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Homegrown

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HOMEGROWN

by

Eddie Del Chuculate

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in English (Writers' Workshop) in the Graduate College of the University of Iowa

May 2013

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in English (Writers' Workshop) at the May 2013 graduation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOMEGROWN	1
THE DEMONS	50
RICKY	69
GRANDPA OLD BULL	86

HOMEGROWN

He's driving his Mark Five to a club out in the country, submerged in music, thought, and Seagram's, when he sees a pair of bluejeaned legs protruding from under an old bleached-blue pickup at the bottom of the hill. The figure crawls out and starts waving him down, arms criss-crossing above his head like an airport worker guiding a plane to its gate. He brakes to a crawl, turns down the radio, gravel pings and pops. First thing he sees is a shotgun cradled in the rack on the rear window. The figure becomes a tall black dude wearing overalls with no shirt, just denim against dark skin. Country, he thinks. Probably harmless. He checks both sides of the road, looking for cohorts in an ambush, then discards the thought it's a ruse to jack his car and wallet. Fifteen-year-old Lincoln and maybe fifty bucks? He thinks if the gun was for mischief or mayhem it would have been hidden. He stops and powers the window all the way down. In front, the sun is a fat tangerine globe, not as white and hateful as earlier. The guy leans in. "Yo, man, can you help a brother out with a jack?" he says, one gold buck tooth gleaming. He looks him over again. He doesn't look nutty, or like a county-jail escapee. The Seagram's speaks up, says, "All right, cat daddy."

He pulls over in front of the truck, making sure cars coming either way will have room on the narrow road. He pushes the button for the trunk, kills the engine. He's about to get out when he sees a squatty dog galloping down the middle of the road like a bullet, right in the sun's glare. Little puffs of reddish dust rise beneath its blurry legs. As it nears he sees it's a brindle-colored pit bulldog, young, its hanging tongue the color of baseball-card bubblegum. It streaks by, huffing, and in the mirror Jordan watches it jump against the man's thighs, stump of tail wagging like an admonishing finger.

“That dog bite?” he yells out.

“Naw, it’s OK,” he answers. “He just a young pup.”

He gets out and the dog shoots over to him, head down. Jordan braces, but it only wants to be petted. He leans down and scruffs the dog’s wide skull, feels its short stiff fur. It grunts and whines, looks up at him with eyes rimmed in pink. Panting heavily, it seems to want to go in four directions at once.

“Lucky I came by,” he tells the man while rummaging for the jack, pawing through fishing rods, golf clubs and ball bats. “Just bought this car, so I hope it works. It’ll be a trial by fire.”

Jordan offers him a beer. He takes it and without deliberation guzzles like he’s about to die of thirst, Adam’s apple bouncing. He drinks the whole thing, stomps the can flat with a tan work boot, belches.

“Not bad manners, just good beer,” he says, and takes the jack. “You mind if I keep the can? I collect cans.”

“In that case,” he says, “I’ve got some more for you in the trunk.”

His pant legs are so short they don’t even come to the top of his boots. He instantly feels sorry for him. Jordan himself had been taunted in school for wearing “highwaters,” been told he was “flooding.”

He’s about six-five, lanky as a hoe handle. You can see the bones of his ribcage around his chest, near the brass snaps of his overalls. His eyes are somehow pale yellow and red at once. Like a shot of hot sauce on eggs. Looks higher than a kite, Jordan thinks.

He offers his hand and they shake.

“Jordan Coolwater.”

“Victor Caesar,” he says, strokes his moustache. “You already met Sheriff.”

Right leg lifted, Sheriff is shooting a golden stream on Jordan’s front tire.

“Looks like Sheriff is dehydrated. Probably needs water,” Jordan says.

Victor claps his hand and yells and Sheriff quickly finishes. Jordan laughs and lights a cigarette, watches Victor kick his own jack out of the way and begin the assembly, placing the square base on bottom, then the post into the triangular hole. He trips the switch and the horse-head part clicks rapidly to the bottom, then he flips the lever again and slides it back up, clacking. It works.

“Hell, yeah,” Victor drawls. “I appreciate this. My narrow black ass would have been walking till sundown you hadn’t come along.”

Victor takes the tire tool and starts breaking off lug nuts, each one shrieking as it comes loose. He begins to pump the jack, and the rear lifts ever slightly. Jordan checks to make sure there’s something blocking the front wheel so it doesn’t roll into his Lincoln, but Victor already has a big rock there. Jordan drains his beer and throws the empty in the pickup bed where it joins a few dozen more.

“What you doin out here in a big Town Car like that?” Victor says, spinning the lug nuts off all the way, twirling the tire tool like a baton. He stops and wipes off beads of sweat from his forehead with a red bandana.

