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Faster horses

Woody Kipp

The University of Montana

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Faster Horses

by

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Dean, Graduate School

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Date
I should just drive on down and wake them up in the dark. No, I thought, I'll just sit on this hill for awhile, wait for daylight. I guess I want a little drama when I pull into the ranch yard, kids running for the house to tell the grownups somebody--not a neighbor but somebody in a car they never saw before--was coming, dogs barking, people peeking out the kitchen window to see who it is. It's been 20 years since I sat on this hill. 20 years almost to the day since I knocked my younger brother into my father's grave as we were getting ready to bury him. My mother wouldn't let my father get buried in a bent casket and they had to hold everything up while the undertaker made a flying trip to town and brought back a new unbent casket. By the time they hauled my brother, and my father, at least for a little while, out of the grave, changed him into a new casket, I was already on my way to Wyoming.

Right here, where I'm parked, this is the hill that Meriwether Lewis took his measurements from in 1805. I forget what he was looking for around here, gold, or another Indian woman to help paddle his boats, I forget, but the Montana Historical Society came out here when I was a kid and put up a little monument down by the creek where they say he camped. They call his camping spot Camp Disappointment. I guess he didn't find what he was looking for. I turned on the dome light in my pickup and saw that it was almost four o'clock. The daylight would be coming in another 45 minutes. Right
now it's so dark I can't see the edge of the hill in front of me. When I was a kid, too young
to handle the teams of horses pulling the mowers and rakes, I would come up onto this
hill with a hand held mirror and, as long as it was a sunny day, flash the sun down into
the haying meadows to let the men know it was dinnertime. Sometimes they wouldn't
look up at the hill for a long time. I wasn't allowed to leave the hill until I saw them raise
the sickle bar of the mower or the teeth of the rake and start for the ranchhouse. The hill
is high and juts out over the valley. On cloudy days the mirror didn't work. Sometimes, if
my horse was already saddled, I would ride to the working men and sometimes I would
walk. My mother preferred I ride because sometimes when I walked I was sidetracked
and the men didn't get their dinner till well after noon.

I probably looked like one of those people in the movies when they do an obvious
double take, to let you know something is not quite right. My folks' house was gone. I
figured there was going to be some changes in 20 years but somehow I pictured the long
log house as always being there. I looked down at my folks' ranch while the daylight
came slowly, revealing things in the landscape below little by little; the darkness of the
leaves of the cottonwoods along Cut Bank Creek were the first things that came into
focus. I had just finished smoking some good weed and I was high as the light lifted the
night from the valley floor and revealed the changes that had taken place in the past 20
years.
The round horse corral was still standing but near the old corral I could see a new corral and a new barn. The old barn was still there. There were some new buildings. Uncle John worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a carpenter when he was a young man.

Whenever my father wanted a new building he'd get a quart of whiskey and he and Uncle John would sit in the barn and plan out a new building. My mother didn't allow whiskey in her house though she knew my father sneaked drinks now and then. Once, looking for some horse tack in the barn, she came across a half full bottle of whiskey that had been hidden but not good enough. That evening, after we finished eating supper, she called to my father through an open window. He went to the window and saw her standing by the gate post leading into the yard. The bottle of whiskey was set on the top of the gate post and she had one of our baseball bats in her hand.

"Francis, look out here, I have something of yours."

When my father, and us, looked out the window, she smiled a fake smile, and swung the bat, the bottle exploding with some of the whiskey getting on her dress.

"I'm going to burn this dress and I expect you to pick up every piece of broken glass from my yard," she told my father. Then she disappeared into their bedroom. He made us pick up the pieces of broken bottle and went back to his reading. My mother was a devout Catholic.

The year I left, 1964, was the year of the big flood. A hundred-year-flood they said. It was in the days and weeks following the flood that the trouble started between my dad
and me. We flooded here on Cut Bank Creek but it was not the way they got it on Birch Creek and Two Medicine River. Over there, on the south side of the reservation the white people built dams so they could irrigate the land they ripped off from the Blackfeet in the last century. Then it rained for four days straight and melted the snow in the mountains and swept all those people away. The little kids who drowned would be big people by now if they had lived. They found some of the people. Some are still out there, someplace.

Well, things change in 20 years. But the house being gone, that was one of those things you don't expect. I guess because I spent my childhood in that house I just always thought the house would be there, come hell or high water. I wondered if my brother, William, was like our dad, always up at first light. A cowboy friend of mine, a Shoshone cowboy, had been at the finals of the Northern Plains Indian Rodeo Association a couple of years ago. He had met William and his wife, Lavonne. A big bay horse called Indian Dream had been bucking cowboys off regularly that year. When the Shoshone had asked who owned the horse he had been told the bay belonged to a guy named William Bear Black Medicine. There aren't too many people with that name, it's not like Smith or Jones, so he introduced himself to the owner of the horse. William told him he was my brother. He didn't hint at bad blood; didn't say anything about being knocked out cold on top of our father's casket as being the last time he had seen me. The Shoshone said she was really something to look at, William's wife. I wondered if she would be enough to keep William
in bed past first light. It didn't matter, I wasn't in a rush. The smoke was good and I was happy to sit still on Meriwether Lewis' hill while the light worked its way into the valley.

I couldn't see my Uncle John's ranch, located about three miles up the creek. Actually, he was the reason I was sitting on this hill. He had died a couple of days ago and William managed to get hold of me at a rodeo in Oregon through the main office of the Professional Rodeo Cowboy's Association. He sent word that my uncle John had died; he thought I should know, in case I wanted to come home for the funeral. Uncle John had always liked both William and me, me because I was a horse handler, William because he had always taken an interest in the old Indian ways. That's the way it seemed, anyway, when I was a kid. Maybe he just liked us because we were his nephews. William had sent word when my mother died but I didn't go home for her funeral. I prayed for her soul but I didn't go home for her funeral; to this day I feel guilty about not going home for my mother's funeral. She died seven years after my father died.

They had just lowered the gray casket into the ground. I hadn't spoken to my dad for three months, ever since he caught me outside the Silver Dollar Bar in Browning, the main town on the reservation. "We have cattle to move, horses to break, hay to get knocked down, fences to build and you're up here drinking and whoring around with that little half breed white trash," he said. I took a swing at him and knocked him backward a couple of steps. My dad was a powerful man, physically. He took the blow and hit me
back right on the forehead, knocked me down and then reached down and grabbed me by
the hair and started slapping my face, back and forth, for about a minute. I grabbed one of
his legs and tried to pull him down and he pushed my head back and hit me again right in
the face. It was a hard blow, enough to make my head swim, though for the past few days
I had been drinking whiskey and dorking the half breed white trash so it didn't take much
to make my head swim a little more. When he was about forty feet away, walking back
toward his truck, he stopped and looked back at me. "You little son-of-a-bitch, I'll teach
you to take a swing at me." Then he left and we never talked again. He sent William to
look for me about a month later. I told William to tell my dad, "Fuck you." Cherie was
with me when I said that and she said that was not a good message to send to my father. I
didn't tell her he had called her half breed white trash. A heart attack killed him shortly
after that. William was standing right next to me as they lowered the casket. When the
casket was sitting in the grave and Father LeFleur finished his short prayer, William said,
to me, sort of under his breath, "See what you did?" That's when I knocked him into the
grave. That's how I ended up owning 40 acres of my father's ranch.

I sat there for most of an hour, looking down at the valley of Cut Bank Creek. Then I
rolled another joint and started the pickup, put a Rod Stewart tape in the tape deck and
started down the hill toward the ranch. I wondered what 40 acres I owned of the ranch.
That's how much my dad had willed me. William owned the rest. My dad was a half-
breed and knew something about money and property and how to go about getting them.
When I left he owned about 4,000 acres of the Blackfeet reservation and leased a whole bunch more of tribal land. Whether William had added to that amount I didn't know. I owned 40 acres out here somewhere, though. I could probably have owned half of the ranch if I hadn't started running with Cherie Springer, fell in love, at seventeen, and took off on the rodeo trail.

Dogs came barking up the road when I was a hundred yards away, a blue heeler bitch with three pups, another dog that looked to be some kind of shepherd and a black lab. They trailed me into the yard. Dogs but no kids. I knew William had been married previously but hadn't heard whether there had been any children. Of course it was awful early even for ranch kids to be out of bed. It was about 6 in the morning. I shut my pickup off and sat in the yard looking around. It looked like William was doing pretty good for himself. Except for the family house most of the older buildings were still there alongside the newer buildings. Somebody hollered "Hey" and when I turned toward the new house a woman with long reddish brown hair was standing on the porch waving at me, making gestures to come to the house.

The Shoshone cowboy had been right. William's wife was something to look at. She was tall, probably about five ten with auburn hair that went past her waist, went all the way past her butt, actually. The door to the house faced east and the early morning sun was striking her hair. Her look was intent as I came through the yard gate and started toward
the house, as if she were making an assessment as I approached her. She didn't look friendly or unfriendly, just intent. When I reached the bottom step of the porch she smiled.

"William thought you might show up during the night," she said.

"You're his wife?"

"I'm his wife, Lavonne." She stepped toward me and shook hands. "I know it's been a long time since you two have seen each other. I have some chores to do, some horses to take care of. I'll go do that. The coffee is ready. He's up." She walked down the steps of the porch and as she reached the bottom of the steps turned back toward me, "Nice truck," she said.

I watched her till she went out the gate. She knew I was watching her, it was hard not to watch her. Her hair, reaching to the backs of her thighs, swayed as she walked. She was wearing Wrangler jeans and immediately it brought to mind the slogan cowboys were fond of voicing: Wrangler butts drive me nuts. As I stood watching her walk toward the barn I heard footsteps approaching from within the house. When I turned toward the door William was looking at me through the screen door. He had a half smile on his face. For a moment we just looked at each other. Then he pushed open the screen door and stepped outside. He stepped toward me and as I was about to put out my hand to shake hands he put his arms around me and hugged me. "Hey, brother," he said softly, near my ear.
The log house, my folks' house, burned but William saved some of the things before the heat became too intense to enter. The main thing that caught my eye was the big family picture that had been taken when William was four and I was seven. My father wanted the picture taken with the backdrop of Cut Bank Valley. My mother wanted the picture to be taken in the photographer's studio in Cut Bank, the white town 25 miles away. Neither would give in. Finally, the photographer came to the ranch and we all dressed up and had our picture taken with the horse corral in the background. Then, the next time we went to Cut Bank to get groceries, we had to take our good clothes with us and have another picture taken in the studio. The fire that had been started by kids playing with matches during the time of branding calves was the final compromise on the picture fight. William had been able to save my father's version, which hung in his kitchen. My mother had hung her version in the living room. William had not been able to get to the living room, where the wood stove sat against the north wall. The wood and the kindling had been stacked next to the stove in a large wood box made of rough lumber by my father. One of the small boys playing in the house while the grownups were all at the corral had touched a kitchen match to the dry kindling. My mother's dark intense Indian eyes stared at me from the wall. I prayed for her soul silently. Her eyes followed me.

"I've pretty much followed you through the Rodeo Sports News," William said. "They
say you rode some pretty tough horses." There was a new electric stove in the kitchen but right next to it was the Home Comfort wood cooking range that had belonged to my mother.

"So how did you manage to save Mom's stove?" I asked.

He crossed the kitchen to the electric stove and poured himself coffee. He pointed down to the bottom of the wood stove and I saw that one end of the stove rested on wooden blocks where the stove legs were missing.

"We were getting ready to cut the nuts out of a couple of stud colts we missed earlier. We were branding calves that day and when we finished with the calves we were going to throw those colts down and cut them while we had a lot of help here. Kids were running everywhere, you know how it is during a branding, and just about the time we were getting through with the calves some kid came hollering from up around the house, screaming that the house was on fire.

"Well, we had a kid from Browning working for us, a good horse hand, named Buzz Shanley, and he was going to rope the colts off a big grey gelding I had at the time. We all went running to the house when the kid said it was on fire. Buzz was already horseback and rode up to the house. The kitchen was full of smoke and a couple of the men who went in with me didn't stay in there very long. It was getting pretty hot. I couldn't move the stove by myself so I had Buzz ride right up to the door and take his rope down and I looped it around the stove and he drug it out through the door with that
big grey gelding." He touched one of the wooden blocks with the toe of his boot. "It's still a good stove but we broke the legs off when we pulled it out the door."

He was leaning against the Home Comfort. "I couldn't figure out why you didn't come home when Mom died." He was still trim. Tall, with dark brown hair that he had grown into braids. Quite a few of the Indians in recent years had grown their hair long, braiding it, sometimes wearing it in a ponytail. The braids surprised me that morning. Our mother had insisted on our hair being short, in crewcuts usually.

"You know what they say," I said, "a man shouldn't go where he's not wanted."

He looked at me hard. "No, that wasn't the way it was." He pointed with his coffee cup toward the family portrait on the west wall of the room. "They weren't old when they died, you know. He was 48. She was 55."

"I didn't know how it was. Nobody was sending me postcards telling me how it was. So I stayed away."

He pointed toward the family portrait again. "She was pretty mad for a while after you knocked me into the grave and they had to get a new coffin. Then you left without saying anything and for a long time we didn't know where you were."

"I wanted to rodeo. You know how she felt about that," I said.

"You met Lavonne?"

"Yeah, she's pretty." He came with the silver coffee pot. "I didn't meet the first one, though."
"She was nuttier than a fruitcake," he said. "I have to give her credit, though, she gave me some pretty good ideas about running this place as a business."

"Business?"

"I've been doing some things, trying to make a few dollars, you know?" The floor of the kitchen was lit with the early morning sun coming in the east window. "I raise and sell bucking horses, for one thing."

"They bucked a horse out a couple of years ago, horse called Indian Dream. Friend of mine said you raised him, big bay horse."

