Christine

Michael Dorris
Mysteries were the least of my problems.

When the world didn't end, I got another chance and made the most of it. I became the most popular high school girl on the reservation and never missed another party. You might hear stories about me, how wild I was, how I got what I asked for. But I don't take back a thing. If I blamed myself for being dumb, I wouldn't know where to quit. I had to find my own way and I started out in the hole, the bastard daughter of a woman who wouldn't even admit she was my mother and the fat sister of the prettiest boy that ever lived.

Everywhere else in the world, in 1960, things were happening — wars, psychedelic drugs, love-ins — and there we were at Holy Martyrs Mission, still writing themes about whether if God could do anything, could He make a rock He couldn't lift. That kind of shit. No wonder I was screwed up. You try to make a real world out of what you see on one television channel and what you hear on the radio. You try to put together cute outfits from the second-hand trash from the charity store. You try to have fun when there's nowhere to go and you might be related to every other boy in town.

People on TV talk about The Sixties as if those were the best times of their lives. They brag on old pictures of themselves with dirty hair and strings of beads looped around their necks, and make victory signs with their fingers. But if they had ever shown themselves on my reservation looking like that, they would have been locked up or worse.

After supper, when there was nothing better to do, my girlfriends and I smoked Salems and Pall Malls and watched Walter Cronkite. He was the best the set at the Teen Snack Bar at the mission could pull, and still his sound and picture didn't always match. One time we saw some hippies in Washington, D.C., stick flowers down the barrels of soldiers' rifles. We leaned forward with our mouths hanging open, trying to hear through the static and waiting for the fun to start, but nothing happened. Those G.I.'s just looked straight ahead and held tight. You could imagine what was going on inside their helmets, but their hands were tied. There was a young guy who looked real Indian and I watched him the closest. Maybe he was Mexican, I don't know. Either in real life or because of our reception, the muscles in his cheeks seemed to clench in and out, in and out. The boy with a pony tail, facing him, had a shirt made out of an American flag, and that had to drive the Indian soldier crazy.

You don't live on a reservation without learning respect for the red, white, and blue. Every pow wow, every graduation, every grade school basketball game in the school gym, out come the Honor Guard dressed in their fancy-dance costumes, with the man in the middle carrying the flag. When they appear, everybody gets quiet so that the only sound is the cowbells and jingles on the bearers' outfits. They do a circuit around the place and then park in the front while one of them offers a prayer in Indian, then they parade off slow and solemn. You stand at attention with your hand over your heart. It isn't till they leave, out of the light or the room or the gym, that you hear a kind of sigh pass through the crowd. Cards get dealt on plastic covered tables, referees blow their whistles, baskets full of bingo numbers spin, old ladies hitch their shawls and shuffle out for the first round-dance.

My brother Lee was the best looking thing on the reservation and he knew it. He could
be sweet too, do what people wanted and get on their good side. He spoke the old language with the grandmothers and had clean English for his teacher in school. When he was no more than seven years old, he hoop-danced at pow wows, and before long he was soloing with five hoops. Without ever missing a beat he threaded them over his twisting, bending body and spread them like wings across his back. He was magic, slippery as floor-wax. My mouth would go dry watching him, afraid he'd drop a feather or trip himself. I didn't move, but when it was over and I stood, my muscles were as sore as if I'd performed, myself.

When he got to be a teenager Lee bought himself a special tweezers to pluck any beard that grew on his cheeks or chin, and we fought over the mirror in the bathroom whenever I went out on a date. You try to get your make-up straight with a tall boy stooping in front of you, turning his face back and forth, looking for the sprout of a new hair. The color of his eyes got blacker the closer he got to the glass. They hypnotized me so bad I forgot myself in their reflection, and half the time went out the door without lipstick or with my hair a mess. If I complained, Lee would yell that I had the bedroom, so the bathroom was his.

It doesn't matter what a boy looks like, but there was Lee, long and loose-jointed, while I was short and had to watch my weight. His eyebrows, full where they began on either side of his nose and then tapering off to nothing, could have been drawn onto his forehead with a sharp pencil. Even when his face was relaxed, he looked as though he had just heard something he couldn't imagine was true. Me, I had to spend hours with my two-sided magnifying mirror, shaping my brows into thin, straight lines, not near as nice. You could see the foundation of bones beneath Lee's cheeks, but no matter how much I angled my chin and clenched my jaws, I had the face of a squirrel hoarding nuts for the winter.

