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The University of Montana

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Honor Song

a novel

by

John Erik Sakariassen

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The author wishes to acknowledge the following sources for two traditional Dakota stories which, in an altered form, appear in the text of this manuscript:


For my mother and father,

and for Amy
PART ONE
It was October, before first snow. The earth was stiff but not yet frozen. In the borrow pit beside the road, the grass was bent over, wet with frost. I kept to the pavement.

Traffic is next to nonexistent on Fort Lincoln Road, Sunday mornings—only an occasional family of church goers, and spiffed-up church goers don't pull over at the sight of a thumb on the side of the highway. By now, my legs were well beyond tired, my mind unsettled.

Running had seemed like a good idea, the practical solution. Don't look back. Don't think about the past. I had only myself to consider, after all.

I watched the sun edge up atop the bluffs across the Missouri. In an hour or two, it would burn off the mist that hung gray in the cottonwoods, down through the bottoms.

It should have been easy, really. Over the years I had come to feel
a disquiet in my sense of belonging. Perhaps it was because my father stressed independence. He was always a self-contained man—at least since they buried my mother.

October. They buried her in October. I could remember that day long ago, the fog and the frost and the breath from the minister’s mouth as he said: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," and then sprinkled a handful of cold dirt onto the box in which she lay. They should have buried her in her coat. It wouldn't be fair that she enter eternity cold, much less alone.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away," my father had whispered, staring deep into my mother’s grave. The Lord is an Indian giver, I remembered thinking. But it wasn't the Lord that took my mother, it was tuberculosis. We stopped going to church after that. I was only six years old.

A cattle truck rolled past my thumb and fast disappeared into the distance. The thick smell of diesel lingered on. Only truckers and preachers work on Sunday in North Dakota. Both deliver.

There were honkers flying in formation overhead. Canada geese, south-bound. I slowed up and watched as they tightened their V. F-4 Phantoms on maneuver. "Roger, Delta Leader, this is Delta Fo-er . . . bearing one-eight-niner, we're go." My father once told me that geese mate for life. My father never remarried.

He hired a housekeeper to see to it the two of us were properly fed and dressed in clean clothing. She was an older woman, heavy and dark and of German descent, and she hummed as she busied herself in the kitchen.
The tune was always *Alice Blue Gown*, or rather, the first part of it. Before she ever hit the refrain, she started over. My father let her go after a couple of months. He said she was a luxury we couldn't afford.

A thicket of bull berries stood opposite the fence that paralleled the highway. Its leaves glistened, silver in the morning sun, like crystal heavily faceted. The limbs of the thicket drooped under the weight of the fruit, red and ripe as ever. I ran down across the borrow pit and climbed the barbed wire.

Bull berries are good—eating only well into autumn—after a freeze. Overnight, they turn, bitter to sweet. Those in the tangled stand before me were just right.

I picked carefully over the thorny branches, loading my mouth as I went along. Bull berries leave your tongue numb and your cheeks dry, but the taste is good, especially when you can't really remember the last time you ate.

I spit a mouth of seeds into the pale grass, glanced down at the red-stained palms of my hands. I felt a knot tighten hard in my stomach. Suddenly, I was not so hungry.

The Mint Bar last night, that confusion of events, now seemed a lifetime behind me. Running should have been easy. I wiped my hands against the sides of my jeans and made my way back to the road.
"Jesus Christ, son, what happened to your face?"

It was a flashy little man in a white Cadillac that drew over to offer a lift. I climbed in and closed the door. The radio in the dash was tuned to church music, gospel.

"Got into a fight," I answered.

"Busted you up good, looks like. --Indian?"

"At the Mint Bar . . ."

I wondered how he knew it was an Indian.

"What'd you do, fuck his squaw? They'll castrate you if you fuck their squaws!"

The man laughed as he stepped square on the gas. The Cadillac pulled smoothly away from the shoulder. He was wearing a gray pin stripe, a fancy one, with narrow lapels and a nipped-in waist. It wasn't a church suit.
"Just an argument," I said. I could get tired of these questions.

"Probably drunk. Prairie niggers are always looking for a fight when they're drunk!"

I studied the lines of the little man's face. He looked about forty. His eyes were set deep; his chin was small. He had his hair slicked back like the man in the Brylcreem commercial—a little dab'll do ya.

The man started singing along with the radio, swaying his head a little, to keep time.

"Amazing grace—
How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch
Like me . . ."

I eased down in the velvet upholstery and laid my head against the window. There was a sting in my face that I noticed more as the heat in the car took the chill from my skin. I tried to sleep, but I couldn't clear my mind, I couldn't withdraw from my anxiety.

Over a month had passed now since I sat in that chair in the appeal agent's office. Over a month.

"You can object to killing, but you can't object to dying."

The words still burned in my memory as much as the image of the man who had said them. There was hate in his stare. I was the enemy within.

"Do you believe in God?" he continued.

I looked back at the door to his office. It stood closed and locked behind me. What was I doing here? What was the use? I wanted to make
out my father's shadow through the translucent window set in the door. He would be waiting on the other side, I thought.

"Did you hear me? . . . I said, do you believe in God?"

I paused before answering; it was a trick question. "Yes, I believe in God."

They were all trick questions—"Would you fight if the United States were under attack? Would you fight Hitler? Would you fight if the enemy had killed your mother?"—still, I had to answer.

"Do you have a church?"

"My mother was Methodist . . . ."

The agent stood, then slammed his fist to the desk. "This isn't your mother's appeal. Do you have a church?"

"No, sir."

I had to tell him. I couldn't lie. He gave me a long, deep gaze and then shook his head.

"The Selective Service tries to be fair, boy. God knows this board tries to be fair . . . ."

The agent smiled each time he looked at me. It was a condescending smile, a smile filled with the same hate as his stare. The smile made me sick.

"You should have claimed CO status months ago, before you were classified. Why did you wait so long?"

"Sir, if my father could just speak for me—"

"Your father can't help you now, boy. No one can help you now. You can't even help yourself."
He looked down at the papers spread before him on the desk, the papers he had taken from my file. In his hand was the letter I had written requesting an appeal.

"You don't really want me to bring this before the board, do you? You know you don't stand a chance in hell at reclassification. Let me tear up this letter and we'll put the whole dirty matter aside."

His office was hot, the air stale, heavy. If only the door were open, then I could think straight.

"You're a coward, boy. 'CO' is the first two letters of the word coward."

Think straight.

"I want to appeal!"

The agent put down my letter and took his seat. His brow and jaw were tense. He leaned forward.

"I have to know one thing," he said. "Could you kill someone? Are you capable of taking a human life?"

A campaign ad came over the radio in the Cadillac. It was Nixon: "This time vote like your whole life depended on it"—sponsored and paid for by the Republican National Committee.

I turned to look back out the rear window of the car. The bluffs and the woods and the highway grew small and faded on the horizon. The fog in the bottoms was gone, and I could see the Missouri, slow and wide and bright with reflection in the sun.
My father was a good man—decent and wise, with a natural patience that took a healthy sum of work to match. He held an understanding of life, better than any other I have ever known. He said life was nothing more than a 24-hour-a-day education. When a body ceased learning, it was bent for decay. I suppose it was that understanding that allowed him to accept humanity without prejudice—man alone is responsible for the fate of mankind, and the intervention of thought by one mind over another clouds the continuing education of man.

He met my mother aboard the Northern Pacific. His destination was simply the West. They fell in love by the North Dakota border, and stepped off the train six hours later to say "I do." The stop was Mandan, and Mandan was west enough to suit my father. It was the end of the Second World War, and they, like the rest of the nation, were caught up in the craziness and the euphoria and the optimism that followed the
Allied victory.

My father had been an officer with the U.S. Army Air Corps, somewhere in the British Isles. "Lieutenant Warren Bradley"—it was a desk job, no heroics. Before that, he studied English literature at Middlebury in Vermont. He never spoke of family, and if he had any, it remained undisclosed. "Home," he said, "is a place for living, not going back to." Our home was always a good place to live.

The old house on Collins was two blocks down from Courthouse Hill, yellow and trimmed with white when we lived there. Lilacs crowded the house at its corners, and two elms stood tall in the boulevard strip. There was an apple tree in the back yard—McIntosh—and it was said to produce the best pie filling in Morton County. We used to give away box loads to neighbors who often reciprocated by bringing around a homemade pie on a Sunday afternoon. My father would joke, "Better a picker than a peeler—"

The house was carpenter Gothic, modernized. A previous occupant had taken liberty to enclose the front porch and remove the gingerbread. Apparently, it was the progressive thing to do.

I had an attic bedroom in the southeast gable. It was snug, with low walls and sloped ceilings, and at the end there were two windows, set side by side, that focused squares of sun on the bed, summer mornings. The windows overlooked the Williams' place, next door.

I used to send Morse code messages by flashlight to Kirby Williams, whose windows stood opposite mine. Often, it was the solution to some impossible homework assignment transmitted one direction or the other.
We had a sophisticated communications network, not to be underrated. Kirby and I were blood brothers, sworn by oath on an August afternoon, south of town at Dead Heart Slough. He told me that it was an old Indian ritual, that it would make our friendship last forever. I squeezed my eyes closed, and I heard the blade of his pocket knife click open. A moment later, we shook hands—Kirby and Fletcher, comrades for life.

My father and I left Mandan in the fall of 1961, just over a month into the new term. The school board had expressed a concerned dissatisfaction with what my father deemed appropriate literature, and though fifteen years' teaching stood behind him, and though he held district tenure, his methods were now under question.

A civic election was near, board positions were on the ballot, and loose talk had surfaced, talk that might mean a heavier than average voter turnout. There had been mention of book burnings—the classroom was no place for Salinger! And who was this English teacher anyway? Mr. Bradley wasn't born here, was he? And what of that wild son he was raising? And why hadn't he remarried—now, six years after her death? And what of his religion?

But it wasn't the moral question that angered my father, it was the question of purpose. So we left Mandan—the yellow house on Collins and blood brothers.
The Cadillac slowed as we neared the bridge that crossed the Heart River, just outside town. We came in past the state park at Fort Abraham Lincoln, home once to the Seventh Cavalry. My father had taken me there often. I could remember spending hours hunting old shell casings and uniform buttons and Indian arrowheads. It was a busy place, then, alive with tourists and picnickers and history buffs who stared with strange fascination at the cornerstones that marked the spot where General Custer's house had stood. But there were no history buffs now, no picnickers, no tourists—Fort Lincoln loomed silent, closed for the season.

"I used to live in this town," I said.

The man in the pin stripe glanced to his rearview mirror, then eased the car into the turn lane. "Coming back to relive your past?"

"Coming to catch a train."

Overhead, the signal changed red to green and the Cadillac pulled out,
left onto Main Street. Mandan looked as it had always: a small town of big vision and ambitious architecture. It had been a town of promise, a railroad town that sprang up when Manifest Destiny and the Northern Pacific pushed west across the Missouri. In recent years, the trains passed through more often than they stopped. Still, promise survived in the hearts of the town's merchants and businessmen who erected a slogan and billboard to carry it:

MANDAN IS WHERE THE WEST BEGINS.

The car continued, past the S&K Dairy whose soft serve in a dime cone took the edge off a summer heat wave. Just beyond, stood the Blue Ribbon Chick Hatchery. It was a production scale brooder where a field trip had once exposed Mrs. Cushing's fifth grade class to the miracle of life, adding to our vocabularies the words embryo and incubation.

I read the names and dates set in the weathered stonework that capped the brick facade storefronts on Main. There was the R. P. Rippel Building, 1932, and the Dailey Building, 1926, and the National Bank and Sullivan and Marcovitz Buildings. Across First Avenue, stood the Golden Rule Building and the Story Building, and beyond, the Lewis and Clark Hotel. They were landmark names, old names of growth and prosperity—names that had built a community.

It seemed funny coming back. I felt like a stranger. But even living here, somehow, I had always been a stranger.

"What time is your train?"

I turned. He was fishing a Marlboro from a slightly crumpled pack, held loosely in his steering hand.
"Not too sure," I answered.

"Going east?"

"West, I think."

The pin stripe man pressed a cigarette between his lips and slid the package into his inside coat pocket. He reached to the lighter in the Cadillac's dash. "You sound like a man definite about his plans."

The cigarette caught hold of the glow from the lighter, and a thin line of smoke drifted upward. The pin stripe man chuckled, then drew in.

"Yes, west . . ."

The Cadillac crossed the eastbound lane and came to a stop in the drive at the depot entrance. It was a red brick structure—colonial revival—said to be patterned after Jefferson's Monticello. The execution was sound, with good lines and careful symmetry, yet the paint on the columns and cupola was a cracked and tired white and the building held that dark film that comes from the settling of diesel smoke. It shared the south side of Main with a row of old warehouses and a confusion of track in the switching yard, and everything there, even the vacant beanery, even the N.P. Park to the west, with its lawn and its walks and its evergreens, carried the stamp of the railroad.

The pin stripe man pressed a button near his armrest and the power window lowered a crack. He took a quick last pull on his cigarette, exhaled, then shoved the stub outside. A breeze caught the stub and tumbled it across the drive to the curb.

"Front door service," he said.

Inside, the ticket window stood empty, though a sandwich half on
folded wax paper and a cup of coffee sat amidst a spread of documents on the counter. Behind, the telephone receiver dangled, off the hook at the back wall.

The waiting area was quiet, occupied only by a family of Indians—an old woman and two small children. She would be their grandmother, I thought. Her dress was red calico and she sat with a detached stiffness on the high-backed wooden slat bench. The smaller child, the girl, slept at the woman's breast, and the boy lay sprawled on the tile near her feet, an open comic book between his elbows.

There was a black chalkboard train schedule on the wall opposite the ticket window. Beneath "Westbound," it read:

North Coast Limited: Tr 2 Ar 4:32 a.m. Lv 4:42 a.m.
Mainstreeter: Tr 3 Ar 4:34 p.m. Lv 4:49 p.m.

I glanced to the wall clock above the schedule. It was twelve noon.

"Son of a bitch!" cut the silence and a man in Northern Pacific uniform, wrestling a swollen suitcase, struggled up the corridor. As he neared the ticket window, his eyes caught mine, and he forced a tentative smile. "With you in a minute."

The man dropped the bag, then clutched the receiver and pressed it under his cheek. "Brown, American Tourister . . ." He reached for the coffee on the ticket counter, raised it, then hesitated. "How the hell should I know? Tell him we've got a goddamn Paiute for a porter—I don't care . . ." His glance shifted from the suitcase to the sandwich to me. "With you in a minute," he repeated.

I pulled wadded bills from the pocket of my jacket and attempted to
straighten and arrange them into some small degree of order. They were wrinkled and still uncounted, taken in my hurried departure the day before. There would be enough, I thought.

The man at the window slammed the phone on the hook; his coffee sloshed and spilled to the floor. "Something for you?"

"A ticket ... to Seattle."

"Name?"
I couldn't think of anything original. "John Doe."

"John Doe!"
He wrote the name on the ticket.

"Baggage, Mr. Doe?"
I shook my head.

"John Doe to Seattle, no baggage ... forty-seven dollars, even."
I peeled forty-seven, even, from the bills in my hand and snatched up the ticket. The man at the window smiled, then lifted his sandwich half.

The dizzying scent of pine disinfectant—a heavy application—caught me as I opened the men's room door. The walls in the room were dirty grade school green, a frosted glass window the single source of light. Above the urinal, scratched in the paint, I read: "Niggers are proof that Indians fuck buffalo."

I washed my hands, then glanced to the mirror on the wall over the sink. I noticed the bruise, the dark swelling in my face. "Time heals all wounds," my father would say.
I stepped off the curb, across from the gray brick and white marble of the Lewis and Clark Hotel. A neon vacancy sign burned red in the lobby window. The church goers would be there by now, I thought—Lutherans and Methodists and First Presbyterians—in the dining room for a post-ecclesiastic Sunday buffet brunch. I crossed the street to the hotel entrance and wandered inside.

There was a maid in the lobby watering an ailing potted palm that stood beside the front desk. A thin, aged man—not so near death as the palm—eyed her from his position on the leather couch at the near wall. There was a smell about the man, absorbed by the lobby, a Saturday night whiskey and bar smoke smell that made me realize he had been camped there throughout the night. The maid seemed indifferent to his presence; he was as much a fixture as the palm or couch itself.

I took a booth by a window in the hotel coffee shop. The place had
a newly remodeled look. It was the "New" Captain Clark Cafe. There was new upholstery—orange vinyl, shine intact—and there were new tables and a new counter top of matching, simulated wood-grain Formica. On newly paneled walls, hung the framed exploits of the intrepid explorers: Lewis and Clark aboard the keelboat, Lewis and Clark among the Mandan and Minnetaree, Lewis and Clark with the Shoshoni Bird Woman, Lewis and Clark reach the Pacific. . . .

The floor waitress was seated on a stool at the counter, engaged in dreamy conversation with the cowboy next to her. He was pouring catsup on his scrambled eggs and tossing bits of idle flattery her direction. The counter waitress wandered over to warm his coffee.

"Say—you're a dead ringer for Ann-Margret . . ."

She wasn't.

The counter waitress smiled, then pressed forward. "Do you really think so?"

"Easy—Ann," said the floor waitress, "this one's mine!" She placed a hand on the cowboy's forearm.

The counter waitress turned and glanced to my booth. "Not anymore, honey—you've got a customer!"

She brought over a menu and stood by, pen and ticket book in position. Her uniform was orange, lighter orange than the vinyl. A red, white, and blue "Humphrey-Muskie" button was pinned to her apron pocket. She ran the back of the pen through her hair, then touched it to her chin.

I opened the menu. "What's good?"

"The dining room is good," she answered, "this place is—marginal."
"How's the chicken a'la king?"

"Fatal."

"Give me the hot beef."

She scribbled the order, then reached for the menu. "Comes with whipped potatoes and coleslaw." It was automatic.

An Indian couple stepped into the cafe and took a table near the door. The man was wearing an olive Air Force parka, the woman a Pendleton jacket. Both kept their coats on.

"I almost went to New York City once," said the counter waitress, "—to become an actress."

"No foolin'?" The cowboy pretended to be impressed.

"Would've done it too, 'cept for I went and got myself pregnant. Couldn't be no actress now—stretch marks."

The floor waitress came in from the kitchen and returned to her stool at the counter. She hung a hand on the cowboy's shoulder and gazed into his brown eyes. She had seen the Indian couple. She chose to ignore them.

"Is she telling you she's some kind of actress?"

The cowboy nodded, then sipped at his coffee. The counter waitress leaned forward, ready to pour.

"I said I was almost an actress—"

"—Almost Ann-Margret!" He set down his cup and she filled it.

"Them Injuns wants service, honey—" The counter waitress smirked as she glanced toward the couple. "And it is your table . . ."

The floor waitress held firm, batted her eyes.

The couple stood, then shoved back their chairs. It seemed they knew
what might come next. The man hesitated, his eyes swept the room.

"Wasichus!" he said, his voice low and resonant, and they left the cafe.

"Can you figure out that one?" said the cowboy, shaking his head.

The waitresses seemed genuinely amused. It was as if they believed Indians couldn't really hate whites, as if somehow racism was purely a white privilege.

"Hey—what do you call an Indian that's only got one dog?"

The waitresses hadn't heard it yet.

"—A vegetarian!"

They roared and the cowboy was on a roll.

"What do you call an Indian that's got four dogs?"

"A rancher," I answered. It was automatic.
Of course my father had been right about resigning his position, there was no decision to make; I could see that now—no decision if a man doesn't compromise principle. Still, through the ordeal, I sensed in him a certain remorse for my concern. I was twelve then, and the understanding of a twelve year old is often limited to nothing beyond emotion. So again I was reminded: "For reasons we may never understand, life is often a most unfair proposition."

"Hear you're leaving . . ."

It was Kirby Williams, I knew the voice. He slid down the levee and kicked clear a spot on the bank beside me. I picked a small flat stone from the dirt and cast it out across the lazy water of the Heart. The stone skipped twice, then sank.

"They've asked him to resign—they won't even hear his side."
Kirby nodded. "Don't seem fair."

A leaf dropped from the limb of a box elder that grew twisted and overhung the river at the opposite bank. It settled slowly, then touched the water. A ripple blurred the tree's reflection. It was the last warm weather of autumn that year: Indian summer.

"How many fish do you suppose we've pulled from this old river?"

Kirby paused. He seemed to be figuring. "Not near so many as got away."

"We'll be leaving next week—Friday," I told him, "—soon as school's out. Most of our stuff is already packed. There's even a truck lined up."

His gaze shifted downstream to where the Heart bent south into the cottonwoods. "The big ones always got away," he said.

My father had found an opening at the agency at Standing Rock—a BIA school. Apparently, Indian schools suffered a continual shortage of educators, and even mid-term, a teaching certificate was considered near guarantee for employment.

I glanced to the water and caught myself mirrored dark among the shadows. I wanted to hate someone just then. It could be anyone, I thought—the school administrators, the superintendent, the whole stinking self-righteous city of Mandan. Instead, I chose to hate the fish, the big fish that always got away.

"We're moving down to Fort Yates."

Kirby turned sharply. "Fort Yates? . . . on the reservation?"

"It won't be so bad," I said, "they signed a treaty!"

He laughed. We both laughed. Ours were the Indians of John Wayne
and Gary Cooper, the Indians of Broken Arrow and Apache Drums, the Indians of Hollywood.

"Fletcher,"—Kirby's words came slowly—"you suppose we ought to write? . . . Send letters back and forth? . . . Maybe visit sometimes?"

"I suppose so."

"Once a week, okay? . . . We'll write once a week?"

"Once a week," I answered.

A meadowlark sang from atop a tall stump in the buckbrush across the way. It seemed late in the year for a meadowlark, but he sang again anyway.

"It'll never be the same," I said. "Never."

A car drove up along the top of the levee and came to a stop close-by. The dust settled. A car door opened. It was a fisherman, dressed in green coveralls, and with him was a black dog of no particular breed. I watched as he collected the gear from the car trunk. The tackle box was out first, a multi-compartment affair. Then came the rod and reel, encased in a tan leather and canvas sheath. He took out his dip net and his bait bucket and his plastic-covered folding stool, and set off on the twenty-foot or so journey to the water's edge.

"Mighty fine day," he said, setting up the stool. A smile grew wide on his rough, round face. "Mighty fine day now, wouldn't you say?"

"Mighty fine," I answered.

"Mighty fine," said Kirby.

The black dog caught a scent by the water and trailed it upstream into the rushes that lined the riverbank. There was a "yelp" and a flutter, then a ringneck, flushed from the brush, and a chase was in progress.
Kirby pulled a stick of white driftwood from a tangled clump of grass on the bank at his feet. He lifted the stick to inspect its possibilities, then out came his pocket knife. The knife had long been an object of my envy. It was a Buck—lock-blade—with an ebony handle and silver plate fittings. He laid the edge against the driftwood and peeled off a long thin strip.

"Fishin' any good today?"

I turned. The fisherman was setting his rig, measuring the distance between sinker and lure with a pocket rule. He was precise about his tackle—a scientific angler.

"The big ones get away," I replied.

The fisherman nodded, as if to confirm the truth in my statement. He must be nearsighted, I imagined, and Kirby's driftwood stick became a fine casting rod, his lock-blade Buck knife the reel. Nearsighted and foolish: fish don't bite in the Heart, come autumn.

Kirby continued to shave at the driftwood. A pile of white curls formed between his legs. With each pass, the wood grew thinner, until the blade bit deep and the stick broke in two.

"We'll still be friends, Fletcher. We'll always be best friends."

"Sure we will," I answered, "always."

"And we'll write to each other, and visit—"

"—Often."

I looked at Kirby, at his short red hair and his gray-blue eyes. We were blood brothers, sworn by oath. Nothing could change that.

"I want you to have this," he said as he laid the pocket knife into
my hand. "It's a loan . . . to prove that you're coming back."

I held the knife to study its detail. The weight of the handle felt good in my palm. I had always wanted the knife, but now . . .

Kirby lifted the end of the broken driftwood stick and tossed it out to the river. The stick made a splash, submerged, then bobbed to the surface.

"Hey—hey," said the fisherman as he cast his lure to the water. "See that big one jump?"
The hot beef was cold. A thin film covered the gravy that covered the beef and the slightly charred toast beneath. I lowered my fork to the table.

"Best damn food in the Dakotas!"

I looked up. It was the pin stripe man, the little man with the white Cadillac. He took the unoccupied seat at my booth and slid to the window.

"Best damn food," he repeated, "always make a point—" He focused on the hot beef plate, then turned to the counter. "Waitress, bring me the chicken a'la king!"

"The food is bad," I said. "Even the help agrees."

"Nonsense."

"But the beef is cold and the toast is charred . . ."

He shook his head. "Can't be."
I pushed the hot beef plate toward him. The movement cracked the film on the gravy. "See for yourself," I said.

The pin stripe man inspected the food, poking the gravy and the whipped potatoes with a table knife. A betrayed look came to his face: an angry look, cold as the beef. "Outrage!" he shouted. "Waitress! Waitress!"

But the waitress wasn't interested in customer satisfaction—she had just lost her cowboy to the likes of Ann-Margret. "Problem?" she snapped from her stool at the counter. "Milk sour? Fly in the soup?"

"The food is bad," said the pin stripe man.

The waitress stood slowly, then stepped to the booth. A blond curl fell against her forehead as she bent to study my plate. Her hair was blond, but the roots were dark.

"What's the matter with it?"

"The beef is cold," he answered.

"It was hot when it left the kitchen."

"It's cold now."

The waitress turned. She shot me a hostile stare. I didn't care about the beef; I had no intention of eating it.

"He's been sitting there, daydreaming," she said, accusing me with the end of her ball point pen, "—picking at it with his fork for the past half-hour."

"Look at the toast," the pin stripe man continued. "The toast is charred—black!"

"It's pumpernickle."
"Pumpernickle?" The pin stripe man leaned forward. He slid the table knife under the toast, lifting it to have a peek beneath. "Pumpernickle?"

The waitress shifted her weight to one leg and opened her ticket book. She scribbled the pen in the corner to start the ink moving. "You wanted the chicken a'la king?"

"Huh?" He dropped the knife. "Yes . . . chicken a'la king."

She wrote the ticket, then closed her book.

"Imagine," he mumbled, "pumpernickle—"

I shook my head. The toast was charred, but it didn't really matter.

"Say— I never did catch your name, son."

I glanced to the pictures of Lewis and Clark that graced the cafe walls. In every picture they looked to the far horizon. The pictures had captured a dream.


The man nodded, then reached across the table in a diplomatic gesture. The sleeve of his pin stripe suit brushed the hot beef gravy. "Richard Halliday—but you can call me Rich." He laughed, amused that he had made a joke. "Get it? . . . Rich? . . . You can call me Rich?"

I shook his hand and smiled, not at the joke, but at the gravy.

"Made my money on land deals, buying and selling mineral rights, negotiating leases—"

"—A middleman?"

He paused. His eyes narrowed. "A self-made man, younger than you when I started, John Clark. Came off the farm in forty-six—dirt poor . . . ."

Dirt poor. It was a relative term.
I sat back against the orange vinyl booth seat and took a long stare out the cafe window. There were boys in the park by the depot, and a football—a game of touch in progress. It was afternoon and the sun had cut the morning's chill. A pile of jackets on the grass at one end of the field marked a goal line.