"That horse made me some money," William said. "He could go all the way to the National Finals if they handle him right, don't abuse him."

Uncle John's body was due to be delivered to the ranch sometime that morning. He would be placed in the living room until the burial. Indians have a high regard for their dead. A few years ago they decided the mortuary in Browning was an awful cold and lonely place to leave someone you loved. Some of the tribal community leaders met with the undertaker, a fat, balding white man named Adam Keebler; they asked if he couldn't keep the viewing room of the mortuary open throughout the night; Indians sometimes sit with their dead all night.

"No, no," said Keebler, thinking of the extra work it would bring him, "it would be just too hard on me, trying to keep this place open all night." The committee suggested the
tribal council could fund a night watchman to keep order during the night, to keep the street people who were always full of wine, from coming in and causing a ruckus like they sometimes did even if the dead wasn't a close relative. Keebler had been many years among the Indians, dressing their dead. He couldn't understand why all of a sudden they wanted to start sitting up all night with the dead. An old lady explained that it was the traditional way to spend time with the dead. "Our old ways are starting to come back," she said, "and if you let us sit up in your waiting room you will be blessed. Otherwise..." and she pointed down to the ground, letting Keebler know he would be going to Hell for refusing this sacred request. But Keebler was a man who believed in science and her threat didn't affect him. Soon after, though, families started requesting their dead be brought to their homes instead of being laid out in his cold waiting room. Keebler didn't mind. He added transportation costs to the cost of the funeral. And if the weather was bad and the hearse became stuck in snow or mud while delivering the body to a home in the country he added the down time to the bill. The Indians cursed him and said among themselves that it was typical, that the white people had no respect for the dead.

"Why don't we take a walk, I'll show you some things that've happened around here since you left," William said. I stood and held on to the edge of the heavy table. I shook my knee.

"What's wrong," he said.
"I bunged up my knee a couple of years ago. Sometimes when I sit for a while it gets like this," I told him.

"You don't ride bucking horses without getting hurt," he said. We could hear Lavonne outside, her voice playful, apparently talking to her dogs. The morning was full of noise and scents. Cows bawling, magpies, wild peppermint, cottonwood. "Let's go down to the barn, I want to show you something." Lavonne was in the fenced yard playing with the blue heeler pups, throwing a ball and running with them, her long hair flying wildly. Sometimes the pups would grab her pants leg and growl playfully. Blue heelers have been bred to heel livestock and will actually heel anything that moves. Once, raking hay for my dad in the river bottom, a blue heeler named Buttons was with me. She was fond of biting at the cleats of the tractor tire as I raked the hay, as if it were the heels of a horse or a cow. Suddenly, as I sat daydreaming with the rake turning behind me, I saw something big and dark go flying through the air. It was Buttons. She had grabbed onto the thick rubber cleats of the tractor, her teeth had stuck in the rubber and threwed her about ten feet in the air. She hit the ground yowling and took off for home and never came to rake hay with me again. She also never heeled tractors again.

"I'll have some breakfast ready in a few minutes," Lavonne said, "so don't go taking off somewhere."

"We'll be back," William said.

We went through the yard gate and walking next to him I realized he was taller than me.
by several inches. He was shorter than me when I left. I was curious about his long hair.

"So why did you decide to grow your hair long?"

He slowed from the brisk pace he had set. He glanced at me. "Indian way," he said, and kept on walking toward the barn. The barn was round. I had seen round buildings before but never a round barn. The stalls were arranged so the horses were tied with their heads next to the walls. Inside were five horses, two of whom were tied next to each other and seemed, by their size, to be a draft team, big greys. A center pole in the middle of the barn was surrounded by a four foot fence and inside the fence were saddle mounts and hooks hanging from the ceiling for hanging bridles and halters and other horse equipment.

On the right side of the greys was a big sorrel with a blaze face and three white stocking feet. William went to a barrel with a hinged wooden top and leaned into the barrel, bringing out oats in two coffee cans. He went to each of the horses and fed them a can of oats. I was looking around inside the round barn.

"You build this?"

"No, I have a friend who helped build a round house over on Flathead Lake for some rich people. I hired him."

"I like it."

"Yeah, it seems to give you more room than a square barn." After feeding the horses he sat down in a wheelbarrow. "See that big sorrel there?" He pointed to the sorrel bally
standing next to the greys. "I'm going to kill him for Uncle John."

"You're going to kill him? Why?" The sorrel was eating oats. He looked at the horse and then at me.

"You know, in the old way, the old Pikuni way, the way they did when a warrior died."

I had heard of the practice of killing horses when a man died but that was in the last century. I had seen pictures done by Western artists with a traditional burial scaffold with a dead horse lying under the scaffold.

"Uncle John really liked to ride this horse," William said. "Especially when we were running horses. He'd always ask to ride this Brandy horse." We could hear Lavonne calling from the house.

"Breakfast time," William said. "Only thing, don't mention what I just told you, about killing the horse for Uncle John. You see, Lavonne raised that horse from a colt. He was an orphan whose mother got caught in a cattle guard and died before we could get her out.

I don't know how she would feel about making a sacrifice out of him."

Instantly I didn't like the feeling of being a part of the horse killing without his wife knowing about it. I'd been around a lot of horse people through the years and people can really get attached to a horse.

At breakfast I realized William's wife was one of those kind of women whose beauty is so overpowering that a man takes his chances sneaking looks at her even when her
husband is near. She had went to nursing school and after graduation was given a job with the Indian Health Service. The choice had been to go work in Arizona or Montana. Her family owned a ranch on the Rosebud reservation in South Dakota. She was a half-breed who didn't really look Indian except for her long hair. Her eyes were green.

It didn't seem appropriate to ask where my 40 acres was located while we were waiting for Uncle John's body to be delivered by the undertaker. Like most of the Indian families we had our own family graveyard. It wasn't until the government lured the Indians into the town of Browning with government housing and jobs in the bureaucracy that they started to bury their people in the cemetery on the west side of town. In the family graveyards were many small graves. Whooping cough, diptheria and other diseases that came with the white people took a heavy toll, especially among infants and children. Most of the families, even though they lived in the town, occasionally went out into the country to their family graveyards and kept fences up to keep horses and cattle from trampling the graves. I had noticed our family graveyard as I came in to the ranch off the hill that morning. William had taken good care of our dead. There were old wreaths of flowers on the graves and the wires of the fence were strung tight. Uncle John would join the family dead tomorrow. I had heard the names of the family dead as a child: Bull Chief, Taking Arrows, Big Striped Bear, The Only Chief, Medicine Water, people who lived a long time ago. People who killed horses for their dead.
Shortly after we finished breakfast a car pulled up outside and my cousin Trudy came into the house. She was surrounded by children, seven of them. Her oldest daughter, a teenager, carried an infant. I didn't recognize Trudy. She had been timid and shy when I last saw her. Now, she was fat and carried herself boldly forward, her fists clenched as if she were always at the ready to strike someone. Her voice matched her body. She spoke loudly and without pretense.

"So, Tom Black, you come home," she said. She sat directly across from me, her heavy thighs spread apart, her pink nylon stretch pants tight across her huge overhung belly, the material of the pants going up into her crotch, making a crease. "I'll bet you didn't even know who I was, did you?" she said.

I lied to her. "Hell, Trudy, you could be in the middle of New York City and I'd recognize you." She knew I was lying and gave a short snorting laugh.

"Yeah, I was only fifteen when you left. I was there when you knocked him in that grave." She nodded in the direction of William who didn't seem to hear what she said. He was holding one of her small boys on his lap, bouncing him. She smiled at me, a kind of conspiratorial smile, as if we knew something William didn't. Her front teeth were missing.

"You kids go out and play, get away from me, you're always hanging on me," she told her children. The children didn't move. One little boy was sitting directly in front of his mother on the floor. He kept staring at me and when I looked at him he would look away
and as soon as I quit looking at him his gaze returned to me. He had dazzling blue eyes and sandy colored hair.

"Is this one yours?" I asked Trudy. She hesitated a moment before answering, looking down at the sandy head in front of her, as if trying to remember if that was her child. The child, about four, turned to look up at his mother.

"Yeah, he's mine. That's Nathan." The teenage daughter had disappeared into the living room with her baby. The baby began to cry, squalling loudly. Trudy looked over her shoulder into the room. "Change that baby's diaper," she told her daughter.

"Where's Ted?" William asked Trudy.

"That bastard is drunk again," she said.

Lavonne had been outside and now came into the kitchen. When the blue eyed boy saw her he jumped to his feet and rushed to her. She picked him up and hugged him and pirouetted around the room with him, kissing him on the neck.

"Hi, my little man," she told him. She kissed him on the forehead. He snuggled against her neck as she spun around the room with him. She went to a revolving cupboard and brought out a package of creme colored cookies. "Lookit," she told the blue eyed child and gave him a cookie. She carried him as she went to give each of the other children a cookie.

"I'm going to feed the chickens," she said in a singsong voice. "Who wants to go?" The children rose as a troop and followed her outside. The daughter with the baby seemed
several years older than the rest of the children.

"I left baby's diaper bag in the car," she told her mother. Her mother told her she was busy visiting, that the girl should go get the diaper bag herself. The girl looked sullen as she walked through the kitchen.

Another vehicle pulled into the yard. Trudy stood and walked heavily to the window.

"It's a white guy," she said. In a moment a knock came at the door and a white man with a black cowboy hat and heavy jowls came into the room, nodding at me and Trudy and going to the far end of the table to shake hands with William.

"Help yourself to that coffee pot," William told the man. "There's cups hanging right there above the stove."

The man poured himself coffee then sat between William and I at the table. Trudy went into the living room for a moment then came back out and went out the door. She didn't look at any of us as she went by.

"This is my brother, Tom," William told the man. The man had been sitting at an angle, facing toward William. He was bulky and turned toward me, sticking out a thick hand. All of a sudden he smiled and pumped my hand.

"Oh, hell, the bronc rider, Tom Black, hell yes, I know you. I mean, I've never met you personally but I've seen you ride a whole bunch of times. You remember that big pinto horse you rode down in Billings? Yep, I was there. Boy, that was a hell of a ride."

I rode in Billings almost every year at their annual county fair. The shows and the
people and the motels all blended together after a while but I remembered the pinto horse.
The horses don't blend. You always remember the horses.

"Tom's here because we're getting ready to bury our uncle," William told the man.

"Oh, oh, I see," the man said, "well, you probably don't feel like talking business today, then. Maybe I'll just give you a call when the burial's over."

"The undertaker's going to be bringing the body down here in a couple hours," William said, "but we don't really have anything to do until then. We can talk business."

He looked at me and jerked his thumb toward the man. "Walt's a cattle buyer, travels all over the state. Every now and then he runs into somebody with a spoiled horse that can buck and brings them to me and we try 'em out for bucking horses."

"Well, it's not about a bucking horse this time," the man said. "I was down around Glendive the other day and ran into those team ropers, Fornwalts, brothers. I guess they got into a wreck pulling their horses in a trailer a couple weeks ago and killed Larry's team roping horse when they tipped over."

"Damn," said William, "that's too bad."

"Anyway, Larry said to keep my eye open for a good team roping horse, a heading horse.

When I was on the road up this way I got to thinking about that horse you were using last spring over at the Choteau roping. That's a nice big horse, the sorrel bally you were using." He looked at William to see what kind of impression he was making on my
brother with his sales pitch. "He'd probably pay a pretty good price."

"That's just too damn bad about his rope horse," William said. He looked above our heads, toward the window to the east, as if he were making a decision. "I'm not thinking of selling that sorrel bally, though." He glanced at me for just an instant. I knew they were discussing the big sorrel we had seen in the barn that morning, the one William said he was going to sacrifice for Uncle John.

"I've seen those good roping horses go for as much as ten, twelve thousand dollars," the man said. "But that's the really top notch ones, like the ones those PRCA cowboys use." He sat forward and leaned toward William. "I'll be back through here sometime within the next two weeks. If you change your mind and want to sell that horse let me know."

He gave a short laugh as he was standing up. "I'll tell that guy he'll have to pay me a finders fee before I tell where the horse is at." He went to the door and stopped. "I'm sorry about your uncle," he said and then he went out.

There were several more relatives and friends at the ranch by the time the undertaker showed up hauling Uncle John. Most of the people I hadn't seen since I left home. A few I had seen at rodeos here and there; a couple I had met at strange places like bars far from the Blackfeet Indian reservation. We carried the grey coffin from the long black and chrome hearse into the living room. William told me Keebler had called earlier and made him measure his doors into the house and into the living room. Once he had hauled a
body to a house in the Heart Butte area and the house, built many years before, with narrow doors, wouldn't allow the coffin through the doorway. Keebler had suggested they keep the body of the old man in the barn but the son had said bullshit and got out his chainsaw and widened his doors on the spot. He said he'd be go to hell if his dad was going to lay in a barn.

Lavonne had changed into a white blouse and a dark blue skirt before the body arrived. She started organizing the food that people brought with them. There was something almost bubbly about the way she did things, ready to laugh at the drop of a hat. Of course, she was light-skinned and had reddish hair and if you didn't know she had Indian blood you could mistake her for a fullblooded white woman on the street. Many of the true fullblooded Indian women were dark and brooding and seemed unhappy. The living room was fairly large and somebody had borrowed folding chairs from the Catholic church in town, probably on the strength of my dead mother's devotion to the church. Uncle John, because he was one of those who had refused the teachings of Christianity, had not been on good terms with my mother. They once had an argument over religion and after that Uncle John never came into our house again, at least not while my mother was alive.

"I don't care if he ever comes in this house again," she told my father, "one thing I don't need is somebody who eats raw kidney and prays to the Sun. It's the mark of a heathen."