We were so different I wondered if we had the same father, and if we did, why it was the daughter got the short end of the stick. I studied middle aged men on the reservation for a clue in their faces. Without my cosmetics, I could have sprung from anybody with a big nose and a gap between their front teeth, but looks like my brother's didn't spring from out of nowhere. Aunt Ida never gave a hint, except once to say she had been a fool twice and there wouldn't be a third time. She wouldn't let us call her 'Mom,' since she hadn't been married, but she claimed we both favored her side. That was a joke. She was ugly the way some people get, each part of her too big or lop-sided, like a woman slapped together out of branches and mud. Her back was broad, her neck was as thick as her head, and on her left cheek was a burn scar the size of a plum. She always seemed old to me, though she couldn't have been more than forty, my present age, on the New Year's Eve when the world didn't end. I thought it was the last chance I had to study my mother as a human being, so I paid her close attention. When all the living and the dead appeared at midnight, as the Apocalypse foretold, I didn't want to confuse her with someone else.

I memorized her too well. To this day I can't get that picture out of my mind, and every time I think about her as she is now, hard and mean, her image gets dressed in the damn blue flowery cotton shift she wore that night. She had it mailordered for $4.99 from an ad in the Rocky Mountain News, found anklets at the reservation store to match, and rolled them down over bleached tennis shoes. For Christmas, Lee gave her a navy blue muffler made out of washable yarn, and I bought her a pendant necklace with a little picture of the Sacred Heart on a gold chain. I thought it would be a safe thing for her to wear at the Last Judgement, when she had to atone for having Lee and me without a legal husband.

I was committed to her appearance. While Aunt Ida sat, stiff as a brick, I gave her
a Lilt home-permanent. Her hair had no white in those days and hung in a thick, coarse curtain to her waist. Following the directions on the box, I rolled it in clips and strips of soaked tissue paper that swelled above her ears like hot dogs. Her skull looked too small, the way a cat's does when it gets wet, but even that sight didn't slow me down. I carefully mixed the setting lotion and squeezed it from its pointy tube onto the top of each knob. Then I neutralized her whole head.

"Just wait till it gets brushed out," I told her. "You'll be beautiful."

Aunt Ida endured it all like a doomed martyr, like a woman in the electric chair, and humored me because of the Sacred Heart. Because she had given me no present, she was in my power.

Just before five o'clock, I took out the pins and her hair unwrapped in long ropey coils, matted and stuck together. A brush wouldn't separate it and I broke my comb's teeth trying to drag it through. Finally I pulled it apart and shaped it with my fingers as the fat muscles of Aunt Ida's neck flexed and strained against my hands. She looked like a wild woman, like someone who had just ridden a jeep through a tornado.

She walked to the bathroom mirror. Her hair stuck out in odd places and was straight on all the ends where I had not wound it tight enough. I frowned at Lee to keep his mouth shut, and followed.

"You could be a beauty operator," she said, pushing at a lump of wave the way you see them do on TV. "I resemble Jane Russell." The strangeness of hearing Aunt Ida pronounce a movie star's name among all that Indian, which is the only thing she ever spoke at home, made me find her eyes in the mirror and, for the first time in my life, they met mine, woman to woman.

The crags and crevices of Aunt Ida's face weren't as deep then, but they sealed into hard lines at the first sound of Lee's laugh. She backed out of the bathroom like a truck in reverse. I told Lee to shut up, but the damage was done. Aunt Ida banged the cast-iron skillet on the stove and dumped in a can of corn-beef hash. She tied Lee's Christmas scarf around her head, and ate alone in front of the television. When I woke the next morning to find the world still there, she had braided her hair so tight that it arched and forked like a sidewinder down her back.

But there was no way anybody, especially Aunt Ida, could stay mad at Lee for long. Even as a little kid, he was a boy people noticed, he was a winner. There were times I saw Aunt Ida wonder at him as though she couldn't believe he was hers.

Sure I was jealous. Everything was Lee this and Lee that from when he was a baby. But he was my brother, and I've got to say he didn't let his looks go to his head as much as some would. There were times he forgot all about himself.

