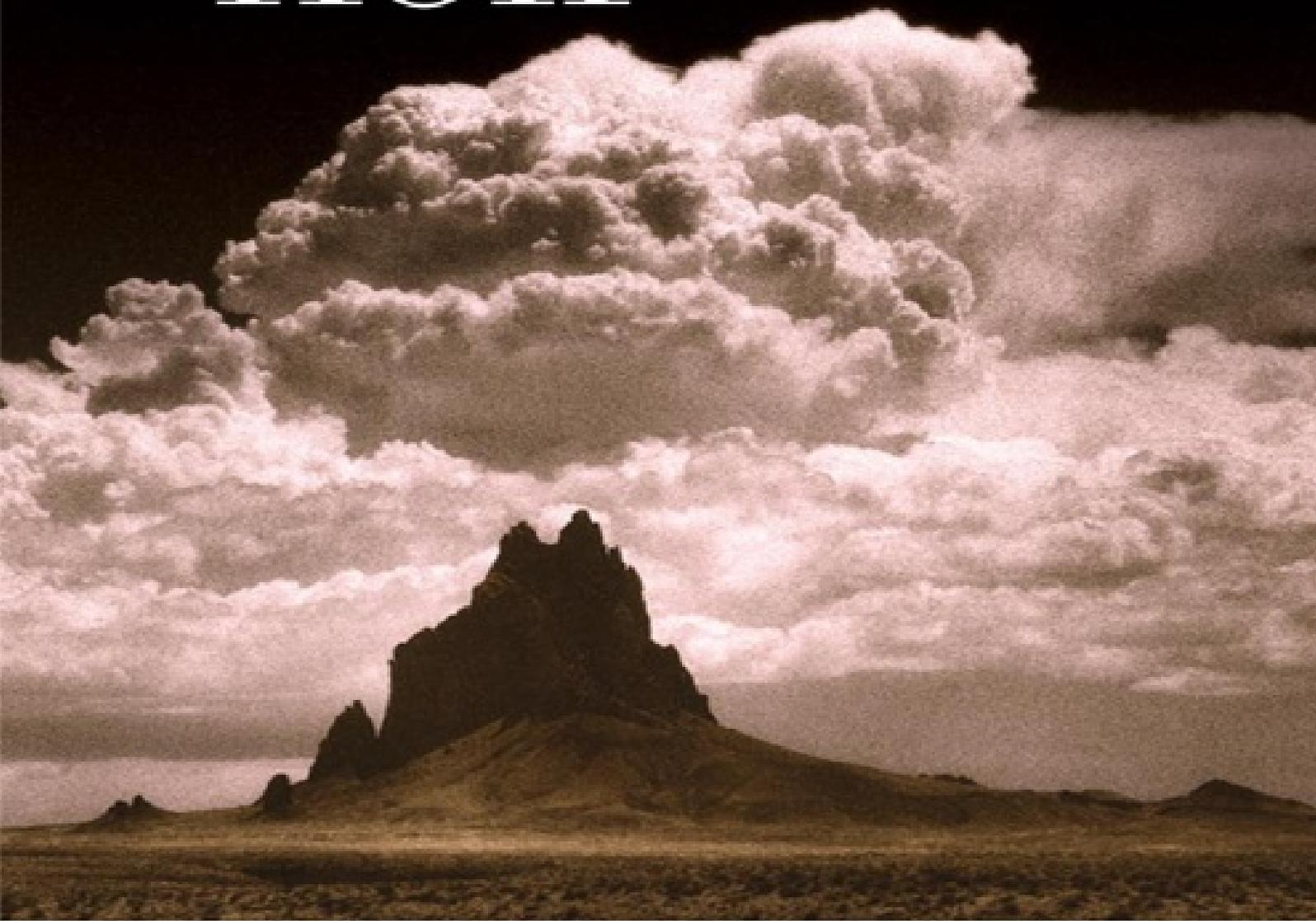


indian country noir



EDITED BY SARAH CORTEZ & LIZ MARTÍNEZ

JOSEPH BRUCHAC ♦ KIMBERLY ROPPOLO ♦ JEAN RAE BAXTER

DAVID COLE ♦ LAWRENCE BLOCK ♦ A.A. HEDGECOKE ♦ AND OTHERS

INDIAN COUNTRY NOIR

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This collection is comprised of works of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the authors' imaginations. Any resemblance to real events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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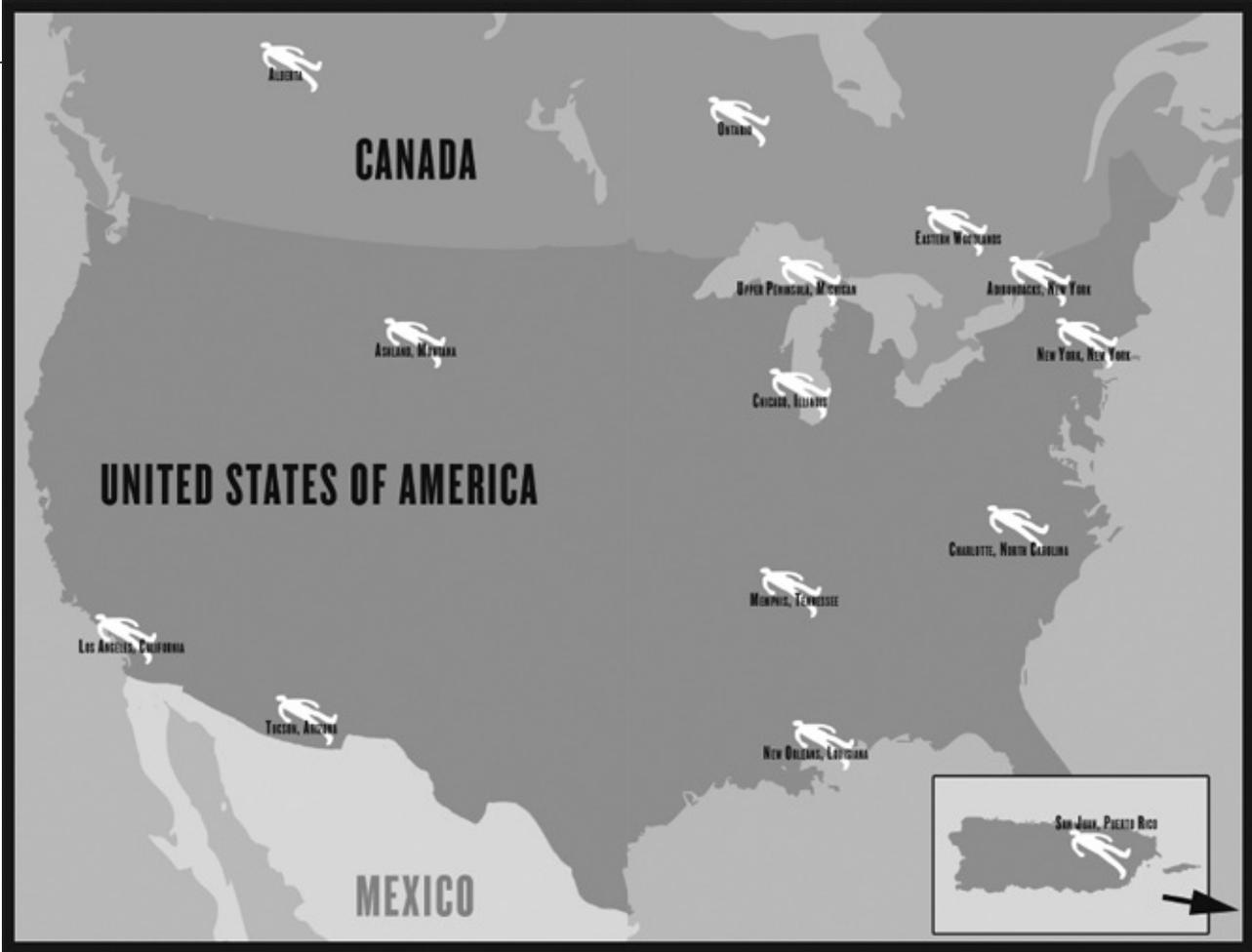


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About the Contributors

FOREWORD

BY RICHARD B. WILIAMS

Stories have been central to communication among Indian people for thousands of years. And the stories you are about to read are truly incredible. They will make your blood boil with fear, anger, passion, and, ultimately, remorse.

These stories are so real that you believe without questioning, so loving that you accept without strings attached, and yet so challenging that your soul is tugged by hundreds of lost spirits. Each tale leaves the reader feeling vulnerable to inner voices calling for you to do something, yet wondering what it is that you are supposed to do.

How can you tell if dreams are real? What do you do when there is such deep sadness because there is no hope? Why is there no real word for goodbye? Does Ashland, Montana really exist? Does being Indian mean that life will be filled with death, pain, shootings, drugs, alcohol, and abuse? I can answer these questions for you. You have to read and experience this book yourself to understand.

For centuries, Indian people faced extinction, brutality, and racism. Ours was a harsh existence, where success meant survival. In our world, boarding schools were killing children, war heroes were dying without hope or dignity, and gifted and talented writers were lost in their own intellectualism with no place to tell their stories.

That horrible existence finally began to change in the 1960s. Since then we have seen a resurgence of Native pride. People are returning to their Indian culture for a sense of who they are. This renaissance is captured powerfully in the work of these authors. Each story evokes deep emotion for the reader. Yet introspection is always a challenge. In these stories, by both Native and non-Native writers, cultures are being exposed; lies, and truths as well, are being told; and all you can do is shake your head and try to determine what is real.

The beauty of Natives writing their own stories means that the experience comes without boundaries, literally and figuratively. These stories from all across North America do not carry the burden of Western political, philosophical, and literary expectations. The results are spectacular and will cause you to raise your eyebrows repeatedly.

We are pleased and honored to share these stories as examples of the passion, violence, and beauty that our people have to share, underscoring the centuries of acquired knowledge that we carry. You can hear the Indian haters saying, *What are those damn Indians thinking?* The beauty is, of course, that Indian people *are* thinking, using their natural intellect. Gone is the time when the sole focus was on survival. Now the focus is on thriving.