"At one time all of your people ate kidney raw, all of your people prayed to the Sun," he reminded her. She had become as much of a white woman as she could, mainly through
the church, and did not like to be reminded of the ways her people lived during the time they were buffalo hunters and nomads seeking gifts of God through the medicine bundles and the vision quests. But it was true. The Pikuni Blackfeet of old did eat kidney straight out of the buffalo, with the blood hot and steaming as they put the kidney to their mouths. It was also true that the Pikuni Blackfeet were seldom sick and could run all day without tiring. Uncle John had been sent to the Catholic schools as a youngster. During the time he was in the missionary schools he had learned to pray the Hail Marys and the Our Fathers and made his First Communion, kneeling as the Catholic priest put the flesh and blood of Christ in his small Indian mouth. When he left the missionary schools he started questioning the men and women, the priests and nuns, who said they were the disciples of Christ. My mother never questioned them. Uncle John ended up by telling my father, "I'll never darken your wife's doorway again." And until she died he didn't. Now he lay in the living room in a pinstripe suit with his buckskin bag containing his Sacred Pipe across his chest. He lay in the room next to which my mother stared out at the world from her place on my brother's kitchen wall. Death brought them into the same house together.

By mid-afternoon the ranch house was full of people, the yard full of kids. Sitting in the living room with the body a few feet away, the people of Uncle John's age would relate tales of certain things he had done in his lifetime. Sitting in the living room with the curtains pulled, the only light a small lamp in a corner, the stories were like hearing an
oral history of the reservation, of the times before the Indians had cars, when families of
the country went to town in a team and wagon once a month to get their rations from the
government storehouse. Middle Calf, a friend of Uncle John’s, told stories of their young
days as cowboys working for the "ID" the Indian Department cattle herd. Shortly after the
creation of the reservation, the neighboring white ranchers, along with their political
friends in Helena and Washington, D.C., had managed to usurp the greater parts of the
lush grasslands on the reservation. Though he gave the outward appearance of trying to
help get them established as ranchers and farmers, the Indian Agent was in collusion with
the white politicians and ranchers and frequently received little gifts of cash from them to
bend the rules. Most of the Indians couldn't read or write so bending the rules was quite
simple.

Middle Rider came to an understanding of certain ways of the white world when he was
among a group of 27 Pikuni Blackfeet who, in 1915, were told their lands would be sold
to grow wheat to complement the World War I effort. Only a couple of the Indians could
read English and write at that time. The mail was general delivery. Indians would go to
the one room building that served as a post office and tell the interpreter their name to get
their letters. The Indian agent sent a man around to tell the 27 Pikuni Blackfeet their land
was being sold to grow wheat. Middle Rider told of how he and Uncle John, whose
Indian name was Medicine Weasel, rode to the town of Cut Bank and demanded to see
the man who was selling their land. The white woman at the court house in Cut Bank told
them the order came from Washington, D.C., and there was nothing she could do about it.

"Those poor dumb Indians," she told a co-worker after they left and started the ride back to Browning, "they don't even know how to read and write and they want to talk about a land transaction."

I sat and listened for quite a while and then William stood up and jerked his head toward the doorway. I followed him outside and we went toward the barn.

"Those old people know a lot of history I never heard," I told him. He nodded.

"After you left, I spent a lot of time up at Uncle John's place," he said, "I'd leave on a green colt and tell the folks I was going to take the colt for a good long ride to take the starch out of him and then I'd go up to Uncle John's and hang around. Middle Rider would be there sometimes. I heard a lot of stories."

He went to the big sorrel. I sat down in the wheelbarrow. He went to the barrel with the oats and scooped out another full can and brought it to the sorrel. Then he untied the greys and led them out singly and turned them into the pasture adjacent to the barn. They were happy to be freed and I could hear them loping away across the pasture. The other horses that were there earlier were gone. Only the sorrel remained. When he realized he was alone in the barn he whinnied, his ears pricked forward, and went back to eating.

"So when do you plan on killing this horse?" I asked him. He looked from me to the horse. The horse continued eating, the sound of the oats being ground between his teeth the only sound in the barn. He gave a nod toward the barn door, as if he didn't want the
horse to hear what he had to say. We went outside. I squatted and leaned against the barn.
He walked to the corral that joined onto the barn and rested his arms on the corral rail that
was the next to highest one. I noticed the corral was built in the old style, with the top
rails about seven feet high. Modern horse corrals, those built for the horses raised in
captivity, gentle horses, were often four or maybe five feet high. The nearly feral range
horses would go over a five foot fence in a flash. Sometimes, frightened and spooked by
the sight of men swinging the catch ropes, they would try the seven foot corrals, usually
splintering the top rail, their bellies coming down on the next to highest rail and flopping
either back into the corral or on over to freedom, at least until they were rounded up and
brought back to the corral. Once the top rail splintered the rest of the horses would try the
same escape. Men would run madly to the broken spot in the corral and stand there while
others went for wire or rope to mend the broken hole in the corral. Often, a pile of fresh
corral poles would be stacked near to the corrals to fix such mishaps.

Three small boys, the youngest about four, the others a little older, came at a run from
the house. They stopped outside the corral and looked at William, their little breaths
ragged from their run. I had seen them arrive with an Indian woman earlier.

"William," one of the boys said, "mom said to ask you if we could play on your
saddles."

"Yeah, as long as you don't knock them on the floor," he told them.

"C'mon," the boy told the others. They crawled through the bottom rails of the corral
and started into the barn to play cowboy on the saddles that sat on empty 30 gallon oil drums. As they neared the doorway of the barn William told them, "Don't spook that horse in there, you hear?" They turned and looked at him. "Don't get near that horse, or else one of you might get kicked."

"What horse is it, William?" one of the boys asked. Two of them were full brothers and the other was a half brother.

"Brandy," he said. The boys looked at each other with delight and awe.

"It's Brandy," one of them said. Their earlier energy had been checked with the mention of the name of the horse and they entered the barn carefully, looking within as they entered; the sorrel whinnied but got no answer from the greys who were grazing a quarter mile away in the field.

"They seem to know the horse," I told William.

"He has quite a reputation," he said, "you can work cattle off him, run horses, rope off of him, do about anything, except sometimes the wild blood in him comes out and he'll buck."

"I've seen a few like that," I told him.

He grinned at me. "When I say he bucks I don't mean he just crowhops. He really goes at it."

Apparently William had taken the horse Brandy to a team roping on the reservation the year before and as he attempted to rope a steer the horse started bucking. William is a
good bronc rider and when he says a horse can buck it means a horse can really buck.

"Maybe you should have sold him for a bucking horse," I told him.

He grinned again. "I tried," he said, "but Lavonne wouldn't hear of it. She raised him on a bottle after his mother got caught in a cattle guard. Lavonne has a girlfriend who lives just out of Cut Bank and we went to visit one evening. Her husband raises some pretty good quarter horses. On the way to their ranch we came across this big sorrel mare stuck in a cattle guard. She was pretty well beat up. By the time they got her free she had been in there several hours. She didn't live long after they got her out."

Cattle guards, made of pipe or metal bars laid horizontal on the ground with spaces between them and a hole dug beneath, are usually enough to spook horses or cattle from attempting to cross them. They are simply a time saving measure that makes it possible to drive through a gate without having a gate. Sometimes, though, horses or cattle will attempt to cross a cattle guard, their hoofs slipping between the slick metal rails, their legs getting wedged as their feet go down into the hole beneath the metal bars. Once they are in the cattle guard they seldom get out by themselves; often they panic and kill themselves trying to get out or hurt themselves so badly they have to be destroyed.

We could hear the boys in the barn as they played cowboy sitting on the saddles. When the breeze shifted I could smell wild peppermint. A rooster crowed and the sound of another carload of people coming to say goodbye to Uncle John could be heard pulling into the yard.
"So you bought the mares colt?" I asked.

"They gave the colt to Lavonne," he said. "He was two months old when she brought him home and started feeding him on a bottle." The woman with whom the young boys had arrived came walking from the direction of the ranchhouse. She was dressed in worn jeans and a man's flannel shirt with the tails hanging out. She rested her arms on the rails of the corral and waited until we had finished speaking.

"I thought I better check on those boys," she said to William. Her eyes went over me quickly, stopping just long enough to hint at flirtation. Her clothes were well used but she had on a new pair of boots with riding heels.

"They're okay," he told her.

She looked back at me. "Do you remember me?" she asked.

My blank look told her I didn't. I tried to place her but nothing came.

"I was with Faith in Helena. We were at the bar in Helena, after the rodeo."

Then I remembered. Six or seven years ago we had drank together in a Helena bar after the Helena rodeo and later in the evening the guy she had been with had ended up in a fight after getting jealous over her playing pool with some men. Still, I didn't remember her name, only that she had looked cowgirl pretty that night and still looked the same as she leaned over the corral rails. She had let her hair grow and it was in long braids that hung to the front of her thighs. Faith Horse Chief and I had had this on-again off-again thing for several years. That particular year she had traveled with me for a time.
"Yeah, now I remember," I said. "I remember the night in Helena but I don't remember your name."

"Delores. Many Capture."

I nodded. "So how is Faith?" I asked.

She hesitated momentarily. "When was the last time you saw her?" she asked.

I figured in my head. "I guess it was on my way to the Calgary Stampede a little over a year ago."

Her eyes went briefly to William before she looked back at me. "She's married," she said.

There was that little pang, that little quick intake of breath. William looked out toward where the greys were grazing. She was watching me. There was a little animal running around in my chest.

"Well, she always did want to get married," I said. The sorrel whinnied from inside the barn. "She marry somebody from around here?"

"She married a white guy who has a ranch between Depuyer and Choteau. Well, maybe more of a farm than a ranch. I think it's mainly a farm but they have a few cows, too."

The early morning is the best time of the day in the country. It's even the best time of day in the city, before everybody starts rushing around in their cars. I left the camper on my pickup just as it was getting light in the east. The evening before, after sitting in the
wake for several hours, William had sat down next to me on one of the folding chairs and said he'd like to have me help him early in the morning. Before sunup he said. I thought maybe he had some cattle or horses to move to another range. On hot days that's the best time to move them, before the flies get to buzzing in the heat. Flies are little but they can be hard on big animals. Sometimes elk were seen running on the prairies, getting away from the deer flies, the flies having run them out of the mountains. They were on the plains before the white people came. The white people ran them into the mountains. I started to walk toward the old horse corral that my dad had built. As I started to go past the new round barn William hailed me from the open barn door.

"I thought you were still in bed," I told him.

"I've been up for a while," he said.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"What I told you about yesterday," he said. As he spoke he jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the interior of the barn. Then I remembered what he had said the day before about killing the sorrell horse for Uncle John. In the old way. The previous day had been so busy getting reacquainted with relatives and old friends the horse killing scheme had almost been forgotten. At least I had nearly forgotten it. It hadn't seemed a reality when he had mentioned it.

"You're serious about killing that horse?" I asked.

"Yeah, did you think I wasn't?"
I realized then, standing in the pre-dawn light in the valley of Cut Bank Creek that this return to culture, Indian culture, was something being taken very seriously. I had seen Indian rodeo cowboys put eagle and hawk feathers on their cowboy hats. I had thought of it as a kind of decoration. One day Shawn Bull Shoulder, a Lakota cowboy from Pine Ridge, had told me I should get an eagle feather for my hat, for protection in the rodeo arena.

"Protection?" I had asked him.

"Yeah, you know,

"Well, it's your horse," I said. "That white guy that was here yesterday morning said he could get you some good money for this horse."

The sorrel whinnied from inside the barn. In another fifteen or twenty minutes the sun would be showing in the east.

"You can come with me or not," William said. "If you want to come and see this thing then we have to get going. I want to do it at sunrise."

"I guess I'll go," I said.

"Don't feel you have to," he said. "If you think it's going to bother you just go on in the house and make some coffee and wait for me. I had planned on doing this alone anyway."

A dim roar came from the sky. A flight of fighter jets, probably on a training mission from the air base in Great Falls, were going west in the blue sky.

"I'll go," I said.
He turned and went into the barn. In a moment he reappeared leading the sorrel. The horse had on saddle and bridle. William had a gun belt with a pistol in the holster around his waist.

"That's dad's saddle," I told him.

He grinned at me. "I'll bet there's a lot of women you've slept with in the past twenty years that you can't remember what they look like today. But at least you haven't forgotten what your dad's saddle looks like."

It was a Hamley saddle that our father had bought new when he was a young man. To make sure others knew it was his he had fashioned a miniature branding iron out of a metal coat hanger and burned his brand, Triangle Bar Z, into the back of the cantle. Except for being darker than I remembered it as a kid, the saddle looked the same. Oilings make a saddle darker and it looked as if William had oiled and cleaned the saddle throughout the years.

He led the sorrel to the gate of the corral connected to the barn and I opened the gate and they went through; he started walking at a slant toward the southeast, toward one of the large hayfields that ran next to Cut Bank Creek; I closed the gate and looked toward the house. It was quiet. Some of the older relatives had sat through the night with the body but there was nobody outside the house as we started toward the hayfield with the horse.

The sorrel pointed his ears and whinnied at the greys and several other horses in the field nearby. One of the horses answered him. William was walking rapidly with the
bridle reins in his right hand, the horse, full of oats and eager for exercise after standing
in the barn, prancing behind him. I could see the Triangle Bar Z burned into the cantle of
the saddle.

William turned to see if I was coming. "I don't want those dogs with us," he said, "chase
them home." The blue heeler bitch and her pups and the shepherd were with us. The black
lab I had seen lying on the porch of the house. He seemed to be aged. I shouted at the
dogs to go home. The mother dog stopped and looked at me but didn't turn for home. I
reached down and picked up a rock and threw it at her and she gathered herself into a run
for home with the other dogs right behind her. I had to run to catch up with William and
the sorrel. The rays of the sun were showing on the eastern horizon. It would be sunup in
another ten minutes. We were now in the big hayfield, a field that was subirrigated from
Cut Bank Creek and grew good wild timothy hay.