Lee never mixed much with kids his own age. He had no patience and didn't like to depend on others in a game, so all through my grade school he lived his life through me. I let him have his way, go with me wherever I went. Maybe I hung around with him because he was nosey and wanted to know my business. He said "What's the matter?" before I knew anything was wrong. He told me how to dress and listened to all my stories. He took my side against anybody. He could talk me out of a bad mood by telling me why he was worse off. I never did get over feeling good to hear him call me Tina, a name nobody else used.

Besides, I liked having an audience when I shamed the boys in my class by being tougher. They knew from experience that there wasn't one of them I couldn't take in a fight, so they tossed dares to test how far I would go, how crazy I could be. I stared down a rattler no further away from me than a creek's width. I stole a quarter from the collection basket at mass and never confessed. I stripped off my clothes just after sunset one All Souls night and ran to the bottom of our hill with the cool air playing on my skin
and my hands over my head. And every time, my brother was there, ready to laugh at those boys when I came out on top.

Lee was everywhere with me, until the spring afternoon he saved my life.

That day the ground was still soggy with melted snow, but the light lasted longer, and when school was dismissed I wasn’t ready to go home. Not far from our house there was a high block of yellow stone hollowed over the years by the finger of a fast stream. It stuck out of that flat land like a castle, its two sides sharp and spooky as towers. It was a ghosty place, whispering and lonesome and flaking chips. Some people claimed to believe it was where the spirit went when you died, but they said that about any place unusual, so I never paid attention. All I knew was that even on hot days, it stayed cool.

Some seventh grader bet me I wouldn’t cross the natural bridge that stretched twenty feet above the creek bed. I laughed at him and thought it was an easy thing, but once I climbed I saw that the yellow rock was so thin and cracked it could break in a fast wind. The group of boys was gathered far below me and short among them, his neck bent back and his thumbs looped in his belt, was Lee. He expected me to walk across as easy as I had done everything else. I was paralyzed by his excitement, and hated him for his lack of pity.

I straddled that bridge, scooted my butt out a few inches at a time, and looked straight ahead. The remains of a big nest hung from the other tower. There were holes in its twigs big enough for a baby to slip through. I went toward it, little by little, with the rough stone scraping the inside of my legs and my underwear pulling tight.

The idea of where I was was never once left me. Wind moved my skirt and my hair, and I gripped tighter. My feet felt like weights in my shoes as I tried to keep them equally balanced. I kept sensing the beginnings of a fall, kept having that feeling that comes just before you lose control, and finally I stopped. My hands became a part of the rock. I wet my pants and didn’t care.

The nest was the one thing tying me to the bridge, and I studied it, racing my eyes along the tracks of the bleached vines and grasses that held it together. I heard shouts below me, but I didn’t look down. Maybe the hawks that built the nest would come back, maybe they’d rescue me with their clawed feet and fly me to the other side. My breath came short, my eyes swelled in their sockets. Then I saw something I did not believe. Lee’s head, peaceful and natural, appeared behind the nest, like a bird spying over the side. Some hair blew into his eyes, and he pushed it back. His calmness flowed to me like rope. It ran the length of my arms and pried loose my fingers. It relaxed the muscles of my thighs and it supported my back.

“Come on Tina,” Lee said.

I slid smooth as oil as he pulled me in, stronger than the tug of earth. I scrambled through the nest, dislodging it to drop behind me. Even when I was standing on the ledge next to Lee, I didn’t turn my eyes, I didn’t look at anything but him. I grabbed his skinny arms with all my strength and felt his sun-warmed skin tense beneath my fingers. I smelled the yellow dust in his hair and the Juicy Fruit in his mouth.

“It’s dangerous here,” I shouted. “Don’t stand so close to the edge. Are you loony?” I wanted him to know what he had made me do.

Lee got frightened, ready to cry. His lips trembled, his chin rose as he turned his head away.

“Don’t be a baby,” I told him, dragging him low to sit beside me. “They’ll see.” But I was the one. My legs were wet from my own cold piss. I had crossed the bridge, but not on my own, and we both realized it. I don’t know what my brother thought about in those long minutes we spent flicking pebbles into the thin air and waiting for the kids below to go home, but me, my mind was making lists of all the things I should never
do, could never try. And by the time we came down, step by step, Lee went first to test the path.

Midway through next year when Lee was twelve and I was a sophomore, a half-breed kid with curly black hair and green eyes moved to the reservation with his mother and took an old house on an allotment not far from ours. Right away, he leched on to us. Though Dayton Nickles was a year older, an eighth grader, he followed Lee around like a shadow on a sunny day. You'd think the only thing in his life was being Lee's friend, and it didn't take people long to tease about it.