"... Worked custom combine two seasons—an outfit out of Canada, Saskatchewan. It's nowhere work. You wake up one day and it's winter, and you're a thousand miles from where you started . . ."

Fourth down came—a punting situation. I watched as the ball was snapped. The play looked good, but the kick fell short and wobbled out-of-bounds into the street.

"... Packed it up and went west, went to the coast, to Seattle. Worked the docks and the canneries and saved my money. You have to be smart, you know. One dollar can become a hundred . . . a thousand."

"I'm going west," I said.

"Seattle?"

"Vancouver, ultimately."

He didn't respond.

The waitress came back with the chicken a'la king and a fresh pot of coffee. She set the plate down hard before the pin stripe man, then filled his cup. "Food look good enough, mister?"

Without hesitation he answered, "Best damn food in the Dakotas!"

She tore the check from her book, then slammed it face down on the Formica. Coffee sloshed from the pin stripe man's cup, and almost under his breath he said, "I suppose a fuck would be out of the question?"
Outside the cafe window, a touchdown triggered a brawl in the end zone. Touch football had become a contact sport. Win or lose, it matters only how you play the game. . . .

"I've done nowhere work," I said.

The pin stripe man reached for the salt shaker. A look of skepticism appeared on his face.

"—On the reservation. It was a construction job, a federal housing project."

"Why is that nowhere work?" His eyes were fixed on the chicken a'la king. He shoved a forkful into his mouth.

"They brought in a contractor from out of state—somewhere east, Ohio maybe. The contract called for local laborers. Fifty percent had to be minority. Affirmative action."

"And the nowhere work?"

"Indians building houses for Indians. A contractor skimming funds, slapping up cracker boxes—houses that Indians didn't want anyway, frame houses with nothing Indian about them."

The man wiped chicken gravy from his chin with a napkin, then took a long sip from his coffee. "Damn Indians ought to be grateful—never any gratitude for the tax dollars that feed them."

Tax dollars that fattened an Ohio contractor. . . .

"The foreman hated the contract," I said. "He wanted to hire only whites. He couldn't work on Indian time. He said the project had to be completed before the turn of the century."

"So what's your point?"
"The work lacked purpose. It was nowhere work."

The pin stripe man wadded his napkin and tossed it to the half-eaten plate of chicken a'la king. He pushed back the plate, chuckled, then belched. "You've got quite a bit to learn about free enterprise, son."

I looked out the cafe window again, to the park across the street by the railroad depot. The football game had broken up; the ball and the players and the jackets that marked a goal line were gone. I watched a dog wander out across the grass. He stopped to sniff the hollow beneath an evergreen, then he too was gone.

The pin stripe man stood, pulled a twenty from his pocketbook and laid it atop the dinner check. A smile tightened his narrow face and the sun, through the cafe window, made his slick hair shine. "Go west, young man" came as parting advice. He was a smooth individual.
The sun felt warm against the back of my jacket as I walked the block to the corner. I had just over an hour to kill before the Mainstreeter would pull into the depot, just over an hour to put behind a past. The sting in the bruise on my face had faded to a dulled ache; the swelling now lessened. He had landed a good one, I thought, completely unexpected. But that was like him—unpredictable. I stopped at the corner, then turned north, up Collins.

The house would be gone, of course, torn down and replaced by an auto bank two or three years back. They had taken the elm trees and the lilacs and even the Mcintosh, to make room for an asphalt drive-up. I saw the thing in a photograph once, in the Bismarck Tribune, an advertisement: "... now open for your banking convenience." Greening up the neighborhood, my father had called it.

The air turned cool beneath lengthening shadows on the west side of
Collins. The shadows crossed over the street and formed shapes of roof-lines on the walls of the buildings opposite, inching taller against the low October sun. In the distance, the street rose, up Courthouse Hill through a red and yellow arch of ash and maple. It was Sunday quiet.

I pressed the buzzer with the heel of my hand and waited. It had been a long time since I stood on that porch, longer than I cared to remember. The letters had stopped before the end of that first year, and the visits had never taken place. Still, somehow, I felt an obligation.

The Williams' house seemed smaller here than in my memory, and there was an unfamiliar weathering, as if a coat of paint had been planned but put off. It stood in sharp contrast to the clean look of the neighboring auto bank.

I pressed the buzzer again and held it. A woman came to the door.

"Mrs. Williams?"

"Yes—"

She was an older Mrs. Williams than the one remembered. Her face showed the distressed lines of age. In her presence, I felt a certain uneasiness—could she, did she, recognize me?

"I'm looking for your son Kirby. Is he home?"

Mrs. Williams stood silent, blank.

"I'm looking for Kirby," I repeated.

Again, the empty silence. Something was wrong. She looked on me with eyes that seemed tear-tired, wistful.

"What the hell is going on here?" It was Kirby's father. He moved
up behind his wife and rested his hands on her round shoulders. He seemed to be sensing some note of distress. "Who are you?"

"I'd like to see Kirby," I answered.

He grew tense. His focus shifted slowly from me to his wife. I could smell the hint of liquor on his breath. "Is this some kind of cruel joke? Who are you?"

"I have to see him ... it's important."

"What do you want? What's your business here?"

"I'm an old friend," I said. "There's something I have to give him, something that belongs to him."

Mrs. Williams turned to her husband, pressing her body against him. His arms closed around her, and her emptiness was replaced by muffled weeping. Mr. Williams's voice cracked. "Kirby is dead . . ."

Kirby—dead? The words hung heavy in the still October air. I felt the chill. Then Kirby spoke: "We'll always be friends, Fletcher. We'll always be best friends."

" ... He was killed in action—Tay Ninh—in August . . ."

Kirby—dead? We were blood brothers, sworn by oath—comrades for life.

" ... If you were his friend, you would have known. He was buried at Arlington. A military funeral."

Mr. Williams eased his wife back from the door and she wept behind, in the shadows of the foyer. Through the screen, he would not see my lips, forming an unspoken I'm sorry.

"Who are you?" he questioned again. "Don't I know you? There's something familiar——"
I turned and started away from the porch.

"I've seen you before, who are you?"

Down the walk to the street, I began to run.

His voice broke into chapped shouting. "Come back here. Who are you? What do you mean upsetting my home?"

I felt the pounding quicken in my chest as I crossed Collins Avenue. No need to run. No need to panic. Christ . . .

"You're that Bradley kid, aren't you—Warren Bradley's boy, from next door. I know who you are. Come back here—"

There were people gathered in the depot waiting area, standing, impatient and restless, awaiting the boarding call. I stood inside a dim circle of yellow light, cast by the lamp overhead. In an hour, the sun would drop behind the bluffs in the west, and the moon would rise to take the night shift.

Foolish to run. No reason. What would it matter that he knew my name? I thought of the knife in the pocket of my jacket, a lock-blade Buck with an ebony handle and silver plate fittings. Then I thought of the fetish in my pocket with the knife—the little coyote of carved bone—and I remembered the broken leather cord and the fight of the night before.

I pulled the fetish from my pocket, wet the ends of the broken cord in my mouth, and knotted them together. It was a crude charm, small and roughly shaped. Still, it was unquestionably Coyote.

I placed the cord around my neck and the bone fetish dangled at the
opening of my jacket collar. Whispering, I said, "Iktomi, once again you are the trickster."

The fetish didn't answer.
The cars of the Mainstreeter jerked, rocked back, then inched forward under the strain of their couplings. A whistle blast sounded to clear the tracks beyond the switching yard, and the engine labored to speed, settling the train into an even rhythm down the line.

I pulled off my jacket and folded and pressed it between my shoulder and the window, adjusting it in an attempt at comfort. It was an awkward position, the jacket slipped often and had to be pushed back and held into place. A losing battle.

Outside, the westward sky was streaked in bands of red and amber that paralleled the horizon, broken only by the ragged buttes that rose black against the distance. Shadows drifted through the draws, climbing then falling among the hills in the prairie twilight, blending with the scattered darkness that lay beneath the clumps of sage and bunch grass. A yard light came on and warmed a cluster of farm buildings that stood a
quarter-mile or so out from the tracks. I saw another light, more distant, and then others, farther down the line. Then the red and amber streaks of sky faded, and the glowing yard lights were all I could see.

We had taken the train east once—to Minnesota. I was six at the time and the train proved a source of endless fascination for me. There was freedom aboard. The windows were a theater, the world a double feature. I was too young to understand that the excitement of the trip should lose out to its purpose. My mother had been moved to a hospital in Rochester, and doctors there never spoke of recovery.

The jacket again slipped from my shoulder. I gave up on it and stuffed it down beside the armrest. I considered moving to the club car and ordering a beer. A beer might taste good, might pass time. There would, of course, be the matter of ID and the age of majority. I'd have to fabricate a story: "I left my wallet in the sleeper . . ." or "I was mugged yesterday at Penn Station . . ." or "My driver's license is under suspension—DWI—and I burned my draft card last month in a peace rally . . ." But then I remembered that it was Sunday and the club car would be closed, and I decided that I didn't really want the beer in the first place. I reached for my jacket and tried it once more beneath my shoulder.

The Minnesota hospital employed a visitation policy that excluded children: high risk of communicable disease. There were countless hours, then, spent with nurses in waiting rooms, with games and puzzles and dog-eared picture books. And I remembered being lifted to someone's shoulders outside that honey brick building and waving to a window high on the third floor. It was my mother's room; the dark figure that moved
behind the blind turned open was my mother. And there were tears, the hopeless and helpless tears that were my father's.

The train slowed as it passed through a town, laying down a whistle blast that served only to interrupt the small doings of the small town's citizenry. The lights of the town formed a blur in the rail car window. I tried to separate the blur's components, sorting out the individual lights of the town's homes and businesses. But the blur held, and the train passed into darkness, leaving behind a town, nameless and faceless.

For a moment, I saw a figure, caught up in the glare of the window: a figure clear and alive. Then the figure changed into my reflection. In desperation, I tried to restore the first image, but it only came back in pieces—the way it always came back when I tried to force the picture to mind. I strained to bring the fading pieces together, to focus, but the figure was out of reach; the image of my mother, gone, and only my reflection remained.
"A man learns from his mistakes," my father told me. And then he added, "Sad, though—mankind does not. That is why history repeats itself."

"Then the historian can predict the future?"

"Yes—but he is powerless to change it."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because society does not possess conscience and reason; these are powers of the individual."

"Is man doomed?"

"Mankind is doomed ... doomed to commit again, the errors of the past."

The train took a rough section of track going into a curve and the cars jolted and swayed a little to one side. I sat up, startled by the motion, then eased back into my seat. There was a cramp in my shoulder.
where it had pressed against the window. I raised my arm and moved it around to work out the stiffness.

Across the aisle, a man, pulling nervously on a cigarette, flipped over a page of a wrinkled Newsweek. A blue-white haze formed in the space above his head, rose slowly to the ceiling, then spread laterally. He was middle-aged, of that stocky middle-aged build, and next to him sat a woman who seemed familiar with his nervous middle-aged movements. She was comfortable and accepting, and I presumed she was his wife. Yet her attention seemed divided, drawn to something distant in the window—the stars perhaps.

The man took the cigarette between his fingers and drew it from his lips, and with the same hand, made a loose fist in an automatic gesture to cover his mouth. As he cleared his throat, an ash dropped to the opened magazine, then slid off the page to his pant leg. The woman turned.

"Says here, Ellen, they're planning on halting the bombing."

The woman nodded, but did not speak.

"Says Johnson's been negotiating a secret deal with Hanoi—going to let them Viet Cong in on the peace talks." He stubbed his cigarette into the ashtray at the end of his armrest, then continued, "Now what kind of a way is that to win a war? I ask you, Ellen . . . Jesus Almighty, this thing could just go on forever—"

Ellen seized a long, deep breath, then stopped short and turned away, toward the window. The man flipped another page of his Newsweek.

... Again you are the trickster . . .
"Hah!" he snapped. "It's a great big ploy! Says here now a bombing halt'll bolster Democrat chances on election day. Says it could turn the tide, give Humphrey an edge. No wonder we don't ever win the war--they're always mixing it up with politics!"

And Kirby is dead . . .

A knot wrenched the pit of my stomach. I rubbed my eyes and the Newsweek man slipped out of focus.

Tay Ninh . . . a military funeral.

Crazy fool, you goddamn crazy fool.
It snowed the day we moved to Fort Yates. The cold air that came with night stayed on, and the warm daytime air that had lingered long into that autumn passed and was forgotten. The snow accumulated first at road edges, then finger drifts formed, and dead brown pastures became speckled in white, and long white ribbons grew in the even rows of fallow fields. The snow fell against the windshield of the orange U-Haul truck, trapped in the steady wiper slap, pushed aside. Aboard the truck, two lives were in transit.

At the Cannonball River, snow gathered on the steel guardrails of the narrow bridge, and across the bridge, a green metal sign—white letters—stood roadside:

ENTERING STANDING ROCK INDIAN RESERVATION.

The orange U-haul passed over the bridge, and the draft of the truck pulled the snow from the guardrails, sending it swirling to settle below
among the bare cottonwoods and empty willows of the river plain.

"There is a legend," my father began, "about an Indian woman who turned to stone. She was an Arikara, married to a Lakota man, and they had a child—a small baby. One day, the man announced to this woman that he had decided to take a second wife. Among the Lakota, it was proper for a man to have many wives, yet the woman would not accept this and she became jealous and pouted. She was Arikara. He was Lakota.

"When the time came for the village to strike camp and move on, the woman refused. She remained seated on the ground with her baby upon her back while the tent was taken down around her. The husband believed her stubborn and selfish and resolved to teach the woman a lesson, so he left her there and went on with the camp.

"As the day wore on and the man had had time to consider his actions, he grew sorry and he stopped and he told his two brothers to go back for the woman—for now he was fearful that in her desperation she would come to kill herself. The brothers rode off then, and by evening, they came upon the place where the village had been camped. There, they found the woman—sitting, just as they had left her. She did not move.

"The older brother called to her, but the woman did not answer. Then he reached out and placed his hand upon her head, and he found that the woman and her baby had turned to stone.

"The brothers rode hard now, and when they caught up with the others, they told their story. The husband, however, did not believe them. He thought that the woman was dead, that she had killed herself, and that his brothers were trying only to spare him this grief. So the people turned
around, and together they went back to the place where they had left the woman. The story was true—she had turned to stone."

My father paused then, and I turned to look up at him. His eyes were fastened on the road ahead, pulling steadily at the distance. A gust lifted a whirl of snow and carried it over the highway.

"The stone was thought to be what they call wakan—considered very sacred. It was given a position in the center of the village, and when the people moved, the stone woman was taken with them. They selected a horse thought worthy of the task, and they constructed a travois and placed the sacred stone upon it. Then they painted and decorated the horse and travois with streamers and colors, and in this way, the woman of stone traveled down through the years."

My father told me many things that day. He told me of how this reservation had been named "Standing Rock" for the woman in the legend, and that the stone had been fixed atop a brick monument opposite the agency office, overlooking the Missouri River. He told me many things about the people who lived here and of the circumstances under which the reservation had been created.

The agency had been established in the barren country between the Cannonball and Grand Rivers, at the base of Proposal Hill. It was the agency of the Upper and Lower Yanktonnais, the Sihasapa, and the Hunkpapa, in the days of the Fort Laramie Treaty, of the Great Sioux Reservation. It became an agency of exiles, according to my father—Gall, Crow King, Rain-in-the-Face, Sitting Bull—principles in the Custer fight, objects of the military solution.
The Indians stood in the path of progress, blocking the railroad and the settlers and gold seekers—blocking the Manifest Destiny of a nation. So, where conflict would arise, military posts were pressed to keep order, to protect vital American interests: Fort Randall upstream from the Niobrara, Fort Phil Kearny and Fort Laramie on the Platte, Fort Robinson at the Red Cloud Agency, Fort Bennet at Cheyenne River, Fort Yates at Standing Rock, Fort Rice above the Cannonball, Fort Abraham Lincoln at the mouth of the Heart, Fort Buford near the Yellowstone. A directive had come from the commissioner of Indian affairs in Washington, and the non-agency Indians were ordered onto the reservation under threat of war, and when the threat of war was not enough, the soldiers left the posts, and a great military campaign was set in motion.

My father said that in the early engagements, Indian resistance had proved formidable. The Army soldiers suffered unprecedented defeat at the Rosebud and the Little Big Horn. But these losses served only to strengthen the resolve of the military, and the Indians were soon to realize that a life-way on the prairie was in its twilight. Under pursuit, the Indians broke into small bands, moving often to avoid the soldiers who pursued them. Many were convinced to surrender, to move to the reservation, to live as agency Indians. Some held out, fled north across the border into Canada.

It was a time of intense hardship, a time of uncertainty. Bands that remained off the reservation did so in the face of starvation: before the hands of white hunters lay the annihilation of the buffalo. In Canada, government officials met pressure for extradition—asylum granted to
Indians there strained international relations. It was a desperate time for these bands. They were tired of running, tired of cold and hunger and fear, broken in spirit, and lonesome for those left behind.

On the reservation, the Indians were told to live as white men, to behave in a civilized manner. Their religion was outlawed—considered heathen—and their children were taken away and placed in government boarding schools where English replaced Lakota. Men who had lived by hunting were ordered to give up their horses and rifles, told to farm the land. But the land in this place was not well-suited to farming, and the Indians themselves were ill-equipped to become farmers. Crops failed. In the harsh winters that followed, the people starved. Then missionaries came and spoke to the plight of the Indian: "Jesus is Savior!" And they baptized them, saved their immortal souls. . . .

We were a good distance beyond the Cannonball when we came upon the causeway that stretched through the backwater of the Missouri, connecting the agency town to the highway. Here, the snow fell upon the causeway, merging with the dust and the gravel—transformed to slush where the water lapped the banks. And the orange U-haul moved along the causeway, and I could hear the tires beneath the truck turning the gravel and the dust and the snow, and I could see behind, wet, gray tracks of slush.

Then we entered the town; the orange truck entered the quiet streets of Fort Yates. On Agency Avenue, we stopped at the curb before the house my father had rented. It was a small house—single story—green, with darker green trim. On the weathered roof, the autumn snow collected, then it shifted and fell to the open steps of the porch below. I stared
at the house from the cab of the truck, and I wondered how that strange house would ever be home.
"Roll your sleeve back..."

The man held a saturated cotton ball, ready to swab the target area. I tugged up my sleeve, then turned my head. The coolness of the alcohol, the vigor of its fumes, added to the tension. I closed my eyes. The man tightened his grip at the back of my arm.

The Heaf test came to Standing Rock Community Elementary my second week there. I was in the sixth grade under the intolerant and young Miss Fixx. She called us forward that day—alphabetically—groups of five, each in turn sent quietly to the office of the school nurse. She took pride in such measured efficiency. She was strictly stick-to-the-book.

"It's painless," the man said.

He lied. My elbow jerked back in reflex to the puncture. I turned to look at my arm. The man twisted the disk, working the tines back and
forth beneath the skin surface.

"See . . . painless, nothing to it!" He removed the implement, placed a dry cotton ball over the puncture mark, then clutched my opposite hand. "Hold it there a bit, in case it bleeds."

"My mother had TB . . ."

The man bent down from his stool and reached into the black case on the floor beside him. He began preparing a swab for the next in line.

"She died from it," I said.

The man did not respond. Instead, he raised his alcohol prep. The line advanced and mechanically the man said, "Roll your sleeve back . . ."

I left the nurse's office—unalphabetically—last of my group of five. "Loitering," Miss Fixx would call it. But the idea of Miss Fixx seemed cause enough to loiter. Intolerant and young, I thought. Older teachers were more understanding, more sympathetic.

I lifted the cotton ball from my arm and inspected the small mark left by the skin test. Though it hadn't bled, the patch was still sore. I rolled the white cotton between my fingers, then tossed it to the floor of the hall.

Beyond the school library and the other offices, the hall took a bend to the right. It was the classroom wing, grades one through six. The walls, between classroom doors, were lined with pigeonhole shelves, and below the shelves a row of coat hooks. The pigeonholes were stuffed to capacity: scarfs and mittens, caps, occasional brown-paper sack lunches. Overstuffed. A scattering of strays lay out of place on the tile underneath. From the hooks hung the kinds of coats that children
wore: poplin coats and Levi jackets and fuzzy colored coats that never quite resembled the animal fur intended. Most were worn and sadly faded. They were hand-me-downs, coats that had seen these hooks before.

I cast a glance down the length of the hall to the far end of the wing. The door to the sixth grade class stood open, and I could hear the muffled voice of Miss Fixx as she called forward a second group of five. Outside the room, a figure lingered in the flat light of the corridor. The figure did not go in.

It was Harmon Circling Hawk. I recognized him only as I approached. He had been to the N.O. for the tuberculin screening; he'd left just shortly before I had. Something in the hall had drawn his attention—a small dark object in the shadowed space beneath the row of dangling coats. He stooped beside the wall, then reached for the object. I quickened my pace.

The knife must have fallen from the pocket of my jacket. It was Kirby's knife, the lock-blade Buck.

"That's mine, drop it!"

Harmon looked up. His eyes caught mine. "Finder's keeper's," he said. He sounded smug. He shoved the knife deep into the pocket of his trousers.

Before he could stand fully, I slammed his shoulder solid against the wall. The row of coats shook, and articles dropped from the overstuffed pigeonholes.

"It's my knife . . . it fell out of my jacket. Give it here."

Harmon rose slowly, catching, regaining his balance. He turned
toward me, but said nothing. He was very composed.

"It's my knife," I said again—louder this time.

"It could be your knife," he replied. "It could be anyone's knife—"

An audience formed in the hall around us. It was the second group of five tuberculin subjects. I heard one of them whisper: "What's got him geared up?" But nobody answered.

It was Kirby's knife—ebony handle and silver plate fittings. It's a loan, Fletcher . . . to prove that you're coming back . . .

Harmon's head snapped back under the force of the blow. It was a clean strike, square to the mouth. I paused. A red spot formed on his lip. I threw another, but the second was blocked. Then a return punch came and numbed my cheek and temple, and I grabbed on to his shirt, and I tried to drag him down.

There was an "Oh Jesus!" muttered somewhere among the half-circle of onlookers, response to a move I made in desperation—a panic move. My knee thrust upward, a stab to his groin. Harmon doubled forward, then rolled to the floor.

" Enough!"

I looked up. The audience scattered. The appearance of Miss Fixx, while not really unexpected, left in me a peculiar weakness. Oddly, her expression seemed marked more by regret than anger, a sublime resignation to time and place.

"Undoubtedly, one of you will come up with an explanation," she said.

Harmon stood, his hand firmly pressed to his abdomen. He stared at her, then turned and stared at me. The fate of the knife was in his control
—a word, a gesture, and the Buck lock-blade would become the irretrievable property of Miss Fixx. I looked down at the pocket that concealed the knife, then watched his hand for sign of movement. A silence followed, a seemingly endless silence.

Our sentence was a week's detention. Each day, we would remain seated, through the bell, beyond Miss Fixx's "Class dismissed." And we would wait there, eyes focused on the wall clock over the classroom door, ears fixed on the woman's quiet sounds: a cough, a shuffle of papers, the ceaseless squeaking tap of a shoe beneath her desk. It was effective punishment. It approached torture.

"Hey, Fletch—"

I stopped and turned around slowly. Harmon stood at the top of the steps outside the building.

"Wait up," he said.

A gust blew a swirl of thin gray snow and dust through the playground. The swirl settled against the steps. A tumbleweed broke loose from its hold beneath the steel-gray monkey bars and skipped into the street.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He zipped his jacket and ran down the steps into the schoolyard. He slowed up as he came near. "You forgot this," he said, pulling the knife from his pocket. "It must mean an awful lot to you if you're willing to fight for it like that."

I took the knife and nodded. Then I noticed his lip, red and badly
swollen. "Hey, I really mashed your face up, didn't I—"

He laughed. I hadn't expected him to laugh. "You're not about to
win any beauty contest yourself."

I reached to touch my cheek; the skin was puffed and tender. "No,
I guess not." He slugged my shoulder playfully then, and I slugged him
back.

"Friends?"

I paused. I smiled. "Friends," I answered. A handshake sealed the
treaty.

We crossed the field behind the school, over to Agency Avenue. In
the path, I stopped and kicked up a stone that was frozen into the dirt.
I hurled the stone at a street lamp by the curb, but it overshot its mark
and dropped into a neighboring yard. The street lamp was already broken.

"You live around here?" I asked.

Harmon shook his head. "Out Kenel Road—my grandfather's place.
The school bus picks me up."

"But ... detention? The bus? How are you getting home?"

"I'll walk," he said. "Nothing wrong with walking. Walking is good
for the soul—makes you think. All the time you're walking, you're
thinking. Good for the soul."

"How far is it?"

"Not so far—I'll do a lot of thinking."

A haze of wood smoke slipped from the stovepipes and chimneys of the
houses across the street. The smoke smelled sharp and heavy in the chill
air. It was nearly dusk.
"You should have told her," I said. "You should have explained. She couldn't have made you stay after, she couldn't have made you miss the bus—not if she knew."

"Really, it's all right. I don't mind."

"Then come to my house. My father, he'll give you a ride. He'll drive you in our car. He'll understand . . ."

"No, really, it's not necessary." He bent down to pick a rock from the gutter, then he tossed it at the same broken street lamp. Some of the remaining glass fragments cracked away and spilled to the pavement. It was a direct hit.

"Look, it's my fault," I told him. "I got you into this mess in the first place."

Harmon didn't respond. He seemed to be turning the proposition over in his mind.

"The house is just up the street. My father will understand. What do you say?"

For a moment, a stillness hung in the air, a quiet, heavy as the wood smoke. Harmon looked at me, then smiled and nodded. Up the street, the green house took on the pale gray of twilight, and here, the world seemed absent of color. As we approached, a light came on in the big living room window, then another over the porch, and the house was warmed by the soft yellow light. The two of us stepped up quickly onto the porch, crossed to the door and entered.

My father was sitting in the living room, relaxing, reading. The book had put him into a good mood; it was that new one, Franny and Zooey.
I cleared my throat to announce our presence, and his eyes searched the page for the end of a sentence. Across the room, the television glowed, but the sound was down low so that all you could hear was the laughter of a studio audience. It was tuned to *I Love Lucy*, a rerun.

I cleared my throat, then cleared it again. My father closed the book on his thumb, turned, and lowered his glasses. The bright light of the reading lamp made his gray hair look blond.

"You sound asthmatic," he said.

I cleared my throat once more—for show. "It's a long story," I said, anticipating a barrage of questions. "We had this fight ... in the hall, at school. It's all resolved now, though. Miss Fixx made us stay after."

"Should I ask what the fight was about?"

I shook my head.

On the television, Lucy and Ethel were trapped on the roof of their apartment building. It was beginning to rain.

"There's something else," I added. "Harmon could sort of use a ride home . . . ."

My father eased back against his chair. He raised a finger to his chin, then drew it lightly over his neck and down. He pinched his shirt collar. He began to chuckle, as though a pet theory had just proved out. "And I suppose the both of you could sort of use a little dinner first?"

I smiled and his chuckle became a contagious laughter. On the television, the laughter echoed through the studio audience.
"You can't make a living selling Fuller brushes on the reservation"—so my father had said about it. He was a high school English teacher, employed by the BIA—a job that would keep him busy only nine of twelve months a year. Come June, his colleagues packed their bags and joined the great teacher migration. Work in any form was scarce on Standing Rock, so they left those summer months, to find promise elsewhere, to get away, to forget.

