

TONY HILLERMAN

Bestselling author of
SACRED CLOWNS and **COYOTE WAITS**



THE DARK WIND

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COMPELLING READING."**—*CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER*

**TONY
HILLERMAN**

**THE DARK
WIND**

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Contents

HarperCollins e-book exclusive extras:

[Leaphorn, Chee, and the Navajo Way](#)

[The Novels, As Annotated by T.H.](#)

[Tony Hillerman on...](#)

[Skinwalkers Becomes a MYSTERY!](#)

[Profile of the Navajo Nation](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Tony Hillerman](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

THE FLUTE CLAN BOY was the first to see it. He stopped and stared.

“Somebody lost a boot,” he said.

Even from where he stood, at least fifteen yards farther down the trail, Albert Lomatewa could see that nobody had lost the boot. The boot had been placed, not dropped. It rested upright, squarely in the middle of the path, its pointed toe aimed toward them. Obviously someone had put it there. And now just beyond a dead growth of rabbit brush which crowded the trail, Lomatewa saw the top of a second boot. Yesterday when they had come this way no boots had been here.

Albert Lomatewa was the Messenger. He was in charge. Eddie Tuvi and the Flute Clan boy would do exactly what he told them.

“Stay away from it,” Lomatewa said. “Stay right here.”

He lifted the heavy pack of spruce boughs from his back and placed it reverently beside the path. Then he walked to the boot. It was fairly new, made of brown leather, with a flower pattern stitched into it and a curved cowboy heel. Lomatewa glanced past the rabbit brush at the second boot. It matched. Beyond the second boot, the path curved sharply around a weathered granite boulder. Lomatewa sucked in his breath. Jutting from behind the boulder he could see the bottom of a foot. The foot was bare and even from where Lomatewa stood he could see there was something terribly wrong with it.

Lomatewa looked back at the two his kiva had sent to guard him on this pilgrimage for spruce. They stood where he had told them to stand—Tuvi’s face impassive, the boy’s betraying his excited curiosity.

“Stay there,” he ordered. “There is someone here and I must see about it.”

The man was on his side, legs bent stiffly, left arm stretched rigidly forward, right arm flexed upward with the palm resting beside his ear. He wore blue jeans, a jean jacket, and a blue-and-white-checked shirt, its sleeves rolled to the elbows. But it was a little while before Lomatewa noticed what the man was wearing. He was staring at his feet. The soles of both of them had been cut away. The bottom of the socks had been cut and the socks pushed up around the ankles, where they formed ragged white cuffs. Then the heel pads, and the pads at the balls of the feet, and the undertips of the toes had been sliced away. Lomatewa had nine grandchildren, and one great-grandchild, and had lived long enough to see many things, but he had never seen this before. He sucked in his breath, exhaled it, and glanced up at the hands. He expected to find them flayed, too. And he did. The skin had been sliced from them just as it had been from the feet. Only then did Lomatewa look at the man’s face.

He had been young. Not a Hopi. A Navajo. At least part Navajo. There was a small, black-rimmed hoop above his right eye.

Lomatewa stood looking down at the man, thinking how this would have to be handled. It had to be handled so that it would not interfere with the Niman Kachina. The sun was hot on him here, even though it was still early morning, and the smell of dust was in his nostrils. Dust, always dust. Reminding him of why nothing must interfere with the ceremonial. For almost a year the blessing of rain had been withdrawn. He had thinned his corn three times, and still what little was left was stunted and withering in the endless drought. The springs were drying. There was no grass left for the horses. The Niman Kachina must be properly done. He turned and walked back to where his guardians were waiting.

“A dead Tavasuh,” he said. Literally the word meant “head-pounder.” It was a term of contempt which Hopis sometimes used for Navajos and Lomatewa chose it deliberately to set the tone for what he must do.

“What happened to his foot?” the Flute Clan boy asked. “The bottom was cut off his foot.”