"Where's Dayton?" they asked Lee whenever he appeared some place alone. "Did he get off his leash?" But my brother was in his own world and never joked back.

I thought it was funny too, at first, comical the way Dayton hero-worshipped Lee, but you can only laugh at something so often. Every time I blinked, there he was, even at Aunt Ida's, dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt, hanging his head, a wad of snuff tucked under his lower lip and a tin can for spit in his hand. But no matter what I said, or how I said it, Lee wouldn't tell Dayton to get lost. He just smiled and shook his head. "We're buddies," he said. "We get along pretty good." And that was it for the whole summer, for the next four years.

After I got popular, it mattered less to me who Lee ran around with. I had new things on my mind and a new body to go with them. I washed my clothes in hot water so they'd shrink, and I could harmonize the words to every good song on the radio. At night I set my hair, and in the morning, when it was rattled as high as it would go, I laced it with stiff Ray-Nette until even an Alberta blow wouldn't muss it. What I lacked in looks I made up in other ways, and a boy had a good time on a date with me. Some of the girls talked behind my back, as they always had, but they came to me with their questions about making out. I was the expert.

Most afternoons I lay on my bed listening to The Teen Beat on the radio and comparing popularity tips from my magazines. One day when I left my door open a crack for air, I caught Dayton snatch a glimpse at me from the other room. The color of his eyes was so bright it shocked me. There I was, memorizing the choruses to "Poor Little Fool" and "A Thousand Stars" and suddenly the Green Lantern was bearing down. I crossed my ankles and stuck out my tongue, but as soon as I noticed him, Dayton looked away, pretending he was just exercising his neck.

That started me thinking, and then everything made sense. Lee was just Dayton's route of getting close to me, which is what a lot of boys his age wanted more than they knew. When I thought of Dayton that way, as a boy, he still wasn't much, but it tickled me that he was so shy. I tried substituting Dayton's face for the older boys I usually pictured when I sang some of my songs. "Lipstick on your collar/Told a tale on you." If innocent little ninth grade Dayton was caught with my tangerine shade on his t-shirt, people's eyes would bug out. Some songs I listened to, like "Teen Angel," had the girl getting hit by a train or run over by a car, and I could see Dayton grieving for me, swearing he'd never go with anybody else as long as he lived, maybe becoming a priest. The more I thought about him, the more he looked a little like an Indian Frankie Avalon, which would make me Annette, one of my idols.

I had this game with her hit song. Every day I waited for the d.j. to play "First Name Initial," and when it came on I dropped what I was doing and experimented with my name and a different husband. My notebook was filled with decorated monograms, all starting with my "C" and each one ending with a different boy's last name. After I had curved and shaded it with my magic marker, "C.N." was one of my favorites.

Locating Dayton without Lee was even harder than finding Lee without him, but
that only made me think about Dayton the more. He was a challenge. If he and Lee watched TV on the couch, I squeezed in between them. I dropped back to visit my old teacher just to stand in the front of Dayton's classroom and show myself off. But nothing I did drew Dayton out. He'd lose his nerve and hide behind Lee until I thought I'd go crazy.

And then, one April night, I ran into him late, near the outskirts of a nighttime pow wow. The woman's shawl contest was on, but I wasn't entered. I was dressed in pedal pushers and an off-the-shoulder blouse like Molly Dee wore, and my hair was curled and perfect. I was at my best. My fingernails were shaped into sharp ovals and I wore My Sin.

I was glad for every minute I had taken with my appearance when there, all alone under the lights, leaning against a post, was Dayton. He didn't look like any little boy to me. His eyes were open too wide and had that shiny, dreamy expression that comes from drinking wine too fast. The hair beneath his cowboy hat gleamed with Vitalis and he had rolled the cuffs of Lee's faded red Western shirt halfway up his arms to disguise the fact that it was too short for him.

The pow wow noise faded, as if the volume was lowered, when I approached him. We were just the two of us in a place with no walls. I slumped to make him taller and sim­m ered from under my eyebrows like Annette.

"Lee's not here." Dayton's voice was mad, as if they'd had a fight, but I couldn't be bothered with that now.