Cut Bank Creek was a hundred yards away. William led the sorrel to the edge of the
creek where the flood of '64 had pushed gravel out of the riverbed, where the creek made
a sharp turn to the south and ran up against a deep cutbank and then started east again. A
great grove of old growth cottonwood trees grew on the east side of the creek here. When
we were young we would come here on sunny days and picnic and swim in the deep pool
where the creek turned. A big cottonwood lay on the bank of the creek, pushed out of the
stream channel by a spring flood. The timothy hay had already been cut and was in thick
windrows in the field. Cut Bank Creek made a gurgling sound from fifty yards upstream
where the water ran over a high spot in the contour of the land, creating a rapid that fed into the deep pool near us.

In addition to being our picnic and swimming place, the pool was used as a doctoring place for halter pulling horses by our father. Some horses, after being broken to the saddle, will stand tied for hours without a fuss. Some, though, for whatever reasons, become halter pullers, pulling back when tied, breaking bridle reins, or, if the halter shank with which they are tied is not strong, will break the shank and, sometimes, with the sudden release of their weight backward, will themselves go over backwards, creating a danger for whatever or whoever might be behind them when they decide to go into a pulling fit. My father bought a big grey gelding from a white rancher with the idea of turning the horse into a pulling horse. He weighed about fifteen hundred and was stout as two day old coffee. The horse was a halter puller and when he reared back against the tie rope he broke it. The big grey came sailing backward across the alleyway of the barn right into another horse my father was in the process of untying. They all went down in a heap. The horses didn't seem to be hurt but my father had two broken ribs from the wreck; the horses had knocked him against the manger. He was so mad he threatened to shoot the grey. Uncle John said he would fix the horse.

Uncle John took the grey down to the stand of old growth cottonwoods and tied him to a big tree that must have been a hundred years old. He used an old piece of rope that had been lying around the barn and wasn't of much use anymore. With the horse tied to the
cottonwood about ten feet from the edge of the steep bank leading into the deep pool, he started flapping a gunny sack directly in front of the grey, deliberately causing him to pull back against the frayed rope. The rope broke and the grey went backward into the deep pool of water; my father had been stationed on the opposite side of the creek to catch the grey when he came swimming out of the pool. We didn't call them pools. We referred to them as greenholes. Again Uncle John tied the grey to the tree with the old rope and again frightened him backward with the gunny sack and again the grey went back against the rope and into the pool. When he hit the water he went pretty much plumb out of sight and must have taken a little water into his lungs. The third time he no longer pulled on the rope when frightened with the gunny sack. He was cured of halter pulling. Uncle John was proud of the job he had done on the grey. "You could tie that horse with a piece of string, now," he said.

William hadn't said a word since telling me to chase the dogs home. When he stopped at the edge of the hayfield and faced east, the horse saddled and bridled and William with a pistol on his hip, I realized I was being accomplice to something I didn't believe in. I had seen a lot of horses die in rodeos through the years. Sometimes they get hurt so badly in the rodeo arena they have to be put out of their misery. Some break legs while bucking, some run blindly into fences and break their necks, some go over backwards in the chutes and twist their spines, paralyzing themselves. The men who furnish the rodeo stock, the stock contractors, usually keep a pistol handy in case a horse gets hurt so badly they have
to be killed. I had seen that. There was a practical reason for it. There was no practical reason for what I was about to be witness to.

Suddenly the image of protestors parading outside of a prison where a condemned death row inmate was living out his final minutes came to me. I have never taken part in a protest but I began to feel a little of what those people parading in the streets outside of prisons must feel. The horse was innocent. The horse was going to be sacrificed for an old belief that nobody, as far as I knew, had believed in for almost a hundred years; a belief that went with the buffalo hunters. This was more than just a hawk feather in the hat for decoration.

"It seems like an old broken down horse, one past his prime, would work for this just as good as a horse like this," I said. William was faced toward the east where the sun was just about to rise. Then, I realized, when I saw his lips moving, that he was praying in a low voice. He was thirty feet away from where I sat on the cottonwood and his voice was hardly audible to me. Then an even greater surprise came. He was praying in the Blackfeet tongue. Our mother fumed when she found out Uncle John had taught us a few phrases in the Blackfeet language when we were kids. A savage language in her eyes. Through the years I had forgotten most of those phrases so I was astonished, listening closely, to hear William speaking fluently and rapidly in the Blackfeet tongue. When he finished the prayer the sun was just beginning to show on the eastern horizon. He pulled something from inside his shirtfront and I recognized it as a braid of sweetgrass, the
incense used in Indian religious ceremonies. He brought a kitchen match from his shirt pocket and lit the end of the braid of sweetgrass.

"It seems like an old horse would work for this kind of a thing," I said, surprised at the loudness of my own voice. I thought maybe he hadn't heard me the first time. He left the sorrel ground tied, with bridle reins hanging down, a good cow country trick to keep your horse from running away. Most horses, after stepping on the reins and abusing their jaws from doing so, will remain standing with the reins hanging down. The smoke from the lighted braid of sweetgrass was grey and thick. I had often smelled the sweetgrass smoke when I was at Uncle John's house. He said it kept a person close to the Great Mystery. He burned it daily in his house. William started walking around the horse in a clockwise pattern, shaking the braid of sweetgrass as he went; he went around the horse this way four times, letting the smoke of the sweetgrass go onto the body of the horse as he walked and continued to pray in the Blackfeet tongue. He seemed not to have heard my statement about maybe killing an old horse.

"It seems for something like this, any old horse would do," I said, "it seems like it's just the act that counts, not the horse itself." I have seen horses killed. But what I was about to see was making my heart pound in my chest. He had been offered good money for this horse just yesterday. And it wasn't just the money; this was a good using horse that had a lot of good years in him. Even those little boys at the barn knew about this horse. I didn't want to see this horse killed. I didn't want to be a part of this. I should have stayed at the
house and made coffee like William suggested. I should have jumped in my truck and got the hell out of here.

William pinched off the burning end of the braid of sweetgrass and put the braid back inside of his shirt. The new sun was almost wholly visible now. With the sweetgrass back in his shirt, William took the bridle reins in his left hand. He reached with his right hand, his fingers visible in the mane directly behind the horses left ear. He was talking low, in the Pikuni Blackfeet tongue. One of the words I had learned in childhood was *ponokamita*. It was the Pikuni word for horse. Uncle John, sitting around in the barn, refusing to go into the house where our mother was, sometimes talked about the history of the Pikuni Blackfeet. He said when the Pikuni Blackfeet first saw the horse, they were about to raid a Snake village in what is now the state of Idaho. They were afoot and were looking forward to taking wives and plunder from the Snake village. That's how the Idaho town of Blackfoot got its name, from that raid. As the Pikuni sat on a hill overlooking the Snake village they were suddenly astounded to see the Snakes come riding out of the nearby trees on strange animals, some dark colored, some light colored, some spotted, animals that looked surprisingly like elk, *ponokah* in the Pikuni tongue; they were carrying men and goods on their backs and the only animal the Pikuni knew of who carried loads was the dog, *emita*. They called the new being *ponokamita*, elk dog, and, that night, creeping close to the tethered animals, testing them to see if they would bite or otherwise prove hostile, found the animals docile, incredibly large and powerful up close,
strikingly beautiful in the muted light of the moon, their ears pricked, low whistling
snorts coming from their noses as the Pikuni approached along the buckskin rope with
which the elk dogs were tied. The Pikuni forgot about new wives and returned home with
the elk dogs instead.

I rose from the cottonwood log and started toward the sorrel. I'd just swing up on the
Injun side and ride him away. Once I was on, William couldn't shoot him. It was thirty
feet from where I had been sitting to where the horse stood in the hayfield in the bright
new sun of the day. I couldn't see William's face. The horse's neck and head hid his face
from me. I was halfway to the horse, William was still talking to him, when I realized he
knew I was coming. It is said there is a mental telepathy between people who are closely
related by blood. Maybe William, without even seeing me, knew what was on my mind. I
was fifteen feet away from the off side of the horse when I saw the movement of
William's hand beneath the horse's neck as he pulled the .38 Special from its holster. In
one swift movement the quiet morning air of the hayfield was broken by the exploding
powder of the cartridge. The sound made me jump. The sorrel's front feet buckled and he
went to his knees. It seemed for just an instant he stayed just there, on his knees; then the
powerful hindquarters shot the sorrel forward in a jump that took him forward several
feet. His knees did not hold him this time. The knees buckled as he came down and he
went over with his right side facing up, his hind legs kicking wildly for several seconds
before the whole body stiffened. He made a coughing sound and a great burst of air came
from his rear end before he went limp and was dead. I smelled the freshly mown timothy hay of the field.

William stood with the pistol still in his hand, looking at the sorrel where he lay. Blood was coming out the nostrils of the horse. The only sound was Cut Bank Creek running over the gravel. He put the pistol back in the holster and walked near the horse. He stood looking down at the horse for a moment, then looked up at me. The grass was wet with dew and the sun was new and fully risen.

"I knew you were going to do something," he said. I wondered how he knew I was going to do something when I hadn't known what I was going to do until a couple of minutes ago.

"I just don't agree with this whole thing," I said.

"I know," he said, "that's what I was told last night, that you don't believe in these ways."

He had visited with several of the old men who had stayed late at the wake the evening before. I wondered what one of them had talked of what I believed.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"Pooksapoot," he said, using the Pikuni word for "come here." He went to the cottonwood and sat down. "Istoopeet," he said, motioning for me to sit beside him on the log. A magpie, probably alerted by the sound of the gunfire from wherever he had been in the brush and trees along the creek, came flying down the creek, turning toward the
hayfield before he reached where we were sitting. The black and white bird flew to the middle of the hayfield where there was a hay corral. The hay corral was ringed with barbed wire, six strands of barbed wire stretched tight so stock couldn't squeeze through and eat the hay, often trampling and ruining much of it if they did get through the fence. The gateposts leading into the hay corral were railroad ties set deep into the ground. The magpie lighted on one of the railroad ties and made murmuring sounds. Soon another magpie came from out of the trees across the creek and flew to the hay corral. The bird, known to the Pikuni as *mamiatsikimi*, longtail, was a sacred symbol to the Pikuni society known as the Magpie Society, who, when they held their annual dance, would turn a magpie loose in the ceremonial hall, the bird flying around in the dance hall during the dance; the bird was released after the dance was over. I didn't know this. William told me this as we sat on the cottonwood log.

"Uncle John was a member of the Magpie Society," he said. "Those birds have come to honor his spirit." It appeared to me that they were gathering for a feast as soon as we left. By nightfall I knew the eyes of the horse would be gone, pecked from his head by the magpies and their relatives, the crows and ravens. If he wanted to believe the birds had gathered to honor our uncle, he could believe that if he wanted.

He looked me directly in the eye. "I knew you were going to do something to try and stop me from killing the horse," he said. Again, I wondered how he knew this when I didn't.
"You knew?" I asked.

He swung his legs up over the cottonwood and pivoted till he was facing away from the hayfield. He stood and walked to the edge of the creek. He stood looking down into the green depths of the pool where we used to swim. More magpies were coming, from up the creek and down the creek, settling on the posts of the fence around the hay corral. Sometimes they make a wild cackling sound. Right now they were making low, gurgling sounds, as if there were something in their throats. When the posts around the hay corral were full, they still were coming and started sitting on the ground around the hay corral.

"Did you ever hear of someone called Bear Lodge?" he asked.

I shook my head and then realized he couldn't see the shaking of my head. "No."

"He's an ancestor of ours, from way back," William said. "Several generations ago."

"So what's he got to do with the horse," I asked.

"After my first vision quest he started coming to me in my dreams."

I had heard the old stories of vision quests, how men acquired supernatural powers from animals, even from rocks.

"So what did he say about the horse," I asked. I did believe that some dreams were capable of coming true. A couple of times I had dreamed things that later happened, not exactly like I had experienced them in the dreams but close enough.

"He didn't say anything about the horse, he just told me that my brother had been gone from his people for a long time. He seemed sad about that," said William.
He squatted and picked up a rock. He stayed in a squat position as he threw the rock into the pool. I threw my legs over the cottonwood and pivoted till I was facing him. He rose and came back to the cottonwood and sat down.

"You don't know who I am," he said. The black handle of the .38 was sticking out of the holster on his right hip. Something in the way he said that made me feel uneasy. He said it in the way a big person tells a child something, sure of their adult knowledge. I knew about the tradition of killing horses for fallen warriors. For Christ's sake, anybody who has looked at an exhibition of western art has seen the bural scaffold with the dead horse lying underneath. It seems like every western artist has to try that scene at least once.

"You're going back to the old way, that's who you are," I said.

"No, that's where you're wrong," he said. A whitetail doe appeared on the high cutbank where the creek turned east. She walked west on the cutbank and started down the trail that was cut into the steep sidehill so we could go up the cutbank to check cattle on the far side of the creek. The underbrush that grew under and between the cottonwoods was thick. It was a favorite place for does to hide their fawns. He turned toward me, lifting his right leg until it rested on the log.

"We're not going back," he said. He grinned at me. "We say we're going forward to the buffalo." He grinned at me again. "Forward to the buffalo, full steam ahead. That was Bear Lodge's message about you. You been gone so long you don't understand what's happening here among your own people."
"Forward to the buffalo?" I asked.

He looked at me and then looked upriver. "Forward to the buffalo." He stood and walked around the end of the cottonwood, walked until he was standing looking at the sorrel. "You don't know about the old way of doing this," he said. "Come here."