As you read this volume, remember: it's fiction ... or is it?

Richard B. Williams is the president and CEO of the American Indian College Fund.

INTRODUCTION

SPIRITUAL TRANSGRESSION

Welcome to Indian Country ... It lies within the physical and emotional antipodes of North—South—East—West, and encompasses territory both familiar and unknown. Many who inhabit Indian Country love it, and they often stay after their time on Earth is done. Others have died trying to claim it. They continue to wander there in the endless circle of time. This book has stories by both Native and non-Native authors reflecting them all.

The circle defined by the cardinal directions of the Medicine Wheel is your reminder that a harmonious relationship with nature and all living beings is how creation was ordained, with all of us equal and connected. Thus, all directions lead to each other, just as all these stories, in turn, point toward one another through a shared ethos.

As you step back into the troubled history of Joseph Bruchac's "Helper" and Liz Martínez's "Prowling Wolves," you will find yourself swept up by a fresh and powerful look into personal revisionist histories. It is, perhaps, not unpredictable that some of these tales show the narrator partaking in what appears to be an eminently satisfying dose of revenge: Jean Rae Baxter's "Osprey Lake," Mistina Bates's "Daddy's Girl," and David Cole's "[JaneJohnDoe.com](#)" among them. And while eliminating the person perceived as evil may have its own brand of dark glee, Melissa Yi's "Indian Time" gives us a truly haunting tale of twisted intention and vengeance. Two of the stories are breathtakingly lyrical in their approach and articulation of the hard price paid by some Indians for spiritual homelessness and transgression: Kimberly Roppolo's "Quilt like a Night Sky" and A.A. HedgeCoke's "On Drowning Pond." Leonard Schonberg's "Lame Elk" takes us to the bitter cold of January in Montana for another tale of a crushed life.

For a glimpse at how a contemporary character with Indian blood functions in an urban environment, enjoy the fast-paced lives created by O'Neil De Noux in "The Raven and the Wolf" and R. Narvaez in "Juracán." Gerard Houarner keeps us in a contemporary setting in Manhattan's underground, yet masterfully weaves the mythological and historical through several different planes of reality. And speaking of myths, are there any stronger, especially in our media-driven society, than that of the "American Indian"? See how non-Native authors Lawrence Block in "Getting Lucky" and Reed Farrel Coleman in "Another Role" use the Hollywood-engendered mythos to bring us to yet other unexpected places.

Before you journey with these talented authors through the north, south, east, and west of Indian Country, you might wish to reflect upon the words of the famous Oglala Lakota teacher Black Elk: "Birds make their nests in circles; we dance in circles; the circle stands for the Sun and Moon and all round things in the natural world. The circle is an endless creation, with endless connections to the present, all that went before and all that will come in the future."

*Sarah Cortez
Houston, Texas*

PART I

EAST

HELPER

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Adirondacks, New York

The one with the missing front teeth. He's the one who shot me. Before his teeth were missing.

Getting shot was, in a way, my fault. I heard them coming when they were still a mile away. I could've run. But running never suited me, even before I got this piece of German steel in my hip. My Helper. Plus I'd been heating the stones for my sweat lodge since the sun was a hand high above the hill. I run off, the fire would burn down and they'd cool off. Wouldn't be respectful to those stones.

See what they want, I figured. Probably just deer hunters who'd heard about my reputation. You want to get a trophy, hire Indian Charley.

Yup, that was what it had to be. A couple of flatlanders out to hire me to guide them for the weekend. Boys who'd seen the piece about me in the paper, posing with two good old boys from Brooklyn and the twelve pointer they bagged. Good picture of me, actually. Too good, I realized later. But that wasn't what I was thinking then. Just about potential customers. Not that I needed the money. But a man has to keep busy. And it was better in general if folks just saw me as a typical Indian. Scraping by, not too well educated, a threat to no one. Good old Indian Charley.

Make me a sawbuck or two, get them a buck or two. Good trade.

I was ready to say that to them. Rehearsing it in my head. For a sawbuck or two, I'll get you boys a buck or two. Good trade. Indian humor. Funny enough to get me killed.

I really should have made myself scarce when I heard their voices clear enough to make out what the fat one was saying. It was also when I felt the first twinge in my hip. They were struggling up the last two hundred yards of the trail. That's when I should have done it. Not ran, maybe. But faded back into the hemlocks.

Son of a bidgin' Indin, the heavy-footed one said. And kept on saying it in between labored breaths and the sound of his heavy feet, slipping and dislodging stones. The other one, who wasn't so clumsy but was still making more noise than a lame moose, didn't say anything.

I imagined Heavy Foot was just ticked off at me for making my camp two miles from the road and the last of it straight up. It may have discouraged some who might've hired me. But it weeded out the weaker clientele. And the view was worth it, hills rolling away down to the river that glistened with the rising sun like a silver bracelet, the town on the other side that turned into a constellation of lights mirroring the stars in the sky above it at night.

The arrowhead-shaped piece of metal in my flesh sent another little shiver down the outside of my thigh. I ignored it again. Not a smart thing to do, but I was curious about my visitors.