I pulled my shoulders so my blouse pressed against my strapless bra. I was close enough for him to smell me. I ran my fingers, light as music, on the metal buckle of his belt. Dayton's eyes wouldn't quite focus. He turned his head to the side and watched my dancing hand. That seemed to wake him up a little.

There's a certain way you act when you go courting at pow wow, and the first step is to move away from the lights and into the dark air that surrounds the circle of contestants and spectators. I hooked a finger into the top of his waistband and gave a little tug. "You want to go find him?" I said.

Dayton was two years younger than me and not yet used to drinking, but he wasn't dumb. There was no way he could say no. His dreams had come true. I stepped closer to him and let my knee brush against his leg. Then I moved away, out towards the open field. I went slow until I heard his steps following, and then I walked faster. There was a place, a hollow where the pasture dipped and formed a foxhole, where we could stretch out and be alone, if nobody had claimed it before us.

We didn't talk as I led the way. There was no moon but the spring night was clear and rose around me wide as blowing curtains. That land was so level that the only way you didn't see stars was if you looked at your feet, and the sky smelled of deep water. I could have jumped off into it and swum wherever I wanted. I stomped through the flattened long grass that had laid preserved under months of snow and felt on my ankles the scratch of new growth pushing through. Lee was going to be surprised about me and Dayton. I couldn't wait to see the amazement on his face when I told.

It was so dark that Dayton bumped into me when I stopped in the spot I had picked out. We stood in the center of a bowl in the earth, the sides sloping around us high as our shoulders, and I didn't move away.

"I guess we can't find him," I said. Every part of my body was alert and ready. I could never predict what a boy would want the first time.

I heard Dayton breathing. He was a shape blacker than the night and suddenly a stranger to me. I found one of his hands and brought it to my stomach. Before I had a baby that was a part, hard and round, that boys couldn't get enough of. Through the thin material of my cotton pants I felt the heat of Dayton's long fingers as I pushed them against me.
Finally he moved. He put his other arm around my shoulders and I leaned into him. He rubbed his mouth on my lips and I straightened my arms and laced my fingers behind his neck. I was ready to fall on the ground, ready for anything. He kept pushing on my mouth. His lips were drawn tight. I knew without any doubt he had his eyes shut too, blocking me out. As I bent my elbows, let my hands slide lower, Dayton tensed and shivered the way an animal does when it hates to be touched. I stepped back and he made no effort to stop me. Usually by this time things were beyond my control for a while, so I was at a loss.

“Well what do you want to do?” I asked at last. I wished there was some way to turn on the lights and read his face.

“Maybe we should keep looking for Lee,” Dayton mumbled too quickly. He was embarrassed, trying to pretend that he didn’t know what just hadn’t happened. He cleared his throat and made everything worse.

“It’s just that you’re a big sister to me, Christine.”

Boys dreamed of having what Dayton was passing up. Most boys. If anybody was supposed to say no, it was the girl.

“Or a sister-in-law,” I shot back, kneeing him with my words. I’m not a person who stops herself at the time and wishes later she hadn’t. Dayton understood what I meant, though I bet nobody had ever thrown it in his face before.

“You’ve got it wrong,” Dayton said, but I didn’t wait to listen. I marched back to the powwow and left him to explain to the night what his problem was. I hated my outfit, hated the feel of the flimsy material of my pants as it strained against my hips and thighs, hated the greasy taste of the lipstick Dayton’s kiss had smeared onto my teeth. Everything about me was all wrong, and it took me years to forget that it was Dayton who showed me.

After that powwow it wasn’t the same with the three of us, though I’m not sure if Lee ever figured out why.

It wasn’t that Dayton and I actually argued about anything, but our shame soured us on each other. We began to pull Lee in two directions, forced him to choose between us. I’d suggest we go joy-riding in a borrowed pick-up and Dayton would nag Lee to practice his lariat, I’d have my heart set on “Rome Adventure” at the drive-in and Dayton would tune in “Bonanza.” Somewhere along the line, what Lee wanted got lost, and he had to divide his time pleasing Dayton and me. And that made nobody happy.