When I was standing next to him he motioned toward the horse. "I inherited everything of dad's when he died except that 40 acres he gave you. That saddle is mine. Take it off, it's yours now, the bridle, too."

"It's mine?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's the way it was done. The spirit of the saddle, the bridle, the saddle blanket, they went with the horse. Now they're ready for a new life. Take them." I couldn't reach the long latigo because the horse was lying on it so I reached down and pulled on the tongue of the cinch and released the short latigo. This was not the same feeling as unsaddling a dead saddle bronc in a rodeo arena. I felt like I didn't want to touch the horse. The fact that he had been offered in sacrifice made him feel different. I went around the rear end of the horse and tried pulling the saddle off but the horse was lying with the near stirrup under him. The saddle couldn't be taken off unless we could lift the horse to free the stirrup.

"You'll have to lift on him," I said to William. He came around the head of the horse and tried lifting on the mane with one hand, his other hand under the horse's shoulder. The sorrel was too heavy.
"This was a bad place to kill him in the first place," he said. "When we come to cut this timothy next year the bones will be getting caught in the mower. I'll harness those greys up and come down and pull him into the brush. We can get the saddle off then."

I owned my dad's good Hamley saddle. We started for the house. The magpies, as soon as we were a short distance from the horse, started moving onto the horse.

Chapter 2

Some of the old people who had sat up with the body all night were out in the yard, like snakes greeting the warmth of the sun. Middle Calf, Uncle John's good friend, was sitting crosslegged in the yard. It looked like lawn grass had been planted in the yard but had only grown in patches. Here and there native grass grew in bunches. The blue heeler pups were rolling around, tackling each other, growling. Middle Calf had on a white Stetson hat. It was a new hat, without sign of strain, without the usual sweat stain at the base of the crown that hats of everyday wear show. Most horsemen, not all of them, keep a new, pretty hat just for dressup. His boots were good Justins with wingtips and undershot riding heels. His hair was cut short in the manner of white cowboys. His face was the face of the fullblooded Blackfoot, with prominent cheekbones that gave a taper to his face.
from the front.

He reached out his hand as I approached him in the manner of all the old timers, who shake hands nearly every day even if they see each other every day, a sign of respect. I sat on the grass next to him.

William had kept the barn between us and the house after we left the hay field. He didn't want Lavonne seeing him with the gunbelt. He was planning on leaving the gunbelt in the barn but I told him with all the kids running around it might not be a good idea; he agreed and veered off toward the old barn saying he knew a good place to hide it. He was coming from the old barn as I sat with Middle Calf.

"You sat up all night?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I sat up with him," he said. He pointed to my pickup and camper. "You slept in there, eh?" I told him I did.

"I've never slept in one of those outfits," he said, "must kinda be like sleeping in a sheep wagon."

"I've never slept in a sheep wagon," I told him. "I was in a sheep wagon one time but I was just visiting a shepherder, never slept in one." William came and sat down beside us.

"I was working for old man McCleary one time," Middle Calf said after he had reached out and shook William's hand. "He had a big sheep outfit out around Red Buttes. I was young then. I musta been about twenty one, twenty two. He asked me if I was any good
with a green team. I was pretty cocky about horses in those days. I told him I could handle any team he could get a harness on." One of the blue heeler pups came bounding toward William. When he reached for the pup it stopped short and put its head down between its front paws and gave a sharp bark. He shook his foot at the pup and the pup grabbed his pants leg and growled in its throat and pulled at the pants leg, shaking its head back and forth.

"Old McCleary, he was quite a horse hand himself, you know. Some of those old sheepman, that's all they knew was sheep, didn't know a damn thing about horses, but he could sit a horse. He had that kid of his, the one got drowned when he run off the road down in Two Medicine, drunk. Had him run those horses in. He pointed out a big blue roan and a black and I roped 'em. They acted pretty gentle when we was harnessing up, didn't try kicking at us or anything. They was okay when we started, a little jumpy right at the start but after a quarter mile I figured hell they're okay. When we started down into that little shallow coulee west of McLeary's sheep shed all of a sudden I saw that roan's ears go up and just like that this old hereford bull that had been getting a drink of water under that cutbank right above the crossing came charging out of there, I don't know why in the hell he didn't run the other way, away from us, but anyway it was enough to spook that roan and he jumped right into that black and away we went. We went up the other side of that crossing going about a hundred and it's flat on top on the other side, you know, pretty flat all the way to Square Butte. Anyway, if you was to just look at it you'd
think it was flat. But it's not as flat as it looks. There's little dips here and there, little places where that wagon would just drop out from under me. Next thing I know, here's old McCleary, right alongside of me, on that pinto he used to ride, hollering at that team at the top of his lungs. I didn't know if he was hollering at 'em to stop or if he was trying to make 'em go faster. Wasn't like those cowboy shows on the movies where the guy rides right up and grabs the bridle and the runaway stops, no, hell, seem like old man McCleary was trying to outrun that team of his. He jerked his hat off and was a waving it at 'em like he was part of the circus or something. I kept thinking one of those wheels might come off. Ever now and then a wheel would drop down into a big badger hole and it'd feel like the whole outfit was going over and I was picturing myself underneath with that wagon box on top of me going hell bent over the prairie. They musta run damn near two miles before I see that black start to weaken. I was out in the middle of that big flat by then so I started to take 'em in a big circle. Before that I was afraid if I went to the left they might end up back in that coulee and we'd hit one of those deep washouts. Then if I went to the right they might go on up over that hill behind those Branding Rocks and off that steep part into Hay Coulee. Christ, that'd be worse than going into hell itself steep as it is. Once I got 'em stopped McCleary got down off that pinto and rolled a smoke. He walked around that team and wagon, looking things over and he said, "By God, that team really run, huh?" My legs were shaking so bad I had to sit down for a while, shaking the tobacco plumb out of the cigarette paper. McCleary said it was a good thing he tied that
sheepherder's supplies down in the wagon otherwise they'd a been scattered from hell to breakfast. That was their last big run. They made a good team of horses after that."

By ten o'clock that morning the house, the yard, even the barn, were full of people. The living room was full of mainly elderly people, sitting quietly, visiting, remembering; the yard was full of children, their mothers, their aunts; the men drifted to the corral and the barn, talking horses, cattle, women, tribal politics. Uncle John had been married for a number of years sometime in his 20s. His wife and two daughters and son had come during the wake but didn't stay too long. His ex-wife, whose name was Katherine, was a good friend of my mother. She, too, was a devout Catholic. I had heard Uncle John say she had turned his children against him because of his Indian beliefs. They had lived in the town of Browning during the marriage and when it was over he had moved to the allotment of land he owned on Cut Bank Creek; he went back to his Indian religious beliefs and his wife and children continued to go to the Catholic church. I had never known them to visit him at his cabin. He seemed to enjoy the solitude, however. When he went to town he would sometimes stop and visit his children until Katherine remarried; then he would get a friend to go to her house and tell his children to meet him downtown at the drug store. One daughter, after she reached her teenage years and developed a mind of her own, Annabelle, enjoyed the company of her father and nearly always would show up to drink a soda and visit with him. The other daughter, Katie, and the son, Darrell, would stay home and tell Annabelle to tell him they had other things to do. Katherine's
new husband, Leroy, agreed that her ex-husband suffered from a form of madness in holding on to the tribal ways. "He's trying to take his kids back to the tipi" he would tell people.

Annabelle introduced herself to me. She said her mother had taken ill and wouldn't be able to attend the burial. She was a few years younger than me. I remembered playing with her in the town when we were children. She said she taught school in one of the few remaining country schools on the reservation. Most of the outlying areas now had school bus service and the children attended school either in Browning or one of the outlying communities, Heart Butte, Starr School or Babb on the far northern border of the reservation. There was also a school in East Glacier, the little tourist trap town that made its money from the tourists as they wended their way through Glacier National Park. The Park had once been a part of the Pikuni Blackfeet reservation. In 1910 the U.S. Congress created the Park; the old men of the tribe still say today the Pikuni agreed to a lease; the millions of tourists and their millions of tourists dollars that annually pass through Glacier Park go into Uncle Sam’s pockets; the Pikuni do not share any of the proceeds from the park and the people of the reservation are very much aware of the treaty--the Agreement of 1895--that their grandparents signed, giving them a perpetual right to hunt, fish and gather wood in what is now the park. Annabelle was scheduled to go to court over the treaty rights. Her mother was against this. Her mother said making waves would only make things hard for everybody.
"I have to go to court in about a month," Annabelle said. "The tribal council hired a lawyer to defend me but I don't think I like the guy, it seems like he's talking money and I'm talking treaty rights."

"What else is there besides money," I asked. She gave me an astonished look, widening her eyes and tilting her head at me. She had Uncle Johns Indian looks. She looked like a teacher. Her eyes were dark and intent.

"I forget, you've been gone a long time, Tom, a long time living among the white people. After the funeral's over I'll show you some things." Her sister Estelle came up to her and they wandered away. They didn't look like sisters. Estelle was heavy, with a double chin and large body supported by spindly looking legs encased in nylons that both had runs in them. She looked like she was constantly pouting, her lips drawn into a reverse smile.

We were standing in the yard. Lavonne had borrowed a large coffee maker capable of making fifty cups of coffee at a time. A black extension cord ran to the coffee maker that was sitting on a low table a few feet from the steps of the porch. People dressed for the burial were standing in small groups in the yard, waiting for Keebler. Keebler's duties would be limited this afternoon compared to most funerals. He would not have to load the body into his hearse today. William was going to pull Uncle John's body on a horse drawn wagon to the family gravesite. In the days before he died, while still conscious, Uncle John had told William he did not want to be taken to the grave in a car. He wanted
to be buried in the family gravesite; he wanted to be pulled to his grave by horses. He did not want Katherine at his funeral. William had told him he could pull him to the grave with the team of big grey Percherons, but there wasn't much he could do to keep Katherine from attending the funeral. That morning, as William combed and curried the greys in the barn he said Uncle John must be working from the other side. Aunt Katherine had called early that morning to tell him she wouldn't be able to attend the service, that she had stomach cramps that had kept her up all night.

"She asked me what kind of a service it was going to be," said William. He laughed. "I told her it was going to be a religious service." He picked up the left front foot of the grey he called Isaac and inspected the bottom of the foot for rocks. "She wanted to know if there was going to be a Christian service. I told her the Catholic priest, the new one, LeFleur, would be here." Uncle John apparently had given William the directions for his burial while he was still conscious, before he went into the two day coma before he died. No white priest were to bury him. William had to alter that plan though, as Estelle had thrown a fit, saying her father would end in purgatory without the Christian rites. The young Jesuit, LeFleur, said he would be willing to come and pray for Uncle John; he said it was okay if there was to be an Indian service in conjunction with his own service. The old Jesuit, Montour, would not have come. He came among the Pikuni Blackfeet just about the time the Great Depression started, in the late 1920s, bringing with him only a few clothes and his religious paraphernalia, bringing mainly the conviction that the
heathen Pikuni needed to be saved from themselves and this wayward nature worship they had been practicing for a long time, a practice that had nothing to do with the living God, he was sure of that, and not long after his arrival on the Great Northern railway train in a squalling snow storm, unloading on the railway platform a mile south of the town of Browning, looking out at the vast prairie emptiness to the east, the sheer rise of the Rockies a few miles to the west, the buildings of the Indian town barely visible in the gusting snow, he knew, his finely tuned Jesuit mind really knew, that Satan was everywhere on the earth and surely, as sure as God was in his heaven, the Devil dwelt among these abject people who, before the light was sent to them, had, for centuries, prayed to the Sun. And the Moon. And the Stars. And the Animals. Once ensconced in his meager household that was attached to a frail wooden church in which he began his labors, he found that the Indians had among their relics a serpent tipi that was considered sacred. Middle Calf, who had sometimes visited and argued religion with the Jesuit Montour, said the news of the serpent tipi caused the then young Jesuit's mouth to hang open. The Jesuit lived out his life among the Pikuni, bringing solace to some, much fear to others. The young LeFleur had been sent to replace him.

We had meant to hitch the team of greys up the previous afternoon but in the busy drone of getting things ready for the funeral, visiting with guests, the time had slipped away until it was too late. William said we would wait until this morning. The greys would need some good stiff exercise before it was time to hitch them to the wagon that would be
used as a hearse to haul Uncle John. A frisky acting team would not be good for a hearse wagon. William said they were a well-broke team. I had experienced other teams that were supposedly well-broke. I know men that are crippled from runaways involving well-broke teams. I agreed with William. It would be a good idea to take some of the steam out of the big Percherons before we hooked them up as hearse horses. Hearse horses should be slow, moving to the beat of the drum of the dead.

I helped William harness the greys and we hooked an iron doubletree to their trace chains with a log chain trailing behind. The magpies, the ravens and the coyotes had fed for a day off the sorrel. He was beginning to smell. William hooked the log chain to his front feet and as soon as he moved the sorrel a few feet the saddle came free.

"I'm gonna take them for a little workout," he said. He wanted to work the freshness off the greys. He started for the middle of the hay field, the sorrel sliding over the stubble of the timothy, his front feet stretched out in front of him, his head occasionally catching on a low spot in the field. I picked the saddle up. When my dad was a young man the Hamley saddle was a mark of cowboy wealth, a sign that the man sitting in it knew something about quality when it came to dressing up a horse. It was a sign of commitment to the trade, a sign of frugality. A ranch owner might be able to one day decide he wanted a new Hamley and sit down and order one but a working cowboy had to save for quite a while if he wanted to join the ranks of the Hamley saddle owners. Men were judged by the equipment they used and whether they really did know how to use it
once they owned it. I had seen my dad rope range bulls, bulls that sometimes weighed nearly a ton, with this saddle. William said the spirit of the saddle had gone to carry Uncle John. I didn't really understand that concept but I did understand owning my dad's saddle.