“Put down the spruce,” Lomatewa said. “Sit down. We must talk about this.” He wasn’t worried about Tuvi. Tuvi was a valuable man in the Antelope Kiva and a member of the One Horn Society—a prayerful man. But the Flute Clan boy was still a boy. He said nothing more, though, simply sitting on the path beside his spruce bundle. The questions remained in his eyes. Let him wait, Lomatewa thought. Let him learn patience.

“Three times Sotuknang has destroyed the world,” Lomatewa began. “He destroyed the First World with fire. He destroyed the Second World with ice. He destroyed the Third World with flood. Each time he destroyed the world because his people failed to do what he told them to do.” Lomatewa kept his eyes on the Flute Clan boy as he talked. The boy was his only worry. The boy had gone to school at Flagstaff and he had a job with the post office. There was talk that he did not plant his corn patches properly, that he did not properly know his role in the Kachina Society. Tuvi could be counted on but the boy must be taught. Lomatewa spoke directly to him, and the boy listened as if he had not heard the old story a thousand times before.

“Sotuknang destroyed the world because the Hopis forgot to do their duty. They forgot the songs that must be sung, the *pahos* that must be offered, the ceremonials that must be danced. Each time the world became infected with evil, people quarreled all the time. People became *powaqas*, and practiced witchcraft against one another. The Hopis left the proper Road of Life and only a few were left doing their duty in the kivas. And each time, Sotuknang gave the Hopis warning. He held back the rain so his people would know his displeasure. But everybody ignored the rainless seasons. They kept going after money, and quarreling, and gossiping, and forgetting the way of the Road of Life. And each time Sotuknang decided that the world had used up its string, and he saved a few of the best Hopis, and then he destroyed all the rest.”

Lomatewa stared into the eyes of the Flute Clan boy. “You understand all this?”

“I understand,” the boy said.

“We must do the Niman Kachina right this summer,” Lomatewa said. “Sotuknang has warned us. Our corn dies in the fields. There is no grass. The wells are drying out. When we call the clouds, they no longer hear us. If we do the Niman Kachina wrong, Sotuknang will have no more patience. He will destroy the Fourth World.”

Lomatewa glanced at Tuvi. His face was inscrutable. Then he spoke directly to the boy again. "Very soon it will be time for the kachinas to leave this Earth Surface World and go back to their home in the San Francisco Peaks. When we deliver this spruce back to our kivas, it will be used to prepare for the Going Home Dances to honor them. For days it will be very busy in the kivas. The prayers to be planned. The *pahos* to be made. Everything to be done exactly in the proper way." Lomatewa paused, allowing silence to make the effect he wanted. "Everybody thinking in the proper way," he added. "But if we report this body, this dead Navajo, to the police, nothing can be done right. The police will come, the *bahana* police, to ask us questions. They will call us *ousm* Sothe kivas. Everything will be interrupted. Everybody will be thinking about the wrong things. They will be thinking of death and anger when they would be thinking only holy thoughts. The Niman Kachina will be messed up. The Going Home Dances would not be done right. Nobody would be praying."

He stopped again, staring at the Flute Clan boy.

"If you were the Messenger, what would you do?"

"I would not tell the police," the boy said.

"Would you talk of this in the kiva?"

"I would not talk of it."

"You saw the feet of the Navajo," Lomatewa said. "Do you know what that means?"

"The skin being cut away?"

"Yes. Do you know what it means?"

The Flute Clan boy looked down at his hands. "I know," he said.

"If you talk about that, it would be the worst thing of all. People would be thinking of evil just when they should be thinking of good."

"I won't talk about it," the boy said.

"Not until after the Niman dances," Lomatewa said. "Not until after the ceremonial is over and the kachinas are gone. After that you can tell about it."