But my father and I stayed on, and the summer became ours. He took contract work by mail, proofreading manuscripts for publishing concerns, indexing, editing and ghostwriting. At this, he worked mostly at night, said it was work that might cure his insomnia: "Nothing worth losing any sleep over." It was his composed independence that spilled into those summer days, filling them with the simple adventures of living. There were occasional jaunts into the city of Mobridge, evenings at the Mac
Theater; and fishing trips to Fort Rice and Smith Bay; and hamburgers, Coca-Cola, and a game of eightball, close as a walk to "Muttsy's" on Standing Rock Road. Life existed for the sake of life, and that was good.

The Annual All Nations Powwow was held early in August that first summer, at Long Soldier Coulee, in conjunction with the Wild Horse Stampede. It was a wacipi, a celebration, a gathering. Participants came from far and wide, from Iowa and Minnesota, Montana and the Dakotas, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Washington State. They rolled through the town by the hundreds, cars crammed with families and on-the-road furnishings, pickup trucks piled high with gear, pulling trailers, bound for the rodeo grounds. At Long Soldier Coulee, the camp grew by the hour and swelled with cars and tents and people and excitement. It was the event of the year in Fort Yates, North Dakota—the only event, really—and there could be no question that my father and I would attend. No question that this was to be only the first of many All Nations Powwows.

We arrived at the entrance to the powwow grounds shortly past noon, Saturday. The road in from the highway was blocked by a long double-line of parked cars. Below the road, stood the circle of a dance arbor, where some sort of grand entry of dancers was already under way. My father pulled off to the shoulder. We would make our way in on foot.

There was a dry creek bed that cut down through the coulee, bordered on either side by ash, burr oak, and box elder; and atop a bench above the creek to the north, stood the grandstand and the arena and the stock pens of the rodeo grounds. Here and there among the trailers and pickups, riders worked their horses or tested their ropes, preparing for events
yet to come. In the arena, a nervous tension filled the air, then a gate swung out in a huge cloud of dust, and the whoops and shouts poured out from the grandstand.

Below the bench and the rodeo grounds, the tents and the camps of the All Nations Powwow were spread through the hollow, clustered beneath the wooded stands along the gully of the creek bed. It was a community, alive with the business of the day. There were women and men gathered by camp stoves, and the smell of fresh coffee hung thick in the air. Dogs ran about, attended by children, and everywhere you looked, people were smiling.

To the east of the camps there was a great clearing, and in the center stood the dance arbor, surrounded by a wide walkway and the awnings and booths of the concessionaires. My father and I took a place among the mass inside the circle of the bowery, and we sat there and we watched and listened. Over the loudspeaker at the announcer's stand, an old man spoke a prayer in Lakota, and the people of the circle bowed their heads with studied respect.

A flag song followed—slow, intimate and fine—sung by the drum from Ring Thunder. Then the announcer called for an intertribal, and the loudspeaker squealed and hummed. He made a joke about a wasichu electrician: "The white man has his wires crossed!" The crowd broke in with laughter while the song and the drum started up, and the arbor filled with dancers, and the circle grew rich with color and spectacle and emotion.

I didn't expect to cross paths with Harmon there that day. It seemed
funny now, but somehow I had never really thought of him as Indian. We were classmates, just school acquaintances, nothing beyond that.

"Hey, Fletcher boy——"

He called from the walkway, outside the bowery. He was standing near a concession booth, a converted Airstream trailer, sharing a hot dog and a Coca-Cola with Leo Redhorse and another boy I didn't know. I rose slowly, then wandered over.

Harmon smiled, grinned as I approached. "Not often you see a white face here—not here in the crowd at the powwow."

I paused before answering. The scent of hot fryer grease oozed from the Airstream. "Yes," I said, "I think I understand how old Custer must have felt."

Harmon looked at Redhorse and laughed. The other boy choked on his hot dog. "You're all right, Fletcher boy," he said. Then he offered me a swallow from his bottle of Coke as though it were some ancient rite of acceptance. "You're all right . . . ."

There was an honor song that day, sung for George Medicine Calf, a Hunkpapa holy man who had died in an automobile accident the previous summer. The powwow announcer spoke highly of the man's accomplishments. He was well respected among the traditional Lakota—both a spiritual and political leader. Not long before his death, he had accompanied an Indian delegation to Washington D.C. where he spoke to the Secretary of the Interior and met with President Kennedy. Still, he was a simple man; he maintained few possessions. His life was dedicated fully to his love for his people, and for this they sang an honor song.
"He was a prophet," said Harmon. "They say that his knowledge was
given to him by the Thunder Beings."

"You believe that?" I asked.

"I believe it's best to respect the old ways."

His answer, to me, seemed fair enough. I nodded to confirm my
agreement.

The dance was led by four men in traditional dress. They wore bus­
tles of eagle feathers and hair roaches, and they carried eagle wing fans
or staffs wrapped in fur and red wool, ornamented with the tail feathers
of spotted eagles. Their steps were slow and calculated, and their move­
ments were made with ordered precision. They were American war veterans,
the announcer said, held in highest regard by the people. It was a
matter of honor.

The four were followed next by Medicine Calf's widow, then by his
family and relatives. Beneath the circle of the bowery, the people stood,
removed their hats, and as the procession passed, those who had been
close to the man being honored stepped in behind and took their place
among the dancers. As they did this, they offered small gifts of money
to the widow, and she accepted these gifts with dignity.

When the honor song had ended, a giveaway was held. Members of the
man's family came forth and spread the articles of the giveaway in loose
arrangement on the grass near the pole in the center of the dance arbor.
There were intricately-sewn star quilts—handmade—and fine blankets,
Pendleton and Hudson's Bay. There were colored shawls, ribbon shirts,
and calico dresses; and there were beaded items: moccasins and pouches
for tobacco. And then a young boy led a horse into the circle, a sorrel, sleek and spirited, with a snip of white, a star on its forehead, and as the boy paraded the horse about the bowery, I sensed from the expressions of those people around me that a giveaway of such magnitude had not been seen in years.

"My grandfather told me once about the 'Keeping of the Soul.'"

I looked at Harmon. His eyes were focused on the proceedings in the bowery center. "Keeping of the Soul?" I asked.

"It's a rare practice these days, but there are some, old people mostly, who believe the soul does not enter the spirit world immediately after death. They say the soul remains for a time with the beings of the earth, and the relatives of the one who has died must be careful..."

"But why a giveaway?"

"According to my grandfather, life and death are part of a circle, and like a giveaway, toska ake luha: what you give, you will in turn receive. A giveaway held to end a Keeping of the Soul will bring honor to the one entering the spirit world."

A low buzz reverberated from the loudspeaker, and the announcer called forward the first recipient. It was an old woman, helped to the center of the bowery by a young girl. The woman took her gift from the holy man's widow with grave acceptance, then returned to her place in silence. The announcer called others, and each made his way to the center, and one by one the gifts were distributed. Finally, the announcer called out the last name: "Victor Circling Hawk..."

I watched as the man stood and stepped from the edge of the bowery.
He was tall and rather old, and his hair was long and gray, braided in the fashion of the traditionals. He wore a red silk shirt and his hat was black felt—a Stetson. The recipient moved toward the center with an exacting grace, a conscious modesty. It was Harmon's grandfather who came forth to claim the sorrel.

It was midnight when my father and I left Long Soldier Coulee and the All Nations Powwow for home. The air inside the car was stuffy and warm. I rolled down my window. Outside, from the distance, I heard the sounds of the drum and the singers and the dancers' bells echo against the hills of the coulee, and it occurred to me then that the events of those twelve short hours had somehow changed my life.

My father let the engine warm up, then he pulled out onto the highway. To the east, I saw the lights of Fort Yates, reflected in the still backwater of the Missouri.

"Why do different people hold different beliefs?"

My father paused for a time, then answered, "There are as many beliefs as there are individuals to believe in them. No two minds are alike."

"Whose beliefs are correct?"

"Beliefs are based on circumstance. One is as correct as another."

"And what if beliefs conflict?"

The car slowed and my father turned to look at me. "Well then, Fletcher," he replied, "beware the man of only one book."
FOURTEEN

Muttsy DuBois was a mixed blood: by his own admission, one part vodka, two parts tomato juice. He was a self-styled entreprenuer. He owned and operated the only lucrative private business in Fort Yates—a combination pool hall-pinball arcade, complete with lunch counter and short order grill. The place was known simply as "Muttsy's," and its strategic location on Standing Rock Road—wedged between the Super Valu and the Standard Oil—made it the social center of the business district.

Rose was the woman in Muttsy's life. She was half his age, but gaining. Together, they lived in the back of the establishment with a small boy named Wallace—a product of Rose's previous marriage and the probable cause of its failure. Rose was a member of the Assembly of God, and her mission in life was Muttsy's alcohol reform. It was a tall order. Even before the passage of House Resolution 108, Muttsy was reputed to be the chief customer of his own bootlegging operation.
It was here at Muttsy's, nearly two weeks after the All Nations Powwow, that I again met Harmon Circling Hawk.

"Muttsy—"

"What'lit be, tiger?" Muttsy sucked at his teeth.


"Bottle or glass?"

"Bottle."

He pried the cap off a Bubble-Up with a church key that dangled on a string near the cooler. The bottle fizzed over, then the fizz subsided. The cooler made a rattling noise.

"Hot one today," said the proprietor Muttsy, "mus'be close t'near a hundert." He reached to switch on the brown plastic radio that sat atop a metal shelf beneath the range hood over the grill. The radio took a long time warming up. "Mus'be a record. Bet it's a record. You think it's ever been this hot?"

I shook my head. "Never," I said, though I didn't really think it was that hot. On the radio, a man read the livestock report.

Wallace was a pool shark. He was only seven years old, barely tall enough to see over the table, but still he was a pool shark. I wandered over and watched him rack the balls.

"That kid'11 clean yur ass!" Muttsy said. He was leaning against the counter, half-fiddling with an oscillating electric fan. The fan refused to oscillate. "Watch'm break now—clean yur ass!"

Wallace drove home the cue and the white ball slammed into the rack, scattering the colored balls over the surface of the table. Two dropped.
"Hah!" cried Muttsy, "clean yur ass!"

On the radio, the livestock report was interrupted for an automobile advertisement: "See the USA in a Chevrolet . . ." Wallace stood back to chalk his stick. I took a swallow of Bubble-Up.

At the front of the arcade, past the end of the counter, the screen door swung open and Harmon stepped inside. He stopped for a moment to survey the room, and he gave me a nod when he saw me. Muttsy called to him from behind the till. "You heard the temperchure? Bet it's a record—"

Harmon smiled as he moved up to the counter, then he reached into his pocket and produced a small handful of coins. "I need some Lucky Strikes—for my grandfather." He pushed the loose pile of coins toward Muttsy.

The proprietor tucked his lip against his teeth as he studied the change.

"That was a fine-looking animal they gave your grandfather," I said.

Harmon turned. He seemed pleased. Muttsy laid four packages of Lucky Strikes on the counter, then stepped back to the till to ring the sale.

"Would you like to ride him? Today . . . this afternoon?"

"You really mean it?"

"Sure," he replied. "Why not? I've been on him—that sorrel's a good horse."

The screen door swung open again and a woman entered. She was Indian, rather heavy, and with her was a little girl. The Indian woman was holding the little girl's hand, and they walked past us, and the woman lifted the
girl onto a stool at the counter.

"Hot one today," Muttsy began. He dropped the coins into the tray, then slid the drawer closed. A hand-lettered sign was taped to the cash register: NO CREDIT!

I offered Harmon my Bubble-Up. He smiled, lifted the bottle and took a swig. The woman at the counter ordered coffee and an Eskimo Pie.

"I'm not very good at riding," I said, "not very good at all."

"That's okay, I'll show you. There's really nothing to worry about. Honest."

From the back room of the place, a voice boomed out with smug command.

"WA—L—L—ACE, you better not be shootin' no pool! How many times I told you, DuBois, I don't want that kid shootin' no pool?"

Rose was the woman in Muttsy's life. Assembly of God. Muttsy reached down beneath the counter, raised a flask to his lips and tipped it. He smiled then, and sucked at his teeth, seemingly content with the world and himself. Across the room at the pool table, the shark dropped the eightball.

The Standard Oil Station stood adjacent to Muttsy's, and Harmon and I walked over. It was an old building, made of concrete and cinder block. Its walls and its windows were coated in a thin and greasy film. There was a wooden bench in the shade outside the front of the station, a bench where old men sat and smoked their cigarettes and talked of the days of their youth.

The station attendant was a white man. In his coveralls, he possessed
the same filmy look as the building. The old men at the bench outside
were Indian, and each time the attendant passed by, they would snicker
and mutter among themselves in Lakota. The white man gave them a sus­
picious eye as they did this, and it turned into a game with the men.

"Fill it up?"

Harmon's grandfather stood by his pickup and counted the bills he
had pulled from his wallet. He turned and looked at the station atten­
dant. "Four dollars," he said. "Four dollars, regular."

The pickup was an International, dark green and of late 40's vintage.
It was dented in places with rust forming at the ridges of the dents.
The driver's side window was cracked, and the pattern in the glass resem­
bled the web of a spider. Harmon's grandmother sat inside the cab.
Behind her, a gun rack above the seatback held a rifle.

"I told Fletcher he could ride the sorrel—"

The old man did not respond. He was re-counting his bills. "Put
in another dollar—five dollars altogether."

The attendant glanced up at him suspiciously, then looked back toward
the bench in front of the station. The men at the bench snickered.

Harmon prodded: "Grandfather? . . . The sorrel horse?"

The old man turned sharply, and his eyes settled on mine. He stared
into my eyes as though he were searching for something within. He shifted
the brim of his hat, adjusting for the angle of light, then a smile broke
on his brown and weathered face. "That sorrel gelding is a good horse.
He's very swift, you'll have to hold on like hell!" Harmon's grandfather
laughed when this was said. "Hold on like hell!" he repeated. And the
laughter made the station attendant nervous.

On the highway, Harmon and I rode behind, in the box of the old International. We shared that space with a load of USDA stamped commodities, goods from the Super Valu, and a skinny, brown and gray mottled dog, referred to by Harmon as "Queenie." The dog stood forward in the pickup box, eyes closed, tongue out, face to the road wind. The road wind seemed to ease the early afternoon heat.

"Harmon—how come you live alone with your grandparents? Something happen to your mother, your father?"

Harmon did not look up. He stroked the back of Queenie's neck a few times before answering. "It was about five years ago—my mother, she left us. She was always drinking a lot, always coming home drunk—you know, practically alcoholic. But my father, he really did love her. He really tried hard to please her. He was always buying her things, nice little earrings and things. There's talk she ran off with some rancher up by Selfridge—a white man. People are always saying that, but it isn't true. I know it isn't true."

"Do you miss her? Do you ever hear from her?"

"Somebody said she was living in Minneapolis, but that was a couple of years ago." Harmon paused, then looked up. Queenie nudged at his knee, and he resumed petting the animal. "I think about her a lot, if you want to know the truth, Fletcher. I think about her all the time. I wonder how she's getting along, if she's ever happy."

"What about your father?" I said.
"He lives in Los Angeles, in California. He took a relocation job. I wanted to go along with him, but he said it would be better if I stayed on the reservation. He said I should learn from my grandmother and grandfather. He writes sometimes, and sends us money when he has it. Someday, I'll go out there to see him."

The truck slowed at the Kenel Road approach and we took a slight bump at the turn. The dirt road was hard and dusty, and the ruts in the surface were dried hard. The old International strained through the gears and was slow working back up to speed.

"My mother is dead," I said to Harmon. "I was only six when it happened, but I still remember."

We were a mile or so beyond the junction, on the downgrade of a hill, when a mule deer—a spike buck—leapt from the borrow pit and bounded into the road before the pickup. The truck broke hard, skidding to a stop at the road edge, and the deer shot through the brush across the field and lumbered up the hillside behind us. Harmon's grandfather was out of the truck, the rifle jerked from the gun rack. He steadied the stock against the hood of the pickup and drew down on the deer. I heard the shell drop into the chamber. Then a piercing crack echoed in the distance. Near the hilltop, the deer stumbled, his legs buckling, collapsing beneath him as he went down.

The dog was out of the box first. Harmon ran fast behind. When he reached the animal, he whirled around, gave me an even stare. "You coming?" he shouted. He held his hands cupped to the sides of his mouth.
But I couldn't move. I kept seeing the deer, running, bounding out of the ditch, climbing, and then suddenly nothing.

"What's the matter?" He stood next to the animal, his feet spread. "Fletcher boy, come on."

I closed my eyes, tried to swallow. Nothing. I drew a breath, then forced a nod, and I proceeded slowly across the narrow field, into the dry snarls of brush, up the grass-covered slope. Past my shoulder, I could see the old man getting into the truck. He put the truck into reverse, and the clutch grabbed and the engine whined as he backed up the steady grade.

It was a clean shot. The bullet had entered low, directly behind the shoulder. Queenie sniffed at the blood that seeped from the wound, and the deer shuddered, and his legs stiffened in a feeble kick while the life and the breath left the body.

Harmon pulled at the hind quarters and swung the carcass around so that the head was pointed down-slope. His grandfather arrived shortly thereafter, and set to work with the knife. He was swift with his movements, smooth and precise, and there was an odd calm that came over his expression as he opened the neck to bleed the animal. For a moment, I sensed a peculiar stillness, then the blood spilled out across the steel of the knife and it stained the old man's fingers.

I wanted to help them. Really I did. But something wouldn't let me, something held me back. The muscles of my legs, my arms, grew rigid and tense, unmoving. There was a weakness in my stomach. I stared at the deer, at the eyes, the blood, and I felt a shiver creeping over my
body, a chill in the level heat.

Harmon's grandmother stood quietly nearby and watched as the old man went about the work. She seemed older than the man; her face was darker, more deeply creased. Her hair was pulled back, bound beneath a calico scarf. The scarf emphasized her features.

Harmon's grandfather worked at the underside now, cutting from rib cage to belly. It was an old knife that he used. The blade was pitted and ground thin from too much sharpening. When he came upon the pelvic bone, he began to saw away furiously. The bone sheared loose then, and Harmon took hold to spread the legs, and the quarters split open, and the bowels and the viscera rolled out from the cavity.

There was an accepting reverence in the way the old woman looked upon the thing. She seemed to see the deer only as a gift, the way the commodities stacked in the pickup box were a gift, the way the star sorrel gelding or life itself was a gift.

Queenie moved in to poke among the entrails, and the old man kicked dirt at the dog and shouted. He'd been wrapping the heart and liver in a torn length of burlap bag, saving them out.

Harmon signaled me to come around then. He nodded his head past his shoulder, indicating the carcass, his hands firm, still gripping a hind leg. "Take the front," he said, "we'll drag it to the road."

I looked at the old man, then back at the woman. They stood patient, waiting as though they could feel my unease.

"Fletcher..."
centration. I started forward then, slowly. Once more, I tried to picture the deer, running the slope of the hill. But the image was lost now, and all I could see was the unsettled dust drifting into the sky.

It didn't take us long to pull the carcass to the road. When we reached the pickup, Harmon dropped the tailgate and we hoisted it into the box. I turned and looked back toward the old man and woman, toward the place on the hill where the mule deer had lain. I could see Harmon's grandfather reach to his shirt pocket, and I watched as he pulled a cigarette from its package and kneeled and placed it gently in the grass. He stood then, and he lowered his hat, and over his chest, he made the sign of the cross. Nearby, the old woman looked upon the man, and it seemed that she saw the man as a gift.
The Circling Hawk place sat down among the breaks, at the base of a point where two coulees joined. There were scattered stands of ash here along the bottoms of the drainage, and dogwood and chokecherry and growths of buckbrush that spread up the sides and gave way to bunch grass. The road in was no more than a worn set of tracks, and it dropped from the ridge against the slope of the point and followed the edge to the house.

It was a small house, low to the ground: a bleached-white cabin of cottonwood logs. The cement in the chinks was crumbled loose in spots, patched over in others with gray weathered planking. And there was an addition tacked to one side, a frame addition sheathed in a layer of green roofing paper. At the back, the house was crowded in tall green weeds that reached to the eaves of the roof. A gnarled burr oak grew near the weeds, and a path wound around it, up a short rise to the outhouse.
To the east of the cabin, a wooden shed stood, roofed in corrugated tin. It was a sad little structure with a pronounced lean, and its tin roof sagged and was rusted. Next to the shed there was a corral, and behind, two stock pens in a minor state of collapse, a broken-down work chute between them. Barbed wire strung here and there about the place—downed and snarled in some sections—evidenced a cattle venture long ago abandoned.

The old International bounced and swayed and pulled to a stop in the yard. Up the road behind, past the shed and corral, the dust and the haze turned up by the truck settled evenly upon the earth. Harmon's grandfather stepped from the cab. He paused for a moment, and in a sweeping gaze, looked out on the valley and the land that gave him life. Above the valley, the August heat played tricks on the eyes and the jagged rocks at the coulee rims seemed to move in an even grace against the sky.

The sorrel gelding, the horse with the star on its forehead, was tethered to a picket at the far end of the Circling Hawk yard. In the sturdier of the pens, two mares—a buckskin and a red-speckled roan—stood about indifferently.

"Fletcher boy, you worried about something?"

I turned. Harmon had caught me off guard. "Worried? . . . What's there to be worried about?" In the yard behind him, I watched the sorrel as he pounded a hoof into the dirt and then reared a bit and lifted his head till the rope and the halter found tension. The mares in the pen seemed to eye me with a restless and curious pleasure. "Worried?" I repeated, "worried?"
Harmon smiled as he looked at me, and he began to chuckle, amused at my evident apprehension. My eyes fastened on the sorrel again, then I glanced back at Harmon, and though I returned his smile, I wasn't really sure what to make of the situation.

"I can tell that you're worried," he said to me then, and the chuckle intensified, grew into laughter.

Harmon's grandmother climbed out from the cab, brushed lightly at her dress and straightened it. She turned around and stepped back to the truck box, resting her hand along the panel. From the opposite side, the old man grinned, and she looked away in pretended embarrassment. It was a powerful grin.

There were tasks to be done now. "Huwope," Harmon's grandfather said, and he and the old woman began transferring the packaged goods into the house. The mule deer lay slumped in the bed of the pickup; the once-liquid eyes were now clouded and filmy, and blood was dried black at the mouth. Harmon reached to take hold, and together we raised the carcass and eased it down over the side. Queenie jumped from the box and circled around. Her interest in the deer was renewed.

"You'll have your share, old girl," Harmon said. The dog seemed well enough aware of this.

We dragged the carcass to a grassy spot by the side of the house, laying it out to be butchered. I thought it odd that the deer would not be allowed to hang, that the meat would not be given any chance to cure. But I kept these thoughts to myself and said nothing.

Soon, Harmon's grandmother emerged from the cabin. She carried a
knife and a coil of twine and a small bundle of rolled newspaper. I wondered who among the Circling Hawks had been the reader of those papers, but again, I said nothing. She made her way back to the grassy spot then, and she stooped slowly here, placing the twine and the bundle beside her, and she called to the dog and spoke to her softly in words that were Lakota.

A tin cup hung turned atop the pump shaft. The wellhead stood a few short yards from the house, and the pump, grown around its base in milkweed and clover, was red and flecked brown with rust. Harmon's grandfather took grasp of the cup and he eyed the spout closely as he worked at the handle.

From the pen across the yard, the mares watched the magic. A gurgle sounded, pulled up from below. Then the water spilled forth, and the cup filled with water, and the water filled the old man's belly.

He leaned forward, returning the cup to its place on the pump shaft. Then he lifted his hat and he wiped at his lips and brow with his shirt sleeve. At the spout, the water had slowed to a trickle, and the wash on the ground spread quickly away to seep among the weeds.

The hide slipped easily from the flesh. The old woman's hands worked as if by instinct, moving the knife back and forth beneath the fold, pulling the skin in even increments. Then the hide was removed entirely and the venison exposed. From the loins she took roasting pieces, cut long and with the grain, and these she folded into newspaper and secured with lengths of twine.

Harmon's grandfather lit a cigarette, drew on it a few times, then
wandered over. He stood by his wife with a casual manner, peering over her shoulder, inspecting the job like a line boss. Each movement evoked its response: if she cut too deeply, the old man would cough; too shallow, and he began to sneeze. An error in the angle of the knife sent him into convulsions.

The old woman turned and gestured with the knife. "Wica ca hokci ke sni ya skun," she said. Then she winked at him and went back about her business.

The old man took a pull on his cigarette and he paused before releasing the smoke. The smoke curled white and thinned above his head, dissipating innocently into the vast and summer sky.

We saddled the roan first. It was an easy matter.

"Her name is Louise," Harmon said.

"A horse named Louise?"

"It's my mother's name—the horse was named for my mother." He jerked on the strap to tighten the cinch, then fed the end back through the ring. "She was just a filly," he continued, "not even green-broke. One day, when my father was not looking, that horse kicked him right in the head—knocked him over completely unconscious. Later, when they revived him, he couldn't stop laughing. He said it was just like that day that he met Louise . . ."

Harmon placed his hand against the speckled mare's neck, and he smiled and stroked her with a comfortable fondness. His smile was reflected in the old horse's eye.

We went back then, to the shed, to get the second saddle. It was
hot inside, and there was a musty odor about. White bands of light passed through cracks between the siding boards, forming thin even stripes on the dirt-gray floor below. Above, near the shed's single window, the remains of a hornets' nest dangled from the ridge piece, its abandoned curls of paper catching spare shafts of light.

Harmon pulled down a bridle from its nail on the wall and draped it around my neck. "Hang on to that," he said as he gathered the reins and swung them up over my shoulder.

In the corner stood the saddle, upended, and a striped blanket lay folded over its back. The saddle was old; the leather was dark and oily —polished smooth from wear. Harmon tossed me the blanket which I wadded under my arm. Then he grabbed hold of the pommel and lifted, and the saddle rode awkwardly and jarred against his hip as he strode off stiff-legged for the door. "Aren't you coming?" he asked.

The old man stood outside with the sorrel. He held the lead firmly, close to the halter, but the horse was rather skittish and he had difficulty keeping him still. "He'll want to run—you'll have to rein him tight!" He spit past his shoulder to the weeds beneath the rails of the corral. Queenie trotted up to sniff the spot.

"Ho there great horse, what is it you're thinking?" Harmon leaned the saddle to a fence post and approached the animal with cautious respect. "Easy boy, easy . . ."

He reached behind and I gave him the bridle. The horse was reluctant and had to be coaxed into taking the bit. Harmon doubled the blanket next, and spread it and smoothed it back from the withers. The
old man loosened his grip on the lead rope. His gaze drifted to the hills and sky, then beyond—perhaps to a time that was past—and his dark glassy eyes took on an energy of youth.

"Fletcher, bring over the saddle."

"He'll want to run," the old man repeated. His voice became raspy and distant, excited.

He'll want to run—maybe he was frightened. Yes, I could see that now, the great star sorrel was frightened. It was very clear.

I brought up the saddle and Harmon swung it atop the horse. The animal skittered sideways. The old man adjusted his grip and his footing. Behind him, Louise spooked and backed against the corral fence.