The one thing that was pure Lee’s was rodeo. All over eastern Montana he was getting known, even when he was no more than a teenager. He climbed on any horse, and rode it till it was kicked out and gentle. I had a life of my own, so when Lee went off to compete I wished him luck, but Dayton travelled along to carry Lee’s saddle, and Dayton told the stories of Lee’s victories when they came home. He boasted that Lee made jackasses of the older white cowboys who took bets on the side against him. He painted Lee as on the way to All-Around. And Lee would listen with the rest of us, shaking his head and laughing as though he was hearing it for the first time, as though it had happened to somebody else. When people wanted more details, they would ask Dayton instead of Lee because Dayton always made things sound exciting.

But when the talk started that Lee was poised to enter the big ones at Cheyenne and Calgary, Aunt Ida was dead against it.

“Look at those fools in ten years,” she said. “Broken and stooped-over, pains in every joint, old before thirty. Good for nothing but shoveling the corral dirt.” Actually what she said was sharper than that since she said it in Indian. English is mild in comparison, full of soft sounds that take the punch out of your thoughts. When she did speak English, Aunt Ida pronounced each of her words separately, as if surprised to hear her own
voice using a language she only heard in church. Her sentences crackled like electricity, tapping the air in code. Her face said she doubted these noises meant anything a person could decipher and so she broadcast at an angle, a question in her eyes, ready to confront confusion. Around us she didn't bother with English at all, and in Indian her words poured like thick whiskey which had never seen water, like hootch straight from the barrel.

I don't know what exactly Aunt Ida harbored in her mind for Lee, but she had an idea of him, no doubt of that. Every once in a while when she watched him she nodded her head, strong and sure, as though she had just decided something. She ordered his clothes from Sears and kept them nice. She made his favorite corn soup whenever she could get the ingredients together. She wouldn't go to see Lee ride, but you could tell she listened to Dayton's stories while she was off in another part of the room, washing the dishes or pretending to search for her sewing.

When Lee danced at our pow wow she decked herself out in her mother's beaded moccasins and wore porcupine quill earrings. The time he came in second in the Men's Fancy she sat long into the evening on her folding chair at the edge of the grounds as they had one dance-off after another, and when Lee finally lost she made him escort her in the closing Circle instead of letting him sulk. I never saw her dance before, and it amazed me. You forgot her weight, and her feet tapped quiet as deer hooves as she worked her way around the drum. She didn't have the prettiest shawl, just an old purple blanket she had crocheted herself, but with her head bent and her eyes lowered, her body floated steady while her legs stepped and crossed. Lee was just as taken aback as I was, and though he caught on eventually and bowed and waved beside her, the hand mirrors and cut-glass beads of his feathered outfit reflecting in the lights, Aunt Ida was the one you couldn't take your eyes off.

When John F. Kennedy was killed a few months after my falling out with Dayton, Aunt Ida sat like a door-stop in front of the TV in our house with Lee right beside her and Dayton next to him. They filled the couch. People had said Lee was going to be the Indian JFK because he was so handsome and smart, and I know that's why they were so fascinated. They saw Oswald get shot, they saw John Junior salute, they saw Jackie's eyes behind her black veil, they saw it all.

The sound came through the thin walls into my room, and Lee kept shouting to tell me what was happening. He wouldn't let me play records, and nothing but Kennedy was on the radio. Even Teen Beat was off. It's not that I didn't feel bad. I thought Jackie was a beautiful woman and I was sorry that she lost her husband so young and then had two kids to raise on her own, but I didn't take it personal like Lee and Dayton did. People got shot on our reservation all the time and nobody turned the world upside down about it.

Lee moped for weeks after, his mouth grim and solemn like he couldn't shake serious thoughts from his head. I never knew if Dayton was upset himself or just went along for the ride, but he was with Lee every minute, talking about how if it wasn't for JFK we'd have been bombed by Cuban missiles because we were a number one target, being so close to where the ICBM's were buried.

Over the next couple years Lee and Dayton were like kids who wouldn't grow up, like Siamese twins who couldn't be cut apart. Even when they took out girls, they double dated, and almost never went with the same ones twice. People had gotten so used to seeing Lee and Dayton together that they even stopped talking about it. But not me. Dayton had herded me out of my own brother's life and then as much as told me I wasn't good enough for him. I didn't forget, I just saved and waited.
After I graduated, I went to work part-time in the Tribal Council Office and had a paycheck. Not a weekend went by when I didn’t go to dances in town. I saw every double feature that came to the drive-in. I had my pick of boys. That Christmas I got a 10 karat gold-plated I.D. bracelet from one guy and a hand-tooled leather wallet from another.