Curiosity killed the Chippewa, as my grampa, who had also been to Carlisle, used to joke.

For some reason the picture of the superintendent's long face the last day I saw him came to mind. Twenty years ago. He was sitting behind his desk, his pale face getting red as one of those beet I'd spent two summers digging on the farm where they sent me to work for slave labor wages—like every other Indian kid at the school. The superintendent got his cut, of course. How many farm hands

and house maids do you need? We got hundreds of them here at Carlisle. Nice, civilized, docile little Indian boys and girls. Do whatever you want with them.

That was before I got my growth and Pop Warner saw me and made me one of his athletic boys. Special quarters, good food and lots of it, an expense account at Blumenthal's department store, a share of the gate. Plus a chance to get as many concussions as any young warrior could ever dream of butting heads against the linemen of Harvard and Syracuse and Army. I also found some of the best friends I ever had on that football squad.

It was because of one of them that I'd been able to end up here on this hilltop—which, according to my name on a piece of paper filed in the county seat belonged to me. As well as the other two hundred acres all the way down to the river. I'd worked hard for the money that made it possible for me to get my name on that deed. But that's another story to tell another time.

As Heavy Foot and his quieter companion labored up the last narrow stretch of trail, where it passed through a hemlock thicket and then came out on an open face of bedrock, I was still replaying that scene in the superintendent's office.

You can't come in here like this.

I just did.

I'll have you expelled.

I almost laughed at that one. Throw an Indian out of Carlisle? Where some children were brought in chains? Where they cut our hair, stole the fine jewelry that our parents arrayed us in, took our clothes, changed our names, dressed us in military uniforms, and turned us into little soldiers? Where more kids ran away than ever graduated?

You won't get the chance. I held up my hand and made a fist.

The super cringed back when I did that. I suppose when you have bear paw hands like mine, they could be a little scary to someone with a guilty conscience.

I lifted my little finger. First, I said, I'm not here alone. I looked back over my shoulder where the boys of the Carlisle football team were waiting in the hall.

I held up my ring finger. Second, I talk; you listen.

Middle finger. Third, he goes. Out of here. Today.

The super knew who I meant. The head disciplinarian of the school. Mr. Morrissey. Who was already packing his bags with the help of our two tackles. Help Morrissey needed because of his dislocated right shoulder and broken jaw.

The super started to say something. But the sound of my other hand coming down hard on his desk stopped his words as effectively as a cork in a bottle. His nervous eyes focused for a second on the skinned knuckles of my hand.

Fourth, I said, extending my index finger. No one will ever be sent to that farm again. No, don't talk. You know the one I mean. Just nod if you understand. Good.

Last, my thumb extended, leaning forward so that it touched his nose. You never mention my name again. You do not contact the agent on my reservation or anyone else. You just take me out of the records. I am a violent Indian. Maybe I have killed people. You do not ever want to see me again. Just nod.

The super nodded.

Good, I said. Now, my hand patting the air as if I was giving a command to a dog, stay!

He stayed. I walked out into the hall where every man on the football squad except for our two tackles was waiting, including our Indian coach. The super stayed in his office as they all shook my hand, patted me on the back. No one said goodbye. There's no word for goodbye. Travel good. Maybe

we see you further down the road.

~~The super didn't even come out as they moved with me to the school gate, past the mansion built with the big bucks from football ticket sales where Pop Warner had lived. As I walked away, down to the train station, never looking back, the super remained in his seat. His legs too weak with fear for him to stand. According to what I heard later in France—from Gus Welch, who was my company commander and had been our quarterback at Carlisle—the superintendent sat there for the rest of the day without moving. The football boys finally took pity on him and sent one of the girls from the sewing class in to tell him that Charles, the big dangerous Indian, was gone and he could come out now.~~

Gus laughed. You know what he said when she told him that? Don't mention his name. That's what he said.

I might have been smiling at the memory when the two men came into view, but that wasn't where my recollections had stopped. They'd kept walking me past the Carlisle gate, down the road to the trolley tracks. They'd taken me on the journey I made back then, by rail, by wagon, and on foot, until I reached the dark hills that surrounded that farm. The one more Carlisle kids had run away from than any other. Or at least it was reported that they had run away—too many of them were never seen again

That had been the first time I acted on the voice that spoke within me. An old voice with clear purpose. I'd sat down on the slope under an old apple tree and watched, feeling the wrongness of the place. I waited until it was late, the face of the Night Traveler looking sadly down from the sky. Then I made my way downhill to the place that Thomas Goodwaters, age eleven, had come to me about because he knew I'd help after he told me what happened there. Told me after he'd been beaten by the school disciplinarian for running away from his Outing assignment at the Bullweather Farm. But the older, half-healed marks on his back had not come from the disciplinarian's cane.

Just the start, he'd told me, his voice calm despite it all, speaking Chippewa. They were going to do worse. I heard what they said they'd done before.

I knew his people back home. Cousins of mine. Good people, canoe makers. A family peaceful at heart, that shared with everyone and that hoped their son who'd been forced away to that school would at least be taught things he could use to help the people. Like how to scrub someone else's kitchen floor.