Lomatewa picked up his bundle of spruce and settled the straps over his shoulders, flinching at the soreness in his joints. He felt every one of his seventy-three years, and he still had almost thirty miles to walk across Wepo Wash and then the long climb up the cliffs of Third Mesa. He led his guardians down the path past the body. Why not? They had already seen the mutilated feet and knew the meaning of that. And this death had nothing to do with the Hopis. This particular piece of evil was Navajo and the Navajos would have to pay for it.

JUST AS HE REACHED THE RIM of Balakai Mesa, Pauling checked the chronometer. It was 3:20:15. On time and on course. He held the Cessna about two hundred feet above the ground and the same distance below the top of the rimrock. Ahead, the moon hung yellow and slightly lopsided just above the horizon. It lit the face of the man who sat in the passenger's seat, giving his skin a waxy look. The man was staring straight ahead, lower lip caught between his teeth, studying the moon. To Pauling's right, not a hundred yards off the wingtip, the mesa wall rushed past—a pattern of black shadows alternating with reflected moonlight. It gave Pauling a sense of speed, oddly unusual in flight, and he savored it.

On the desert floor below, the sound of the engine would be echoing off the cliffs. But there was no one to hear it. No one for miles. He had chosen the route himself, flown it twice by daylight and once by night, memorized the landmarks and the terrain. There was no genuine safety in this business, but this was as safe as Pauling could make it. Here, for example, Balakai Mesa protected him from the radar scanners at Albuquerque and Salt Lake. Ahead, just to the left of the setting moon, Low Mountain rose to 6,700 feet and beyond that Little Black Spot Mesa was even higher. Southward, blocking radar from Phoenix, the high mass of Black Mesa extended for a hundred miles or more. All the way from the landing strip in Chihuahua there was less than a hundred miles where radar could follow him. It was a good route. He'd enjoyed finding it, and he loved flying it low, with its landmarks rising into the dying moon out of an infinity of darkness. Pauling savored the danger, the competition as much as he delighted in the speed and the sense of being the controlling brain of a fine machine.

Balakai Mesa was behind him now and the black shape of Low Mountain slid across the yellow disk of the moon. In the darkness he could see a single sharp diamond of light—the single bulb which lit the gasoline pump at Low Mountain Trading Post. He banked the Cessna slightly to the left, following the course of Tse Chizzi Wash, skirting away from the place where the sound of his engine might awaken a sleeper.

“About there?” the passenger asked.

“Just about,” Pauling said. “Over this ridge ahead there's Oraibi Wash, and then another bunch of ridges, and then you get to Wepo Wash. That's where we're landing. Maybe another six or seven minutes.”

“Lonely country,” the passenger said. He looked down upon it out of the side window, and shook his head. “Nobody. Like there was nobody else on the planet.”

“Not many. Just a few Indians here and there. That's why it was picked.”

The passenger was staring at the moon again. “This is the part that makes you nervous,” he said.

“Yeah,” Pauling agreed. But what part of “this part” did the man mean? Landing in the dark? Or what

was waiting when they landed? For once Pauling found himself wishing he knew a little more about what was going on. He thought he could guess most of it. Obviously they weren't flying pot. Whatever was in the suitcases would have to be immensely valuable to warrant all the time and the special care. Picking this special landing place, for example, and having a passenger along. He hadn't had anyone riding shotgun with him for years. And when he had, when he'd first moved into this business—cut off from flying for Eastern by the bad reading on his heart—the passenger had been just one of the other hired hands sent along to make sure he didn't steal the load. This time the passenger was a stranger. He'd driven up to the motel at Sabinas Hidalgo with the boss just before it was time to go to the landing strip. Pauling guessed he must represent whoever was buying the shipment. The boss had said that Jansen would be at the other end, at the landing point with the buyers. "Two flashes, then a pause and then two flashes," the boss had said. "If you don't see it, you don't land." Jansen representing the boss, and this stranger representing the buyers. Both trusted. It occurred to Pauling that the passenger, like Jansen, was probably a relative. Son or brother, or something like that. Family. Who else could you trust in this business, or in anything else?