William took the greys past the hay corral a little ways and then turned them back. They were both geldings, Isaac and Andy, and they were leaning into the collars. I could hear his voice, low, reassuring, insistent, as he talked to the team, pushing his own power into the horses through his voice. He was talking to them in the Pikuni tongue. The driving lines were taut into William's hands and I could see they were pulling through the bit also. The dead sorrel was a medium weight for a team of this size. They both weighed about 1800 pounds and were matched in height, body build and color. Horsemen often went long distances trying to find a good match for a horse they already owned. From where I stood holding my dad's saddle I could hear the sound of the sorrel's body sliding over the hay field. The magpies, crows and ravens that had been disturbed in their feeding when we arrived could be heard in the cottonwoods, scolding us, telling us to leave, letting us know that they were doing their job by eating the sorrel, cleaning up the dead meat of the world.

I put the saddle back on the ground and followed William and the horses as he went into the cottonwood grove, pulling the dead horse deep into the grove, guiding the greys around the trunks of the cottonwoods, talking to them, left or right or straight ahead, so
the sorrel wouldn’t catch on a tree and get hung up. Once he had the sorrel where he
wanted it he called for the greys to stop. "Waapat" he told them, back up. They stepped
backward and he unhooked the log chain from the front feet of the sorrel, rehooking the
hook of the chain into the clevis of the doubletree, making a loop of the dragging chain.
As soon as the horse was lying still the flies began gathering in a mad frenzy, joining the
birds, the coyotes, the bobcats who prowled the riverbanks, in cleaning up the carrion. In
a few days there would only be the hollow skeleton of the horse left. In a year or two
even the hide would be gone, part of it eaten by coyotes in the hard times of deep winter,
some of it going into the dampness of the earth, rotting away. The hair of the tail and the
mane would not rot away. The hair would become scattered as animals and birds ate
away the flesh of the horse. The hair would remain. The Indians believe hair is a sign of
the spirit. On their dance costumes and their religious paraphernalia they often use horse
hair as ornamentation. They believe the spirit of the horse is with them. I once had an
affair with a Navajo cowgirl who came from a traditional family, a family who still lived
in a hogan and practiced the old Navajo ways. She told me that human hair was the
visible sign of the human spirit, the visible extension of the soul; they always took good
care of their hair because it was a sign that one was taking care of the spirit by doing so.
She was careful not to let any of her hair remain in a brush or a comb. She gathered it and
either burned it or buried it in the ground. She was afraid of being witched by an evil
person if they were to get hold of her hair or being witched by evil spirits if she left the
hair lying around where they could get at it. She was spooky. Pretty, but spooky.

Her name was Bernina Yazzie and she knew a lot about her people and their old way of life. I guess I had impressed her with the ride I had made one day in Prescott. The horse was a blue roan named Tumbleweed. I've never been a believer in psychic things but sometimes, sitting on a horse in the chute it seems like I can sense what kind of a ride I'm going to make. It's just a feeling. Sometimes I've been wrong. Sometimes I've felt really good before a ride and ended up getting dumped on my head. But that afternoon in Prescott I felt good. The big roan was quiet in the chutes. That always helps. It's hard to get into a good concentration mode when a horse is jumping around in the chutes, banging you against the sides of the chute, some of them so wild they go over backwards in the chute. A horse going over backwards in the chute, with you underneath, is a bronc rider's worst nightmare. When the blue roan jumped out into the Arizona sun that afternoon I was ready for him.

Uncle John had taken me for a walk one evening when I was about fifteen. From his usual sitting place in the old barn, a place we had come to understand was his place alone, the hardbacked chair he sat on having been scavenged from the dump pile and rewired back together where the wire braces underneath had been missing, he rose and walked to the open door of the barn, standing at the door looking out into the quiet of the evening, then looked back over his shoulder and told me to come with him. We walked in silence the two hundred yards to the edge of Cut Bank Creek.
"I was watching you today when you were working with that pinto colt," he told me.

"You did okay but there's one thing you have to learn," he said. It was twilight and the birds had settled into their roosts for the night. It was quiet except for the gurgle of the water over stones. "You kept looking at us, thinking about how you looked to us," he said. "You can't do that when you ride that kind of horse. You have to think only about the horse, otherwise he's gonna throw you off." Then we walked back to the barn and Uncle John saddled his horse and went home.

I rode a lot of bucking horses after I left home. A lot of them threwed me off. One day, traveling with a white cowboy named Larry Mattson, slipping out of Tulsa in the evening after a rodeo, he asked me, "Do you think about the crowd when you ride?"

"Yeah, I guess I do," I said. Mattson was a veteran. He had been fairly good, never great, throughout his time on the rodeo circuit, winning sometimes, losing a lot, always going on, determined in his mediocrity.

"You have to be able to shut the crowd out," he said. "When I get on a horse I build a wall in front of the crowd." His hat was off and his receding hairline was white. "Like mentally, you know, a wall, and then it's just the horse and me." He lit a Camel cigarette and rolled the window down to let the smoke go out. After he smoked he hummed a few bars from a Johnny Cash song and went to sleep. His snores were ragged, uneven, sometimes he would jerk like he was doing something violent in a dream. Once he said "Janet." It was on that day in Prescott with the sun bright and Larry dead for nearly a year
after a car wreck that I understood what he told me, what Uncle John on that quiet evening along Cut Bank Creek had told me years before; the crowd matters before the ride, the crowd matters after the ride, but during the ride only the horse matters. Only the horse ducks and dives and sucks breath during the ride. The rest are statues waiting for the ride to be over. It was on that day in Prescott that I managed to shut the world out.

That evening, as I sat with some other cowboys in a bar, Bernina Yazzie stopped as she was going by our table. It seemed as if she were debating whether to stop or go, or maybe like she had forgotten something in the women's bathroom from where she had just come. I had watched her walk by on her way into the ladie's room and again watched her as she came out. She had on light blue jeans with a red blouse. The jeans were tight and form fitting and the red blouse made her black hair look extra black. She was from one of the tribes in the southwest.

"When she turned toward the table I somehow sensed she was going to speak to me. Maybe it was because I was the only Indian cowboy sitting among white cowboys that I knew she was going to say something to me. When she turned toward the table it was like a military turn, a pivot on her left foot. "That was a pretty good ride you made, it's too bad you had to cheat the horse, he's an honest horse." She pivoted again and walked away.

There was a country and western band playing in the bar. The two cowboys sitting next to me had heard what she said. The others leaned forward on their elbows and asked what
she had said, the music drowning out her voice for them.

Lance McGill, the cowboy sitting next to me, gave a loud hoot after he had turned back to the table after having watched her walk away, watched the action of the light blue jeans move excitingly in the soft neon lights of the bar. I watched her, too. She sat with a group of other Indian cowboys and cowgirls at a table near the door. When she sat down she gave a quick look at our table and started talking to a woman next to her and the woman half turned to look at our table.

Lance was having a good laugh. Cowboys love a good time. They love to chide each other. "She said he cheated the horse," he told the other cowboys at the table. They took it up immediately. Being accused of cheating a horse was like a businessman being accused of embezzlement. Cheating was not giving the horse his head, pulling on the buck shank so his head movement was limited, limiting his bucking ability. It was a flagrant violation of the rules for a saddle bronc rider. It was an excuse owners of bucking horses used when a cowboy rode their horse and sometimes it was true. It is hard for a judge to really tell whether a cowboy is taking a horse's head away from him. There has to be tension on the buck rein, it acts as a balancing device for the cowboy; only the cowboy really knows whether he is deliberately taking the horse's head away to a degree that affects the horse's ability to swing his head freely and buck to his best ability. I had been wrongly accused on that evening, my friends were having a good time hooting and making exaggerated claims that backed the pretty woman up. Later, I asked her to dance and she accepted and
that's how our relationship started. I learned quite a bit about the ways of her people. The affair lasted for over two years on a hit and run basis, whenever I was in the southwest. Then, one day at a rodeo in Brawley, California, I saw her getting into a pickup with a tall white cowboy. I asked around and found out she had married. Like William, she believed in a lot of the old ways of her people. To me those ways were interesting but they weren't ways that had any meaning in the modern world.

William turned the team around in the cottonwoods, the empty doubletree clanking and the dragging chain making a metallic clicking as it dragged over the shrubs and buckbrush that grew under the canopy of the cottonwoods. I followed behind. Near the edge of the grove he stopped the greys and tied the driving lines around a cottonwood.

"I need something off that horse," he said. He started walking back to where the swollen sorrel lay in the dappled shade of the cottonwoods. I followed him. When he neared the sorrel he reached into his pocket and pulled out his pocket knife. He squatted and reached into his shirt pocket, bringing out a small round ball of sage. He began praying in the Pikuni tongue. Again, I understood a few of the words. Ponokamita. Horse. Natoosi. Sun. Espoomookit. Help me. Kamotani. Deliver me from evil. When the ball of sage had finished burning he pulled a braid of sweetgrass rolled into a coil from his shirt pocket and pinched some of the sweetgrass onto the red coals of the sage. I smelled the sweetgrass and understood why it was called sweetgrass. The smell was sweet, pleasant.
As the smoke rose into the air he passed the blade of the knife through the smoke. Then, he reached down and lifted the thick tail of the sorrel and began cutting the tail off at the base. The knife must have been sharp as it cut through the meaty and gristly part of the tail easily. When he got to the tailbone he twisted the tail until the bones in the tail cracked against each other; and again cut with the knife. He turned to where I was standing off to the side watching him.

"I need this for my sweat lodge," he said. When we returned to where the greys were tied he asked me to carry the horse tail as he needed his hands free to drive the team. I carried the tail and picked up my dad's saddle when I reached it.

"We could cinch that saddle on one of these horses," he said. "You wouldn't have to carry it that way."

"No, I'm okay," I said. I wouldn't have to carry the saddle if we put it over the top of the harness. But I hadn't touched this saddle in 20 years, it was my dad's saddle, now it was mine, so it had a special feeling to it, a feeling that somehow made the saddle not so heavy to carry, a feeling of being close to my father; I wondered whether he would approve of me owning his saddle. Bernina Yazzie mixed Christian beliefs with Navajo beliefs and often talked about forgiveness. She said if a person was not capable of forgiving they would soon become so heavy with anger they would explode like a balloon. I thought about that as I carried my dad's saddle. The pulling of the dead sorrel didn't seem to have taken much of the friskiness out of the greys, they were stepping
along swiftly, the harness jangling. I couldn't keep up with their pace carrying the saddle and the horse tail. William looked back and saw that he was going to reach the barn well ahead of me.

"I don't want Lavonne seeing that tail," he hollered back at me. "Keep the barn between you and the house when you get close," he said. I didn't like this feeling of being his accomplice in the death of her horse. I had spotted an old horse with jutting hip bones the day before, standing in the horse pasture that connected to the barn. William had laughed when I mentioned the poor condition of the horse. I told him he should sacrifice that old horse instead of the sorrel. He gave me a wry look. He said in the old way you always gave your brother your best things, not the old, the faded, the worn out, you gave him the best you had to offer.

"You don't recognize him, huh? he had asked. I looked hard at the horse, an old bay with one white stocking that reached halfway up the rear right hock.

"No."

"That's dad's horse, the Morgan, Sonny," said William. The recognition came at once as soon as William named the horse. This was the sprightly bay that pranced when saddled, dancing sideways with exuberance, always ready to run. Nobody but my dad was allowed to ride Sonny. When a horseman spends a lot of time fine tuning a horse, cueing him when to stop on a dime, when to turn, back up, based mainly on leg movement, barely audible verbal cues, the horse becomes attuned to those little signs; when somebody else
rides the horse, even if they are an excellent horseman, the cues are never going to be
exactly the same; because they are not the same the horse can become mixed up as to
what is expected. Those kinds of horses were, in essence, one man horses. They
understood the commands of the man who had trained them. Nobody was allowed to ride
Sonny for that reason. As I walked toward the barn, I could see Sonny, his life of
prancing over, looking bedraggled, his bones protruding from his skin. He was standing
in the horse pasture, standing hipshot in the sun, standing in retirement because William's
sentimentality would not allow him to sell the horse to the horse buyer. Sonny would not
become canned dog food. He would feed the birds and scavengers of Cut Bank Creek
when he died, but at least they were local, they were family, as he was. He would one day
lie down in the horse pasture and die of old age. I was carrying the saddle that he had
carried.

William had the greys in their stalls by the time I reached the barn. They would be
hooked to the wagon that was to be used as a hearse in a couple of hours, as soon as the
prayer service was over. I had made sure to keep the barn between myself and the ranch
house as I walked. I thought if somebody were to see me they would surely wonder what
kind of concoction they were seeing, a man carrying a saddle and a horse tail. Where's the
horse that's supposed to carry the saddle? Where's the horse that goes with the tail?
Nobody, however, was around the barn. It was getting close to noon.

"Well, I guess we should go put our funeral clothes on," William said. The yard was
filling with cars coming from all parts of the reservation. As we neared the yard I was surprised to see several white people among the Indian people milling about in the yard, everybody dressed for the funeral service. I didn't know Uncle John had had white friends.

Many of the Indian people spent their lives close to home, the only contact with white people being the white merchants who owned the stores on the reservations. It was known among the Indian people that they were closely watched by white merchants, on the reservation and in the adjacent towns, when they went into the stores, the merchants afraid the Indians were going to pocket something without paying for it. This was nothing new. My dad once exploded in a hardware store in the town of Cut Bank when he realized the white woman working as a clerk was tailing him in the store.

