But if you want another rifle, maybe we can work something out."

I was desperate. "Well," I said. "It's about twenty more than Franklin and Warren will give you when they come here tonight."

Kenny turned in a complete circle and slammed his fist onto the pistol counter. "Where is my head, chief? I almost forgot--I sold it already."

"To who? When and to who?"

Kenny lit a cigarette with a big silver and turquoise lighter. "Yesterday. To the Frontier Museum in the city. Two hundred dollars."

"Is it there now?" I asked. "Is it at the museum?"

Kenny blew smoke at me and shook his head. "Nope. It's on the mail truck. Put it on twenty minutes ago."

I left without saying anything more. He yelled something about telling Franklin and Warren how the sword was gone, but I didn't answer. I was in too much of a hurry.

The mail truck usually got to Tonk early because it had to go to Tandem and two other small towns before heading back to the city. When I left the Golden Nickle, I checked the clock at the bank--it was before ten, which meant it was probably just pulling into the Tandem post office. I knew if I wanted to catch it I'd have to drive out to the stretch of road between Sugar and the city. It was a long, deeply rutted dirt road, but I knew the mailman would take it because I'd seen him do it when we were out hunting sometimes. I guess it was a shortcut.

I stopped at the house to get Charley. He was getting

ready for school, loading his books into his briefcase. "Charley," I said. "We have to get something off the mail truck."

He barely looked at me. "What?"

"We have to stop the truck before it gets to the city," I said.

Charley shook his head and fastened his briefcase. "You're nuts," he said. "You should get some therapy."

I said what I knew would get his attention. I didn't want to, but I was starting to panic. It was an emergency. "Charley," I said. "There's a letter on the truck going all the way to Washington, D.C."

He raised his eyebrows. "Washington? About what?"

"Charley," I told him. "It's a letter about how you aren't really an Indian. If they get it, you'll lose your funding and go to jail."

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. Then he got all pale and sweat beads popped out on his lip. He dropped his briefcase and screamed and ran to his room like a crazy man. The Indian thing was Charley's big secret. He grew up thinking his mother was a full-blooded Indian woman, and so did everyone else, including the government. The truth was that she was from back east and studied Indians in college. Then she got pregnant by a guy and moved across the country, to Tonk. She was dark-skinned enough to pass for Indian, which is what she told everyone she was. She married one of our guys, had Charley, and that was that. But after she got a tumor a few years back, she told Charley the truth. That's when he started getting

interested in all the traditional stuff. Before that, he was just like the rest of us.

He told me the story of his mother one night when we were drinking and became blood brothers. He swore me to secrecy and said that if I told anyone, he could get into big trouble. The next day, after he sobered up and remembered, he said I could live at his house free of charge. He said it was because we were blood brothers, but I think he was more worried about me telling on him. I never did, never even brought it up until the big rabbit came into my life. Then I had to.

After a while Charley came out of his room carrying his .30-30 and the stone hatchet he bought from a lady down the street. He looked at me but his eyes were somewhere else. "Let's go," he said. "Get your rifle and let's go."

I grabbed my new gun from the table and followed him out to the truck. I started to feel a little nervous, with the rifles and everything, but I figured he would calm down on the ride.

He drove like a madman until we were out of town. Then he lit a cigarette and looked at me and asked where we were going.

"Colonel Blue Road," I told him. "Ambush."

"Yeah," he said. "Ambush." I waited for him to ask for details, about the letter, or about the ambush, but he didn't. He was too freaked out. He just drove, singing a song I recognized from one of his pow wow albums. I lit my own cigarette and hung onto the suicide handle on the dashboard.

Halfway between Sugar and the city--on Colonel Blue Road--

was an old dead cedar tree that stuck out pretty far. It was the narrowest point on the stretch, and that's where I told Charley to go. I told him to drive right up against it like we'd had an accident.

He hit the tree doing about thirty and smashed the front end of the truck pretty badly. Charley got a cut on his forehead and I banged my shoulder on the dashboard, right on the sore spot where the big rabbit had squeezed me. But other than that, we were okay. Charley was so upset I don't think he felt a thing, and I was too worried to care.

We sat on the tailgate and shared a bottle of peach brandy that I found under the seat. I told Charley my plan, and he listened to most of it. He was still singing the song, and with the blood running over his eyes he looked like an Indian out of the movies. I told him that and it seemed to make him feel a little better. I knew it would.

We were just in time, it turned out. The bottle was only halfway gone when I saw dust rising in the distance. The mail truck. I jumped over to the road and stretched out across it, trying to look all broken up. Charley hid behind the tree with his rifle. I told him not to shoot anyone.

The truck came closer, and closer, until it seemed like it was going to drive right over me. I was about to roll away when it stopped. The mail man climbed out and limped over. He was old, with white hair. I held my breath while he poked me with the toe of his shoe. First a light tap, then he gave me a good

kick in the ribs. I let the air out and yelled, and he dropped to his knees, saying how sorry he was.