Oraibi Wash flashed under them, a crooked streak of shadowed blackness in the slanting moonlight. Pauling eased the wheel slightly backward to move the aircraft up the desert slope, and then forward as the land fell away again. Broken ground under him now, a landscape cut by scores of little watercourses draining Black Mesa's flash floods into Wepo Wash. He had the engine throttled down to just above stalling speed now. To his left front he saw the black upthrust of basalt which was the right landmark shape in the right place. And then, just under his wingtip, there was the windmill, with the shadowed bottom of the wash curving just ahead. He should see the lights now. He should see Jansen blinking his . . . Then he saw them. A line of a dozen points of yellow light—the lenses of battery lanterns pointing toward him. And almost instantly, two flashes of white light, and two more flashes. Jansen's signal that all was well.

He made a slow pass over the lights and began a slow circle, remembering exactly how the wash bottom looked as his wheels approached it, concentrating on making his memory replace the darkness with daylight.

Pauling became conscious that the passenger was staring at him. "Is that all you have?" the passenger asked. "You land by that goddamn row of flashlights?"

"The idea is not to attract any attention," Pauling said. Even in the dim light, he could see the passenger's expression was startled.

"You've done this before?" the man asked. His voice squeaked a little. "Just put it down blind in the dark like this?"

"Just a time or two," Pauling said. "Just when you have to." But he wanted to reassure the man. "Use to be in the Tactical Air Force. We had to practice landing those transport planes in the dark. But we're not really landing blind here. We have those lights."

They were lined up on the lights now. Pauling trimmed the plane. Wheels down. Flaps down. His memory gave him the arroyo bottom now. Nose up. He felt the lift going mushy under the wings, the passenger bracing himself in the seat beside him, that brief moment before touchdown when the plane was falling rather than flying.

“You do this on trust,” the passenger said. “Jesus. Jesus.” It was a prayer.

They were below the level of the wash banks now, the lights rushing toward them. The wheels touched with a jounce and a squeal as Pauling touched the brakes. Perfect, he thought. You have to learn to trust. And in the very split second that he had the thought, he saw that trust was a terrible mistake.

AT FIRST JIM CHEE ignored the sound of the plane. Something had moved beyond Windmill Number 6. Moved, and moved again, making a small furtive sound which carried much farther than it should have in the predawn stillness. A half hour earlier he'd heard a car purring up the sandy bottom of Wepo Wash, stopping perhaps a mile downstream. This new sound suggested that whoever had driven it might now be approaching the windmill. Chee felt the excitement of the hunt rising in him. His mind rejected the intrusive hum of the aircraft engine. But the engine sound became impossible to ignore. The plane was low, barely a hundred feet off the ground, and moving on a path that would take it just west of the nest Chee had made for himself in a growth of stunted mesquite. It passed between Chee and the windmill, flying without navigation lights but so close that Chee could see reflections from the illumination inside the cabin. He memorized its shape—the high wing, the tall, straight rudder; the nose sloping down from the cabin windshield. The only reason he could think of for such flight at such an hour would be smuggling. Narcotics probably. What else? The plane purred away toward Wepo Wash and the sinking moon, quickly vanishing in the night.