"For Christ Almighty," he roared at the woman, "you're following me around like a bloodhound, afraid I'm going to steal something worth a dollar ninety-nine. You stole this whole damn country and you're worried about me stealing a dollar ninety-nine." The woman changed gears immediately, frightened at the violence in my father's voice. Men who work horses and cattle, working in the ragged distance of space that is the open prairie, working in corrals with hundreds of bawling cattle, milling horses, over whom their voices must be heard, develop loud voices.

"I thought you might need some help," the woman told my father, her voice nearly
"Bullshit, you think I'm going to steal something," he said. The woman retreated before the rage in my father's voice. He had been in the front part of the store looking at gate locks as the lock on our yard gate had worn out. William and me had been in the far back section of the store where the horse tack was kept. We knew our father's voice when he blew up. We had been inspecting some pretty naugahyde chaps, bronc rider chaps, that were hanging on the wall. The store was long and narrow. By the time we reached the front of the store the woman, her eyes wide, had retreated to the relative safety afforded by the counter that surrounded the cash register. She had very red hair. She was not really old or not really young. The manager of the store, a thin bald white man, came rushing from his glassed-in office at the rear of the store. He had looked out the window at William and me as we inspected the horse gear; then he went back to adding in his ledger book.

"What's the problem, Maggie," he said, wringing his small white hands as he glanced at my father. My father was of the generation who always opened doors for women, who didn't use foul language around women, who took their hats off when they entered buildings. Probably out of habit and because he was talking to a woman, my father had his hat in his hand. Sometimes, though, when arguing with my mother, he cussed. His dark eyes held a rage that only an Indian could understand. It was a rage that had been building since the first white man, in this case Meriwether Lewis, had entered the
Blackfeet homeland. The theft of the rich Pikuni Blackfeet homeland had been monumental, covering a large part of the state of Montana and portions of the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan; my dad, as did most of the elderly Pikuni, knew about the treaties, the legalized ripoff that went under the name of white man's law; he was being followed around in a store by one of the daughters or granddaughters of the thieves, afraid he was going to steal a light bulb or some such when the very ground upon which the store was built was a perversion of their Holy Bible so vast in its irony it made the old people stutter and stammer when they tried to speak of it.

"I, I just thought this man might need some help and he started yelling at me," the clerk Maggie said.

"I run a ranch and I buy a lot of my ranch stuff in this damn town," my father said, looking at the manager whose name was Frank Conroy. Conroy's Hardware, Established 1946. All Your Hardware Needs. Licensed Feed and Grain Supplier.

Conroy's thin arms were blue veined and hairy. "I guess I don't understand exactly what the problem is," he said.

"I come in to look for a gate lock and she follows me around like I'm a four-year-old kid trying to steal something," my father said, his voice loud, accusatory, waving his hat for emphasis.

"Oh, my," the clerk Maggie said, raising both hands to her head as if she were going to put her hands over her ears to block out the accusation. The sleeves of her blouse came
only to her shoulders and the material of the blouse below her armpits was wet with sweat, the armpits full with thick red hair. "I just walked over toward him..." she said.

"Listen," my father said, his voice dropping an octave, as if he were now going to let them in on a secret they had been waiting a long time to hear. "People on the reservation talk about this all the time, how ever time they come in a store down here they get followed around. I know kids steal sometimes but by Christ I've been running a ranch for over twenty years now and I don't expect this kind of treatment." By the time he finished saying this his voice had risen again; Conroy was staring at him like he was watching a movie.

"Is that what they say on the reservation?" Conroy asked. "Well, we do have some shoplifting now and then Mr., I guess I never did catch your name?"

"Francis, Francis Bear Black Medicine." Conroy stepped toward my father and stretched out his hand. My father shook hands with Conroy. Maggie, sensing a chance to lower the tone of embattlement in the store, came quickly around the counter and approached my father with her hand also outstretched for shaking. My father shook her hand, looking her in the eye as he did so. She gave a weak little smile that played only at the corners of her mouth and not in her face or eyes at all. She immidieately stepped back away from my father after shaking hands.

"If someone were to come onto your ranch and steal something, well, it's the same thing here, you can't be losing your merchandise, hell, you'd go out of business in no time at
all," Conroy said.

"If you came to my ranch I wouldn't be tailing you all over the place to see if you was going to stick something in your pocket," my father said, and as he said it our mother came in the door. My father was angled away from the door so didn't see her enter. The door to the store was a heavy glass door with a hydraulic closing cylinder, the door making no noise as it closed.

"This is what gets me," my father said, again waving his sweat stained silver belly Stetson in the air. When cowboys want to show off riding a bucking horse they take off their hat and start waving it in the air, around the horse's head to scare and spook the horse into bucking harder. He had a lot of practice waving his hat around. "This is what really gets me, you folks come here on the damn railroad cars without a thing and now you think you own the whole damn country and everything in it."

My mother stopped just inside the door, staring at my father, immediately recognizing the tone of voice he was using, that tone of judgement and authority he used in attempting to win the arguments he had with her. From where William and I were standing, we could see our mother, see the concern in her face as she realized her husband was having a confrontation with white people. My father once accused her of putting on airs around white people and she didn't speak to him for a week. She stood there probably twenty seconds before she wheeled and went out the door. My father was going on about how the Indians, before the white people came, lived in tipis without locks and there was no
thieving going on among the Indians.

"You folks taught us that stealing was okay, you stole the whole damn country, stole the buffalo, stole everything in sight," my father said.

"I've read about your people stealing horses from one another," Conroy said. My father gave a slight smile at this accusation. He started to say something when the door opened and a young white woman with two blondheaded girls came into the hardware store. Conroy immediately put up his hand as if to stop the words of my father. "Good morning, Eileen, how are you this morning," he said to the woman. He jerked his head toward the rear of the store. "Let's go back to my office, Francis." The clerk Maggie greeted the customer and we walked toward the rear of the store. On the way William told dad our mother had been in the store. He looked surprised. We had heard enough of their arguments to know that what was happening right now had the potential to turn into a major scene at the ranch. My mother was big on appearances and didn't like to be thought of as low life and common. We knew she would consider arguing with a storekeeper as common and beneath her dignity.

"Go tell her we'll be out in a few minutes," my father told me, "you and William just go on out to the car, wait for me." We were reluctant to leave. Our father arguing with Conroy was excitement we had never experienced in a white man's store before. It was a side of our father we had not seen.

"She'll be okay," William said.
"No, I mean it, go out to the car," our father said, his voice laced with threatening authority. Conroy sold cowboy boots in the western wear section. There were chairs so people could sit and try on a pair of boots. Conroy was already in his office, taking books and papers off a chair so my father could have a place to sit. William had already sat down in one of the chairs in the boot section. He knew my father's tone of command meant we had to leave. We did so reluctantly, walking slowly out the store. The clerk Maggie was still standing in the same place, talking to the blondheaded woman named Eileen. Our father had parked around the corner from the hardware store that was located right at the corner of Main Street and a side street. We were surprised when we turned the corner of the store and our car was gone. We had been anticipating a lecture from our mother, about how our father had made her ashamed with his brash ways, of arguing with a storekeeper of all things. She would go on about how the white people would never treat the Indian decently until the Indian people could act civilized. She did not consider our father particularly civilized, even though his father had been white. When I asked her why she had married him she said because he was handsome and she didn't know cowboys, Indian cowboys, could be so uncouth and raw; her father, a fullblood, had worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, had given up the savage ways, had played the piano, read a lot. She said the old saying about beauty being skin deep had tricked her.

When we saw that the car and our mother were gone we immediately sprang back to life. We hurriedly started back into the store to inform our father that our mother had left.
Maggie was now showing something to the blond woman in the next aisle over from where she had been standing when we went out. The blond woman was on one knee looking closely at something in her hand. Maggie was bent over explaining something to her. The little girls were down the aisle, skipping toward their mother, singing a nursery rhyme as they skipped. As we passed by where the women were busy, William looked over and then gave me a look and I knew what he meant. Maggie's black skirt was pulled tight over her rear end as she bent over and William's smile was meant to let me know that this was something to look at. He was going on thirteen. I had been noticing such things for quite a while now.

Our father was sitting in the chair Conroy had cleared for him. I went to the door and as my dad was sitting just inside the door I leaned down and whispered that mom was gone with the car. He straightened in the chair and looked directly at me, then nodded his head and made a motion with his hand telling me to retreat out the door. William and I were interested in what was being said so sat in the chairs closest to the door. We had lost interest in the horse gear for the moment.

"...that was back in the early 50s, a few years after I took over the business," Conroy said.

"Well, you got a point there, but I know something about the history, there wasn't a bunch a damn drunks stumbling up and down the streets of Browning till they opened the bars in '54, then it was wide open, drunks every place you looked," my dad told him.
"I'm quite aware of that, Mr., Mr..."

"Most people just shorten it to Black," my dad told Conroy.

"Oh, I see, yeah, Black Bear Medicine, wasn't it?" said Conroy.

"Almost, Bear Black Medicine," my father told him.

The earlier anger of my father seemed to have disappeared. He erupted in short bursts. Often, when quarreling with our mother, he would all of a sudden quit the argument. She would continue the argument while he sat and read. My dad's voice now had the tone he used with us when explaining something after we had made a mistake. He still held his hat in his hand.

"We don't know many white people," he told Conroy. "There's a few white people on the reservation, but most of them are the ones who married into the tribe and they're just like Indians now."

"I'd like to get to know some of the Indians," said Conroy, "but the ones who come into my store just buy their stuff and they're gone. It's hard to get to know somebody that way."

"Do you fish?" my father asked Conroy.

"Oh, I love to fish," he said.

"Cut Bank Crick is full of fish, why don't you come out some weekend, fish a little, I'll introduce you to some Indian people. People who don't steal from stores," my father said. Conroy looked at my father, seeming a bit startled at the invitation, calculating whether
he could trust the invitation; he had passed through the reservation many times, but like
most whites had no friends there, no reason to stop, so didn't, looking curiously around at
the Indians on the street as they passed through the town of Browning, many of those on
the streets had fallen prey to the alcohol. The judgements of the white people came from
those trips through the town as they took their trips to the mountains of Glacier National
Park. Some of the white people who had to travel through the Indian town wished there
was a bypass so they wouldn't have to travel through the Indian town on their way to the
park. A committee was formed of some of the leading citizens in the town of Cut Bank;
they went before the county commissioners and petitioned the commissioners to approach
the state government; there must be money available to bypass the town of Browning.
Browning wasn't good for their children, their wives, they claimed. The winos seen
standing on the streets of the town frightened their children. The white men were sure the
dark figures lounging against the buildings in the Indian town were undressing the white
wives as they were being driven through the town, sure the miscreant brows covered by
old cowboy hats were full of white thighs spread wide.

The blond woman had left the store. Conroy shook our father's hand again as we
approached the front of the store and as he did so looked at Maggie, letting her know that
she should do likewise. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding," she told my father. This
time she smiled what seemed a genuine smile, unlike the earlier smiles that seemed a part
of the window dressing of the store.
We left Conroy's store. After looking around the corner to see whether our mother had returned, which she hadn't, our father, letting out a deep and meaningful sigh as he gazed at the spot along the curb where our car had been parked, said, "Well, that's the way she is around white people."

The stores in the town of Browning carry the essentials of living but there are no specialty stores such as there are in white towns. Browning had no store specifically for farm and ranch needs. Nearly all the Indian ranchers came to Cut Bank at least occasionally to buy things needed for their ranches. We walked to a cafe and ate. It was getting late afternoon and William and I were wondering how we were going to get home. There had been talk of bringing phone service to our part of the reservation but it hadn't happened yet. We knew we could probably call somebody we knew in Browning to come and get us, take us home, but our father didn't seem particularly disturbed by being set afoot in the white town. Maybe our mother hadn't left us. Maybe she was just driving around someplace, letting our father think about his sin of making a scene in a white store. Maybe she was just letting him stew. She might show up yet, we thought.

"Maybe you can go to the movie tonight," our father said. The idea excited us. Rarely did we get to go to a movie. We walked to the Gateway Motel. It was advertised as the Gateway to Glacier National Park, a tourist ploy for the summer months. The old white lady behind the desk hardly looked at us as she had our father fill out the registration form. He rented two rooms, one for himself and one for William and me.
"I'm going to the Paradise Bar and drink a few beers, maybe some of my friends are there," he told us. He gave us money and told us we could go back to the restaurant and eat. Then he left. There were two showings of the movie, one at 7 p.m., one at 9 p.m. As we left the motel we saw our father in a phone booth talking to someone. We decided, after watching the movie the first time, to stay and watch it again. When we left the movie theatre the wind was blowing and the streets were deserted. William immediately went to sleep in the room. I lay thinking about our mother, what she would be doing at home, mad at our father for shaming her, probably mad at us too simply because we were with him. I couldn't sleep. I rose and dressed. I knew where the Paradise Bar was. It had a reputation for being a tough bar. Cowboys and oil field workers they called roughnecks often drank there. I peeked in the front window of the bar but my father wasn't there. There were some other bars not too far away, all of the bars in the town were in a two block area, what people called the skid row part of town, so I looked in each one. My father was in none of them. When I returned to the motel I noticed there was a sign that said Lounge as I entered the motel. The motel had an attached dining room that was closed for the night. Next to the dining room was the Lounge. I peeked around the corner of the Lounge entrance and immediately saw my father in profile, sitting at a table with the clerk Maggie. Later, lying in bed, I heard laughing in the next room, my father's room.
I didn't recognize the woman standing in the yard. Her hair was white, not the red of that
day long ago when she had been accused of bloodhounding my father. When Conroy
came to fish he at first came alone. Then, deciding it was safe for white women to venture
onto the reservation, brought his wife. Then, one day, Maggie accompanied Conroy and
his wife, the women walking through the hay meadows, guided by my mother who found
the company of white women exciting, found the things they talked about engrossing. "I
like Maggie, but sometimes she looks at me funny, you know, how people look at you
funny sometimes, like they want to tell you something," she told my father. "I feel sorry
for her because she's alone, her husband was killed driving truck a few years ago."