"Easy boy . . . Ho there."

"He'll want to run—"

I could see white showing in the corners of his eyes, and his ears were flat and laid back against his head. The horse was frightened, more frightened than I was. In my mind, an odd kinship was formed between us, a peculiar affinity, mutual fear.

Harmon hooked the stirrup over the horn, positioned the saddle, then cinched up the girth. "You won't have any trouble, Fletcher. He'll settle down when he feels your weight on him. Just stay loose, don't tense up."

I pulled down the stirrup and turned it for my foot. Then, clutching the reins to the saddle horn, I threw my leg over. The horse reared and pitched in an arc on the lead, and I dropped forward against the pommel to his neck.
"Bear down with your knees," Harmon shouted.

The old man unclipped the lead rope, and the sorrel bounded ahead and circled tightly in the yard.
We rode the south coulee, tailing it back to the open country above the breaks. It was a broad land. Buttes dotted the prairie as far as you could see—flat-topped buttes, creased by erosion, sun-baked red and gray. It was a land of bunch grass, of sagebrush and yucca. The land was immense and looked mostly untamed.

"Harmon, you ever seen a ghost?"

"What kind of ghost? You mean like spooks?"

"No, a real ghost—ever seen one?"

"Nope. Ghosts generally leave me alone."

Harmon sat forward in his saddle, nudged the horse's flanks a little, clicked his tongue against his teeth. Reluctantly, the roan Louise picked up her pace.

"Have you been seeing ghosts?" he asked as he drew up.

I looked at him but did not answer.
We swung south at the crest of a rise and caught up to a fence line and followed it. Ahead, a magpie took flight from its post, then circled and landed farther down, only to take flight again. I turned, shifting my gaze into the distance. A bank of clouds was building in the west.

"People do have souls, don't they Harmon? I mean when they die, their souls keep on living, isn't that right?"

"Everything has a spirit," he answered. "The animals, the trees, the earth—all of them have spirits."

"People?"

"Yes."

"And these spirits are alive? . . . still alive, even after a body is dead?"

"That is what my grandfather says. Yes."

I considered his answers before speaking again, yet really wanted to form no distinct conclusions.

"My mother is dead," I said after a time. "Tuberculosis. She died when I was six—I already told you that."

Harmon turned. The leather of his saddle squeaked beneath him. He waited.

"I've seen her ghost," I went on. "My mother, I've seen her several times—I'm sure of it. It happens when I'm alone. I'll get this feeling, it's like I know that someone's behind me, staring at me. And then, when I turn around, I'll see her. It's just for a second, a split second—she's gone after that. But even so, I know that I've seen her."
The Missouri River lay to our east, below the escarpment known simply as the breaks. The river was Lake Oahe here, reservoir to a dam a hundred miles downstream, a backwater that invaded the river plain to spread up the creeks and the coulees, setting adrift the agency town as an island—a physical segregation that mirrored the town's purpose. From the bluffs where we rode, we gazed out upon the lake. Its surface shimmered in the late-summer sun.

"Fletcher boy, you know how to swim?"

I nodded. "American crawl."

Harmon smiled, then chuckled, and the mare perked her ears back, lifting her head in anxious curiosity. "Come on," he said, "we're going in swimming—American crawl!" He gave old Louise a sharp kick in the slats, and the horses broke into a canter toward the rims.

The side hills were grassy, grown thick in bluestem and brome grass and white-flowered yarrow, tall and ungrazed. At the edge, the horses slowed to an even lope, and we dropped down and angled along the side of the ravine. The tall grass swished the animals' bellies, bending away beneath them as we plodded cross-slope.

The gully below was choked in short stands of willow, and farther down, rushes and cattails grew where the bottoms were muddy and soft. As we continued east, the ravine widened, connecting with other arms of the drainage until it opened upon the lake in a great backwater bay. Harmon and I were quick to dismount.

We loosened the cinches and led the horses down the bank toward the water. There were killdeers and curlews on the skirt of the lakeshore
and a confusion of gulls that lifted as we passed. Swallows circled close overhead, swooping and diving near the steep and sandy cliffs where they nested, feeding on insects that seemed easy game.

The horses drank readily, their muzzles buried beneath the water surface, their bellies expanding and contracting as they sucked. Then we scuttled back up the bank, leading the horses to a shaded place beneath a small grove of ash. We looped their reins over a low-hanging branch.

I turned for a moment, looking out on the bay and the stillness of the water, and I saw there, the dead-white cottonwoods that stood in the shallows bordering the opposite shore. There were hundreds of cottonwoods, bare and bleached the color of bone, rising from the surface like the arms and the hands and the fingers of the dead, trapped here in a watery tomb. Hundreds of cottonwoods. Ghosts of trees.

"Fletcher—you coming?"

Beyond the trees, I saw an eagle, and then its mate—a pair of spotted eagles gliding in an arc above the bluffs across the bay.

"Fletcher?"

The eagles rose steadily higher, and I watched as they changed form and became specks against the sky. I adjusted my focus, but the specks grew smaller. Movement then faded and the eagles were gone.

"Fletcher—"

I spun sharply.

"—you coming?"

There was a round and grass-covered knoll of earth—a hillock island—projecting from the water near the mouth of the bay. The island stood
a hundred yards or so off shore, a narrow sand bar silted in beside it, caught among the driftwood snags at its base.

"We'll swim to the island," said Harmon. "I'll race you—what do you say?"

I glanced back to the bay, marking off the span in my head. "You're on," I answered. It was an easy distance.

We shucked off our clothes and left them piled on a driftwood log that lay partially embedded in the gravel and the sand before the water's edge. I looked at Harmon, at his brown skin, naked in the white light that played off the bay, and there was a long and awkward silence as he noticed my stare.

"Come on, Fletch," he finally said, "last one in is a rotten egg—" And he took off then, down the sandy bank and plunged headlong, fully to the water.
The clouds came up from the west, low and dark, and passed overhead, forming shadows on the land that moved swiftly away beneath us. There was a rustling in the trees that carried down through the valley; a breeze had settled in, cool, steady and direct. Harmon dropped from his saddle to unhook the wire gate—last gate before the house. A low rumble sounded from the distance.

"Almost there," he said.

The sky had grown dark and gray and close by the time we reached the Circling Hawk yard. The dark clouds moved forcefully now, twisting and spreading, changing shape, building. There was a light that burned yellow in the window of the cabin, and the faint smell of wood smoke was stirred by the wind. We climbed down from the horses, unsaddled them quickly, removed their bridles. Then we turned them out, and we watched from the fence rail as the star sorrel gelding and the red-speckled roan stumped
off across the dim, gray pasture.

"I see you are back."

I turned and looked around past my shoulder. It was Harmon's grandfather. He stepped from the doorway of the cabin, then started across the yard. As he approached, he said, "Did you have a good ride?"

"Yes," Harmon answered, "it was a good ride—a good day altogether."

Harmon's grandfather looked at me. "And the sorrel gave you no trouble?"

"I showed him my respect . . . ."

The old man's eyes widened as he smiled. "That is the best way," he said.

He helped us carry the tack into the saddle shed. Then we set off for the house, and as we passed through the yard, I noticed a crude pole framework standing near the place where the mule deer had been butchered. There were strips of venison, cut long and thin, draped over the cross members—spread here, I imagined, by Harmon's grandmother late that afternoon, to jerk in the dry heat of the sun. Now, the thin meat was dark with flies, and the flies were sluggish as they moved about the meat. A sign of coming rain, I thought.

"Come, you two, into the house." The old man held the door, and he gazed at his grandson and added, "Your grandmother is fixing you a treat."

"Wojapi?"

"Yes—and frybread. Into the house now, hokahe!"

The kitchen was warmed by the heat of the wood stove. The stove was grand and visually solid, painted gray, slightly rusted, and there were
nickel-plate letters on the oven door: HOME COMFORT. Harmon's grandmother was stoking the firebox when we entered the room, and the great stove rumbled with combustion as it drew a new supply of air.

A clear bulb glared from its socket on the ceiling, illuminating a circle that spilled across the kitchen table to the worn linoleum of the floor below. We sat down around the table, and she brought us coffee and canned milk to smooth its flavor. The cups that we drank from were delicate, made of bone china. The patterns did not match.

The kitchen was not really a room to itself—only the front portion of a greater room that appeared to serve many functions. I looked around. There was an old faded couch against the near wall. Its upholstery was green, smooth and shiny at the centers of the cushions. Opposite, stood an iron bunk with a gray wool blanket folded at the far end of a cotton-tick mattress. A silver crucifix hung on the wall above, and there was a television set—RCA—atop its stand near the foot of the bunk. The dog, Queenie, lay curled on the floor before the glowing tube. It was tuned to Dick Van Dyke.

"It is a modest house," Harmon's grandfather said. He must have noticed me, looking around. He hoisted his cup and sipped at the coffee. "It's a good house—comfortable and familiar. Most of all, it's familiar."

The old woman was mixing bread dough. She added the ingredients without measuring, adjusting the quantities by eye and by feel. She mixed the dough with her fingers, directly on the surface of the table. At the back of the stove, next to the coffee pot, a blackened kettle emitted the tangy scent of something stewing—venison, I guessed.
The old man seemed to be speaking to no one—and to everyone. "It's a good house," he continued, "but not according to that social-work lady! She didn't like this house. She didn't like Indians. She even refused the food we offered her."

He stood then, took his cigarettes from his shirt pocket, and he tapped the package against the palm of his hand. The cellophane made a crinkling sound. "Who does she think she is anyway—some white lady, come snooping around?"

Harmon's grandmother paid him no attention. She went about her business, folding and kneading the dough, working it to the proper consistency.

The old man put a cigarette to his lips, and he moved toward the stove and scratched a wooden match to life against the stove's iron surface. He drew several short puffs before the tobacco caught fire.

"She wanted us to move into that development—the one on the edge of Yates. Government housing. She said she would get us a brand new house with running water." He paused as he pulled on his cigarette, then a smile broke and he began to chuckle. "I said to her, 'Who is this fellow Running Water? And why does he want us to share his house?' The social-work lady got pretty flustered over that one!"

The old man lifted the granite-ware coffee pot by its bail, took it from the back of the stove and carried it to the table to refill his cup. A thin line of steam rose from the spout as he tipped the pot to pour the coffee. "Flustered," he said, "that's what she was. My father built this house, and my brother and I helped. I'll die in this house."

Harmon's grandmother spooned lard into a deep-sided skillet, then
poked up the fire in the stove. The lard spit and sizzled as it melted, and when it was hot, she pulled at the soft, white dough, slipping the pieces into the boiling grease.
"Things were much different then—" The old man studied the fetish, turning the charm between his fingers. It was small, in the form of a coyote, made of carved bone. The edges of the charm were worn smooth, almost polished, yet its surfaces were dull and yellowed. "There were many restrictions, but the people adjusted. They were stronger then—they had to be strong."

A blade of lightning split the sky outside the kitchen window. It was followed by thunder, a sharp crack that shook the cabin, rattling the loose panes of glass. Above the table, the ceiling light flickered, then grew steadily back to strength.

The old man went on: "When I was a boy, my grandfather—my mother's father—told me how it was. He was a very wise man. A very knowledgeable man. In my life, I have known many men who were wise. I once went away to the Carlisle School, and I tell you, this man was wiser than
anyone there. He told me the stories of the Hunkpapas and of the deeds of the Strong Hearts, the society he had belonged to. He told me about the early days on the reservation, about the good times . . . and about the difficulties. I listened carefully and I remember. Things were very much different then."

Harmon sat opposite this old man. His chair was turned backward, and he sat with his legs straddled, his arms folded over the pressed-wood chair back, his chin resting on his folded arms. He looked at his grandfather and he listened to the telling. His expression was rapt, his dark eyes reflective.

"How old are you?" I asked the old man. But his answer was indirect.

"They were camped on the Grand River," he said, "—my grandfather and his relatives—when the Indian police came to take Sitting Bull. These people, camped here, meant no harm; you must understand they meant no harm. The Minneconjou, Kicking Bear, had been among the Arapahos, and from them, he learned the ghost dance religion. At the Grand River, he told these people what he had learned. They were afraid at first, and skeptical, yet they came to believe in the visions and they prayed long for the old ways to be returned. But the Indian police came, and there was a skirmish . . . Sitting Bull was killed, and many others. All about, there was a great commotion, and the camp scattered, and the people fled."

The old man raised the carved bone fetish and squinted as he held it to the light overhead. He stared upon the charm with focused concentration, as though the coyote spoke to him, passing clues that caused him to remember. "My mother would have been a young girl in those days. She
lived those events, though she never talked of them. It was my grand­father who told me the stories, my grandfather who told me never to forget."

Again, the lightning came, snaking down outside the window—again, thunder and the rattling of glass and the flicker of the bulb above the kitchen table. Across the room, Queenie lifted her head to look about, to sniff the air. The RCA had lost its picture.

"They moved on to Cheyenne River, and then to the Badlands and the camp of the Minneconjous and Wounded Knee Creek. It was winter. There were many women and children in the camp, and there was not enough for all of them to eat. Still, they believed in this ghost dance, they believed in the good world that would come. And so they prayed, and they sang the holy songs, and they danced for the holy visions.

"But the good world did not come to my grandfather and his relatives, and it did not come to the rest of these people, for one morning, the camp awoke to find itself surrounded by the wasichu soldiers. Some of these soldiers rode down into the camp and ordered the people to surrender their rifles. One man resisted. A shot was fired. And then the craziness . . . the soldiers who lined the hills above the creek opened up on the camp, shooting at everyone, women and children. And they killed them as they ran trying to escape up the ravine.

"My grandfather took a soldier's bullet that day. It passed through his shoulder and he lived, but many others were not so lucky. His sister and her daughter and his two sons were among the dead. My mother was just a young girl then. This is what my grandfather told me."
Harmon's grandmother came over to the table, and she brought a plate heaped with frybreads and set it down on the table center. From the kettle on the stove, she ladled the stewed venison onto plain white dishes, passing them along as they were filled. She then took a short stack of bowls from the cupboard, and in careful portions, spooned out the wojapi. The bowls were yellow plastic, molded with little gold flecks in them. The bowls looked out of place beside the china cups.

I looked at the old woman, Harmon's grandmother. She too would have a story, I thought—a hundred stories or a thousand. Her people had lived through the changes. Surely she would remember. But the old woman was wholly quiet. Her stories remained within. Perhaps she did not speak English, or else she was timid and chose to pretend so. Either way, she sat at the table, silent.

"This is good," Harmon's grandfather said, "a real treat." He laid the bone fetish on the table beside him, then reached ahead to the plate of fried bread. "This woman will not tell you herself—she is very modest—but I will tell you, she makes the best frybread on the whole damn Standing Rock Reservation!" He made his selection with youthful eagerness, tore it open, closed his eyes and passed a steaming end beneath his nose. "Light as a feather!" he added. "Light as a feather—" and then he laughed, sopping up the thin venison gravy, lifting the bread to his mouth.

The modest woman maintained her silence, seemingly unamused by the old man's antics. Her eyes were fixed on her plastic bowl as she ran her spoon in slow circles through the pudding.
Harmon leaned forward. The chair back creaked beneath his weight. He grabbed a frybread, then turned and held it out to me. "Go ahead, Fletcher boy, take it." And when I did, his grandmother looked at me and smiled.

"When I was a boy, my grandfather told me stories—" The old man gulped at his coffee, then reached for the charm. "—Iktomi," he said, "trickster stories."

"Can I look at it?" I asked.

He hesitated, holding the charm. "You are a curious one," he said. "It's only a little charm, it has no medicine."

"That's okay, I just wanted to see—"

The old man's gaze shifted from the fetish to me, then back to the fetish. "The trickster is a shady fellow. Sometimes he is Spider, sometimes Coyote ... sometimes white man. Always, he is selfish, thinking only of himself." He laid the charm in my palm and closed my hand tightly around it. "I will tell you a story," he said, and as he spoke, he kept a watchful eye.

"This character, Iktomi, was traveling about one day when he heard noises close-by—singing and laughing and dancing sounds—and these noises made him curious, so he stopped and looked around for their origin. You understand, this fellow is curious by his nature. He is very nosy, always trying to join in—a real gate crasher. Anyway, when Ikto heard these dancing sounds, he got excited and his feet burned and his soles began to itch. Right now, more than anything, he was wishing to dance. So he cocked his ear and listened hard, and the noises seemed to grow louder
and louder.

"Now there was an old dried-up buffalo skull lying there beside the path, and Ikto discovered that the noises were coming from inside this skull. So he hurried over and peered down through the eye hole, and he saw the inside was all lighted up, and these mice were in there, shouting and dancing and having a big wacipi. This place was really hopping, I tell you. Inside that skull they were staging a regular powwow!

"Well, Ikto got pretty excited seeing all these mice having such a good time, so he ran around to the back of the old skull and gave a knock at the door. 'Mice, open the door,' he was saying to them, 'I want to come in and join this dance.' His feet were really itching by now, you understand. 'Take pity on me,' he kept saying, 'I want to dance too.'

"Well, the little mice didn't know who was out there, but they felt pretty sorry for him—sounding so desperate and all—so they opened the back door to let him in. When they did this, Ikto thrust his head inside the skull, far as it would go. Then one of the mice shouted, 'It is Iktomi, look out!' And the mice hurried off out into the darkness, leaving the trickster with that old buffalo skull stuck hopelessly onto his head.

"Ikto sat by the path for a long time now, weeping and feeling sorry for his condition. From time to time, he heard others pass by, and he wept louder when he knew that they could hear him. Finally, he got the idea that he might be able to dislodge the skull by smashing it against a rock. So he tried this and he swung his head smack into the rock, shattering the skull to bits, but bruising his head in the bargain. They say
he went about for days after that, all dizzy and vomiting—"

My hand opened slowly, exposing the fetish, and the glare of the kitchen light over the table fell across my opened hand, shadowing the image of the trickster.

The old man raised a forkful of venison, pausing to chew before he went on. "When I was a boy," he said, "my grandfather told me stories. He gave me that charm and he told me to remember. We stayed near the river then, with some of our relations. It was a good-sized settlement. There were log houses and many tents. I was just a small boy then. It was before my father was made to take his allotment, before this house was built."

The old man touched his chin softly, and his fingers found a whisker that grew from his neck. As he focused on the charm that lay in my hand, he began tugging at the whisker, twirling the thin white strand between his solid fingers.

"The men from the agency spoke to my father. They said my brother and I would have to go away, to live at the agency boarding school. I was very much afraid, I tell you. I thought that I would never see my relatives again.

"I remember that my mother made new moccasins for us, and that she decorated them and put beads all over them. She was proud of the way she had dressed her sons and she wanted the white people at the agency to see this. But when we arrived at the wasíchu school, it was not to be so. They took away our Indian clothes and they gave us tight shoes and tight-collar shirts, and they cut our hair short—in the white man
style. We were afraid, yes. But mostly, we were lonesome.

"Before we went away, my grandfather spoke to me. It was the last time my grandfather spoke to me. He gave me the charm and he told me to remember. All of his stories, the ways of our people—these things, he told me to remember. He said that it was good to learn from the wasichu, for the white man was here to stay. But he told me to be careful of what I would learn. 'The wasichu is very strange,' he said. 'He has no respect for this sacred earth, no respect for its beings, no respect for even himself. The wasichu, he is the trickster!'"

Above the table, the kitchen light flickered. I placed the charm in the old man's hand.
As suddenly as it had amassed, the thunderhead broke, and the clouds slipped off to the eastward and the blackened distance. The air was stilled now. The sky, clear and luminous with stars, cast a pale light upon the surface of the land. It had not rained.

Harmon's grandfather drove me home to Fort Yates, and I climbed from the truck and crossed the yard to the house. There were cricket sounds and moths battering about the glowing porch light. At the top of the steps, I stopped and turned, and I watched the International pull from the curb, and I listened to the whine as it worked through its gears, down the street toward the edge of town.

I then entered the house. The screen door snapped closed behind me.

"Fletcher?"

... My father's voice.

"In the kitchen," he said.
He was standing in front of the electric stove, his back to me, adjusting the front burner where a steel cooking pot simmered. The radio on the counter next to the kitchen sink played *Stardust*—Glenn Miller, the big band sound.

I wandered up and stood beside him.

"I was afraid you had run off—maybe joined the circus," he said. "But just in case, I saved some dinner." He lifted the pot cover, fished out the spoon which had slipped from the rim, stirred twice, then tasted. "It was macaroni and cheese . . . more like mush now. The noodles have disintegrated."

I looked at him and smiled. The spoon was dripping cheese onto his chin. "I was at the Circling Hawk place, with Harmon," I said. "He let me ride that sorrel—you know, the giveaway horse."

My father nodded, settling the spoon back into the pot. "Yes, yes—the wild adventures of youth." And the spoon fell away from the pot rim, splattered, then sank to a level somewhere beneath the surface of the macaroni and cheese.

"He lives with his grandparents," I said.

"Yes, I know that."

"His grandfather told us stories. They're good people—they were very good to me."

My father did not look up. He was concentrating on the sunken spoon, attempting to raise it with a table knife. "Victor Circling Hawk is a very honorable man," he said.

I glanced at the thick and yellow substance in the pot, then at my
father. "I think there's something I should tell you—"

"Yes?"

"Harmon's grandmother, she made frybread. Light as a feather. It's not that I don't like your macaroni or anything—see, it's just that I've already eaten."

He laughed then as he shut down the burner. His teeth were white and even in his smile.
PART THREE
TWENTY

The Mainstreeter slowed as it approached another town. Its hypnotic rhythm fell away, overtaken by the shrill grind of steel and the now familiar whistle blast that followed. I sat up, uneasy, rubbing my hands against my face, and then the stinging came and the soreness of the bruise on my cheek and the image of the fight that played over in my mind. I shook my head and tried to focus.

Through the window, my eyes glanced the cold white lights of the town's warehouse district. Security lights. The train was past the state line now. I was certain of that. The stop would be Glendive—Miles City, with luck. I turned and combed my hair back with my fingers and looked about inside the car. Across the aisle, the man with the Newsweek magazine lit another cigarette.

At the station, the train took on passengers: figures that moved through dim light and shadow, down the railway platform in cold night mist.
A soldier was among them, a Marine in uniform, shouldering his coat and duffle. I watched as the soldier boarded the train, as he entered the car and worked his way down the aisle. A resigned distance showed in his eyes, and his face seemed empty of expression. I looked away briefly when he caught my stare.

"Seat vacant?"

I didn't answer.

He swung the duffle from his shoulder and stowed it overhead, then laid his coat up and straightened it. His uniform was crisp, freshly ironed—a mother's touch, I thought.

The Newsweek man leaned over his armrest, halfway into the aisle. "Semper fidelis!" he let out, waving his cigarette before him. A narrow space between his two front teeth made his S's whistle. "Semper fidelis—always faithful. That's Latin, you know." The man coughed, sucked his cigarette, then coughed again. "Damn proud bunch, the Marines."

Beside him, the woman—the one he had called Ellen—slept securely against her window, fogging the glass as she breathed. The soldier took his seat.

"What town is this?" I asked the soldier.

"Glendive."

"Not Miles City?"

"Glendive, Montana." He loosened his tie.

A whistle blast sounded that echoed in the distance, and we pulled from the station, and the train lumbered through the rail yard, its wheels setting up an uneven clatter. Opposite the aisle, the Newsweek man stared at his wrist watch. His brow tightened. He shook his wrist, then held
the watch to his ear. "Damn thing's stopped," he grumbled. A glowing ash fell from the end of his cigarette.

"Where are you headed?" the soldier asked.

"Vancouver."

"What's up there?"

"Anonymity."

The soldier rubbed his nose.

"What about you?" I said.

"Camp Pendleton—out in California." His lip twitched as he spoke.

"Home on leave?"

He nodded. "I'm going to be reassigned Wednesday."

The Newsweek man leaned over his armrest again. He was holding the watch, winding the stem between his fingers and his thumb. His cigarette drooped loosely from the corner of his mouth. "You handle them M-16's? Damn powerful weapon, the M-16."

"It does the job," said the soldier.

"Does the job and then some!" He listened to the watch and resumed the winding. "Hell, I read a ballistics report—said the M-16 rifle will cut a man in two."

"But somebody still has to pull the trigger," I said.

The Newsweek man craned forward, pointing the wrist watch my direction. His blue eyes were small and squinty. "Say, you're not one of them peace-niks are you?" He was shaking the watch for emphasis. "Jesus Almighty, you young radicals ... long hairs!"

"My hair isn't long—"
"It's the badge of revolution," he said.

I shook my head and slunk back in my seat.

"Ellen." He elbowed his sleeping wife. "Ellen, you've got to see this. You'll really want to see this."

She opened one eye. "Lloyd?"

"Come on, Ellen."

Ellen looked disturbed. A few strands of hair fell against her face. She pulled them away. "What is it, Lloyd?"

"You've got to see," he said. He stubbed his cigarette into the armrest ashtray, then motioned toward me with his head. The wrist watch fell to the floor. "One of them peace-niks, Ellen—sitting there right next to that Marine."

Ellen was still.

"Don't you see, Ellen?"

"See what, Lloyd?"

"It's a curiosity—"

The train passed into a settled darkness, beyond the town and its lighted streets. Above the plain of the Yellowstone River, a half moon outlined the ragged breaks of the uplands.
But the appeals agent would not listen. He had all the answers before there were questions.

"You’re a coward, boy. I see it here all the time."—Hate in his stare, in his condescending smile—"Conscientious objector . . . 'CO' is the first two letters of the word coward."

He drummed a pencil against the edge of his steel desk. The pencil’s course and rhythm seemed inconsistent. I said nothing. His chair squeaked as he shifted his weight. He was a solid man.

"I'm going to be honest with you. I'm charged to keep our nation's best interest in mind. Do you understand that?"

I gave him a reluctant nod.

"This CO thing, we can’t let it get out of hand. It would become a disease. What if everyone were an objector? Who would hold the line?"

"If everyone were an objector, sir, we wouldn't need a war."
The agent pinched his eyes closed. He breathed in, then shook his head. "You're not with me, boy. I'm trying to explain—"

I noticed a photograph in a gold frame on his desk, a family portrait. The agent sat grinning in the center of the picture, and his wife and children were gathered around him. It was Christmas; there was a Christmas tree and they were all wearing sweaters—one big, happy family, grinning and wearing sweaters.

"The Selective Service gives you thirty days to request an appeal. Thirty days." He flipped through the papers that lay in the opened folder on his desk. He rubbed his brow with his knuckles. He did not look up. "Your letter was written nearly three months after the deadline. Tell me, how come all of a sudden you're a conscientious objector?"

"It's not all of a sudden," I said.

"It's not?"

"I've always been opposed to killing, sir."

He glared at me with overriding contempt. "You mean opposed to being killed," he said. "I'm not convinced."

A long and steady silence followed. I felt a growing tightness in my throat, sealing my throat. Why couldn't he understand? Was it really that difficult? The agent sorted the various papers in my file, straightened them, then closed the folder.

"You want my advice, boy? ... Don't make waves. The system is fair when it's not abused. It's more than fair. Think about that before you get the fool's idea to come back here and waste my time again."
There really wasn't much point for us to stick around in Bismarck. An appearance before the local board would mean nothing without the appeal agent's consideration. The decision was no longer in their hands. And so my father and I set off for home, Fort Yates and the reservation, the old Fort Lincoln Road, south.