He'd broken out the small window of the building where they kept him locked up every night. It was a tiny window, but he was so skinny by then from malnourishment that he'd been able to worm his way free. Plus his family were Eel People and known to be able to slip through almost any narrow place.

Two dogs, he said. Bad ones. Don't bark. Just come at you.

But he'd planned his escape well. The bag he'd filled with black pepper from the kitchen and hidden in his pants was out and in his hand as soon as he hit the ground. He'd left the two bad dogs coughing and sneezing as he ran and kept running.

As his closest relative, I was the one he had been running to before Morrissey caught him.

You'll do something, Tommy Goodwaters said. It was not a question. You will help.

I was halfway down the hill and had just climbed over the barbed-wire fence when the dogs got me. I'd heard them coming, their feet thudding the ground, their eager panting. Nowhere near as quiet as wolves—not that wolves will ever attack a man. So I was ready when the first one leaped and latched its long jaws around my right forearm. Its long canines didn't get through the football pads and tape I'd wrapped around both arms. The second one, snarling like a wolverine, was having just as

hard a time with my equally well-protected left leg that it attacked from the back. They were big dogs probably about eighty pounds each. But I was two hundred pounds bigger. I lifted up the first one as I held on to my arm like grim death and brought my other forearm down hard across the back of its neck. That broke its neck. The second one let go when I kicked it in the belly hard enough to make a fifty-yard field goal. Its heart stopped when I brought my knee and the full weight of my body down on its chest.

Yeah, they were just dogs. But I showed no mercy. If they'd been eating what Tommy told me—and I had no reason to doubt him—there was no place for such animals to be walking this Earth with humans.

Then I went to the place out behind the cow barn. I found a shovel leaned against the building. Convenient. Looked well used. It didn't take much searching. It wasn't just the softer ground, but what I felt in my mind. The call of a person's murdered spirit when their body has been hidden in such a place as this. A place they don't belong.

It was more than one spirit calling for help. By the time the night was half over I'd found all of them. All that was left of five Carlisle boys and girls who'd never be seen alive again by grieving relatives. Mostly just bones. Clean enough to have had the flesh boiled off them. Some gnawed. Would have been no way to tell them apart if it hadn't been for what I found in each of those unmarked graves with them. I don't know why, but there was a large thick canvass bag for each of them. Each bag had a wooden tag tied to it with the name and, God love me, even the tribe of the child. Those people—if I can call them that—knew who they were dealing with. Five bags of clothing, meager possessions and bones. None of them were Chippewas, but they were all my little brothers and sisters. If I still drew breath after that night was over, their bones and possessions, at least, would go home. When I looked up at the moon, her face seemed red. I felt as if I was in an old, painful story.

I won't say what I did after that. Just that when the dawn rose I was long gone and all that remained of the house and the buildings were charred timbers. I didn't think anyone saw me as I left that valley, carrying those five bags. But I was wrong. If I'd seen the newspapers from the nearby town the next day—and not been on my way west, to the Sac & Fox and Osage Agencies in Oklahoma, the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming, the lands of the Crows and the Cheyennes in Montana, the Cahuilla of California—I would have read about the tragic death by fire of almost an entire family. Almost.

I blinked away that memory and focused on the two men who paused only briefly at the top of the trail and then headed straight toward me where I was squatting down by the fire pit. As soon as I saw them clearly I didn't have to question the signal my Helper was giving me. I knew they were trouble.

Funny how much you can think of in the space of an eyeblink. Back in the hospital after getting hit by the shrapnel. The tall, skinny masked doctor bending over me with a scalpel in one hand and some kind of shiny bent metal instrument in the other.

My left hand grabbing the surgeon's wrist before the scalpel touched my skin.

It stays.

The ether. A French accent. You are supposed to be out.

I'm not.

Oui. I see this. My wrist, you are hurting it.

Pardon. But I didn't let go.

Why?

It says it's going to be my Helper. It's talking to me.

They might have just given me more ether, but by then Gus Welch had pushed his way in the tent. He'd heard it all.

He began talking French to the doctor, faster than I could follow. Whatever it was he said, it worked.

The doctor turned back to me, no scalpel this time.

You are Red Indian.

Mais oui.

A smile visible even under the mask. Head nodding. *Bien.*

We just sew you up then.

Another blink of an eye and I was back watching the two armed men come closer. The tall, lanky one was built a little like that doctor I'd last seen in 1918. No mask, though. I could see that he had one of those Abraham Lincoln faces, all angles and jutting jaw—but with none of that long-gone president's compassion. He was carrying a Remington .303. The fat one with the thick lips and small eyes, Heavy Foot for sure, had a lever-action Winchester 30-06. I'd heard him jack a shell into the chamber just before they came into view.

Good guns, but not in the hands of good guys.

Both of them were in full uniform. High-crowned hats, black boots, and all. Not the brown doughboy togs in which I had once looked so dapper. Their khaki duds had the words *Game Warden* sewed over their breast pockets.

They stopped thirty feet away from me.

Charley Bear, the Lincoln impersonator, said in a flat voice, We have a warrant for your arrest for trespassing. Stand up.