Chee turned his eyes, and his thoughts, back toward the windmill. The plane was none of his business. Navajo Tribal Policemen had absolutely no jurisdiction in a smuggling case, or in a narcotics case, or in anything involving the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency or the white man's war against white man's crime. His business was the vandalism of Windmill Subunit 6, the steel frame of which loomed awkward and ugly against the stars about one hundred yards west of him and which, on the rare occasions when the breeze picked up on this still summer night, made metallic creaking sounds as its blades moved. The windmill was only about a year old, having been installed by the Office of Hopi Partitioned Land to provide water for Hopi families being resettled along Wepo Wash to replace evicted Navajo families. Two months after it was erected, someone had removed the bolts that secured it to its concrete footings and used a long rope and at least two horses to pull it over. Repairs took two months, and three days after they were completed—with the bolts now securely welded into place—it had been vandalized again. This time, a jack handle had been jammed down into the gearbox during a heavy breeze. This had provoked a complaint from the Office of Hopi Partitioned Land to the Joint Use Administration Office at Keams Canyon, which produced a telephone call to the FBI office at Flagstaff, which called the Bureau of Indian Affairs Law and Order Division, which called the Navajo Tribal Police Headquarters at Window Rock, which sent a letter to the Tuba City subagency office of the Navajo Tribal Police. The letter resulted in a memo, which landed on the desk of Jim Chee. The memo said: "See Largo."

Captain Largo had been behind his desk, sorting through a manila folder.

"Let's see now," Largo had said. "Where do you stand on identifying that John Doe body up on Black Mesa?"

"We don't have anything new," Chee had said. And that, as Chee knew Captain Largo already knew, meant they had absolutely nothing at all.

“I mean the fellow somebody shot in the head, the one with no billfold, no identification,” Largo said exactly as if the Tuba City subagency was dealing in wholesale numbers of unidentified victims, and not this single exasperating one.

“No progress,” Chee said. “He doesn’t match anyone reported missing. His clothing told us exactly zero. Nothing to go on. Nothing.”

“Ah,” Largo said. He shuffled through the folder again. “How about the burglary at the Burnt Water Trading Post? You doing any good on that one?”

“No, sir,” Chee said. He kept the irritation out of his voice.

“The employee stole the pawn jewelry, but we can’t get a trace on him? Is that the way it stands?”

“Yes, sir,” Chee said.

“Musket, wasn’t it?” Largo asked. “Joseph Musket. On parole from the New Mexico State Penitentiary at Santa Fe. Right? But the silver hasn’t turned up sold anywhere. And nobody’s seen anything of Musket?” Largo was eyeing him curiously. “That’s right, isn’t it? You staying on top of that one?”

“I am,” Chee had said. That had been midsummer, maybe six weeks after Chee’s transfer from the Crownpoint subagency, and he didn’t know how to read Captain Largo. Now summer was ending and he still didn’t know.

“That’s a funny one,” Largo had said. He had frowned. “What the hell did he do with all the pawn goods? Why doesn’t he try to sell it? And where’d he go? You think he’s dead?”

The same questions had been nagging Chee ever since he’d gotten the case. He didn’t have any answers.

Largo noticed that. He sighed; peered back into the folder. “How about bootlegging?” he asked without looking up. “Any luck nailing Priscilla Bisti?”

“Just one near miss,” Chee said. “But she and her boys got all the wine out of the pickup before we got there. No way to prove it was theirs.”

Largo was looking at him, lips pursed. Largo’s hands were folded across his ample stomach. The thumbs waved up and down, patiently. “You going to have to be smart to catch old Priscilla.” Largo nodded, agreeing with himself. “Smart,” he repeated.

Chee said nothing.

“How about all that witchcraft gossip out around Black Mesa?” Largo asked. “Doing any good with that?”

“Nothing I can pin down,” Chee said. “Seems to be more of it than’s natural, and maybe it’s because so many people are going to be uprooted and moved out to make room for the Hopis. Trouble is I’m still too new around here for anybody to be telling me anything about witches.” He wanted to remind

Largo of that. It wasn't fair of the captain to expect him, still a stranger, to learn anything about witches. The clans of the northwestern reservation didn't know him yet. As far as they knew, he might be a skinwalker himself.

Largo didn't comment on the explanation. He fished out another manila folder. "Maybe you'll have some luck on this one," he said. "Somebody doesn't like a windmill." He slipped a letter out of the folder and handed it to Chee.