The plan had been for Charley to stick the gun in his back and hold him there while I searched the truck. But it didn't work out that way. While the mail man was bent over me, feeling my ribs, Charley snuck up and hit him in the head with his stone war club. The mail man got a sad look on his face, and then he collapsed on top of me. All I could think of was how I'd never had a mail man that close to me before.

I yelled at Charley to pull him off, but Charley ignored me. He jumped in the mail truck and took off cross-country. I didn't know what to do, so I pushed the mail man away, got in my truck, and followed Charley. The bumper was hanging from the grill, and while I drove, it dug a long ditch in the ground until it finally just fell off. I jumped out and threw it in the bed. I didn't want to leave any evidence behind.

When I caught up to Charley he was a good two miles away, parked next to one of the ponds that we weren't supposed to fish in because of the radiation water. It was as safe a place as any to search the truck, since nobody ever went there, not even the birds. Charley was sitting by the water's edge, digging through one of the mail bags. I started looking through the boxes for the sword. There was only one that was long enough, but when I ripped it open, it was only a bundle of American flags from the factory in Tandem. I double checked, but the sword wasn't there. It wasn't on the truck.

By the time I finished in the truck, Charley was on the last bag of mail. There was a long trail of envelopes floating out to the center of the pond. Charley was just sitting there, kind of moaning. "Hey," I said. "Let's go."

"We can't. We can't until we find the letter to Washington, man." There were tears in his eyes, and I thought about telling him the truth--or part of it--but I didn't. I was afraid he'd kill me.

"Hey," I said. "You know how things go in Washington. It might take years and years before they do anything."

He kind of brightened a little. "You think so?"

"Yes. Now let's go, Charley, before we get in some really big trouble."

"Yeah," he said. He picked up a pile of magazines and walked with me to the truck. I told him to dump them, but he shook his head. "No way. It's not a raid unless we get something." Then he gave me a crazy look and started singing again. I didn't say anything--I just started the truck and drove away from the pond. The only thing on my mind was the sword.

We didn't talk at all on the way back. When we got to the tree, the mail man was still out cold, or dead, so we kept going. I drove fast until we reached pavement, and then I slowed to just over the speed limit. I didn't want to get a ticket. I just wanted to get rid of Charley and head to the city to try and get the sword. I figured that Kenny was wrong, or lying, and that it had gone out the night before, right after I

traded it to him. He was a fast wheeler-dealer, and I imagined him calling up the museum the minute I left to set things up.

I thought about Charley, about taking him along. But I knew he was going to come to his senses before long, and I didn't want to be there when he did. He'd realize I was the only one who could have mailed the kind of letter I told him about. And if I told him the truth, he'd be mad that I was dishonest and put him through such a mess. Either way, I'd be dead or homeless.

Back in town, I picked up a bottle of Old Crow at the drive-through liquor store and gave it to Charley. Then I dropped him off and headed for the city. I felt like a crazy person in the movies. But every time I thought of going back, about calling it quits, the big rabbit's face popped into my head and I just drove faster. That stuff wasn't like a movie--it was real, and I had a big bruise on my shoulder to prove it.

It was a two hour drive to the city limits, but it seemed to take only a few minutes because I was thinking so hard. I didn't know where the Frontier Museum was, but I didn't just drive around like I usually did when I couldn't find something. I pulled right up to a cop and asked him. He gave me a strange look, but pointed down the road. "Three lights, and take a right," he said. I took off without thanking him, but when I looked in the rear view mirror, he was talking to an old lady and didn't seem interested in taking down my license plate number. Which was a good thing, since I didn't have a license

plate on the back. I started feeling a little better, like the spirits were with me.

When I got to the museum, I parked right in front and left the motor running. There were school buses all over the place, and when I got inside, I found out why. Hundreds of kids were wandering around, being yelled at by teachers and museum workers. I pushed my way through them and looked around. The place was huge. I grabbed a little boy who looked smart and asked him if he knew where the swords were. He pointed at the stairs. "In the army room," he said. "They got all kinds of them, and guns, too."

"Thanks," I told him. I ran up the stairs and started going through the rooms. I passed some things that I would have liked to look at if I'd had more time, like the room full of stuffed birds and animals. I poked my head in to see if there were any big rabbits, but I didn't see any. Maybe they were there, in the back.

The army room had a big sign on the door, calling it that, so I went in and ran from case to case until I found the swords. There <u>were</u> a lot of them, maybe fifteen, but Grampa's wasn't there. I felt like crying, and my stomach hurt from the running and worrying and the hunger. I wanted to sit down and rest, but I thought about the big rabbit and his awful breath, and it gave me energy.

One of the swords looked almost like Grampa's. It was longer, and not as rusty, but it was close enough. I messed

around with the case, but it was locked tight. I could hear people down the hall, coming closer, and I panicked. I went into one of the other rooms, where they had old clothes on dummies. I flicked my lighter under a pink dress and it went up in flames. Before long, the other clothes caught, and then the whole room was on fire. I didn't expect it to be like that--I just wanted to make a diversion.