“You’re turning into a slut,” Aunt Ida spat at me on a Friday night as I was getting ready to meet a date. “Nobody will marry you.”

“You should know,” I said, and continued to line my eyes as if she wasn’t there. You’d think she might have a little understanding, but she was a woman I could never make out because she kept her distance and acted as though she had never been my age, never had wanted to have fun. In her early old-ladyhood, Aunt Ida had become respectable and we were supposed to go along.

Thank God for Lee because I could still tell him everything when we had some time alone. He listened and gave me advice about all my boyfriends, and wanted to see my new clothes and hear about the places I went. He wasn’t just my best friend, he was the only one I trusted, the only one who never let me down.

When I was twenty, I took off to Minot for the first time and didn’t even bring a toothbrush. I thought I was just going to the movies in Malta when I left Aunt Ida’s house, but the guy I was with breezed through that cowtown without even slowing down at the four-way, and headed east.

“What’s going on?” I said. “Where are we going?” But he just pinched my leg and answered we were taking a little trip to see his cousin and did I mind that much? I thought about that for all of thirty seconds and decided I didn’t. “I’ll call in sick,” I said. I was wild and ready to see the world, and I liked myself that way.

They call Minot “The Magic City” and you could see why. When we drove down Broadway for the first time at night, all those lights shining and people hurrying along, I felt like I was inside a movie. Every block I rode I saw more people than lived on the whole reservation, and not a one of them knew my business. When I went into a bar with my date and his cousin and his cousin’s friends, everybody would look up from their drinks and take me in, and I could see they admired what they saw. With all those military from the Air Force base around, I never had to sit out a dance.

I came back from that first trip after only two weeks, but in some ways I never came back at all. I worried all the way down the road to the reservation, every step to our house, what kind of reception I’d get. Aunt Ida must have thought I was lost when she never heard from me in all that time. I wouldn’t blame her for being mad, but when I described what happened maybe she’d be glad for my good time.

She didn’t even glance from “The Guiding Light.”

“I was in Minot with a boy,” I said to shock her. If I started with the worst, it could only get better.

“Diamond Johnson,” she said in a flat voice.

That stopped me.

“Married. With two kids.”

“They’re not living together,” I told her. “His wife’s gone back to South Dakota.”

Aunt Ida kept me waiting until a commercial came on. “His mother came to see me. She claims it’s because of you she lost her grandchildren.”

I tried to explain. Being with Diamond was nothing. That wasn’t what counted about my trip. It was me, all the new things I saw, how people treated me, but Aunt Ida didn’t hear. All that mattered is that some woman had shamed her over me. I exploded. I was nobody she could treat this way.

“You want me to move away?”

She just set her big jaw and watched her program. I spun around and walked out the
door. Once in the open air, I looked around for an idea of what to do next. I didn't have a thing of my own with me and I was too proud to go in and pack. I was breathless with my anger and the sound of the slammed door echoed in my head.

You get a good view from that hill, but no matter which way I turned there were no surprises. I knew the people in every house on this end of the reservation, and there weren't many that would want me for more than a day or two. I didn't even consider Diamond, though he might have said yes. If you take up with a man that way, you never get free again, and besides he was too old.

So family was my only choice, and I moved in with Aunt Ida's younger sister Pauline, her husband, Dale Cree, and their first baby. I never got along with her, but I knew it would gall Aunt Ida for me to be there.

Sometimes when I came in at five in the morning, the music still in my ears, Pauline would be awake for a morning feeding.

"You're wearing yourself out, Christine," she warned, giving me her best Christian look. "This is no life for a young girl." But she always made me start my night from the minute I left the house and relate every detail. She liked it best if I told her things that made her clap her hand over her mouth, things for her to whisper, things that had the ladies at her church shaking their heads. That paid my rent as far as she was concerned.

I had accumulated enough interest in having fun to last me a long time. I had a reputation with men, you could see it in their eyes. I was the first one they called when the neon lights took over, and that was fine with me. There were girls my age already married with two babies, and others who went to daily mass and were nuns in everything but their habits. When I saw them at the store, carrying full shopping baskets, I was glad for the cards I held.

My motto was "you're only young once," and I had the sense to make my youth count double. I was on the road non-stop, to Great Falls or Rapid or Billings, but I still saw Lee sometimes, whenever I could. He was the only person whose opinion mattered a damn to me.