I stayed crouching. It was clear to me they didn't know I owned the land I was on. Not that most people in the area knew. After all, it was registered under my official white name of Charles B. Island. If they were really serving a warrant from a judge, they'd know that. Plus there was one other thing wrong.

Game wardens don't serve warrants, I said.

They said he was a smart one, Luth, Heavy Foot growled.

Too smart for his own good.

My Helper sent a wave of fire through my whole leg and I rolled sideways just as Luth raised his gun and pulled the trigger. It was pretty good for a snap shot. The hot lead whizzed past most of my face with the exception of the flesh it tore off along my left cheekbone, leaving a two-inch wound like a claw mark from an eagle's talon.

As I rolled, I hurled sidarm the first of the baseball-sized rocks I'd palmed from the outside of the firepit. Not as fast as when I struck out Jim Thorpe twice back at Indian school. But high and hard enough to hit the strike zone in the center of Luth's face. Bye-bye front teeth.

Heavy Foot had hesitated before bringing his gun up to his shoulder. By then I'd shifted the second stone to my throwing hand. I came up to one knee and let it fly. It struck square in the soft spot just above the fat man's belly.

Ooof!

His gun went flying off to the side and he fell back clutching his gut.

Luth had lost his .303 when the first rock struck him. He was curled up, his hands clasped over his face.

I picked up both guns before I did anything else. Shucked out the shells and then, despite the fact

that I hated to do it seeing as how guns themselves are innocent of evil intent, I tossed both weapons spinning over the edge of the cliff. By the time they hit the rocks below I had already rolled Heavy Foot over and yanked his belt out of his pants. I wrapped it around his elbows, which I'd pulled behind his back, cinched it tight enough for him to groan in protest.

I pried Luth's hands from his bloody face, levered them behind his back, and did the same for him that I'd done for his fat buddy. Then I grabbed the two restraining belts, one in each hand, and dragged them over to the place where the cliff dropped off.

By then Luth had recovered enough, despite the blood and the broken teeth, to glare at me. But Heavy Foot began weeping like a baby when I propped them both upright at the edge where it wouldn't take more than a push to send them over.

Shut up, Braddie, Luth said through his bleeding lips, his voice still flat as stone. Then he stared at me. I've killed people worse than you.

But not better, I replied.

A sense of humor is wasted on some people. Luth merely intensified his stare.

A hard case. But not Braddie.

Miss your gun? I asked. You can join it.

I lifted my foot.

No, Braddie blubbered. Whaddaya want? Anything.

A name.

Braddie gave it to me.

I left them on the cliff edge, each one fastened to his own big rock that I'd rolled over to them. The additional rope I'd gotten from my shack insured they wouldn't be freeing themselves.

Stay still, boys. Wish me luck.

Go to hell, Luth snarled. Tough as ever.

But he looked a little less tough after I explained that he'd better hope I had good luck. Otherwise I wouldn't be likely to come back and set them loose. I also pointed out that if they struggled too much there was a good chance those delicately balanced big stones I'd lashed them to would roll over the edge. Them too.

I took my time going down the mountain—and I didn't use the main trail. There was always the chance that Luth and Braddie had not been alone. But their truck, a new '34 Ford, was empty. An hour's quiet watch of it from the shelter of the pines made me fairly certain no one else was around. They'd thoughtfully left the keys in the ignition. It made me feel better about them that they were so trusting and willing to share.

As I drove into town I had even more time to think. Not about what to do. But how to do it. And whether or not my hunch was right.

I parked the car in a grove of maples half a mile this side of the edge of town. Indian Charley behind the wheel of a new truck would not have fit my image in the eyes of the good citizens of Corinth. Matter of fact, aside from Will, most of them would have been surprised to see I knew how to drive. Then I walked in to Will's office.

Wyllis Dunham, Attorney at Law, read the sign on the modest door, which opened off the main street. I walked in without knocking and nodded to the petite stylishly dressed young woman who sat behind the desk with a magazine in her nicely manicured fingers.

Maud, I said, touching my knuckles to my forehead in salute.

Charles, she drawled, somehow making my name into a sardonic remark the way she said it. What kind of trouble you plan on getting us into today?

Nothing we can't handle.

~~Why does that not make me feel reassured?~~

Then we both laughed and I thought again how if she wasn't Will's wife I'd probably be thinking of asking her to marry me.

What happened to your cheek? Maud stood up, took a cloth from her purse, wetted it with her lips, and brushed at the place where the bullet had grazed me and the blood had dried. I stood patiently until she was done.

Thanks, nurse.

You'll get my bill.

He in?

For you. She gestured me past her and went back to reading *Ladies' Home Journal*.

I walked into the back room where Will sat with his extremely long legs propped up on his desk, his head back against a couch pillow, his eyes closed.

Before you ask, I am not asleep on the job. I am thinking. Being the town lawyer of a bustling metropolis such as this tends to wear a man out.

Don't let Maud see you with your feet up on that desk.

His eyes opened at that and as he quickly lowered his feet to the floor he looked toward the door a little furtively, before recovering his composure. Though Will had the degree and was twice her size, it was Maud who laid down the law in their household.