It was early evening when we reached the highway. The shadows beneath the bluffs to the river's west were just beginning to lengthen, not yet shading the road. In the bottoms, the cottonwoods stood green and clear in the orange light of the evening. I reached forward to switch on the dashboard radio. My father was the first to speak.

"Your mother and I used to drive along here," he said, "summer evenings, before you were born. Not for any reason—just out for a drive. She always liked it down here by the river."

The radio hummed as I searched out a station.

"And she was terribly spontaneous—impulsive, really. She'd get these crazy ideas and we'd be out of the car and off climbing haystacks, chasing the moon."

I found a weather report. The weatherman said the heat wave would most likely continue.

"You take after her, you know,"—my father glanced my direction—"far more than you take after me. It's in the eyes. You have your mother's eyes. Sometimes when I look at you . . . it's uncanny. God, how I do miss that girl."

Then his eyes were again on the road up ahead, though his pained look of sentiment lingered. I tried to imagine the hay in his hair, the
moon and his smile and the girl he had loved. I tried for a moment to feel his excitement, to understand his frustration with sorrow.

"Why is it you seldom talk about her?"

My father paused before giving an answer. "You go through life, Fletcher, stockpiling memories, but you can't simply confine yourself to dwelling on the past. There just isn't any reason for living in the past. You've got to look ahead to the future."

The sun edged slowly to the westward horizon, and the sky became streaked with the color of the setting sun. We pressed on down the highway, past Huff and Fort Rice, past the Mint Bar to the Cannonball River—pressed on toward home.

... Hate in his stare ...

"He wouldn't listen," I told my father.

"Who wouldn't?"

"The appeals agent. He wouldn't listen. He wouldn't hear me out."

"—And you were prepared for that. You knew going in that there wasn't much hope."

"But I never realized he'd be so irrational."

"You'll always fight irrational behavior, son. Some of it will even be your own."

I turned my head and peered out the window of the car. The sun, at low angle, glared off the guardrails of the Cannonball River bridge.

"There are other options," my father continued, "other deferments you could pursue—if that's what you really want."

... Condescending smile ...
I looked up at the sign by the road beyond the bridge, the green and white sign that marked the boundary of the reservation. Someone had shot the old sign full of holes.
I turned from the window and paused while my eyes adjusted to the light inside the rail car. Ellen came into focus first, sitting across the aisle, staring unassumingly at her nervous husband Lloyd. Lloyd was rereading his *Newsweek* magazine. I watched his lips move as he followed down the page. The soldier in the seat next to me pulled a stray thread from the cuff of his sleeve. There was a plastic nameplate pinned above his uniform shirt pocket. "Douglas," it read.

"Is that your name?" I asked, pointing at the plastic plate, "Douglas?"
The soldier glanced downward, then nodded.

"What's your last name?"

"That is my last name," he answered. "My last name is Douglas."

"You mean they don't let you have a first name? Isn't that kind of impersonal?"

"They just call me Douglas," he said.
"Sounds impersonal to me."

Douglas continued picking at his shirt cuff. The loose thread had caused a seam to open.

"You have a family?" I asked.

"A big family—I'm the youngest son."

"Do they call you Douglas too?"

"Frank, they call me Frank."

Across the aisle, Lloyd was looking from the corner of his eye. He was trying to be discreet.

"How did you end up in that outfit anyway?" I said.

Frank Douglas moved his hand to hide the open seam.

"—The Marines, I mean."

"Oh—the Marines." He paused and turned to look at me. "I was drafted. I was drafted . . . drafted . . . and the train's thrumming engine seemed to work upon his words.

"Aren't you afraid? They shoot Marines—"

"Of course I'm afraid. I've never been so damned afraid."

"It's ironic," I said.

"What?"

"They have to draft people to fight for freedom. It doesn't make any sense."

Lloyd bucked forward then. His head whipped around and he said, as if by call of duty, "Don't let that peace-nik intimidate you."

Ellen narrowed her watchful stare.

"I'm not a peace-nik," I told him, "and I'm not intimidating anyone."
Lloyd released a bogus chuckle. His eyebrows lifted. He forced a smirk. "Smart-ass peace-nik!" he bellowed out, then he rolled up his Newsweek and batted the palm of his hand.

"Lloyd—" Ellen placed her hand on his shoulder. "No, Lloyd."

"Stay out of this, Ellen."

I turned. "Hey Frank, do I look like a peace-nik?"

Frank Douglas looked confused.

"Lloyd!"

"Ellen—"

I shook my head.

Up the aisle near the front of the car, a heavy-set woman struggled to squeeze past a porter. She carried a handbag—a big blue-vinyl handbag that swung and bounced against her thigh as she moved. The porter was a Negro, and he kept backing out of her way, apologizing, backing and dodging her bouncing blue bag.

"It's a free country, Ellen. I got a right to voice my opinion."

Lloyd shook the rolled-up Newsweek in front of Ellen's face.

Ellen remained unmoved.

"Hey Frank, tell me about this big family of yours."

He breathed in. "You wouldn't be interested."

"No—really Frank, I want to know."

He began picking at his shirt cuff again, poking his finger up the open seam, running it beneath the raveled edge. He waited.

"Tell me about your father," I said. "What's he like? You do have a father?"
"No—you wouldn't be interested," he said.

He was right, of course, but it didn't make any difference. I didn't care about his family. I was concerned only with passing time—fooling around. I didn't like Frank Douglas anyway. It wasn't that I thought he might somehow be better than I was. It wasn't anything like that. I just didn't like him. No reason. He was just getting on my nerves.

I sat back once more and turned again to look outside the rail car window. A cloud had passed before the moon, leaving an empty blackness over the land.

"My father is a proud man," Frank Douglas said softly. "I'd like to think he'd be proud of me now, and that some way I could live up to that pride." His voice faltered then, and I could see his image, mirrored in the glare of the window. His eyes shifted. "I may be afraid, but I know one thing for certain—I'll never be ashamed."

And across the aisle, Lloyd and Ellen were silent.
"Pomp and Circ'mstance," said Muttsy DuBois, "that's what they calls it." He smiled and sucked at his teeth, then turned to pry the cap off a Coca-Cola bottle. The radio on the shelf above the grill started playing Hank Williams: "KAW—LI—QA—A—" The speaker rattled when he sang the high notes.

Muttsy poured the Coke into a glass. "Here tiger, here's a little celebr'ation." He reached below the counter for the flask he kept concealed there, but before raising it, he looked around, toward the door to the back of the establishment. That faithful wife Rose, I thought—she just might have her radar switched on. "Can't never be too careful," he whispered, tipping the flask. A generous supply of whiskey entered my Coke glass.

"Now for a toast ... to the Standin' Rock Community High, Class a '68." Muttsy's eyes lit up as the flask touched his lips, and the radio
buzzed, and old Hank Williams crooned.

Pomp and Circumstance. Graduation Day. The whole thing really seemed so shallow, so stiff and really shallow. "... Now you are grown, and the world lies before you ..." I lifted my glass and swallowed hard from the drink. The taste of the whiskey made my eyes water.

Leona Little Bear had delivered the valedictory. She was the Class of '68 Student of Promise—straight A, most likely to succeed—and promise was the heart of her message. She spoke of pride and honor, of Indian self-determination, racial understanding, and a new direction, a new road to the future. But to the Indian students of Standing Rock High, promise was an empty word; to their white classmates, an embarrassment seldom acknowledged. Leona Little Bear, better you speak of dreams than of vision...

"Fletcher boy—" The screen door slapped open. I lowered my glass. It was Harmon, and his cousin, Leo Redhorse, was with him, and Nathan Strong. "Ho there, Fletch." They were smiling and shoving each other around. A dark gap showed where three of Nathan Strong's front teeth had long been missing.

Muttsy licked his lower lip and gazed upon the oncomers. He leaned forward, over his elbows, against the lunch-counter edge. "Lookit this," he said, "gradj'ated less'n a hour ago and they's already holdin' a class reunion!"

It was an uninformed statement. Either Muttsy didn't know or he had simply forgotten. Nathan Strong dropped out more than a month before Christmas. He had heard about work somewhere down in Oklahoma, rough-
necking with an oil crew. But the work didn't suit him or else he just grew lonely. He was back in Fort Yates before New Year's Eve.

I lifted my head and signaled Harmon over. He wandered up slowly, turned and boosted himself to sit atop the counter. Leo Redhorse and Nathan Strong proceeded across the wooden floor to the pool table.

"How's the old man doing?" I asked.

"Not so well—his spells are more frequent lately. It doesn't look good."

Redhorse pulled a cue from the rack on the wall and rolled it beneath his palm over the worn felt surface of the table, checking the stick to see if it was warped. It was a useless test—they were all warped. Nathan Strong searched his pocket for a quarter.

"He won't go to a doctor," Harmon continued. "He's a stubborn old Indian. He prefers traditional methods."

"He should see a doctor," I said, staring into my glass. I said this even though I knew the old man wouldn't.

"My grandmother's sister, Maggie Walks-by-Herself, came up from Eagle Butte. She took things into her own hands. There are relatives all over the place, and a Yuwipi man from Rosebud. They try hard to be comforting, but my grandfather says he wishes only to be left alone."

Muttsy DuBois took another pull from his flask, bubbling it. "Victor's got a right to his wishes," he said. His knuckle caught a drop at the corner of his mouth.

Nathan Strong slapped a quarter into the coin slot. He shoved in the handle, and the balls dropped down and clattered to the tray at the end
"We should get drunk," Redhorse said. "We should all go to Bismarck or Rapid City or someplace and really cut loose." He took a few practice strokes, lining up an imaginary shot, working the cue over the bridge formed by his fingers. "We should get Chinese-eyed drunk," he said.

Nathan Strong laughed. His tongue lapped his gum through the gap in his teeth.

Muttsy screwed down the cap on his flask of whiskey. "You boys don't go gettin' inta no trouble now. Couple years ago, Marvin Real Wolf got all liquored up nighta his gradj'ation—shot hell outa the Super Valu with a twelve-gauge shotgun. 'Just cel'bratin',' he tells the judge. Poor kid, got a year in the pen for that night on the town."

"Well me, I don't own any shotgun," said Redhorse, "—twelve-gauge or otherwise." He took a casual jab at the rail with his cue stick.

Nathan Strong racked the balls.

Harmon's feet dangled from the edge of the counter, and he stared at them, and he moved the toe of one boot in a loosely-formed circle. "I ought to be there," he said. "I ought to be home looking after the old coot."

Across the room, Redhorse scratched on the break. He pinched his eyes shut and swore, cursing his crooked cue.

"We ought to get drunk," I said.

We ended up at the Cattlemen's, on Highway 12 outside of McLaughlin. In the graveled lot in front of the bar, a group of young boys stood
beneath a flickering Grain Belt sign. They were Indian kids, no older than ten or twelve, and they were passing a cigarette and a "found" can of beer among themselves. As we pulled into the lot, the young boys scattered, disappearing into the darkness of the fields, beyond range of the white shafts that shone from the old International's headlights.

Nathan Strong was our buyer. He looked the oldest. He had the shortest hair. We sent him off with the cash we had pooled, and we waited in the lot beside the pickup. At the door to the bar, he stopped before he entered, and he turned around slowly and shot us his gap-toothed smile. He was exceedingly nonchalant.

Redhorse said, "What you bet he buys a round for the house?" He was looking at me with narrowed eyes. Behind him, the muffled drone of jukebox music filtered through the wall.

"We didn't give him enough money. He hasn't got enough money," I said.

"Then he'll befriend some woman—a sex-crazed barfly—and he'll buy her cocktails until they pass out in each other's arms."

"How romantic." I shook my head.

Harmon was leaning against the pickup's front fender. He crossed his arms and scraped the gravel with the edge of his boot sole. "You've got some imagination, Cousin. Nathan wouldn't know what to do with a woman—even if she came complete with an operator's manual."

"And he hasn't got enough money," I added.

There was a dull blue Mercury parked opposite the pickup. In the thin fluorescent light outside the bar, I could see that it was badly
rusted. Its hubcaps were missing, and a twisted coat hanger stuck out where the aerial was supposed to be. Redhorse wandered over to peer through the windshield. The car had Minnesota plates.

"There's a party at Smith Bay," I said. "I heard them talking about it at graduation."

Harmon nodded, but said nothing.

"We could go down there—see what's up."

Redhorse put his hands on the glass and pressed his face between them. "Jesus! There's a dead body in here—a dead man, right here in the front seat—" His head shot up and he backed away from the Mercury, bumping into my side. "Jesus!"

"It's a drunk," said Harmon, "a passed-out drunk."

Redhorse turned around. He looked dazed. He shook his head.

"It's a drunk," I said. But he was not convinced.

I looked at Harmon and he looked at me, and a quiet resignation passed between us. He glanced at the Mercury, then rubbed at his nose.

"All right, Cousin—let's see your dead man." He stepped forward, brushing off his hands on the sides of his jeans.

It was dark inside the car. The man lay slouched beneath the pale gray shadow of the dashboard, his head resting low against the stick-shift.

"You're blocking my light," I whispered to Redhorse.

Redhorse didn't move. He just glared through the windshield. "Jesus," he mumbled. "Jesus . . ."

"He's drunk."
I looked at Harmon. "He's not breathing. If he were drunk, at least he'd be breathing."

"You want me to open the door and ask him to breathe for you?"

"He's a dead man," Redhorse said.

"I don't think he's breathing."

"Jesus!"

Nathan Strong emerged from the Cattlemen's cradling a case of beer in his arms, Grain Belt beer. He ambled up to the blue Mercury and stood off to the side, behind Redhorse. A curious look came over his face. He squeezed his bottom lip through the gap in his teeth.

"Hey, shouldn't we notify the authorities?" Redhorse turned and reached for a beer. "We should tell somebody, don't you guys think?"

Nathan set the case on the car hood. "Tell who, what?" he said.

Redhorse opened his beer, and it foamed out over his hand and down his sleeve, and he bent his head quickly to suck up the foam.

"About the body," I said.

There was a sudden movement inside the car then; the body—the man that lay in the shadow of the dash—jerked forward in violent spasm. I watched, and his hands went to the pit of his stomach, and he shook, and he began to retch and vomit all over himself.

I tried to look away, I tried to force my eyes from the thing. But somehow I just couldn't control myself. I was paralyzed, it seemed—some kind of foul trance.

For a moment, the tremors and the sickness subsided. The drunken man struggled to catch his breath. His eyes opened slowly and fixed upon
mine, and he stared at me, and there was fear and helplessness and des- peration in his dark and pitiful eyes.

"Fletcher boy—come on, we're leaving."

The drunken man shuddered. He tensed, bracing himself for the spasms to follow. I tried to look away, but he kept staring at me. And even as the next set of tremors began, he kept staring at me with those great lost eyes.

We took Highway 12 east, toward the river, the four of us squeezed side by side in the cab of the old International. The cold case of beer rested across my legs. My knees were feeling numb from the cold.

"What took you so long in there?" Harmon said to Nathan Strong. The red needle in the truck's speedometer was bouncing around 65.

Nathan smiled, then took a swallow of beer. "I bought a lady a drink."

"Hey—hey," said Redhorse, "what'd I tell you—" He jabbed his elbow into my ribs.

"Who is this mystery lady?" I asked.

"She's not from around here."

"Hey—hey," said Redhorse.

"Where is she from?"

"She travels . . ."

"A vagrant," I said.

Nathan Strong did not reply. He took a long pull from his beer.

Harmon turned and looked at Nathan. The truck wandered over the cen- ter line. "Is she Indian? . . . A breed?"
"She's better than anything you could pick up." He reached over me and shook his can of Grain Belt at Harmon. Beer sloshed out and soaked into the front of my shirt.


Harmon laughed as he swung the truck back into its lane. "Betty Gray Bull," he said.

There was a fishing access sign at the Smith Bay approach, and the truck's headlights illuminated the brown and white sign. Harmon slammed on the brakes, and the old International skidded and swayed as he pointed it into the graveled turn.

The access road wound down through a coulee, then leveled out along the bottoms. We pulled up behind a tight cluster of cars, parked among the tall cottonwoods up above the bank. Below, the reflection of a bonfire that was burning near the shore, shimmered orange and white across the dark water of Smith Bay. Harmon switched off the engine.

"Pomp and Circumstance," I said. "That's what they call it."
TWENTY-FOUR

Nathan Strong wiped his lips with his shirt sleeve. "They should kick all the breeds off the reservation," he said. Then he laughed, and he looked around him and laughed once again. The beer had run out in the space of an hour, and we were making short work of a finagled bottle of Thunderbird wine.

A rumor circulated through the crowd mingled about the bonfire: Leona Little Bear, student of promise, was off in the bushes spreading her legs for the basketball team. It was a good joke if you knew Leona. Valedictorian. Straight A. Her mother was white, a records clerk at the BIA, and her father held a seat on the tribal council. They had a profitable arrangement, those Little Bears.

"Kick them off," he said again, "all them breeds—" He stared at the fire, and he sucked at the wine, and the fire popped and hissed and sent orange sparks skyward into the night.
Harmon ignored him. It was drunk talk—Nathan Strong was just as much mixed-blood as anyone on Standing Rock. He stood beside the fire with his hands in his pockets, shifting little piles of sand with the toe of his boot.

"Hey Harmon, you thought about what you're going to do? ... I mean now, after graduation?"

He didn't look at me. He just kept pushing up the little piles of sand with his toe.

Above the bank, through the cottonwood trees, a pair of headlights flashed on and then off. I heard a car door slam and somebody shouting. A radio played, faintly from the distance—Nancy Sinatra, Sugartown.

Redhorse passed me the Thunderbird wine. "Well me, I'm going to marry one of those rich white girls," he said. "You know—take over her daddy's ranch. You guys can all come and work for me if you want. I'll hire you. I mean it. Even the white guy. I'll hire the whole goddamn reservation."

"Don't hold your breath," Nathan Strong began. He yanked the bottle away from my lips. "I know where there's real work starting up—construction work, one of them housing projects." He took a swig of wine, then wiped at his mouth. "They're putting in fifteen units right there at Fort Yates. Guy I talked to says the wage ain't nothing to piss at, either."

"What do you know about construction?" I said.

"Nothing," he answered. "Not a thing."

"Then how you figure on getting this job?"
Nathan Strong paused. He looked rather smug. He sucked the old bottle of Thunderbird dry, then flung the empty out into the bay. "Easy, Fletch—they've got a quota to fill, a land-of-opportunity quota."

Harmon kicked one of the piles of sand into the fire, and the spray of the wet sand hissed back at him as it settled in among the hot, glowing coals.

I didn't know what time it was when we reached the Circling Hawk place. By now, it didn't really seem to matter. Harmon had insisted that I stop to see his grandfather. "The old man is very fond of you," he said. "He will want to see you," he said.

We took the short cut, through the town of Wakpala and over the state line, the back way up Kenel Road. Leo Redhorse and Nathan Strong had elected to stay behind at Smith Bay. Redhorse was busy hiring ranch hands, and the amusement potential there was too great for Nathan Strong to abandon.

There were five or six cars parked out in the yard just short of the Circling Hawk cabin. A white canvas wall tent was pitched near the cars, and not far off, before a stand of gnarled trees, stood a sweat lodge of blankets over a bent-sapling frame. In front of the sweat lodge, a small fire burned, and a small boy in a blue denim jacket was poking up the fire with a short, twisted stick.

We climbed from the truck and walked up past the cars. The lights were on inside the cabin, and I could see movement in the windows, figures and shadows. Outside, the wind had picked up, and the sky in the
west was black and void of stars where thunderheads were building. I heard coyotes barking in the broken hills above the coulee, and then there was lightning and the coyotes grew silent. One-one-thousand . . . Two-one-thousand . . . Three—

"Fletcher boy, you coming?"

A rumble sounded first, distant and sustained, then a great boom of thunder that shot through the hills. In the field behind the saddle shed, the horses were skittish, nervous and skittish and pacing the fence line. The front was moving in fast, I thought.

They were clearing the room when we entered the cabin, moving the couch and the television set and the old iron bunk to the small room at the back of the house. Harmon's grandfather was alone inside the bedroom. The door was open and he was sitting upright on the edge of the bed with a blanket drawn loosely up about his shoulders. His hands drooped out over his knees, and his brown eyes were fixed on the backs of his brown and weathered hands.

"Grandfather—"

He did not look up. His shoulders quivered as he held in a cough.

"Hello, sir," I said to him gently.

He nodded and cleared his throat, lifted his hand slowly and motioned for his cigarettes on the bedside table. Harmon fetched the package, then helped him to light one. The old man closed his eyes and drew the tobacco smoke deep into his body.

"They tell me they are going to have a Yuwipi meeting," he said. His eyes remained closed while he spoke. "They think they can cure this
old man's disease. What do you think? Heh? What does this friend of my grandson think?"

I stood with my back resting against the door jamb. "I'm no doc­tor," I answered.

The old man lifted his eyebrows, and he raised his cigarette and drew on it again. "Life is a sacred thing," he said, "too important to leave in the hands of doctors. You are young. You are both young and do not see this yet. You don't understand about sacred things."

"When I'm sick, I see a doctor. I understand that much."

The old man nodded. His lips tightened in a discernable smile. "You are young," he said. "I am an old man. We look at life from different sides of the fence."

He slumped forward then; his back and shoulders heaved as he began to cough openly. Harmon took away the cigarette and grasped the old man's trembling hand.

"Grandfather? You are all right?"

From my position in the doorway, I watched the Yuwipi man prepare his altar on the floor in the center of the outer room. He was burning braided sweet grass, laying boughs of sage about. A warm and earthy scent fast displaced the stale air inside the Circling Hawk cabin.

"Yes, I'm all right," replied Harmon's grandfather. "You are a good boy. This is a good thing, your concern for an old man."

In the outer room, the small boy in the denim jacket—the one who had been tending the sweat-lodge fire—carried in a can of dirt and set it down before the Yuwipi man. The boy went outside again and returned
shortly with a second can. Four times the small boy did this, so there were four cans of earth, four cans altogether.

Harmon sat down on the bed beside his grandfather and adjusted the blanket on the old man's shoulders. "You're not so old, Grandfather—not so old or so sick as you would like to think. It's just that you've become used to the idea. You secretly enjoy all of this attention you receive."

In each of these cans, the holy man planted a flag, a wooden stick with a cloth banner fastened to its end. The flags were of different colors—red, yellow, black, and white—and they were used to mark the four corners of the Yuwipi altar.

Across the room, a firm-looking woman, who I assumed was the sister from Eagle Butte, spread a blanket on the floor close to the wall. Harmon's grandmother joined her here and crouched down to straighten away the wrinkles. There were others now, spreading blankets along the walls, preparing places for participants to sit. In an open space, not far from the altar, the singers—four older men—were setting up their drum.

"Can you blame an old man for his delusions? Heh? Would you take this much away from me?"

The small boy left the cabin again and came back in with an old leather suitcase. He carried the suitcase directly in front of him, both hands clutched hard to the handle. His knees bumped the suitcase each step of his advance, and when the Yuwipi holy man stood, turned and looked upon him, the small boy smiled with determined adoration.
From the suitcase, the **Yuwipi** man took a small, tightly-bound bundle, wrapped in white cloth, and placed it with care at the head of the altar. Opposite the bundle, he laid four cigarettes, four tobacco offerings, side by side and evenly spaced.

Harmon's grandfather sat fully upright now; his gaze shifted to settle on his grandson. There was a long hesitation before he spoke, a pause intensified by his measured breathing. "I must tell you," he said, "in my heart there is pride for the way you have grown. These people, your relatives, they are making a fuss over the wrong person. They do not see this as I do. They are mistaken. This night is important for you—your school graduation. This should be a great honor, but I think somehow it is lost. They should be having a celebration for you. They should be honoring you. This is what I think, what I feel in my heart."

"You're getting yourself worked up, Grandfather."

"No—no! I am sincere when I say this. This is what I honestly believe."

Softly, the singers began to practice their song. The leader held his fingers to cover one ear, gauging the timbre in his voice as it rose above the muted drum. Outside, the rumble of thunder sounded again, passed over the cabin, then faded and dropped off like an echo in the distance.

Harmon's grandfather rasped out a cough, and the blanket slipped back, away from his shoulders. "It's time now, I think. They will be wanting me in the other room now." Without turning his head, the old man
raised his hand, indicating the bureau that stood against the wall past the foot of the bed. "My shirt," he said, "will you bring me my shirt? My red silk shirt?"

It was raining outside. I could hear the muffled rain on the roof of the cabin, on the walls, on the panes of the windows, whipped by the wind. The old man stood, steadying himself with a hand at my shoulder. Harmon took the shirt from its drawer in the bureau and he carried it over and helped the old man fasten the buttons.

We took our place in the outer room, on the floor with Harmon's grandmother and the firm-looking one. By now, there were more than a dozen others in the room. I recognized only one of them: a lighter-skinned man I didn't know but had seen a few times walking the streets of Yates. He had a thin mustache above the corners of his mouth and he kept smoothing it flat with his thumb.

The firm-looking woman was staring at me. Her dark eyes hardened. It was a suspicious stare. "Who is he? Why is he here?" She whispered to the old man, not softly, but in an obvious way so that I would overhear. "He doesn't belong, you know. He shouldn't be allowed . . ."

I glanced over at the Yuwipi man. He paid no attention to the others in the room. He took four small rattles from the opened leather suitcase and laid them out on a bed of sage.

"He doesn't belong," the sister went on. "He's not a believer— you know what that means. He doesn't belong. He'll contaminate the medicine."
The old man smiled, but did not respond. This seemed to anger the firm-looking woman.

One of the singers got up and crossed the room, and he and the boy in the blue denim jacket raised and unfolded a star quilt that lay on the kitchen floor. The Yuwipi man nodded at them and closed up his suitcase. He took the smoldering braid of sweet grass in his hand, and he stood and went over, and he held the braided sweet grass at arm's length before him so the smoke would pass into the outstretched blanket.

... You are young. You do not understand about sacred things . . .

The electric lights were switched out in the cabin, and a single coal-oil lamp was lighted.

... He doesn't belong. He's not a believer . . .

The Yuwipi man stood with his hands clasped behind him, and the singer bound his hands with a length of rope, lacing his fingers together before knotting it off.

... When I was a boy, my grandfather told me to remember. All of his stories, the ways of our people—these things, he told me to remember . . .

Next, the star quilt was draped over his body, and the rope was tied in hitches, firmly around the quilt, at his neck and his chest and his waist and his legs. When the boy and the singer had finished here, they laid the holy man face-down upon the floor, and then the lamp was extinguished and the Yuwipi songs were begun.

... He shouldn't be allowed. He'll contaminate the medicine . . .

And the holy man waited for the Spirit to release him.
TWENTY-FIVE

It was coming down hard when we left the cabin. The tracks of the road were wet and greasy, turning to gumbo, and the windshield wipers on the old International were ineffective in the hard, driving rain.