Maggie became attached to the horses. She spent time in the barn, grooming the horses,
talking to them, once in a while asking to ride. One day, after riding while Conroy fished
and his wife, Roberta, whom he called Bert and sometimes Bertie, visited with my
mother, Maggie returned to the ranch and said she had met a hermit who lived up the
creek a ways. My father had a good laugh. He started calling Uncle John hermit.

"I'm not a damn hermit," said Uncle John, "I go to town." Then, Maggie started
showing up at the ranch without the Conroys. She asked to be taught how to saddle and
bridle a horse. She would disappear into the cottonwood forests and return hours later.
One day my father saw her horse tied in front of Uncle John's cabin.

William had selected some of Uncle John's cronies for pallbearers. They were all old
men, in their seventies and eighties. They dressed in a similar style. Boots, good boots, not the cheap imitations the drugstore cowboys wear. New jeans, Wranglers or Levis. None wore slacks, slacks were worn by those who had assimilated to the point of working in offices or stores; they bought the jeans new for a social occasion and put them on right from the store, after removing the tags. To wear slacks for this crowd of men would have been to draw attention, unwanted attention, it would have been a signal for nudges and small talk—who does he think he is wearing slacks like a businessman?—talk that ultimately would end in derision.

At exactly two o'clock they brought the body forth from the house. The greys and the wagon were waiting outside the yard gate. Somebody had pointed me out to Maggie earlier. We had visited. After losing her initial fear of being among Indian people the native culture—probably as a result of her frequent horseback rides up the creek—had become a consuming interest of hers. She quit Conroy and went back to school in Great Falls, acquiring a degree in sociology. She was hired to work in the welfare office in Browning. She wanted to do something to give some dignity back to those people who lived on welfare, who seemed to have lost their self-esteem.

The pallbearers loaded the mottled blue coffin into the wagon. As the wagon would not be going up any inclines on the way to the family graveyard, William had felt it unnecessary to put the tailgate back in the wagon once the coffin was loaded. The mourners would follow the wagon to the gravesite, a half mile away. Another group of
men with a large Indian drum followed behind the pallbearers. I had noticed them arrive
that morning, all of them coming in the same car, dressed in the reservation uniform of
the day, hats, boots, jeans, silk scarves tied around their necks; they opened the trunk of
the Pontiac they had arrived in and brought forth the large bass drum with an eagle head
painted on both sides of the drum.
I didn't know what the drum was for. I had seen drums like that used at pow-wows. I had
never seen one at a funeral. I was standing next to Jim Cross Bull as the funeral
procession readied itself.

"What's the drum for?" I asked Jim. He looked at me with question in his eyes.

"You been gone quite a while, I guess. A few years ago they started doing this again, it's
an old way of sending them off, singing a going away song." One of the greys stamped a
foot to get rid of a horsefly. "I guess you'd call it kinda like the old time death song."

A lot of the people were still standing in the yard. Keebler, dressed in a dark blue suit
with a corsage pinned on the pocket, hollered out that it was time to start the procession.
Lavonne, Trudy, Annabelle and some other women had been waiting on the porch. They
came as a group into the yard, out the gate and stood in a knot behind the men carrying
the drum. William, with a new black Stetson hat on his head, his hair freshly braided and
wrapped with purple satin ribbon toward the ends of the braids, clucked to the greys and
the wagon with Uncle John started forward. The six pallbearers walked directly behind
the wagon. Then came the men carrying the drum. The rest of the people trailed behind
with the close family members in a small group behind the drum carriers. There were probably sixty people in the procession. The only sounds were those of the harness moving against the horses, against itself as the horses moved, the wheels of the wagon rolling against the dirt road. It was summer and there were no clouds but there were flies, horseflies and deerflies. The greys threw their noses at the flies and their thick manes rumpled in the sun.

Two hundred yards west of the ranchhouse was a place where the high waters of spring runoff came out of Cut Bank Creek, ran for a ways in a low spot and then further east, after crossing the low part of a meadow, went back into Cut Bank Creek a half mile from where it had flowed out. My dad had often talked about building some kind of dike to keep the creek in its banks at that spot. After the water receded there was always a pond left in one particular deep spot that held water for quite a while into the summer. Because of the availability of water next to the unmoving water of the slough the cottonwoods grew large and spreading at that spot. It was a favorite place for horses and cattle to hang out on hot days. The ground underneath the cottonwoods was trampled bare. The trees were so big that two men with arms outstretched could hardly reach around their trunks.

Middle Calf was one of the pallbearers and, after the procession had traveled a hundred yards, as he walked, he prayed in the Pikuni Blackfeet tongue. The Jesuit did not walk up front but was back among the mourners. We were nearing the cottonwood grove when I looked up and immediately sensed danger as the huge black Percheron stud William was
using to breed some size into his bucking horse mares started out of the cottonwood
grove toward the grey geldings. Even though they were geldings and incapable of
breeding, incapable of threatening his harem of mares who stood underneath the
spreading cottonwood trees, still, they were males and he smelled them. Stud horses
sometimes kill geldings if they corner them. The big black stud, his mane and tail
untrimmed, looking wild and fierce in the sun as he came at a trot and then broke into a
lope, was making certain no male horses invaded his domain. The greys were too close to
his mares.

We all saw what was happening at about the same time. Middle Calf, from years of
being around range horses, knew what was about to happen. The greys had been chased
by the black Percheron stud before this day. Teeth marks on their necks and backs
attested to their having been chased by the stud. When they grazed they grazed at a safe
distance from the mares. Middle Calf ran toward the stud waving his arms. Some of the
other pallbearers and men from the crowd of mourners, the braver ones, also ran out to try
and intercept the stud; others took off in the opposite direction, away from the stud and
the danger they could see coming. The Jesuit alone stood still. Maybe he didn't
understand what was happening, what could happen in a case like this, maybe he was
enraptured by the sudden appearance of the great black horse, looking like the Devil
himself bearing down on the greys.

The stud was detoured from a direct path to the greys by Middle Calf and the others who
were probably thirty or forty feet from the wagon, waving their hands, shouting. The stud veered off and went around them and came at the greys from the front instead. When I saw the stud coming I looked around on the ground for a stick or a piece of wood that could be used for a club. There was nothing. The greys were turning sharply to the right, frantic, William's voice trying to calm them and at the same time shouting curses at the black stud.

I started to run up on the outside right hand side of the wagon, the direction in which the greys were turning and realized my mistake. They were coming around fast and I was going to be right in their way. I reversed and half fell trying to get out of the way, the bolster of the wagon screeching as it reached its limit in the sharp turn, the stud biting on the grey nearest him, the Andy horse, as the greys clambered blindly, their only thought to get away from the malignant teeth. The Isaac horse was on the inside of the turn and the Andy horse was pushing him so fast he lost his footing with the wagon tongue pushing against his legs, going to his knees, the other horse trying to rush past him, dragging him as he struggled to get to his feet again. The stud was biting the Andy horse on the rear end and the horse kicked at the stud. I heard some part of the harness break. The Isaac horse regained his feet. The front wheels of the wagon skidded in the dirt the turn was so sharp. William shouted at the horses but he had no control over either the fury of the stud or the fear of the greys.

The violent jerking of the wagon had sent Uncle John's coffin backward in the wagon
bed. As the greys bolted for a draw that came down off the high bench of the prairie into the valley, part of the coffin was already out the rear of the wagon. William's new black hat had fallen off in the initial excitement and lay off a little way on the ground. The greys were now at full speed, the holdback straps broken and dangling beneath the Andy horse as he ran, stepping on the straps and pulling the harness askew on his back. The stud, his ears laid back and his long black mane bouncing in the sun, was biting the Andy horse as they ran. There is an old wagon road, rutted deep, known as the McCloud Trail, from when the bulltrains freighted out of Fort Benton, hauling goods to the Canadian settlements around Fort McCloud, that goes up the draw where the greys were headed.

Suddenly the outside tug on the harness of the Andy horse came up under the right front leg of the stud as the stud lunged to bite at the gelding and stepped over the trace chain. The stud was momentarily thrown off balance as the tug came up under his elbow and he only had three feet to hobble on. When he jerked free from the tug it threw him a little behind the wagon; when he resumed his chase he came up on the other side of the wagon as the Andy horse had been veering away from the stud as they ran, putting the Isaac horse in view of the stud now.

The coffin was halfway out of the wagon bed by now. As the wagon wheels dropped into badger holes the coffin bounced and as the team was running up the slight incline of the draw kept bouncing farther and farther out of the wagon bed. The sides of the draw were not steep. The frightened team had been angling up the draw as they ran. Now, with
the stud on the opposite side of the wagon they turned sharply, the outside horse pushing
the inside horse so sharply he tangled in the traces and fell, the sharp sound of the oak
neck yoke breaking; there was nothing now to keep the two horses together; as the horse
Isaac stampeded down the incline toward the wagon road the other grey was being pulled
along on the ground, his feet tangled in the mess of straps, singletrees and the doubletree
hopelessly snarled. The left front wheel rode up over the hindquarters of the dragging
Andy and his whole harness was peeled off him like a skin. When the wagon went up
over the fallen grey we seen William spill out onto the ground on the far side and then it
was just the stud and Isaac and the wagon and Uncle John, heading straight down the
incline of the draw toward the McCloud Trail. By this time Uncle John's coffin had
disappeared back inside the wagon box.

William was sitting on the ground looking at the wagon with the rest of us when it hit
the McCloud Trail. With the stud still biting him Isaac went over the foot deep ruts in a
leap and the wagon exploded when the front wheels hit the ruts. The coffin came out in a
blur and the stud got spooked by the wagon coming apart and the coffin rolling out onto
the prairie behind him. He stampeded a short distance beyond the ruts and stopped,
looking at the remains of the wagon, the tongue sticking in the air at an angle while Isaac
kept going up the other side of the draw. The stud, his work done, that of keeping his
harem safe, now started back toward the mares, his nostrils flared, his hooves the size of
dinner plates pounding the earth as he ran. When he neared where we were standing he
veered around us and broke into a lope toward the cottonwoods, whinnying at the mares as he closed in on them.

Uncle John's coffin lay in the ruts of the McCloud Trail. The force of the coffin hitting the ground had popped the lock of the coffin open. Uncle John would see the sun again. During the time of the chase nobody had moved from where they had been standing when it started. Now, Middle Calf started at a fast walk up the slight incline of the draw, walking to the side of the ruts of the old trail. William was on his feet, apparently not badly hurt or crippled as sometimes happened when teams of horses stampeded pulling wagons. The horse Isaac, meanwhile, had disappeared over the top of the west side of the draw, the doubletree still hooked to one of the trace chains, bouncing as it hit the ground, while the other grey, with his bridle still on, stood on the opposite incline of draw, looking down at the scene below him.

It was a little over a hundred yards from where we had watched the chase that the coffin lay. As William started down the incline toward where Uncle John lay, I noticed he did have a limp. It's pretty hard to get out of a wreck like that without some kind of injury. I looked back to see who was following us and nearly the whole funeral procession had by that time regained their motion and were walking up the draw. The Jesuit priest was the only one who still stood where he had been standing throughout the chase and wreck. He stood with a quizzical look on his face; I wondered if he was praying.

"Hey," I yelled at him, "Come on." It seemed with Uncle John's coffin standing open it
was a time for a priest. My yell started him walking. The rest of the people were strung out and he was behind everybody. Annabelle was going toward Uncle John's coffin at a run. William stood looking down at the coffin. I didn't really want to look in the coffin again. When I had told Uncle John goodbye at the ranch house as Keebler prepared to lock the coffin closed it was a final goodbye, at least in my mind. I didn't want another goodbye. I started up the side of the draw to retrieve Andy who was still standing, ground tied with the driving lines hanging down. I retrieved him and stood for a moment looking him over to see whether he had been badly hurt in the chase. He was skinned up some on his legs where the trace chains had rubbed but otherwise seemed alright. Then, there was nothing to do but start down the draw to where the funeral procession was now gathered around the open coffin.

Annabelle was sitting on the ground next to the coffin crying, her hand on the chest of Uncle John. Middle Calf was carrying a heavy piece of the wagon box that had been sheared off in the wreck, coming toward the coffin. Jim Cross Bull bent down and raised Annabelle's hand away from Uncle John's chest, speaking to her softly.

"Come, Annabelle, we're going to close the lid," he told her, continuing to hold her hand as William pushed the top of the coffin closed and Middle Calf laid the piece of broken wagon box against the lid to keep it down. My dad had needed a new coffin and now Uncle John needed a new coffin. Some things run in families. I stood holding the Isaac horse a little uphill from where the coffin rested. I had caught a glimpse of Uncle John
just before William pushed the lid closed. The wild wagon ride didn't seem to have disturbed him. He still lay flat and peaceful looking.

"Well, if that wasn't the damndest thing I ever saw," said Keebler, who was puffing hard from the exertion of climbing the grade up the draw. "What do we do now."

The coffin was crumpled badly on one end where it had hit the ground. The latch to the lid was broken. Keebler was looking at William for direction.

"I don't think we can bury him in this one," William said, looking down at the coffin. Annabelle had risen to one knee, her hand that had been on Uncle John's chest was now on the top of the closed coffin lid.

"We'll bury him in the old way," she said, "we'll wrap him in a blanket and bury him in the old way." She stood up and looked at William, at Keebler, at Middle Calf. "I have a new Pendleton blanket I was going to present to Joe Middle Calf for saying the final prayer for my father. I'll get another blanket for Joe. We'll use the blanket I have in my car to wrap him in. We'll bury him that way."