He placed his elbows on the desk and made a pyramid with his fingers. The universal lawyer's sign of superior intellect and position, but done with a little conscious irony in Will's case. Ever since I had helped him and Maud with a little problem two years back, we'd had a special relationship that included Thursday night card games of cutthroat canasta.

Wellll? he asked.

Two questions.

Do I plead the Fifth Amendment now?

I held up my little finger. First question. Did George Good retire as game warden, has the Department of Conservation started using new brown uniforms that look like they came from a costume shop, and were two new men from downstate sent up here as his replacement?

Technically, Charles, that's three questions. But they all have one answer.

No?

Bingo. He snapped his fingers.

Which was what I had suspected. My two well-trussed friends on the mountaintop with their city accents were as phony as their warrant.

Two. I held up my ring finger. Anybody been in town asking about me since that article in the Albany paper with my picture came out?

Will couldn't keep the smile off his face. If there was such a thing as an information magnet for this town, Will Dunham was it. He prided himself on quietly knowing everything that was going on—public and private—before anyone else even knew he knew it. With another loud snap of his long fingers he plucked a business card from his breast pocket and handed it to me with a magician's flourish.

Voilà!

The address was in the State Office Building. The name was not exactly the one I expected, but still sent a shiver down my spine and the metal spearpoint in my hip muscle twinged. Unfinished business.

I noticed that Will had been talking. I picked up his words in mid-sentence.

~~... so Avery figured that he should give the card to me, seeing as how he knew you were our regular helper what with you taking on odd jobs for us now and then. Repair work, cutting wood ... and so on. Of course, by the time he thought to pass it on to me Avery'd been holding onto it since two weeks ago which was when the man came into his filling station asking about you and wanting you to give him a call. So, did he get tired of waiting and decide to look you up himself?~~

In a manner of speaking.

Say again?

See you later, Will.

The beauty of America's trolley system is that a man could go all the way from New York City to Boston just by changing cars once you got to the end of town and one line ended where another picked up. So the time it took me to run the ten miles to where the line started in Middle Grove was longer than it took to travel the remaining forty miles to Albany and cost me no more than half the coins in my pocket.

I hadn't bothered to go back home to change into the slightly better clothes I had. My nondescript well-worn apparel was just fine for what I had in mind. No one ever notices laborers. The white painter's cap, the brush, and the can of Putnam's bone-white that I borrowed from the hand truck in front of the building were all I needed to amble in unimpeded and take the elevator to the sixteenth floor.

The name on the door matched the moniker on the card—just as fancy and in big gold letters, even bigger than the word *INVESTMENTS* below it. I turned the knob and pushed the door open with my shoulder, backed in diffidently, holding my paint can and brush as proof of identity and motive. Nobody said anything, and when I turned to look I saw that the receptionist's desk was empty as I'd hoped. Five o'clock. Quitting time. But the door was unlocked, the light still on in the boss's office.

I took off the cap, put down the paint can and brush, and stepped through the door.

He was standing by the window, looking down toward the street below.

Put it on my desk, he said.

Whatever it is, I don't have it, I replied.

He turned around faster than I had expected. But whatever he had in mind left him when I pulled my right hand out of my shirt and showed him the bone-handled skinning knife I'd just pulled from the sheath under my left arm. He froze.

You? he said.

Only one word, but it was as good as an entire book. No doubt about it now. My Helper felt like burning coal.

Me, I agreed.

Where? he asked. I had to hand it to him. He was really good at one-word questions that spoke volumes.

You mean Mutt and Jeff? They're not coming. They got tied up elsewhere.

You should be dead.

Disappointing. Now that he was speaking in longer sentences he was telling me things I already knew, though he was still talking about himself when I gave his words a second thought.

You'd think with the current state of the market, I observed, that you would have left the Bull at the start of your name, Mr. Weathers. Then you might have given your investors some confidence.

My second attempt at humorous banter fell as flat as the first. No response other than opening his

mouth a little wider. Time to get serious

~~I'm not going to kill you here, I said. Even though you deserve it for what you and your family did back then. How old were you? Eighteen, right? But you took part just as much as they did. A coward too. You just watched without trying to save them from me? Where were you?~~

Up on the hill, he said. His lips tight. There was sweat on his forehead now.

So, aside from investments, what have you been doing since then? Keeping up the family hobbies?

I looked over at the safe against the wall. You have a souvenir or two in there? No, don't open it to show me. People keep guns in safes. Sit. Not at the desk. Right there on the windowsill.

What are you going to do?

Deliver you to the police. I took a pad and a pen off the desk. Along with a confession. Write it now, starting with what you and your family did at your farm and including anyone else you've hurt since then.

There was an almost eager look on his weaselly face as he took the paper and pen from my hand. That look grew calmer and more superior as he wrote. Clearly, he knew he was a being of a different order than common humans. As far above us as those self-centered scientists say modern men are above the chimpanzees. Like the politicians who sent in the federal troops against the army of veterans who'd camped in Washington, D.C. this past summer asking that the bonuses they'd been promised for their service be paid to them. Men I knew who'd survived the trenches of Belgium and France dying on American soil at the hands of General MacArthur's troops.