Perhaps it was the rain pelting the roof of the truck, or the Thunderbird wine, or the hot smell of sweet grass that set my head spinning with disordered thoughts and images. The old man kneeling, bleeding a deer, the spirited sorrel, the backwater bay—these things became part of the illusion, filling my mind, entering my soul. I heard the coyotes barking away in the hills, and the resonating drum, and the wails of singers. I closed my eyes and envisioned the knife—a lock-blade Buck—and a scuffle in a hall. I held them closed tighter, readied for the picture I was certain now would come. When I heard her soft whispers, my mind grew clearer, and my eyes opened slowly to reveal the figure, the figure of the woman I knew as my mother. . . .
In Fort Yates, the streets ran deep in a wash of rain that shimmered under glowing street lamps. We drove in from the highway on Standing Rock Road, past the Standard Oil and Muttsy's and the Super Valu Store. It was late and the town was quiet. The only sounds I heard were from the rain atop the truck roof, the whine of the engine, the tires splashing water that collected in the streets.

I said nothing to Harmon as he pulled to the curb. I tried to think of something to say, the right thing to say, something that might comfort. But it wasn't my place. How could I say anything? What could I tell him? So I just looked at him awhile and said nothing at all.

There was a light still burning inside the house, the reading lamp in the living-room picture window. I ran to the porch, but could not avoid the rain. My hair and my clothing were thoroughly soaked.

"You're dripping on the carpet," said my father when I entered. He was slouched in his reading chair, feet propped on the coffee table, an open book perched firmly on his stomach. Across the room, a test pattern blared from the screen of the television set. "You'll leave a water stain. You'll make the colors bleed . . ."

"It's raining," I told him, "—an act of God."

He lowered his glasses, peered from the book. "God isn't dripping on the living-room carpet!"

Then I sat in my underwear at the kitchen table. My wet shirt and pants were draped against a chair back, pushed close to the hot air register. At the counter next to the stove, my father poured coffee into a pair of mugs he had fished from the clean-dish pile beside the sink.
A fly buzzed up, away from the window, then circled wide, over his head. My father didn't seem to notice the fly.

"Been out celebrating?" he asked.

I nodded, although he wasn't looking. The fly landed on the back of his shoulder.

"A little celebrating wouldn't be out of order—not a bit out of order, Fletcher."

He turned and brought the mugs to the table and slid back the chair that stood opposite mine. He sat sideways, crossed his legs. I took a rather hasty drink of coffee.

"Have you been giving any thought to your future lately? I know we've talked before, but not anything specific . . ."

"Nathan Strong says there's construction work starting up."

"The housing project?"

"I thought maybe I'd try to get a job."

The fly took to the air again, then settled on the rim of my coffee mug. I watched as he made his way around the circle.

"What about college?" my father continued. "You're still considering college, aren't you?"

I waited a moment before I answered. The fly was rubbing his legs together. "Maybe I'll try working for a while. Maybe I'll wait a year—save up some money."

My father tasted a sip of his coffee, then he put down his mug and stood and crossed the kitchen floor. "Hey, are you hungry, Fletcher?" He pulled open the door of the Frigidaire and bent over to look inside.
"There's some leftover meat loaf, would you eat a sandwich?"

"You've got to understand," I told him, "I really do want to go to college . . . it's just that I don't think I'm ready yet. I need some time to figure things out."

He took out the plate with the meat loaf on it and peeled back the aluminum foil. "I'm not exactly wealthy," he said, "but I'd try to help you out if that's the problem." He grabbed for a knife in the utensil drawer. "Do you want mustard or anything?"

I shook my head. "I need time," I said.

My father turned slowly and looked at me then. His eyes became focused, yet strangely sympathetic. "There is a war going on, Fletcher—you may find out that your time is not your own."

I glanced down at my hands. They were closed and held tense against the edge of the table, squeezed tight into fists. I studied them a moment, then shook them open and reached for my coffee. The fly on the rim of the mug was gone.
TWENTY-SIX

I awoke aboard the train to an abrupt shift in motion. There was a piercing squeal, then a slam—a shock wave that reeled through the cars, up and down the line. I sat forward, disconcerted, and turned my head to peer outside the window by my seat. It was an eastbound, pulled up onto a siding. I watched the faces in the lighted windows as we passed. They were tired faces, colorless and indistinct.

None of the faces looked back at me. I had no idea why, but it seemed important to me that one of them look back. I edged up closer to the window, cupping my hands on the glass to shield the glare. But the passing train slipped away too quickly, and I was left staring only at a blank and sullen darkness.

Frank Douglas was snoring in his sleep. I settled back against the cushioned seat, and though I tried not to, I couldn't help looking. He had his head hung back and his mouth was open and his stiff, left arm
extended part way up the aisle.

I considered waking him. I was feeling suddenly conversational and I wanted him awake. His nose twitched and his lips moved, almost imperceptibly, as though he were speaking from within a dream. What is it that makes you brave, soldier? What? Are you really brave? ... Or are you just another fool?

By now, my legs were getting cramped and restless, and my feet were numb, swollen, confined inside my boots. I straightened my legs to stretch the tight and knotted muscles and rubbed the heels of my hands against the sides of my knees.

It would do me good, I thought, to get up and walk about, to put some weight on my bones before paralysis set in. So I stood, and I snatched up my jacket, stuffed it up under my arm, and wormed out past Frank Douglas, balancing myself on the back of the seat in front of him.

Ahead, the aisle was clear of passengers. I made my way forward through the cars of the moving train. For three or four cars, I did not look back.

"Hey, you ... sit down here. Quick!"

I turned. The girl who spoke was sitting by the window, motioning frantically for me to sit down.

"Come on," she said, "hurry—before he gets back."

I looked around to see who it was she was talking about, but there was no one else in the aisle except me.

"God—will you hurry up already ..." She clutched hold of my jacket and pulled it out from under my shoulder. I lost my footing and
felled backward between the arms of the unoccupied seat. The seat was still warm.

"I don't want any trouble," I said to her, straightening up on the cushion. "The last thing I need now is trouble."

She was wearing blue jeans, faded denim blue jeans, covered in patches, and a green suede jacket with fringe down the sleeves. The jacket was zipped all the way to her neck, and her straight, blond hair fell limp and slightly tangled at her shoulders. On the floor beside her feet, lay a canvas Boy Scout knapsack. There was a peace symbol—an embroidered California chicken track—sewn centered on the flap; pinned just above it, a round "Eugene McCarthy" button.

The girl gripped the back of my arm, and leaning out over my legs, she shot a desperate glance up the aisle. "God!" she groaned, "here he comes. What a bastard. What a creep. Quick—pretend you know me . . ."

"I don't want any trouble," I said.

He was a tall man, with a hollow face and eyes that were round and unsettled. He rested his hand on the seatback ahead, apparently waiting for the girl to take notice. When she did not, he cleared his throat. My chin sank automatically between my shoulders and lodged against my chest.

"Go away, for Christ sake . . ." The girl didn't even look up while she spoke. "Go away and find another victim. Can't you see I'm taken?"

The tall man shifted his weight to one leg. The girl tightened her grip on my arm. "Well?" she went on, "what are you waiting for?" Her breathing had grown erratic.
I attempted to lift myself up from the seat, but the girl held me back, pulling me down by the elbow. The tall man grinned at me. His teeth were long and flat and yellow. Beneath the sleeve of his yellowed shirt, there was a dark ring of perspiration which I could see plainly through the gap of his unbuttoned sport coat.

"What's the deal here, junior?" His voice was graveled, almost harsh. "Huh? What's the deal here? Who told'ja this seat was empty? Huh? Who? Huh?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked at the girl. Her eyes winced in apprehension.

"She tell you? Huh? What'd she say?" He shifted his weight back to the other leg.

"She called you a bastard," I said.

"Huh?"

"She called you a creep and a bastard."

He scratched his brow, then bent down a little and glared at the girl, close range. His hollow face showed the puzzled look. "You called me a bastard?"

She didn't answer. She was busy trying to hide behind my shoulder.

"A bastard?" he repeated.

"... And a creep," I said. I was thinking of the stain under his arm.

"Why don't you just stay out of this? Huh, junior?"

"Believe me, I've tried—"

He grabbed me suddenly at the front of my shirt and shook me back
and forth by the collar. Twice, I felt my head snap the upholstery. I raised my hands to protect my face.

"Huh, junior?" he kept on saying. "Huh? Huh?"

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the girl. She bolted from her seat and punched the tall man in the ribs.

I didn't say a word till he was safely out of earshot, and then, beginning only in a whisper. The girl appeared shaken. She was digging her fingernails into my knee.

"Who was that?" I whispered to her.

There was no answer.

"Who was that?" I asked again.

She looked up at me, then turned and scanned the aisle. "I don't really know," she answered. "He got on somewhere after St. Paul . . ."

"You mean he's been sitting here all this time?"

"Gawking," she said. "Sitting here and gawking at me. Gawking. God—you'd think this was the observation car!"

She stopped for a moment and I looked across at her, the planes of her face, the wild but cautious eyes. What are you thinking, girl? What goes on behind those eyes?

"Hey, tell me," she said, "don't you have a name or something?"

"John Smith."

"John Smith? God—that's a new one . . . and I'm Pocahontas . . ."

"Fletcher Bradley," I said.

She smiled at me. "John Smith was better," she said.
"What about you? What's your name?"

"Hillary Gregg—of the Lake-Forest Greggs—family black sheep, outcast, untouchable."

"Life is hell," I told her.

"An absolute drag."

We smiled and shook hands, shook hands to the sorry state of the human condition. Hillary Gregg was no longer shaken.

"Hey, what's that thing hanging around your neck?" She was staring at the charm strung on the leather cord. "It looks like a prairie wolf. What's it made of?"

I pulled the cord up over my head and held the fetish flat in my palm so she could have a better look. "Iktomi," I said, "the trickster—carved out of bone. It's very old. It belonged to an old man, a Sioux Indian . . ."

She lifted the fetish carefully from my hand and raised it to eye level, inspecting it in closer detail.

"... Often, Iktomi will take the form of Coyote. He is very shrewd and sometimes malicious, unable to show any concern at all for others. He thinks only of himself. He's terribly selfish."

"This trickster," said Hillary, "I think I might have met him before." She held the fetish by the leather cord now, dangling it before her at arm's length.

"Oh, he gets around all right, but he's always foiled by his own devices."

"Not this guy, not the guy I'm talking about! He wasn't foiled at
all. It was me that got—" She stopped short, then dropped the fetish back into my palm. "He was a likeable guy, too—a regular barrel of laughs."

I spread open the cord and pulled it over my head, tucking the cold little charm beneath the front of my collar.

"The trickster is usually a likeable character. It's important to him to be admired by others. But he's always leading them into some crazy brand of mischief, and if they don't follow, he becomes full of himself, caught up in all of his own self-pity."

"Well then, maybe I am the trickster," she said. Her wild eyes were inspired.
The old man passed away in his sleep. It was July, a Tuesday, nearly six weeks after the night of the Yuwipi. In the afternoon of the following day, Harmon told me that he knew exactly the moment it had happened. The coyotes had informed him. They had come to him in a dream and they spoke to him a language that he could understand, though the language was neither English nor Lakota. "A great man has died this night," they told him. "A circle of life has reached its beginning."

A funeral home in Mandan handled the arrangements. The mortician—a round, balding man named Mohn—was everywhere, standing in the shadows, nodding politely at people he did not know. On Thursday afternoon, a wake was held in the Standing Rock High Gymnasium, and in the evening, a rosary at St. Peter's Catholic Church.

My father and I were present for the funeral. We rose early Friday and walked to the church. Clusters of people were beginning to gather
on the steps, the concrete walk, the yellow grass of the yard out front. Friday morning and the sun glinted white against the bricks of the old mission church. It was already hot, and the air was dry and uncomfortably still.

The Catholic priest was already inside, taking his time with the preparations. Out front, the clusters of people were restless. They began to whisper among themselves, edging closer to the building, crowding together, waiting for the doors to open. A dog barked from behind a wooden fence in the back yard of a house across the street. I turned and watched the black limousine approach, its tires crunching in the loose gravel.

It was the family of the deceased—Harmon and his grandmother and her sister, Maggie Walks-by-Herself, from Eagle Butte, South Dakota. Mohn was quick to rush out to the curb, to help them from the car. He eyed his watch and rubbed his scalp with his fingers, then stepped around to have a talk with the driver. The old woman stood remote and withdrawn. Harmon took her hand, but her look remained vacant.

"You shouldn't be staring," whispered my father. It came as if he were speaking to a child. "Fletcher, you know it isn't right to stare . . . ."

There was nothing to do inside but wait. We took a seat among the rows of pews and waited. It was quiet in here, quiet except for the scrape of a shoe, the flat echo from an unrestrained cough. The rows where we sat were suffused in bright and angled sunlight which entered through the
windows at the side of the church. The light seemed to overwhelm color and depth, robbing form of definition. I closed my eyes and continued to wait.

The procession began at the back of the church. I listened as the bier and casket passed beside me in the aisle, to the footsteps of pallbearers, to others who followed. When I opened my eyes, I saw the casket ahead, closed and elevated before the church altar, a white-linen cloth draped open upon it. Atop the pall, a crucifix rested, and there were flowers in the sanctuary, and lighted candles.

I heard shuffling among the pews as the priest approached the altar, then the congregation knelt and the funeral mass began.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen . . ."

Redhorse was there, opposite the aisle, a few rows closer to the head of the church, and his younger brother and his sisters were beside him. I saw Muttsy DuBois, alone at the back. He wasn't kneeling. He just sat there by himself, staring at the white-plaster statue of the Virgin. I turned and craned my head to catch a glimpse up front at Harmon, but there were too many others in the rows ahead, and I could not make him out from behind.

"Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. The just man shall be in everlasting remembrance; he shall not fear . . ."

I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to have any part in this. It would be better to remember the way the old man was in life than to
carry this picture around in my head. I stiffened my back against the hard, wooden pew and focused on the flickering sanctuary candles. The priest drew a breath, then went on.

"Release the souls of all the faithful departed from every bond of sin. Enable them by the help of your grace to escape the avenging judgement, that they may enjoy the happiness of eternal light."

I looked at my father as the mass progressed. He sat with his usual practiced patience, hands folded over a knee, a somber but controlled expression—the perfect funeral face. It was his doing, this funeral. There had been no discussion, no question about our attending. "A gesture of concern," as he had put it, "a simple gesture . . . concern for the man's family."

The priest readied the offering now, arranging the articles of communion on the altar, the chalice, the paten, the host.

"Who, on the day before he suffered death," he began, "took bread into his holy and venerable hands, and lifting up his eyes to heaven, to you, 0 God, his almighty Father, and giving thanks to you, he blessed it, broke and gave to his disciples, saying: Take, all of you, and eat of this:" and the priest elevated the Sacred Host above his head, holding it before the congregation, "For this is my body," he said.

The priest next took hold of the chalice. "In like manner, when he had eaten, taking also the blessed cup into his holy and venerable hands, and again giving thanks to you, he blessed it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take, all of you, and drink of this: For this is the chalice of my blood, of the new and everlasting covenant; the mystery of
faith; which shall be shed for you and for many others unto the forgive-
ness of sins." The priest raised the chalice, and cradling it in his
extended hands, he continued, "As often as you shall do these things, you
shall do them in memory of me."

The recession withdrew from the church and passed into the hot still-
ness outside. The burning incense, carried along by an altar boy, left
a trail that spread from the steps of the church downhill to the iron gate
of the unshaded cemetery. It was a sick and rancid odor, a pungent trail
that refused to dissipate in the rising heat of that morning.

As the recession turned, began crowding through the gate, I noticed
a man, an Indian, walking toward us up the road, coming toward us from
the edge of town. He was alone, a thin and tired man, walking alone,
carrying an overnight bag in his hand, his dark suit coat draped over his
shoulder.

Past the gate, inside the cemetery, the casket was placed on a scaf-
fold over the open grave. Here, the followers gathered loosely around,
standing uneasily in the dust and the dry mowed grass to look upon Victor
Circling Hawk's resting place. From the fenced yard up across the grav-
eled street, the dog began to bark again: a shrill echo, splitting the
morning silence. A fly settled down on the white-linen cloth atop the
casket, paused for a moment and then was gone.

The walking man stood inside the cemetery now. I could see him more
clearly, the lines of his face, an expression that seemed to me, broken
with distance. He propped the bag that he carried against one of the
gateposts, then slipped his arms stiffly into his suit coat and pulled
taut the knot in his tie.

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, even
if he die, shall live; and whoever lives and believes in me, shall never
die."

The walking man made his way up through the crowd and paused in
the heat before the casket and the grave. I could see the sun glinting,
flashing silver, as the crucifix was lifted from the pall and presented
to Harmon's grandmother. But the old woman was sadly confused, unable
to control her thin and quavering hands. The cross slipped away through
her weakening fingers and fell to the dusty earth before her feet.

The priest passed the incense over the casket, then sprinkled holy
water upon it. Mohn, the fat mortician, crouched down to retrieve the
cross, but the walking man stepped forward and motioned him aside.

"Lord, have mercy on us.
Christ, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy on us.
Our Father . . ."

The priest closed his eyes and made the sign of the cross. Then the
walking man stooped, his legs shaking, and when he rose, he held the
crucifix tight against his chest. The old woman began to sob hysterically.
Up the street, the dog ceased barking.

"Let us pray for the faithful, the dead who have gone before us—"

The walking man handed the crucifix to Harmon, and that was when I
noticed their singular resemblance. In a low and solemn but unified voice,
those beside the grave began: "Hail Mary, full of grace! the Lord is
with thee . . ."

The walking man turned then, and reached to hold the woman, held
her in the way that I could only imagine a son, now grown old himself,
would hold his old mother. And when the first prayer was finished, the
priest spoke again. "For the recently departed—"

"... Holy Mary, Mother of God . . ."

My father pressed up close behind me. I felt the weight of his
hand clamp down on my shoulder.

"And for the next to die among us—"

"... pray for us sinners . . ."
Hillary Gregg bent over in her seat and dug an apple from the canvas knapsack that lay on the floor between her feet. She straightened up, swung her loose blond hair back behind her shoulder, studied the apple a moment, which she turned slowly in her hand, then bit. A few drops of apple juice squirted from the side of her mouth, hitting me square in the cheek.

"Oh, hey," she said, her mouth still full of apple. "God—where are my manners?"

I didn't say anything to her, I just rubbed off the juice drops on the end of my shirt sleeve.

"You hungry?" she asked. "You want one of these?"

I shook my head.

"Hey—no—come on, I really mean it." She bent over again and produced another apple. "Here, take it," she said, holding it out in front of me.
of my face. She shook it a couple of times.

"You do a good Eve impression," I said. "You ought to take your show on the road." I grabbed the apple to stop her from shaking it and felt around the seat, behind my back, trying to locate the pocket of my jacket.

"You better eat it," she said. "It's good for you—an apple a day keeps the doctor away . . ."

I shoved the apple into my pocket.

"It's the potassium," she said, "apples, they're high in potassium."

"Potassium? Potassium? . . . Tell me, Miss Gregg, where are you off to on this crazy train?" I was making an attempt to change the subject.

She crunched her teeth back into the apple. Chewing, she spoke. "Missoula. I'm going to Missoula to visit my brother. He's a student there, at the University. Economics."

"How long you aiming to stay?"

"Who knows, for Christ sake. Forever, maybe . . ." She scratched her lip.

"I think I understand," I said.

"Sure you do—everybody understands." She chomped at the apple, then continued, "What about you? Where are you going?"

I looked around. "Canada," I whispered. It just slipped out—automatic.

"God—you're a draft dodger! How absolutely wild—"

I thrust my hand over her mouth. "Not so loud."

She started laughing then, choking and spitting up apple all over my hand. "I knew it," she said. "I suspected something—a draft dodger,"
she bellowed out. "Wild!"

"It isn't funny," I said. But how could she know that? How could I tell her—or anyone—that I didn't exactly like the idea of getting killed?

"Hey, I'm sorry," she said. Still, she couldn't stop laughing. She wiped a red piece of peel off her chin.

"It isn't at all funny. I tried to appeal. I tried to get a 'CO' classification. I tried everything."

"Hey—you're serious, aren't you. You really are running away . . ."

"Of course I'm serious. You think I'd be sitting on this crazy train right now if I weren't really serious?"

She swallowed what was left of her mouthful of apple. No, she couldn't know. She could never understand what I was afraid of. No one could understand.

"It was that appeals agent—he didn't care. He took some kind of twisted pleasure in humiliating me. I wrote a letter, asking for an appeal. They're supposed to help you, or so they say—those appeals agents, it's their job to help."

"It's the system," said Hillary.

"Boy, you've got that right—red tape."

She looked at me then. Her eyes had become lucid, and I thought, oddly sympathetic. Her voice calmed. "I'm sorry for laughing," she said. "I really am. Really."

"I went up there to see him—his office. He called me a coward. He said all conscientious objectors were cowards. 'CO' is the first two
letters of the word *coward*, that's what he said."

"Hey, come on, don't get down on yourself. God—it takes a lot of courage to go through what you have, I mean to stick up for what you believe." She paused a moment and took a breath. "'CO' is also the first two letters in the word *courage*, you know."

*Courage*, I thought, now there's an interesting word.
The construction job had started in the middle of June. Right away, it became routine. We always broke early for lunch, around eleven, sometimes earlier. Usually, we just crawled up on a stack of two-by-fours, ate out of a bag. There was never any conversation until the food was gone. Oftentimes there was no conversation at all.

The project was running behind schedule even before it got off the ground. There were to be 15 new houses, each like the house next door, modern houses with electricity and running water. It was the third such development in Fort Yates, the latest in an effort of dogged futility. Nathan Strong and I had been hired on as laborers, step-and-fetch-it boys, go for this, go for that. It was most of two weeks before they let us even swing a hammer. And so we broke early for lunch; we felt we had it coming.

Harmon drove out to the construction site one morning during the
first week in August. It made me uneasy. I hadn't seen him in a while, not since the funeral. The crews had been slapping up sheathing on two of the units that day, and my arms were already beginning to feel like lead. It was hot by eleven. We found a place in the shade to eat our lunch. Nathan Strong was the first to spot the truck. He jabbed an elbow into my ribs, then stuffed part of a sandwich between his great gapped teeth.

The old International bounced along the graded dirt road, spitting up a wake of dust that sifted into the breeze. I stood and moved out from under the shade of the house to wave him in. The old truck backfired as it ground to a stop.

"You've got to quit abusing that vehicle," I said. I was trying to make a joke.

But he couldn't hear me over the rough popping of the engine. He shut it off. It made a hissing sound.

"Fletcher boy . . . Nathan . . ." Harmon jumped down from the cab and wandered over. He slipped his free hand into the back pocket of his jeans. Nathan Strong nodded, then unwrapped a second sandwich.

"What brings you out here?" I said. "Looking for your dream house? . . . You won't find it in this place."

He was carrying a paper bag at his side, all bunched together where he squeezed it in his grip. He glanced around to see if anyone was looking, but the other men always ate their lunches in the seclusion of their cars or pickup trucks—too far away to notice anything peculiar. He smiled.
"What's in the bag?" said Nathan, brushing bread crumbs from the front of his t-shirt.

"A celebration," said Harmon. He peeled back the brown paper bag, exposing the neck of a quart bottle of beer.

"Whoa!" Nathan Strong rose to his feet.

I tossed a yellow-handled screwdriver to Harmon, which he used to pry the cap off the bottle. He had to twist it and work it up under the edge, but the cap popped off with little difficulty.

Nathan Strong reached first for the bottle and he took a deep, sucking pull. The quart bottle gurgled with a rush of air.

"What are we celebrating?" I asked.

Nathan Strong passed the bottle of beer.

"My enlistment," said Harmon. "Talked to an Army recruiter ... nine o'clock this morning."

My throat hardened. I couldn't swallow. The beer gushed out past the corners of my mouth. Slow down, I thought. Take it easy.

"I'll be leaving before the month is out—Fort Dix, New Jersey. Basic training."

I felt my heart pounding fast and unsteady within the cavity of my chest. This announcement had come as an unexpected shock. It made me angry. He had no right. "Who's going to take care of the old woman? ... with your grandfather gone and all?"

He bent and plucked up a blade of grass and peeled it apart between his fingers. "My father, he's going to stick around awhile. And if he doesn't, she can always move to Cheyenne River, to live with her sister
sister in Eagle Butte. We've got relations. They'll look out for her."

Nathan Strong grasped the neck of the bottle and lifted it in a congratulatory gesture. "To the Army," he said, "them guys better look out when you show up."

"You can't do this," I told him. "They'll send you to Nam, you'll get yourself killed. Don't you know that? Harmon, don't be stupid . . ."

His dark eyes narrowed then. He cast a glance to the empty field beyond the edge of the construction site. I could tell he was disappointed. "It's a matter of honor, Fletch. I'm doing it for my grandfather . . . Maybe you don't understand."

Nathan Strong raised the bottle again, then tipped it back and swallowed. A sweat bee—a yellowjacket—buzzed past his forehead.

Understand?


Nathan Strong passed the quart back to Harmon. "Do me a favor," he said, chuckling, "lift a scalp off Ho Chi Minh!"

I shook my head. "Crazy . . ."

A power saw whined from the unit next door. The men were starting in back to work. Nathan Strong rubbed his nose with his fingers, and Harmon gave him the bottle again. He took a hard and hurried last pull of beer, wiped his lips and passed me the bottle. "Down it, Fletch, we got to go."

Reluctantly, I took a drink. Then I flung the bottle hard at a pile
of construction scrap. The glass popped and shattered inside the paper bag.

Harmon called as I turned to walk away. "Fletcher boy—"

I paused. "What is it?"

"I want to give you something." His hand sank into his front pocket. "It's from my grandfather, he wanted you to have it." He pulled out the fetish, the carved-bone coyote, and he opened my hand and laid it carefully in the center of my palm.

... He gave me that charm and told me to remember. The stories of the trickster, he told me to remember ...

"Harmon—"

"Yes?"

"Say hello to Bob Hope for me."
My father, of course, took the pragmatic view. Emotion rarely colored his thinking.

"You must understand, Fletcher," he said, "reason is based on one's perception of the future."

"Then a rational thinker will always know the truth?"

"No—perception is founded only in circumstance, derived only from personal experience."

"Is it wrong to try to change an individual's perception?" I asked.

"The perception itself cannot be changed, only the circumstance, the foundation of reason. Truth, Fletcher, is a measure of the past, nothing more at all than a measure of the past."

"Does your family know?" Hillary Gregg waited for an answer.

"What?" I turned around. "Know what?"
"About your draft evasion, Canada, running away—God, what do you think?"

"I don't have much family," I said, "only my father. I suppose he's figured it out by now."

The train shook as it took a grade. The engine was pulling hard; it had lost momentum. Outside the window, the moon emerged from a cloud, and I could see the pine-covered hills and the rugged bluffs above the river, cast in a soft white glow.

"What happened to your mother?" Hillary asked.

"She died," I answered, "a long time ago. I was only six years old."

"Hey, that can scar you," she said. "I read where if your mother dies when you're real young, it can scar you for life—emotionally, I mean."

I looked at her. She touched her hair. "You sound like a regular Sigmund Freud," I said.

"It's just something I read. God—it's probably all made up, you know."

I nodded. "She died from tuberculosis," I said.

"God—"

"I didn't really know what was happening. I was too young. I remember the night chills and the coughing, and I remember standing outside the bedroom door and hearing my father whispering to her that everything was going to be all right. But nobody ever told me she was going to die. I didn't expect that, I didn't know . . . ."