Chee read what Window Rock reported, with half of his mind trying to analyze Largo. The way the Navajos calculate kinship, the captain was a relative through clan linkage. Chee's crucial "born to" clan was the Slow Talking Dinee of his mother, but his "born for" clan—the clan of his father—was the Bitter Water People. Largo was born to the Standing Rock Dinee, but was "born for" the Red Forehead Dinee, which was also the secondary "born for" clan of Chee's father. That made kinsmen. Distant kinsmen, true enough, but kinsmen in a culture that made family of first importance and responsibility to relatives the highest value. Chee read the letter and thought about kinship. But he was remembering how a paternal uncle had once cheated him on a used-refrigerator sale, and that the worst whipping he'd ever taken in the Two Gray Hills Boarding School was from a maternal cousin. He handed the letter back to Largo without any comment.

"Whenever there's any trouble out there in the Joint Use Reservation it's usually the Gishis," Largo said. "Them and maybe the Yazzie outfit." He paused, thinking about it. "Or the Begays," he added. "They're into a lot of trouble." He folded the letter back into the file and handed the file to Chee. "Could be just about anybody," he concluded. "Anyway, get it cleared up."

Chee took the folder. "Get it cleared up," he said.

Largo looked at him, his expression mild. "That's right," he said. "Can't have somebody screwing up that Hopi windmill. When the Hopis move onto our land, they got to have water for their cows."

"Got any other suggestions about suspects?"

Largo pursed his lips. "We have to move about nine thousand Navajos off that Joint Use land," he said. "I'd say you could cut it down to about nine thousand suspects."

"Thanks," Chee said.

"Glad to help," Largo said. "You take it from there and get it narrowed down to one." He grinned, showing crooked white teeth. "That'll be your job. Narrow it down to one and catch him."

Which was exactly what Chee had been spending this long night trying to do. The plane was gone now and if anything stirred around the windmill, Chee could neither see nor hear it. He yawned, unholstered his pistol, and used its barrel to scratch an otherwise unreachable place between his shoulder blades. The moon was down and the stars blazed without competition in a black sky. It was suddenly colder. Chee picked up the blanket, untangled it from the mesquite, and draped it around his shoulders. He thought about the windmill, and the sort of malice involved in vandalizing it, and why the vandal didn't spread his attentions among windmills 1 through 8, and then he thought about the perplexing affair of Joseph Musket, who had stolen maybe seventy-five pounds of silver concha belts, squash blossom necklaces, bracelets, and assorted pawn silver, and then done absolutely nothing with

the loot. Chee had already worked the puzzle of Joseph Musket over in his mind so often that all the corners were worn smooth. He worked it over again, looking for something overlooked.

Why had Jake West hired Musket? Because he was a friend of West's son. Why had West fired him? Because he had suspected Musket of stealing. That made sense. And then Musket came back to the Burnt Water Trading Post the night after he was fired and looted its storeroom of pawned jewelry. That, too, made sense. But stolen jewelry always turned up. It was given to girl friends. It was sold. It was pawned at other trading posts, or in Albuquerque, or Phoenix, or Durango, or Farmington, or any of those places surrounding the reservation which traded in jewelry. It was so logical, inevitable, predictable, that police all through the Southwest had a standard procedure for working such cases. They posted descriptions, and waited. And when the jewelry started turning up, they worked back from that. Why hadn't the inevitable happened this time? What was different about Musket? Chee considered what little Musket's parole officer had been able to tell him about the man. Even his nickname was an enigma. Ironfingers. Navajos tended to match such labels with personal characteristics, calling a slim girl Slim Girl or a man with a thin mustache Little Whiskers. What would cause a young man to be called Ironfingers? More important, was he still alive? Largo had asked that, too. If he was dead, that would explain everything.

Except why he was dead.