He and Dayton finished their high school as Red Power Indians. They wore wrapped bandanas around their heads to hold their long hair out of their eyes. They took brand new blue jean jackets and bleached them until they looked second-hand. They sewed bright patches on their pants to cover holes that weren't there. They carried around Indian newspapers from California and New York that had headlines that wiped off on your fingers. They called the priests at the mission "honkies" behind their backs, said our reservation was a "nation" and that we were Native Americans instead of Indians.

Between the two of them, Lee and Dayton, they wore more buttons with messages than you could ever read. When you met them on the road, they filled their chests so you saw "Custer Died For Your Sins" or "Indians Discovered Columbus." They got interested in Vietnam and every other damn place that made the evening news, and they hushed me when I told them that stuff had nothing to do with us.

"Shit, Christine, will you can it," Dayton finally said when a group of us were sitting in the Snack Bar watching bombs going off on the TV. Lee wasn't there, home that night with a rodeo-sprained knee, and I had just suggested a hand of Indian pinochle.

"Those Vietnamese ain't so different from us," Dayton went on. "Same skin, same hair. Why don't you shut up, and learn something?"

I turned to him slow and let him wonder for a little bit which one of the things I could say, I would. He had spoken before he thought, before he remembered who he was talking to, and now he hunched in the broken-down chair, at my mercy.
“Those communists might look like you,” I told him, “but not me. I’m American all the way. Why don’t you just get out. You never belonged on this reservation anyhow.”

Dayton kept his eyes on the screen, hoping that was as far as I’d go. He was no match for me without Lee to back him.

For his senior project, Lee went to the old folks at the retirement center and asked for stories about the way things used to be, and they were so glad for someone to pay attention to them, someone who could speak the language, that they told him anything he wanted to hear. The elders, he called those people, like he hadn’t known their names all his life. He started talking about Mother Earth and Father Sky, and had an answer for anything. To hear him talk, Indians were the center of the world.

One day, I ran into Lee in the store, and he was wearing a long white feather, all fluffy on the ends, dangling from his left ear.

“Are you a hippie now?” I asked, joking around, but he acted like a stranger with my brother’s face. He paid for his bottle of pop and turned to leave without even speaking to me.

“Hey, Crazy Horse, it’s me talking. Tina.” My voice was high like I was holding in laughter, but I knew none of the people standing around, listening, were fooled.

Lee paused at the door. His eyes were dangerous.

“I heard what you said to Dayton,” he said, low and steady.

“Are you going to protect him from me? Did he go crying to you?” I had forgotten all about my fight with Dayton and didn’t know what Lee was so mad about.

“He didn’t tell me.” Lee looked at me and chose the words he would say next. “Maybe if you stopped running around with all your red neck white boyfriends you’d care about what was happening in this world.”

I stayed there, pretending to shop, walking down the aisle between the cereals and the paper products, and tried to compose myself. I knew my face was flushed and I hated to let anyone see.

When I finally got out I went straight to Aunt Ida, though we hadn’t spoken in six months. She was alone, sorting scraps of material for a quilt.

“What are you going to do about Lee?” I asked her. She stood in front of me, with her hands on her hips. She had plenty to say but none of it about Lee.

“He’s fine.”

“He’s turning into a criminal,” I said. “Thanks to Dayton. They want to burn down the government.”

Aunt Ida sniffed. Lee was still the Indian JFK. She could no more condemn him than she could fly to the moon.

“Lee knows what he’s doing,” she told me, sure and pleased with herself. “Him and Dayton.”

A look passed between us, and in her eyes I saw her victory, and in her victory I understood the battle we had fought for who Lee was going to be, my brother or her child. He couldn’t belong to both. All along I thought it was Dayton I had to worry about, but I had been wrong.

“He won’t stay with you,” I said.

But pictures of Lee hung on every wall of the room: Lee with his hoops. Lee’s tinted eight-by-ten grade school graduation portrait. Lee and Dayton ready to take the bus on their junior-senior year trip to Helena. Lee in his Fancy Dance outfit, his hair braided with strips of red cloth and falling past his shoulders. Lee’s cowboy shirts, starched and pressed, hung on a clothesline stretched behind a curtain, and his boots, newly polished, were lined at the foot of the bed where he slept.
My eyes searched every corner before I turned to leave.
With the door to my old room closed, there was no sign I had ever lived there.

Michael Dorris