"You were just a kid," said Hillary. "Just a little kid."
"She had to be confined to her room. Isolation. There was a county nurse who used to come by to check on her. The nurse never called it TB, she always referred to it as the 'consumption.' 'We're going to have a look at your mother's consumption,' she used to say. I hated her. I hated that nurse more than I ever hated anyone. It's funny, I used to pray for that nurse to die. I used to think that if she would only die, my mother would be all right; she could get up out of bed, and I could touch her again, and she'd put her arms around me and everything would be all right.

"They said that she had probably had the infection for years, but that it was dormant or something, and she didn't know it until it acted up. They finally had to send her away, to a hospital in Minnesota. That's where she died, that hospital in Minnesota."

Hillary Gregg leaned back against her seat. She smiled at me. It was a helpless sort of smile. Past the planes of her face, I saw myself again, reflected in the window. I turned away.

"The worst part about it was I never got to say good-bye. My mother died, and I never said good-bye."

The train leveled out, regaining its rhythm as it picked up speed. I put my hands to my face and pressed lightly on my temples. But then the pain came back, the throbbing in the bruise on my cheek, and once more, I began to remember. ...

"Hey, I've got an idea," Hillary said. "This is great--really."

She slid forward, turned and grabbed me by the shoulder.

"What's great?"
"This idea," she said. She was getting excited. Her tongue was pressed tight against the corner of her mouth.

"Go on," I said.

She started to giggle. "You get off in Missoula with me, see—and then we tell my brother that we're married. God—he'll just die. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, it'll cause an absolute scandal!"

"You forget, I'm a fugitive—"

"No," she said, "Fletcher Bradley is a fugitive. You, Mr. Smith, are a happily married man." She started rubbing her knee, giggling and shaking and rubbing her knee.

"I couldn't do it," I said. "I couldn't pull it off."

"Hey—trust me," she said, "this will be great."

I shook my head and sank back in my seat.

"We'll have to get a ring. That's it; he'd have to believe it if he saw a ring. God—this is great!"

"You're nuts," I said.

She giggled. "We'll tell him that you're Jewish. That'll absolutely kill him. Mr. and Mrs. Smith—mazeltov!" She sat back and smiled and stared at the rail car ceiling. Her furtive blue eyes turned wide and dreamy. "God," she whispered, "this is great!"
"Hokahe. Shake them feathers! Shake them feathers!" The loud-speaker crackled and squealed and hummed, and the powwow announcer let out a wail, and the arbor filled with dancers—color and motion. "Hoka. Hoka. Grand entry time, everybody dance."

It was wacipi weekend, the last weekend in August, the weekend of the 1968 All Nations Powwow. I decided to attend the event alone. Harmon had already left for Fort Dix. There was a post-card from him in the mailbox Saturday, one of those Army PX post-cards—a black and white picture of a marching platoon. I was on my way out of the house when I discovered it. I paused just long enough to shove it into my hip pocket.

A light breeze stirred the air that evening. I walked out to Long Soldier Coulee from town, and the breeze felt good against the skin on my face. Overhead, the sky was clear and deep blue, the sun brilliant orange atop the gray buttes in the west. Down through the coulee, the
leaves of the oaks and box elders along the ravine rustled softly in the evening breeze.

"Everybody dance. Shake them feathers . . ."

An honor song was sung that evening. It was part of a ceremony to honor five Standing Rock Sioux who had lost their lives in Vietnam. During the ceremony, five U.S. Air Force fighter jets—F-4 Phantoms—passed low above the arbor, their black shadows slipping away beneath the dancers. They had flown in from the air base in Minot that evening, under special arrangement, according to the announcer. On their second pass, the jets took a steep, banking turn, then shot straight upward, accelerating against the vastness of the sky, becoming smaller and smaller above the watchful crowd until the screaming jets disappeared altogether. Five United States flags were then unfurled at the center of the arbor, and a prayer was spoken, first in English, then in Lakota.

... You do the craziest things in the name of honor . . .

"Uh, you wouldn' happen have no chemicals on you, would you, Joe?"
He put his hand on my shoulder, so I couldn't ignore him. "You know, Joe, smoke some chemicals?"

I turned around. The man looked pretty wasted to me, a wasted Indian. I shook my head.

"Come on, Joe . . ." His voice was getting louder—unusually loud. People around me were beginning to look.

"Greedy white man," he snapped, looking back at the people. "Fuckin' greedy white man . . ." Then he stumbled away.

The announcer called for a contest song, junior boys, fancy dancers.
"Take it away." His voice echoed. "Make it a fast one—no lullabies!"

I got up from my seat and wandered out into the walkway. I saw the wasted Indian clinging to the side of a metal garbage dumpster. I headed deliberately in the opposite direction.

... The craziest things ... Harmon, you fool, you've really done it this time—going off like that to get yourself killed ...

Honor? I shook my head, scuffed the trampled dirt beneath the toe of my boot. A little whiff of dust rose up and then settled. Goddamn Indian, next year they'll be singing for you. Don't you know that? Next year, they're going to put you on the program—Harmon Circling Hawk's personal honor song.

"Hokahe. Shake 'em boys, shake them feathers."

I could feel the pounding drum now, reverberating through my body, the high-pitched vocables of the contest song. I continued to work my way around the circle, outside the bowery, past a concession trailer with a piece of cardboard nailed just above its window: FRYBREAD 25¢.

At another booth, a nearby booth labeled "Genuine American Indian Crafts," I stopped and turned and pressed my way in. The booth was made up from an arrangement of card tables, draped in Pendleton blankets. Overhead, above the painted plywood sign, a string of blinking Christmas tree lights beckoned passers-by.

"Genuine Zuni," said the man behind the booth to a woman inspecting a turquoise ring, "real silver—look at that inlay . . ."

"How much?" the woman asked. She sounded skeptical. She was Indian, in her late thirties, I guessed. She wore a lot of make-up.
"Sixty bucks," he said. "Cash." His teeth were big and white and straight.

"Cripes!" she barked and put down the ring.

The man rubbed his belly. "I gotta eat too, you know."

She picked up a different ring, then tried this new one on her finger. She had a red leather handbag tucked up beneath her arm. The handbag matched her red knit slacks.

"Hey, what you got there?" The booth man was pointing a stubby finger at my neck. "That fetish there, is that thing genuine?"

I pulled the cord up over my head, dangling it out before the man in the booth.

"What is it? A little dog or something?"

"Coyote," I said. "It's very, very old."

"You wanna sell it?" He reached out a hand and clawed at the charm. But I stepped back and pulled it away. "How much?" he questioned, scratching his puny chin.

"Sixty bucks," I said. "Cash!"

The Indian woman cackled.

"C'mon," said the booth man, "give you ten—"

I rubbed my stomach, shook my head and smiled.

The Indian woman yanked off the ring and followed me away from the booth. I could hear her chuckling and cackling behind me. "Cripes," she said, "you got him good."

I bought her a cup of coffee at the 25¢ frybread trailer, and the two of us walked back to the bowery. The wasted Indian swore as we passed,
swore at the metal dumpster that held him erect. "Greedy white man," he said.

"... Give 'em a round of applause, ladies and gentlemen." The powwow announcer blew into his microphone, tapped it a few times, then went on, "Intertribal time . . . Hoka, take it away . . ."

We found a place to sit on the bleacher seats beneath the arbor. The Indian woman stared at me while she sipped her coffee. All around the circle, the spotlights came on, illuminating the dance arena in the gray, fading twilight of evening.

"I bought you coffee," I began, "that entitles me to know your name."

"Gail Goodnose," she answered. "Northern Cheyenne, from up by Ashland. It's a little town—Ashland, Montana. But I don't live there now. You couldn't pay me enough to go back there—cripes."

"How come?"

"Too many Indians." She laughed.

The loudspeaker rattled as the announcer let out a roar. "EE-YI-YI-YI . . . This song's a golden oldie, ladies and gentlemen . . . Everybody dance, intertribals . . ."

"So where do you live now?" I asked.

She hesitated. "Rapid City. I'm working secretarial—U.S.G.S., that's the United States Geological Survey, you know." She slurped the last drops of coffee from her styrofoam cup, crumpled it and tossed it to the ground below the bleachers. "No more questions," she said to me then. Her smile was creasing her make-up.
THIRTY-TWO

Darkness fell quickly on Long Soldier Coulee. The moon hung low between two buttes on the horizon, visible above the rounded tops of oak and ash and box elder, spread down through the ravine. In the circle of the arbor, spotlights exaggerated the twisting motions of the dancers, casting shadows at their feet, shadows that were wild and without form.

"This stuff is so backward," Gail Goodnose said. She shook a cigarette out of its package and worked it between her lips.

It was a sneak-up dance, men's traditional. The dancers were making their way toward the bowery center in tight, rhythmic steps, each bobbing and weaving with tireless precision—movements resembling those of a prairie chicken.

She pulled a silver lighter from her red leather handbag and struck it a few times at the tip of her cigarette. "Backward," she repeated. The cigarette caught hold of the flame and she drew in.
I cleared my throat, but I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't to see my kids. It's about the only chance I ever get anymore . . ." She drew on her cigarette again, then raised her chin slightly. When she opened her mouth, the smoke rolled away off the end of her tongue. "My old lady takes care of them, drags them around to the powwows all summer. Her husband is a singer—Ashland Singers. They really go for all this backward stuff."

"You're married?" I said.

She narrowed her eyes, sucked on her cigarette. "Divorced," she said. Her hair was ratted, piled up on her head. She must have used a gallon of hair spray.

In the circle of the bowery, the song came to an end, and the dancers froze, motionless upon a final ringing drumbeat. A vigorous applause rose and was sustained among the viewers around the circle, broken only by the great and rattling voice across the loudspeaker: "Intertribal time, ladies and gentlemen . . . Mandaree Singers, take it away . . ."

"Roxie, my little girl, she'll be seven next month, and my boy, Donald Jr., he's four. They're getting so goddamn big I can't hardly recognize them anymore." Gail snapped the ash from the cigarette in her fingers. She shook her head and crossed her legs.

"How long have you been divorced?" I asked.

She paused, blowing a thin stream of smoke into the air. "Five years," she answered, "five lonely fucking years."

"What happened?"

"Let's just say he wasn't no good."
"That's all?"

She started to laugh. "Cripes you're nosy... no that ain't all." She sucked deep on the cigarette, then blew the smoke from her nose. "My ex was a troublemaker. He'd get to drinking, you see, and then he'd get mean—uncontrollable. It was a fucking nightmare, you know what I mean?"

I nodded my head. She uncrossed her legs.

"You want to know where that man is right now?" She raised the cigarette again, but stopped short of her lips. Then she threw it at the dirt underneath the bleachers. "Deer Lodge Prison, that's where."

I noticed her eyes were beginning to get watery, but I was curious about her husband, so I pressed her for more. "How did he end up in that place?" I asked.

She bit down on her lip, glanced at her shoes. "He cut somebody—in a bar fight. —See, he was drunk."

"Did he kill the guy?"

"No—of course not, not him. He never intended to. But the law don't care nothing for intentions. If you open somebody up, that's good enough for them." She reached down for her purse on the bleacher seat beside her, fished around inside, and tugged out a wadded handkerchief which she applied to her watery eyes.

I slid closer to her and touched my hand to the small of her back. She didn't pull away. She didn't seem to mind. "I wasn't meaning to upset you," I said. I really didn't know what else I could say.

She lowered the handkerchief. In the dim reflected glare from one
of the spotlights, I could see her mascara pooling below the corner of her eye. "I'm not upset," she responded. "It's them kids of mine—Roxie and Donald Jr. I want to be a good mother to them, see—God knows I do. When things settle down in Rapid, when I got me some money, I'm going to move them down there with me." She dabbed her eyes with the handkerchief again, smearing the dark mascara.

The moon had risen well above the buttes by now. I looked up at its round, white form, high over the bowery, unobscured by the incandescent spotlights. This woman, I thought, has got to have fifteen years on me.

A breeze came up and rustled the trees as we crossed the shadowed ravine. The trail cut down through a growth of underbrush, then rose and leveled out along the bench on the opposite side. There were lights burning in some of the camps, a faint echo of laughter. In the distance behind us, I could still hear the pulsing drums and the high-pitched cries of singers, rising from inside the bowery.

"Backward," Gail Goodnose whispered. She stopped in the trail and giggled, then she lit a cigarette.

My chest was pounding when we reached the tent, the campsite. There was no one around, no sign of life at all. I saw a station wagon, dark green, parked nearby, an orange Volkswagon beside it. In an open space in front of the tent, a pair of lawn chairs stood empty. A broken strap on one of the lawn chairs flapped a couple times in the breeze.

"There's a lantern around here someplace . . ."
I turned. She was hunched over the station wagon tailgate, rummag-
ing around inside.

"Cripes," she said, "where the hell do they keep the fucking thing?"

I drew a deep breath, then wandered over and stood behind her. Her
rump wiggled as she dug for the lantern.

"Maybe we don't need it," I said.

When she straightened up, she backed into me. I was standing that
close.

Gail Goodnose shifted her glance and studied me over. "No—maybe
we don't," she said.

Inside the tent, she lit another cigarette, and when she snapped her
lighter closed, a large, black spot danced before my eyes, shrinking
slowly as they adjusted to the dull gray light of the moon through the
canvas. I blinked a few times in attempt to focus. Gail dropped the flap
on the door of the tent, then turned and smiled and stared at me.

"You want a snort?" she asked. "They got a bottle around here some-
place—I know it."

I tried to swallow. "Sure," I answered. The word almost caught in
my throat.

She found the liquor inside a suitcase. It was Windsor Canadian,
a quart bottle. The cap was stuck, so she handed me her cigarette and
twisted it between her teeth. The cap made a grinding sound until the
threads loosened up.

"Ladies first," I said.

She narrowed her eyes, then took a short snort. I handed her back
her cigarette.

"Your turn now, honey," she said to me, wagging the bottle beneath my nose. The fumes of the sloshing whiskey caused me to sneeze.

I grasped the bottle firmly, just below the neck, held my breath and tipped it back. The whiskey burned going down. I felt my chest swell and my face growing hot as I continued to drink.

"Cripes, don't guzzle it all—you want to go blind?" Gail clutched the bottle and pulled it away. Then she stood back a moment, staring at me as if she half expected me to keel over or turn violent. She drew a nervous puff on her cigarette, then screwed the cap back down on the Windsor.

Gail Goodnose—Northern Cheyenne—you've got to have fifteen years on me, at least fifteen years. What am I doing with you? Why am I here? I took a couple of shallow breaths, moved closer to her and reached to touch her cheek. Her make-up was greasy. It rubbed off easily against my fingers, but I pretended not to notice. . . .

"I don't normally do this sort of thing," she said as she slipped off her blouse and slacks. "I've got my standards, you know."

I nodded, but said nothing. Even if I'd tried, I couldn't have said a thing. My heart was really racing now, pumping hard, and I could feel the blood rushing at my temples, the swollen throbbing as I fumbled at the zipper in my jeans.

And then we were together, naked beneath the snagging blanket, my hand cupping her breast, my head dizzy with whiskey and sweat and the smell of her perfume.
"You do believe me, don't you?" she whispered. "I'm no tramp, am I? My old lady thinks that I'm a tramp."

I shook my head and pressed a finger to her lips. My body trembled as I moved inside her. She closed her eyes then. She appeared to be smiling.
A mourning dove called from the direction of the creek bed. I sat up slowly, rubbing my eyes open with the flat of my thumb. The sun glared against the tent canvas. I squinted, then raised my hand to shield the brightness. My skin had become damp, clammy with perspiration. The air was dry and hot and stuffy.

The Indian woman was gone; Gail Goodnose was not beside me. Only crumpled blankets where she had slept, the stale smell of cigarettes and whiskey remained.

I rose to my knees and groped around behind me to collect my scattered clothes. A delayed rush surged through my head as I stood to tug up my jeans. A second later, I felt the pounding in my skull, and I sat down again, against the wall of the tent, pressed my face into my hands, and waited for the dizziness to clear.

Gail Goodnose, it's just as well you're gone. How could I look at
you? Your face? Eyes? And this bright light encircling your form? You mean nothing to me. But then you would understand that, wouldn't you? It wasn't really me you slept with last night, it wasn't me at all. That smile of yours was for someone else. You would understand....

I heard the mourning dove call once more, then a rustling inside the tent, a shifting noise near the wall at the opposite end, and I realized I was not alone. I lowered my hands and glanced across the pile of crumpled blankets. A head emerged from within an Army surplus sleeping bag, a small child, a girl. She sat up and yawned, then fell back again and rolled over. A second head emerged, this one awake—a smaller child, a boy. It was Roxie and Donald Jr., I thought. The boy winked at me.

I finished dressing hastily, embarrassed that I had been discovered—even if by only a four-year-old. I tried to remember when they had come into the tent. They would have been with their grandmother, Gail's old lady, and she too had probably spent the night here. I shook my head and forced a foot into a boot. My heel stung as it slapped the leather insole.

The whiskey bottle lay empty on the floor beyond the blankets. There were lipstick smears on its mouth, bright red impressions of her lips. Beside the bottle lay the wadded handkerchief which she had used to dry her watery eyes.

Donald Jr. crawled away from the Army surplus sleeping bag, then stood and took a couple of wobbly steps my direction. He was wearing only underwear, white briefs that were a size too large. The underwear bagged
between his legs when he walked.

"I was on my way out," I said to him.

Donald Jr. did not reply.

"I was just about to leave—I'm a friend of your mother's." I felt stupid explaining myself to a four-year-old Indian.

He picked his nose and winked at me again.

I shook my head.

Outside the tent, the sky was clear, pale blue above, and the sun higher, more intense than I had imagined. I remembered the post-card when I tucked in my shirt. Reaching around, I pressed my hand against my hip pocket. It was still there, a little creased, but there all the same. I ran my fingers through my hair then, and tried to clear my throat, but it was too dry and I couldn't bring anything up. My teeth felt slimy against the rough, dry surface of my tongue.

The mourning dove was sitting perched on the trunk of a deadfall that lay angled in the buckbrush above the slope of the ravine. With the heel of my boot, I kicked loose a clod of dirt, and I whipped it sidearm straight for the bird. The clod exploded against the sun-bleached deadfall, and through the settling dust, I watched the dove lift, the white tips of its tail fanning out as it skimmed the tangled brush.

I heard the loudspeaker over at the rodeo grounds. It seemed they were having difficulty setting up the calf roping event. The announcer was very apologetic. He tried to kill time by telling jokes. He had a whiny voice and he kept laughing after everything he said. He wasn't very funny.
In the clearing opposite the ravine, the dance arbor stood silent and empty. Some of the vendors were up and about their booths, but there were no customers anywhere to speak of.

Then I noticed a stick game going at the edge of the camp, a few hundred feet from where I stood. The gamblers were crowded beneath a giant striped awning, a canopy that was open at all sides. I tried to listen to the stick game songs, but the rodeo announcer kept laughing and whining, interrupting my thoughts, breaking any effort I made at concentration.

They were songs of deception, Harmon had said, old songs which always told some kind of story. He translated them once as we stood by and listened. He told me they were designed to distract the players, to cause them to lose their attention and their money. We never played the stick game. It was not a game for amateurs.

The sun was well overhead by the time I reached the highway. Traffic was beginning to pick up now, all of it in the direction of Long Soldier Coulee. The grand entry would be starting soon, I thought. But I had seen enough of this All Nations Powwow—more than enough.

I stopped for a moment and stood on the rise where the road from the agency enters the highway. I worked the post-card out of my back pocket, stared at the picture, then turned it over. The message was smudged some, but the penmanship was neat. It was written in pencil. Dark.
Fletcher boy,

Well here I am in the Army! So far about all we ever do is march. They've got us marching all the time, but I'm used to it. I know you don't think I did the right thing joining up. I guess I can't blame you for that. Maybe someday I'll be able to explain.

Your friend,

Harmon

P.S. I saw the ocean!

I looked up then and gazed out over the valley and the bottoms, Lake Oahe and the little town of Fort Yates. It was hot already, though not yet afternoon. I inhaled a deep breath of the hot August air, then I crumpled up the picture post-card, squeezed it tight within my fist, and turned and started walking down the dusty causeway toward home.
THIRTY-FOUR

Hillary Gregg lay asleep beside me, her head resting against my upper arm, just below the shoulder.

"Iktomi, what do you make of my situation?" I held the fetish, centered in my palm. The bone surfaces took on an amber hue in the dim light of the rail car. "You don't answer me, little Coyote. Do you not play a part in all of this?"

I closed my hand and looked at the girl. A few misplaced strands of hair had fallen across her face. The strands fluttered in front of her nose each time she breathed.

It was late. The lights were dimmed inside the car and most of the passengers were sleeping. By now, I had become accustomed to the pounding of the diesel engine, almost comfortable, secure in a way—as if it were a human heart, and its continued pulsing rhythm an assurance of life.
Could she have really meant what she said? Could it be she really wanted me to get off this train with her? It would be fun to play out her charade, I thought. She would be fun to be around. Mr. and Mrs. Smith, the happy couple.

I squeezed my hand tightly around the fetish. I could feel its shape, its form, an impression in my hand. It was smooth. Perhaps it had become worn smooth through many years of handling, turned over and over again so that it was worked upon by the oils of the old man's hands. The leather cord was my addition. I had fastened on the cord so that I wouldn't lose the charm, so that I could wear the Coyote as a kind of talisman around my neck.

I lowered my hand then, and I glanced again at Hillary. There was an innocence in the way this girl slept. Slumped here in the seat beside me—I could detect a certain softness in her, a vulnerability that had been masked by her mischievous nature when she was awake. Those wild eyes were closed now. She did not speak.

"Yes, I will play your crazy game," I whispered. "I will get off this train with you here in Montana. I will put aside all that is now the past, and I will begin again, start over again, live each day only for the future."

I reached slowly to the knapsack which lay on the floor ahead of Hillary's feet, careful not to wake her with any sudden movement. I opened my hand and stared for a very long time upon the fetish. Then I tied the leather cord to the flap of the canvas knapsack so that the fetish dangled a few short inches below.
"This is for you, Mrs. Smith," I continued. "Crazy little trickster, reckless girl, this is for you."
PART-FOUR
The sky was gray when I awoke, overcast outside the windows of the rail car. Above the narrow valley, the mountains were shrouded in gray bands of clouds that hung close and refused to break. And it was snowing here; a clean and gentle snow was falling in the valley, falling steadily upon the timbered slopes higher up. Mountain snow. October.

The porter had said that we were entering Idaho. I had slept past noon and the girl had slipped out earlier that morning in Missoula. I tried to press him for answers, more information. Did she try to wake me? Mention that we were traveling together? That I was to leave this train with her? Go away with her? Did she say anything about me? Anything at all?

But the porter would not be specific. He would say only that the girl had left the train alone. She was traveling alone.

I shifted my weight, then turned and eased back against the solid
cushion. I studied the worn upholstery of the empty seat beside me. No, she had never been on the level. I could see that now. She wasn't serious about it and neither was I. It was all a stupid game—her reaction, all the things I told her. It didn't matter, I thought. It was a foolish idea anyway, a fool's idea that she might have really meant anything she said.

The upholstery was sun-bleached, thin and faded. It had faded blue and green geometric patterns spreading across it. There was a dark stain on the seat that blended into one of these patterns. You could tell it was a stain, though. Probably coffee. It wasn't shiny like the rest of the fabric.

Something in her eyes, that's what it was—those wild and unpredictable eyes. It was a spell. Whether she knew it or not, she had cast some sort of spell. She had a way with those spell-casting eyes.

I glanced to the window, to the falling snow outside. It was coming down more heavily now, collecting in the open stretches of the winding valley, in the scrub along the river and the dark stands of pine and fir above.

Monday now—past noon. I hadn't eaten a thing in nearly 24 hours. I remembered the apple in the pocket of my jacket and I slid forward and reached around behind me to fish it out. She had insisted that I take it. It's good for you, she said.

I worked my hand inside the pocket, but the apple was stuck, wedged against the handle of the pocket knife—the lock-blade Buck. I tried to twist it out, pulling and twisting at the same time. But it wouldn't
budge. I was suddenly desperate then. I tried to force the pocket inside-out. It became a matter of necessity, this struggle, though I couldn't for the life of me figure out why. A seam in the pocket finally split open, and the contents—the apple, the knife—were released.

I thought of the McIntosh, the old apple tree in the back yard of the yellow house on Collins. It had been said to produce some of the finest apples anywhere—firm but not bitter. I thought of my father. We used to give away box loads.

And then I heard the familiar tight click as I opened the knife. I drew the blade down against the skin of the apple, broke the fruit into sections and ate it. It was Kirby's knife—ebony handle and silver plate fittings. On the sleeve of my jacket, I wiped off the blade. I wiped off the blade, paused and stared at the knife. Then, it all started coming back. Everything started coming back...
The induction notice had arrived in the Saturday mail. It came a lot sooner than I thought it would. I hadn't been prepared. There was rainy-day money, saved up from the months on the construction job, but there weren't any plans. I had always thought somehow there would be plenty of time for plans.

I found the envelope torn open, the letter spread flat on the kitchen table, my father's reading glasses angled beside it. I had come in just then, through the back door, but he apparently didn't hear me. The sound of the television blared from the living room. It was the news, the six o'clock news.

And he said nothing to me when I entered the living room, nothing as I stood there beside him. He did not look up. He was sitting in his chair, staring blankly at the glowing TV screen, working his chin between his thumb and his fingers. On the news, a man read the Vietnam body
counts. According to the figures, our side was winning. But that didn’t matter. My father was not relaxed.

I made my way quickly down the hall into my bedroom. I had to work fast. There was no time to think. No time for decisions. I gathered together the loose clump of cash I kept hidden in the back of my top dresser drawer. Then I folded it and stuffed the wad into the pocket of my jacket.

So it had come to this. I had never really imagined it would come down to this. Things had always seemed way off somewhere, in the future—nothing ever to have to think about now. I didn’t even read the induction notice. It seemed I didn’t need to. There wasn’t any point.

I glanced around this room which contained my possessions. Unnecessary things—they would be a burden to me now. I would have to travel light.

I lifted the cord from where it hung around the bedpost, the crude bone charm fastened to its end. Then I pulled the leather cord down over my head and tucked the charm down beneath my collar. All of his stories, the ways of our people—these things, he told me to remember...

The lock-blade knife lay closed atop the dresser. I picked it up, wrapped my fingers over the smooth surface of its ebony handle. I knew the knife by memory, every detail. The weight felt good in my palm. I opened the blade and ran my thumb across the edge, then I snapped it closed and shoved it into my pocket. It was Kirby’s knife, lock-blade Buck... It’s a loan, Fletcher—to prove that you’re coming back...
When I returned to the living room, my father was standing by the picture window, looking out over the porch, into the yard, the street. The television had been switched off. "You're going out?" he said. He didn't turn around.

"Yes. I'm going out."

"I'm sorry I didn't get anything together for dinner."

"I understand ... I'll grab something at Muttsy's."

"There was a phone call earlier, your friend Harmon called. He's back from Fort Dix. He was calling from somewhere here in town. He said he'd be around tonight. He wanted to see you. I thought I should let you know . . . ."

Harmon—back from boot camp? Already back? "I'll probably run into him." I tried to thread the zipper on my jacket. My hands were shaking.

"Fletcher—"

I looked up. "What is it?" I said.