Chee sighed, and wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, and found himself thinking of another of his unresolved cases. John Doe: cause of death, gunshot wound in the temple. Size of bullet, .38 caliber. Size of John Doe, five feet, seven inches. Weight of John Doe, probably 155 pounds, based on what was left of him when Chee and Cowboy Dashee brought him in. Identity of John Doe? Who the hell knows? Probably Navajo. Probably mature young adult. Certainly male. He had been Chee's introduction to duty in the Tuba City district. His first day after his transfer from Crownpoint. "Go on and learn the territory," Largo had said, but a few miles west of Moenkopi the dispatcher had turned him around and sent him into Joint Use country. "Subject at Burnt Water Trading Post has information about a body," the dispatcher said. "See Deputy Sheriff Dashee. He'll meet you there."

"What's the deal?" Chee had asked. "Isn't that outside our territory now?"

The dispatcher hadn't known the answer to that, but when he got to the Burnt Water Trading Post and met Deputy Sheriff Albert (Cowboy) Dashee, the deputy had the answer.

"The stiff's a Navajo," he explained. "That's what we hear. Somebody's supposed to have shot him, and somebody figured one of you guys ought to go along." When they had finally got to the body it was hard to imagine how anyone had guessed his tribe, or even his sex. Decay was advanced. Scavengers had found the body—animal, bird, and insect. What was left was mostly a tattered ragbag of bare bone, sinew, gristle, and a little hard muscle. They had looked at it awhile, and wondered why the boots had been removed and left on the path, and made a fruitless search for anything that would identify the man, or explain the bullet hole in his skull. And then Cowboy Dashee had done something friendly.

He'd unrolled the body bag they'd carried along and when Chee had bent to help him, he'd waved Chee away.

"We Hopis have our hang-ups," he said, "but we don't have the trouble you Navajos got with handling

dead bodies.” And so Dashee had tucked John Doe into the body bag while Chee watched. That left ~~nothing to do but discover who he’d been, and who had killed him, and why he took off his boots before they did it.~~

A sound from a long way off brought Chee back to the present. It came from about where the car had stopped down in the wash—the sound of metal striking metal, perhaps, but too dim and distant to identify. And then he heard the plane again. This time it was south of him, moving eastward. Apparently it had circled. The moonset had left a bright orange glow outlining the ridge of Big Mountain. For a moment the plane was high enough to reflect moonlight from a wing. It was turning. Completing a circle. Once again it came almost directly toward him, sinking out of the moonlight and down into the darkness. Chee heard a clanking sound over the low purr of the engine. The wheels being lowered? It was too dark to tell. The plane passed within two hundred yards of him, downhill and not much above eye level. It flew just above Wepo Wash and then it disappeared.

Abruptly the purr of the engine stopped. Chee frowned. Had the pilot cut the engine? No. He heard it again, muted now.

It takes about five seconds for sound to travel a mile. Even after a mile, after five seconds of dilution by distance, the sound reached Chee’s ear like a thunderclap. Like an explosion. Like tons of metal striking stone.

There was silence again for a second or two, perhaps even three. And then a single sharp snapping sound, from a mile away but instantly identifiable. The sound of a gunshot.

THE RAW SMELL of gasoline reached Jimmy Chee's nostrils. He stopped, aiming the flashlight down the arroyo ahead of him, looking for the source and regaining his breath. He'd covered the distance from his clump of mesquite in less than fifteen minutes, running when the terrain permitted it, scrambling up and down the dry watercourses, dodging through the brush and cactus, keeping the glow of the setting moon to his left front. Once, just before he had reached the cliff edge of Wepo Wash, he had heard the grind of a starter, an engine springing to life, and the receding sound of a vehicle moving down the dry watercourse away from him. He had seen a glow where the vehicle's lights had reflected briefly off the arroyo wall. He'd seen nothing else. Now the flashlight beam reflected from metal, and beyond the metal, more metal in a tangled mass. Chee stood inspecting what the light showed him. Over the sound of his labored breathing, he heard something. Falling dirt. Someone had scrambled up the cliff and out of the wash. He flicked the light beam toward the noise. It picked up a residue of dust but no movement. Whatever had dislodged the earth was out of sight.