All kinds of bells started going off then, and people began running around like crazy. I ran too, but not to the stairs with everyone else. I went back to the sword case and smashed it open with my elbow, like the guys did in the Karate for Christ demonstration they held at the high school in Tonk one year. I took the sword out and stuck it down my pants. I could feel it slicing into my leg, but I didn't care--I just wanted to get away.

The whole hallway was on fire by then, and the flames were moving closer.

When I got outside, everyone--workers and kids and teachers--were standing on the stairs watching flames leap from the second story windows. I just limped past them and climbed into the truck and nobody said a thing. I didn't expect them to--stiff legged Indians are pretty common in the city.

I waited until I was a few blocks away before I pulled the sword out of my pants. I shoved it under the seat and lit a cigarette. My leg was bleeding, but I ignored it and headed for Tonk. I was relieved, but a little worried. I was hoping the rabbit wouldn't be able to tell the difference, or that he

wouldn't care.

By the time I got to the hunting spot, it was getting dark. I drove to where I had seen the rabbit, and while I waited for him I took down my pants to look at my leg. My sneaker was filled with blood, and I felt dizzy. The cut looked pretty bad. It ran almost the whole length of my leg, but I took a closer look and it wasn't very deep. I dug around under the seat and found some gray duct tape. It wasn't as good as a bandage, but it helped to keep the blood where it was supposed to be. I used all of it, then I sat and lit a cigarette and waited.

The sun was on top of the mountain, like a huge orange ball, when I heard the voice. "Hey, Terry."

I turned around and the rabbit was leaning against the truck, chewing on a long stem of grass. "Hey," I said. I limped over and held out the sword. "Here you go," I told him.

He took it from me and looked at it, turning it in his hands. Then he gave it back. "Wrong sword, Terry."

I started to say something, but he twitched his ear and it knocked me against the truck, hard enough to break the side window. "Get the sword," he said. "Get the right sword." Then he pointed at my feet. I looked down, and when I looked up, he was gone.

I sat down in the grass and wondered what to do. I tried to think of what Grampa would have done. He never talked about big rabbits, but once he told me about a ceremony he did as a small boy where he had to eat a deer's eye. When he talked

about it, I almost threw up. I told him I could never have gone through with it, and he just smiled and patted my head. "Terry," he said. "If you really had to--if it was important--you would be able to."

When I remembered that, it gave me some strength. I threw the sword in the bed of the truck and started driving back to town. I figured I'd go home and get some more money from Charley, and go back to the city until I found the right sword. It was all I could think of to do. But when I passed through town, I saw the Double Nickle Pawnshop was still open. The lights were on, anyway, so I pulled up and knocked on the door. I figured Kenny would give me a few dollars for the sword. That would save me the hassle of bothering Charley, who I figured might be waiting for me with a gun.

Kenny opened the door and gave me a dirty look. I could hear voices in the back. The poker game. "What do you want now, chief?" he asked.

I showed him the sword. "You want to buy this?"

When he saw it he became friendly. "Another one?"

"Yes," I said. "I guess my grandfather found two of them."

Kenny led me to the counter, and when I got there, I saw something that made me shiver. It was my sword--the right sword--hanging from two pegs behind his desk. He'd lied to me. I pointed to it and asked him why.

"I wasn't lying, son." He pulled back his coat. There was a gigantic revolver stuck in his belt. "Don't ever call me a liar

again, okay?"

I was too tired, and weak, to do more than nod. Kenny stared at me for a couple of minutes, and then he took the new sword and held it under the light. It had some markings on it that he seemed pretty interested in. "Look," I said. "If you just give me my sword back you can have this one."

Kenny didn't think about it for very long. In three seconds flat, the old sword was in my arms, and the new one was on the pegs. I ran out of the place before he could change his mind.

I went back to the hunting spot, of course. It was really dark, and the truck got buried to its axles in sand when I drove off the road. But it was okay because the rabbit showed up when I started walking. He took the sword, and didn't even look at it. "Thanks," he said. Then he pointed at the sky. I didn't fall for that again. I looked him in the eye and asked what it was all about. Why he'd wanted it so badly. "I need to know," I told him. "I need to know."

The big rabbit clicked his teeth. He slapped the sword against his leg like the Colonel on Hogan's Heroes did. Then he shook his head. "No you don't, Terry," he said. "You don't need anything. You don't need anything at all."

Then he walked away, leaving me all alone. I heard his footsteps for a little while, and then there was only silence. Silence and darkness.

I turned around and started for town, but I only made it to the highway before my body gave out on me. I collapsed on

the shoulder, feeling all the pain from my wounds hit me at once, and then I passed out, looking up at the stars.

When I woke up my leg was gone. I was in the IHS hospital, and my leg was gone. Dr. Hamm--the same guy who told my Grampa he was going to die--came into the room to talk about it. Gangrene was why they took the leg off, he said. Then he leaned close to me and asked what had happened.

It was hard to talk, I was so tired, but I told him. I told him the truth. "Big rabbit set me free."

He shook his head and gave me a shot, and left the room. I looked at my body. It was a mess for sure, but I felt good anyway. I felt free. Like the most free bird in the world.