He turned, squinted a little, to get a better look at me. "Tomorrow is Sunday. Let's go fishing—just the two of us, you and me. We'll drive down to Smith Bay—like we used to. We'll spend the whole day fishing. We'll pack a lunch, make a day of it."

"I'd like that," I said. "Really, you know I'd like that." I finished pulling up my jacket zipper, then reached to turn the knob at the front door.

"Fletcher—"

"Yes?"

He paused. My father paused, continuing to stare at me. His eyes
were flat and glassy. "It's nothing," he said, "—just that you remind me of your mother right now, standing there like that. It's your eyes, you have your mother's eyes . . ."

I nodded, but I couldn't look at him. I didn't think it would be this difficult.

"Good-bye," I whispered as I stepped onto the porch. "Good-bye," I whispered as I closed the door behind me.

I walked the long way to Muttsy's, Fort Street to the river, beneath the tall cottonwoods in front of the old brick agency. The sun had dropped below the horizon and the sky was streaked in orange and purple and red, reflected in the open backwater of the Missouri. I came upon the monument, the old Standing Rock, which had been erected opposite the agency buildings more than eighty years before. The monument was choked around its base in weeds that spread to the edge of the road.

Walking is good for the soul, Fletcher boy. It makes you think. All the time you're walking, you're thinking—it's good for the soul.

A gust blew up and rattled the trees, and the woman of stone seemed to move somehow. Beneath these long shadows, she seemed to be gesturing to me. A cold shiver stopped me dead in my tracks. When the wind gust subsided, the shadows grew still. I stood for a time in the middle of the road, then drew a breath and passed on.

The streetlights came on along Standing Rock Road. In the dusty lot next to the Super Valu, a wiry-looking dog was sniffing the tattered remains of a brown paper bag. I heard geese overhead. They were flying
low and to the south. I paused and watched their dark forms disappear against the sky, then I climbed the concrete steps before the door in front of Muttsy's and entered.

"Hey, tiger." He was wiping down the counter. Muttsy DuBois was always wiping down his counter.

I stepped over and took a stool near the till. The place was empty now—not like in the summer. Saturday night and I was the only customer. I planted my elbows on the clean surface of the counter.

"Snow," said Muttsy.

"How's that?"

"Snow—it's gonna snow. I can tell, feel it in my bones." He tapped his fist against his ribs. "Tonight—maybe tomorrow. Tomorrow for sure."

There was a plastic sign on the back wall above his head, a Coca-Cola advertisement. Drink Coca-Cola. The light inside the sign kept flickering, going out, then flickering, then going out again.

"Blizzard maybe even—wouldn' that jus' do it? Knee deep in snow tomorrow?"

"That would just about do it," I said.

He resumed wiping down the counter. His mouth was working as hard as he was. He sucked his teeth.

"Got the grill turned on?" I asked.

"Knee deep," he said, "an' colder than the nipples on a nun!"

"I'll have a cheeseburger—and potato chips." The plastic sign flickered. "—And a Coke."
Muttsy smiled and licked his lower lip. "Comin' right up, tiger."

The meat sizzled as it hit the grill, splattering grease on the grease-spotted wall behind.

"Say, I hears Harmon is home on leave . . . ."

I didn't respond.

"I hears he's up in Yates tonight. He's drivin' that old truck. That's what I hears." He scraped at the grill, then flipped the meat.

"You wan'chur bun toasted?"

"Just don't forget the cheese," I said.

"He called on the phone, tiger. Says he's stoppin' in later," Muttsy said. "Says he wants t' see you first . . . ."

"Let the cheese get good and melted," I said.

The Coca-Cola sign flickered.

At the Standard Oil, there was a four wheel drive, a Jeep with a soft top, pulled up in front of the gas pumps. The Jeep looked green or maybe some shade of blue; I couldn't really tell in the haze of the fading twilight. It was coated in a thin layer of dust—a hunter's rig, there were two hunters standing around outside. Both wore khaki hunting outfits—baggy pants and loose vests and pockets everywhere. One of them, the heavier man, stood looking over the shoulder of the station attendant who filled the rig with gasoline. He was telling him something, but I didn't hear.

I walked over to the station building where the second hunter stood beneath the glowing yellow bulb of an outdoor light. He had his khaki-
sleeved elbow resting on a motor oil display—Quaker State. The cartridge loops in his hunting vest were filled with shotgun shells.

"Been hunting?" I asked.

He looked put out. It was all he could do to give me a nod.

"Any luck?" I went on. I was trying to sound casual.

"Yep."

"Birds?"

"Yep." He scratched his neck.

"I'm not a hunter myself," I said. The statement didn't seem to surprise him any. "Never been hunting myself. Never even fired a gun."

"Virgil, Virgil, you got any cash on you?" The first hunter was coming toward us, followed closely by the station attendant. "Got to have cash, Virgil. Man says he can't take no credit card."

"Receipt machine's busted," the attendant explained. "Credit card machine's jammed, can't get a receipt out of it."

The second hunter shook his head. "Tell him we don't need a receipt," he said.

"We don't need no receipt."

"Can't charge you gas without a receipt," the station attendant said.

"You guys going north?" I asked.

"Give him the credit card, Duane. Tell him we don't need a receipt."

"I need a ride north," I said.

"I can't do that," said the attendant. "I have to run it through the machine."

Virgil shook his head again. He removed a shotgun shell from his
hunting vest and started tossing it loosely in his palm. "I haven't got any cash, Duane. Tell the man I haven't got any cash."

"If you're going north, maybe you wouldn't mind if I rode along. I could really use a ride—far as Mandan, if you guys have room."

"I insist on cash," the station attendant said. He was looking increasingly adamant.

"Insist all you want," replied Virgil. "We haven't got any cash." He stopped tossing the shotgun shell.

I reached into the pocket of my jacket and pulled out the wad of bills I had taken from my dresser drawer. "I have money," I said. "I'd pay for the gas if you'd give me a lift . . ."

"What's that?" said Virgil.

"I'd pay for the gas if you'd give me a ride."

"Hear that, Duane?" Virgil pushed the shotgun shell back into its loop on his vest. "Kid says he'll pay for the gas."

The station attendant stared at me. For a moment, I was afraid he had sensed my desperation. But in the yellow glow of the outdoor light, I could see the hint of relief overtake his pale expression. "You understand, don't you? I just can't charge the gas without a receipt."
I rode behind, in the back of the rig. There were no seats in back, so I sat against the edge of the wheel well on the side opposite the gun rack.

The light cast by street lamps on Standing Rock Road glared into the Jeep's windows as we passed beneath them, illuminating the scattered lay of birds on the metal floor in front of my feet. I could see the blood on some of them, dried dark and matted into their feathers. They were sharptails, prairie chickens—nearly a dozen of them. I poked at one of the birds with my toe.

Up front, the heavier man, Duane, was holding the wheel. Virgil leaned forward in the passenger seat to turn on the radio. "Remember that time hunting ducks at McKenzie Slough?"

Duane started to laugh.

"Remember how we got them in a cross shoot?"
"—Dropping 'em left and right," said Duane.

I glanced at the lifeless birds before my feet. On the radio, the Beatles were singing Hey Jude.

"Stupid ducks," said Virgil. "They just kept on coming."

Duane laughed. "We murdered 'em," he said. "We slaughtered 'em," he said.

I stared at the birds.

"Stupid ducks," said Virgil. "Hell, we massacred them . . ."

The tires hummed as we picked up speed. We were headed north, up the highway, the Old Fort Lincoln Road. It was a lonely stretch of pavement, I thought, the loneliest goddamn pavement. I turned and peered from the Jeep's rear window: emptiness, the dark river bluffs and the rising moon.

"You know what I heard?"

"What'd you hear, Duane?"

"I heard the Injuns are planning on passing their own hunting regulations."

"Huh?"

"That's right, Virgil. I heard they're going to issue permits for hunting on the reservation."

Virgil's voice coarsened. "They can't do that," he said.

"Hell they can't," said Duane. "And I'll bet they charge a substantial fee on top of it . . ."

"It won't go," Virgil said. "The state won't let them do it."

"State don't have any say over tribal council, Virgil."
"Hell," barked Virgil. "What do those Indians know about hunting regulations anyhow? What? They don't intend to follow them. They just want to stick it to us whites. I've seen them taking game out of season. I've seen them poaching deer and antelope—and I never once heard of an Indian with a permit. You ever heard of an Indian with a permit? Hypocrites is what they are, Duane . . ."

We stopped at the Mint Bar. It was Duane's idea. "I could go for a beer," he'd said. "Nothing like a cold beer at the end of a perfect day."

Virgil reminded him of their cash situation. Duane reminded Virgil of the clump of bills in the pocket of my jacket. I wanted to hide my impatience with them. I wanted to be clear of this place. One quick beer, that's all it would be. One for the road, and we'd be on our way.

The Mint Bar stood on the flat above a short rise to the north and west of the Cannonball River bridge, just beyond the reservation boundary—the middle of nowhere. There was a mercury vapor light shining in the parking lot out front. The building was made of cinder block, mint green with pink trim. A giant neon mint leaf flashed off and on above the door.

"Can taste it already," said Duane.

The parking lot was mostly empty, only a few pickup trucks, no reservation cars. Duane led the way. He did a little shuffle on the cement walk in front of the door. Improvisational dance. Virgil shook his head, then reached around him for the door handle. The door was upholstered—
padded pink vinyl. It had a diamond-shaped window, set off-center.

Inside, the air was rank and without movement, stale from cigarette smoke, the light dim and uneven. A woman was leaning her hands against the glass of the jukebox, studying the selections. She had red hair and wore tight jeans and high-heel shoes. Her blouse was beige and untucked. At the pool table, a bony man with a screwed-up mouth was lining up a shot.

"Lively place," said Virgil. "Hell of a place. You sure can pick them, Duane."

Duane ignored him and stepped to the bar. He drummed his fingers on its dark wooden surface.

"Something for you fellers?"

"Beer," said Duane. He was practically drooling. "Three beers—Black Label."

I sat down at the bar. The stool wobbled. Virgil crossed the room to the jukebox.

"Three Black Labels," the bartender said. He opened the cooler and dug around inside, then produced the bottles.

"This place always this busy?" Virgil was addressing the woman at the jukebox. The woman ignored him. She dropped a quarter into the slot, then punched the same sequence of buttons three times.

"Never very busy in here," said the bartender. "Long time ago, it used to be . . . not anymore."

On the jukebox, Johnny Cash sang Ring of Fire. The red-haired woman started moving her hips. The record was severely scratched.
"Used to be busy as anything," he went on. "In the fifties, owner used to sell bootleg to the Indians—before they went and made it legal. Used to be they'd line up at the back door day the government checks'd come out. Used to be, yes sir . . ."

The bony man dropped one off the cushion. He had a nice leave. He was playing for shapes. Red hair kept swinging her hips.

"Lemme see now . . . three beers . . . a buck and a half . . ."

Duane stared impatiently at the pocket of my jacket. I jerked out a couple of dollar bills and slid them across the bar.

But the bartender didn't pick them up. He clawed at his elbow, then pinched one eye shut. "You look a little bit underage there pal . . ."

"For heaven's sake," cried Duane. "Take the money, will you?"

I pushed the bills closer to the bartender. He ran his fingers through his thin and greasy hair. On the jukebox, Johnny Cash kept right on singing.

"I don't know," the bartender said. He clawed at his elbow again.

"Well crying out loud," said Duane. "Hey Virgil, Virgil—get over here."

Virgil glanced away from the red-haired woman. "What, Duane? What is it?" She smiled at him now that he wasn't looking.

"The man won't take our cash, Virgil. He says the kid here is underage."

The bartender gazed at the bills on the bar. "I said he looks underage. That's what I said."

Virgil approached the bar. He asked me, "Are you underage?"
I shook my head.

"Take the money," he said to the bartender.

"Got to see ID . . ."

"You got an ID?" said Duane.

Again, I shook my head.

"Give him another dollar," said Virgil. "Hell, give him two more dollars—that ought to take care of it."

I pulled two more dollars from my jacket pocket, straightened them and laid them flat on top of the bar.

The bartender grinned as he scooped up the bills, then he pried the caps off the bottles of beer. "You age fast, pal," he said. "You age mighty fast."
THIRTY-EIGHT

Red hair plunked another quarter in the jukebox and punched up Ring of Fire again. The song was beginning to get on my nerves.

"You fellers aren't from around here. I pretty much know all the regulars." The bartender kept scratching his elbow. "Saturday night we get a few regulars. Earl and his wife usually come in—Alma, that's her name."

Duane said nothing. He just sucked on his beer. Virgil stared at the red-haired woman across the room.

"Alma gets pretty comical sometimes—especially when those Kuntz brothers and that Kittredge feller drop in."

The bony man at the pool table lit a cigarette. "Earl's got cancer," he said.

"No—"

"Heard it from Schindler, cancer of the colon."
The bartender shook his head slowly. "It's a sorrowful world," he said.

At the pool table, the bony man chalked his cue. A tiny puff of chalk dust drifted away from the tip.

I heard a vehicle pull up outside the bar. Its engine was loud, running rough and popping. One of the cylinders was missing badly.

"Imagine that," the bartender went on, "cancer."

Why would he want to follow me here? I didn't expect him to come looking for me. I didn't think it was that important. Outside, the engine kept running.

"Schindler told me he doesn't got any insurance, he told me Earl don't believe in it . . ."

"No insurance?" the bartender said.

My eyes were focused on the padded door. Through the diamond-shaped window, I could see him approach. The green light of the neon mint leaf flashed against his face.

"Not a lick," replied the bony man. "And Medicare won't do nothing neither."

"Sorrowful world," the bartender said.

I turned away when Harmon entered, but there wasn't a chance he wouldn't spot me. Who did he think he was coming here? If only he'd left me alone. Why couldn't he leave me alone? What was he after anyway? But it didn't matter, I thought. Things wouldn't change, no matter what he'd say. It was too late for that. I was still going through with this. I had no choice.
"Don't Alma have a rich brother or cousin or something? You'd figure his relations could help him out . . ."

The bony man paused. I heard the tap of his stick, then a crisp clack of balls. "That Earl's a stubborn old fart. According to Schindler, he won't take no charity."

I stared at the translucent bottle of beer, holding it extended on the bar out before me. It felt cold and wet and smooth in my palm. With my fingernail, I started picking at the corner of the paper label.

"Fletcher boy—"

I closed my eyes . . . Maybe someday I'll be able to explain . . .

His hand fell against the back of my shoulder.

"That's just like Earl," the bartender said, "stubborn as anything, I guess."

Duane shifted his weight on the stool beside me. I looked at him. He glanced at Harmon from the corner of his eye. He didn't say anything. Behind him, Virgil winked at the red-haired woman.

"You're a hard one to find," Harmon began. He squeezed up between the stools, propped himself against the bar. "I've been chasing around all night—didn't you get my message? What's with you?"

He looked different. He was wearing his uniform—Army uniform. Crazy bastard. He had his tunic buttoned up straight, and when he pulled off his cap, I could see his head, shaved in a regulation Army crew cut. "You look lousy in green," I told him. He didn't laugh. I turned and continued picking at the beer bottle label.

"Something for you, chief?" The bartender rubbed his big elbow on
the bar.

Harmon wouldn't answer.

"Get him a beer," cried Duane. "In fact, get us all another beer."

The bartender dug into the cooler. I dug into my pocket. He brought up the beers and I paid him. Two bucks.

Harmon drew a breath and held it. This was it, I thought. Here I was, about to find out exactly what he was up to. I didn't look at him. There wasn't any way I was going to look at him. "Fletcher,"—his words followed slowly—"I have to ask you, where in the world do you think you're going? Are you planning to run off to Canada or something? Have you lost your senses? What?"

No, I couldn't look at him. He had a patronizing way that made me feel ashamed. He had always been like that, always so positively sure of himself. "What if I have?" I said.

"I saw your father, he showed me the letter . . ."

"It's not your business," I said.

On the jukebox, Johnny Cash was starting in again. I was really getting sick of that song.

"He told me about your CO application. He told me about your appeal—"

"It's not your business," I repeated.

Duane guzzled at his beer. Virgil stood. The bartender rubbed his elbow.

"Running isn't the answer, Fletcher. There's no sense to it. You should think this thing out. Think about your father—how would he feel? Think about your father—you're all he has."
I swung my arm and knocked the beer bottle in front of me off of the bar. "Leave my father out of this, goddammit!"

Duane lowered his beer. Virgil turned and shot a curious glance my direction.

"You're being irrational, Fletcher."

"Don't talk to me about irrational," I said. "You're the one who's being irrational. Do you really think I want to do this?"

Red hair dropped another quarter in the jukebox. I could have killed her.

"Hey now, you fellers simmer down." The bartender wagged a church key right before my nose. "Don't you go getting my customers riled up."

"What customers?" said Virgil.

The bony man cleared his throat. I could feel the blood pumping into my head . . . Maybe you don't understand, Fletcher boy . . .

"I didn't mean to get you angry, Fletcher—" Harmon reached for my arm, but I pushed him away.

The bartender raised his voice. "Hey, I'm warning you fellers . . . ." "Go ahead," Duane said to me, "give the Injun a piece of your mind. Don't let some Paiute throw you around." He was smiling. Beer dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

"Just leave me alone," I said. I was shouting now. "All of you, goddammit, just leave me alone."

Harmon reached for my arm again. I shoved him back hard. He collided into Virgil. "Leave me alone . . . ."

"I won't go for this," the bartender said.
On the jukebox, Johnny Cash was driving me crazy. I couldn't take it any longer. Everything was driving me crazy. I stood and turned and ran for the door, breathing hard and trying to think. Why did he have to come looking for me? Goddammit, why? The air outside was cool and damp, heavy with the old, damp smell of autumn. I became suddenly dizzy; the green light of the flashing mint leaf made me dizzy, set my head spinning.

"Fletcher boy—"

I tried to ignore him. Why did he want to keep drilling at me? I kept on running. Dizzy.

"Hey, Fletch, slow up. I want to talk to you."

He followed me down the graveled lot, his feet crunching in the gravel.

Don't let him catch you, I thought. Don't let him talk you out of this. You've made your decision, stick to it. From the building behind, I heard the echo of the jukebox, rising louder and louder inside my skull. Think about your father . . .

"Fletcher, come on, listen to me."

The pounding in my chest grew fast and hard, as though my heart were about to explode. He was gaining on me. I could hear him breathing, his feet crunching, gaining on me.

"Fletcher, stop running—you can't solve anything by running . . . Don't be stupid, Fletch. I'll take you home. Where's your sense of honor?"

I felt his hand clamp down on my shoulder. I squeezed my eyes shut,
straining for distance, my lungs sucking the damp air. Why? Why couldn't he leave me alone? What concern was any of this to him? He was trying to be so composed, so rational—talk it out, let's talk it out. How could he know what I was feeling? How could anybody know? But it wasn't any use. I could not escape. My legs slowed, tangled and hopelessly aching. My chest heaved as he spun me around.

"Look at me," he said, panting to catch his breath. "You can't do this. Don't you understand? If you run now, you can never come back. Never . . ."

I couldn't look at him. I just stood there, my eyes fixed at the earth.

"Fletch, listen to me." He grabbed me by the collar and shook me around.

Think about your father . . .

There wasn't any time to think. My heart was pounding. My head was dizzy and spinning. I struck quickly, a loose fist to the side of his head. His arm jerked back, and I felt the leather cord snap away in his hand, and the fetish broke free and dropped to the ground.

"Get away," I shouted.

And then everything became confused. There was a scuffle. I felt a blow to my cheek, the sharp cut of his knuckles. Through the blur, my eyes caught the knife lying in the loose gravel. It must have fallen from my pocket, I thought. Kirby's knife, the lock-blade Buck.

"Stay away, I tell you."

"Fletcher—"
I clutched up the knife and swung the blade open. "Leave me alone, goddammit—go away."

"Fletcher—"

"Go away," I shouted. "Go away."

But he wouldn't leave me alone. Everything was confused, and he just wouldn't leave me alone.

"No, Fletch—don't!"

He tried to take the knife. He came at me, and there was nothing I could do. Everything was so goddamned confused.

"Go away!" I screamed.

The blood splashed my hand as the blade sank into his abdomen. It was an accident. Christ, it was an accident. And the warm blood kept pumping over my trembling hand.

"Oh God, Fletcher—"

The blood just kept coming. It wouldn't stop.

Oh my God . . .

Then his body went slack and he fell limp upon the gravel. I dropped to my knees and bent over him, the blood still pumping, and I held him in my quivering arms, held him a long, long time, held him until the last small breath, all the vestige of life, slipped away from his body.
The moon climbed to a higher place in the darkness above the river bluff, a white half moon that refused to keep its distance. Out of the east, a gust blew up and rustled the cottonwoods off in the bottoms. The gust set a chill to the damp evening air.

Home is a place for living, not going back to ... There isn't any reason for living in the past ... 

I wiped the steel blade against the end of his sleeve, then snapped the knife closed and returned it to my pocket. My hands were shaking. I tried to remain calm. I tried to keep a clear head. Near his body, I noticed the coyote, the bone fetish, where it had fallen in the gravel. I stooped to pick it up. It was a crude charm, really, the sort of thing you can't appreciate without knowing, without the kind of respect that comes with familiarity.

"Why must you play the trickster, Iktomi?"
And the coyote answered: "I am not the trickster, Fletcher. You took his life—it was you."

The engine was still running in the old International out front of the building, rough and popping. Loud as it was, I found it hard to believe no one had ventured from the bar, curious to see what was up. Stay calm. Keep a clear head.

I jammed the fetish into my pocket, strode quickly to the cab and climbed up behind the wheel. The light of the neon mint leaf reflected green in the windshield. Ring of Fire was still playing on the jukebox. 

You killed him . . . It was you.

The stickshift knob vibrated my palm; the gears were grinding as I hunted for reverse. I eased off the clutch then, feeding the gas, and the drive grabbed and the tires spit gravel and the old International jerked and rolled in reverse. Stay calm. Keep a clear head.

No one had come out of the bar. Virgil and Duane, red hair and the bony man—they were all still inside. I stopped the truck next to his body, jumped out and made my way around.

You killed him.

I could feel the throbbing in my cheek where he had struck me with his fist, and the damp, cold air blowing across the lot. I tried to lift him in my arms. The body was heavy and unforgiving. The sweet, sick smell of blood rose against the heavy air and made my stomach turn. Why did you come looking for me? Why couldn't you just leave me alone? Why?

Think about your father, Fletcher—you're all he has . . .
Stay calm. Keep a clear head. It took what seemed like hours to get him into the truck. The springs groaned beneath his weight as I finally slung his body up onto the passenger side of the seat.

I put the truck into first then, and the gears clicked, and the engine wound as the International crept ahead and swung around and started off down the road toward the highway.

They would come after me, I thought. It was an accident, but they wouldn't see it that way. It would take time, though. If I left the body on the reservation, there would be an argument, a dispute over jurisdiction—the sheriff and the Indian police. They would have to call in the FBI. It would take time, they'd have to come down from Bismarck, they'd have to ask questions.

I turned south past the approach and headed for the bridge. The lights of the truck glimmered against the green-metal sign opposite the Cannonball:

ENTERING STANDING ROCK INDIAN RESERVATION.

You killed him . . . It was you.

"It was an accident, I tell you. Goddamn Coyote, Christ it was an accident. I lost control."

Stay calm.

There wasn't any traffic. I was lucky, there wasn't any traffic anywhere at all. I crossed the bridge, then pulled off on the fishing access. I could still see the mercury vapor light burning in the lot, up through the trees across the Cannonball River, and the great mint leaf flashing.
It'll take them a day, I thought, maybe two days to find the body. I'll leave the truck parked here by the river. Anyone passing along the highway will just think it's another drunken Indian sleeping it off.

Keep a clear head.

I shut off the engine. The truck backfired and the cylinders came to rest.

Think about your father, Fletcher . . .

I swung the door open and jumped down from the cab. Then I pulled him across the seat to the driver's side, leaned him forward, resting against the wheel.

Home is a place for living . . .

Why did you have to come looking for me? Crazy goddamn Indian. I shook my head.

It'll take time. They'll have to ask questions. It'll be a day or two before they find the body.

I slammed the door tightly. The driver's side window was cracked, shaped like a spider web. I glanced at his body through the cracked lines in the glass.

There isn't any reason for living in the past . . .

I walked down the dirt bank, then stopped and bent to wash the dried and crusted blood from my hands, immersing them in the muddy water of the Cannonball. From the bank, I could see the faint black forms of the cottonwoods, cast against the river by the distant glow of the mercury vapor light outside the Mint. The forms moved atop the surface of the water, bobbing slowly as the chill wind caught and stirred the branches
of the trees that lined the bottoms. Above, a great black cloud passed before the moon, and darkness crossed the water and entered the valley of the shadow.
It was October, a long way from home. The Mainstreeter slowed in approach of the station. I heard the whistle blast, the uneven clatter, and I sat forward, rigid in my seat. It wouldn't be long now, I thought. The muscles in my back were beginning to ache, cramped tight from the hours of sitting. I tried to keep still, to relax the stiffness.

Seattle. I hadn't really made any plans beyond Seattle. I would have to cross the border somehow, find a way to become lost among the faces. But I was far too tired to think about it now. Rest, that's what I needed, food and rest and time to think.

Inside, the station was practically deserted. The lights that hung from the high vaulted ceiling were dimmed, and I could hear the echo of my footsteps scraping the worn tile of the great empty hall.

I noticed the wall clock across the room, above a row of wooden
telephone booths. It was nearly midnight here—one o'clock back home.
I wondered if my father was still awake. He would have figured it all
out by now. Surely he would have figured it out.

He was probably in the kitchen, in front of the refrigerator, try­
ing to put together some kind of sandwich. There would be a half-pot
of coffee on the back of the stove, simmering away, filling the room
with the warm smell of coffee. And he'd be busy reading something. He
was always reading something, "bettering the mind."

One o'clock—he would still be up.

I reached into the front pocket of my jeans, but I didn't find any
change there. It didn't matter, I thought. I couldn't call him anyway.
What would I say? There was nothing I could say.

October.

He would be teaching school tomorrow. Perhaps he was thinking
about his classes—or grading papers, drinking coffee and grading papers.
He took his teaching seriously. He took everything seriously.

I walked across the room to the ticket counter. The agent was count­
ing the day's money from the till, sorting the bills into neat little
piles. I asked him to change a couple of ones. He seemed reluctant, as
though it would somehow throw off his count. Finally, however, he re­
lented and gave me the change. I hurried back to where the row of phone
booths stood and squeezed into one, closing the folding wood-and-glass
door behind me.

One o'clock. He would still be up.

My hands were unsteady as I fed the coins into the slot. Then I
dialed the number and waited. It must have rung a dozen times before he answered.

"Hello?"
I drew a breath. I tried to collect my thoughts.

"Hello . . . Hello?" he said.
But I couldn't speak. What could I say? How would I begin?

"Hello?"
I held on. I wanted to hear his voice. I wanted to tell him everything. I tried to hold back the tears.

"Hello? . . ."
But I just kept on listening, trying to think what I would say. I wanted to tell him I was sorry, that I hadn't meant to hurt him. I wanted to tell him that I loved him, that I wanted to come home.

Home.

But I couldn't say anything now, I couldn't bring myself to say anything at all. And so I just held on and kept listening, holding back the crazy insistent tears, listening until I realized the line had already gone dead.