Cautiously now, Chee walked to the wreckage.

The plane's left wing had apparently struck first, slamming into a great outcrop of rock which had forced the wash into an abrupt northward detour. Part of the wing had torn off, and the force had pivoted the plane, slamming its fuselage into the rock at about a forty-five degree angle. Chee's flashlight reflected from an unbroken cabin window. He peered through it. His light struck the side of the head of a man with curly blond hair. The head was bowed forward as if the man were sleeping. No sign of blood. But lower, the front of the cabin had been crushed backward. Where the man's chest had been, there was metal. Beyond this, Chee could see a second man, in the pilot's seat. Dark hair with gray in it. Blood on the face. Movement!

Chee ducked through the torn gap in the aluminum where the cabin door had been, forced a bent passenger seat out of the way, and reached the pilot. The man was still breathing, or seemed to be. Chee, squatting awkwardly amid the torn metal, reached forward and unfastened the pilot's safety belt. It was wet and warm with blood. He eased himself between the seats, far enough forward to examine the pilot in the light of his flash. The man had bled copiously from a tear on the right side of his neck—a ragged gash which now barely seeped. It was too late for a tourniquet. The heart had run out of anything to pump.

Chee sat back on his heels and assessed the situation. The pilot was dying. If this cramped space were an operating room with a surgeon at work and blood being pumped back into the pilot, the man might have a chance. But Chee was helpless to save him.

Yet there's the human urge to do something. Chee eased the man out of the pilot's seat and slid the limp form between the seats and out of the torn cabin. He laid the pilot carefully, face up, on the packed sand. He took the pilot's wrist and felt for a pulse. There was none. Chee switched off his flashlight.

With the moon down, at the bottom of Wepo Wash the darkness was total. Overhead, freed now from competition with the moon, a billion stars blazed against black space. The pilot no longer existed. His *chindi* had slipped away to wander in the darkness—one more ghost to infect the People with sickness and make the nights dangerous. But Chee had come to terms with ghosts long ago when he was a teenager in boarding school.

He gave his eyes time to adjust to the darkness. At first there was only the line of the cliff top, which separated the starscape from the black. Gradually forms took shape. The upthrust surviving wing of the plane, the shape of the basalt outcrop which had destroyed it. Chee felt cold against the skin of his hands. He put them into his jacket pockets. He walked to the outcrop and around it, thinking. He thought of the car he had heard driving away and of the person, or persons, who must be in it. Person who had walked away from the pilot and left the man to die alone in the dark. Now the starlight gave the canyon shape, defining a difference between its sandy bottom and its walls, even suggesting brush at the base of its cliffs. It was absolutely windless now, utterly silent. Chee leaned his hip against the basalt, fished out a cigaret and a kitchen match.

He struck the match against the stone. It made a great flare of yellow light which illuminated the gray yellow sand around his feet, the slick black of the basalt, and the white shirtfront of a man. The man sat on the sand, legs outthrust, and the quick flare of the sulfur flame reflected from the lenses of his eyeglasses.

Chee dropped the match, stepped back, and fumbled out his flashlight. The man was wearing a dark-gray business suit with a vest and a neatly knotted blue necktie. His feet had slid from under him, leaving heel tracks in the sand and pulling up his trouser legs, so that white skin was bared above the top of black socks. In the yellow beam of Chee's flash he looked perhaps forty-five or fifty, but death and yellow light ages the face. His hands hung at his sides, resting on the sand. Between thumb and forefinger of his right hand he held a small white card. Chee knelt by the hand and focused his light on it. It was a card from the Hopi Cultural Center. Holding it by the edges, Chee slipped it out and turned it over. On the reverse side someone had written:

“If you want it back, check into here.”

Chee slipped the card back between the fingers. This would be a federal case. Very much a federal case. None of this would be any of his business.

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