The light outside faded as the sun went down while he wrote. By the time he was done he'd filled twenty pages, each one numbered at the bottom, several of them with intricate explicatory drawings.

I took his confession and the pen. I placed the pad on the desk, kept one eye on him as I flipped the pages with the tip of the pen. He'd been busy. Though he'd moved on beyond Indian kids, his tastes were still for the young, the weak, those powerless enough to not be missed or mourned by the powers that be. Not like the Lindbergh baby whose abduction and death had made world news this past spring. No children of the famous or even the moderately well off. Just those no one writes about. Indians, migrant workers, Negro children, immigrants ...

He tried not to smirk as I looked up from the words that made me sick to my stomach.

Ready to take me in now?

I knew what he was thinking. A confession like this, forced at the point of a knife by a ... person ... who was nothing more than an insane, ignorant Indian. Him a man of money and standing, afraid for his life, ready to write anything no matter how ridiculous. When we went to any police station, all he had to do was shout for help and I'd be the one who'd end up in custody.

One more thing, I said.

You have the knife. His voice rational, agreeable.

I handed him back the pad and pen.

On the last page, print *I'm sorry* in big letters and then sign it.

Of course he wasn't and of course he did.

Thank you, I said, taking the pad. I glanced over his shoulder out the window at the empty sidewalk far below.

There, I said, pointing into the darkness.

He turned his head to look. Then I pushed him.

I didn't lie, I said, even though I doubt he could hear me with the wind whistling past his face as he hurtled down past floor after floor. I didn't kill you. The ground did.

And I'd delivered him to the police, who would be scraping him up off the sidewalk.

~~Cap back on my head, brush and paint can in hand, I descended all the way to the basement, then~~ walked up the back stairs to leave the building from the side away from where the first police cars would soon arrive.

I slept that night in the park and caught the first trolley north in the morning. It was mid-afternoon by the time I reached the top of the trail.

Only one rock and its human companion stood at the edge of the cliff. Luth had stayed hard, I guessed. Too hard to have the common sense to sit still. But not as hard as those rocks he'd gotten acquainted with two hundred feet below. I'd decide in the morning whether to climb down there, so far off any trail, and bury him. Or just leave the remains for the crows.

I rested my hand on the rock to which the fat man's inert body was still fastened. I let my gaze wander out over the forested slope below, the open fields, the meandering S of the river, the town where the few streetlights would soon be coming on. There was a cloud floating in the western sky, almost the shape of an arrowhead. The setting sun was turning its lower edge crimson. I took a deep breath.

Then I untied Braddie. Even though he was limp and smelled bad, he was still breathing. Spilled some water on his cracked lips. Then let him drink a little.

Don't kill me, he croaked. Please. I didn't want to. I never hurt no one. Never. Luth made me help him. I hated him.

I saw how young he was then.

Okay, I said. We're going back downhill. Your truck is there. You get in it. Far as I know it's yours to keep. You just drive south and don't look back.

I will. I won't never look back. I swear to God.

I took him at his word. There's a time for that, just as there's a time when words end.

Osprey Lake

BY JEAN RAE BAXTER

Eastern Woodlands, Canada

A frosty halo circled the moon. It was going to snow. Eight inches by morning, the 6 o'clock forecast had predicted. Heather hoped it would hold off until they got wherever they were going. So far, the roads were bare.

“Turn right at the crossroads,” Don said.

She touched the brake. Signs nailed to a tall post pointed to cottages east, west, and straight ahead. Some signs were too faded to read, but on others Heather could make out the lettering: *Brad & Judy Smith, The MacTeers, Bide-a-wee, The Pitts.*

“Are we going to one of those?”

“No. Our sign fell off years ago. I know the way.”

The ruts were four inches deep. Frozen mud as hard as granite. Wilderness crowded the road. The bare twig ends of birch and maple trees and the swishing boughs of spruce, fir, and balsam brushed the Mustang's sides.

The track was getting worse. Heather leaned forward, high beams on, studying the ruts. “Are we nearly there?”

Don's lighter flared. “Ten minutes.”

“There hasn't been a turnoff for half a mile.”

“That's right. We've passed Mud Fish Lake. That's as far as they've brought the hydro. Osprey Lake is next.”

“Does anybody live there?”

“There used to be Ojibwas, but we cleared them out years ago. Now it's just cottagers in summer.”

“What about winter?”

“There's a permanent village at the far end of Osprey Lake. Maybe fifty people. What's left of the Ojibwas.”

The car jolted in and out of the ruts. She pulled the wheel to the right to miss a rock outcrop twenty feet high. Just in time, she saw a tree with a two-foot-diameter trunk lying across the track. Heather braked hard.

“Shit!” Don said.

“What now?”

“We walk.” He picked up the gym bag and opened the car door.

She wasn't dressed for this. Pant boots with three-inch heels, jeans, and a leather bomber jacket. Walking bent over, hugging herself for warmth, Heather couldn't see any path. Don walked purposefully. She stumbled after him.

Heather tripped. Don didn't notice; he kept on moving. She struggled to her feet, tripped again. The heel of one boot had snapped off. On her knees, she fumbled amidst the pine needles lying on the

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