“It’s a Mark,” Jordan says. “Heading out to that blues club over in Rentiesville. Heard of it?”

Victor pulls the wheel off. Jordan grabs it for him and throws it into the bed, careful not to get dirt on his new shirt. He dusts off his hands.

“I’m from around here,” Victor says. “That place been around since I was a kid. It was the Little Red Rooster back in the day. Don’t go there much nowadays, but I’ve had my streaks.”

He’s wiggling on the fresh tire. Jordan looks down on top of Victor’s head and sees the beginnings of a bald spot mixed in with the swirling curlicues of hair. It dawns on him that Victor probably isn’t much older than he is. He remembers that there are two jacks in his trunk. One he kept from the Renault (although it didn’t come with a regular jack, he was sure to put one in there because he didn’t trust the flimsy horizontal platform kind) and one came with the Lincoln. Before he says anything, though, he checks, and, sure enough, he has two.

Victor is cranking down the pickup, flat now fixed. He seems a regular pro at it. He disassembles the jack and is striding over to stow it in the trunk when Jordan tells him to keep it.

“No shit?” he says, incredulous.

“Sure, Vick, I got another one in there anyway. It’s just a jack. Keep it, you might need it.”

Victor has a squirrely way of not looking you in the eye, sort of down at the ground, the way someone with a bad tooth will cover their mouth when smiling, but he does this time, truly appreciative, as if favors for him were an endangered species.

“You a whisky man?” Jordan asks.

“Showl is,” is what the reply sounds like, so he gets the Seagram’s from the chest. Jordan uncaps it, takes the first shot and passes it.

“You must be a guardian angel,” Victor says.

“The devil’s in the bottle and he aims to kill you,” Jordan says. “My grandpa would say that. He had a truck just like this. Used to ride around out here in the country all the time, too.”

The whisky slides to his stomach like glowing coal. Behind him, a young rabbit darts into the road then back into the brush when it sees them. Up ahead Sheriff is sniffing around a brown and yellow box turtle that has stopped in the road. Damned if he doesn’t lift a leg and urinate on it, makes the shell glisten.

“Your dog does piss a lot,” Jordan says.

“Tell me about it,” Victor says matter-of-factly, puffing on a thin, cherry-smelling cigar.

They are at the back of the pickup, each with a foot on the bumper, classic country style. Cans, fishing rods, plastic oil quarts, flat tire in the back. Smoke bends from Victor’s mouth up into his nose holes and back out his mouth again. Victor looks to see if Jordan was looking. Instinctively, Jordan blows a big smoke ring, and a smaller one into that, and yet a smaller one into that. They both laugh.

“What’s up with the shotgun?” Jordan asks.

“That thing?” Victor says. “It’s just an old .410 my granddad gave me. Rabbits, squirrels. If I’m lucky, a few quail.”

A car tops the hill before them and passes slowly, a man and woman both wave. Sheriff chases, barking, but stops when Victor yells. He trots back, tongue lolling.

“I’ve never been to that club before,” Jordan tells him. “Today’ll be my first time. Can you tell me how to get there?”

He’s sure he can find it on his own, but it doesn’t hurt to ask.

“See that crossroads?” Victor says, pointing west with his cigarillo. In profile, Victor’s chin hair looks like curled metal shavings. “Cross it, then take the first left after the horse apple tree. Keep going south down over Tishomingo Creek low-water bridge and keep on, oh, I’d say, another mile. Before you hit the next intersection, they be a little dirt road turns off right. Take it, and it’ll take you straight to the front door.”

“Any women?”

“Probably filthy tonight. Tonight Saturday ain’t it?”

Jordan nods. Victor smiles so big the heavy western sun glints off the gold tooth again.

“Don’t get none on ya,” Victor says. “Thanks again, partner.”

Jordan drives off toward Tishomingo Creek, watching the truck grow smaller in his mirror. When he looks back again, it’s gone. Never heard the truck start, didn’t see any dust. Must have turned at the crossroads, he thinks.

He sees the horse apple tree and stops. He’s in no hurry, would like to drink a few more before he gets there, anyway. He can see for miles all around. Weatherbeaten gray barn off to the right, but no house. Old wooden windmill to the left. Two scissortails, tailfeathers like slender, swooping peace signs, light on a highline wire. On top of the pole are the bell-shaped lens-blue glass insulators Granny liked to collect. He picks up a fat parrot-green horse apple, feels its furrows, gets a little of the white sticky glue on his hands. He fires it at the birds for the fun of it, just to watch them fly. They soar off together, violet flashing on their underbellies. A friend told him the Cheyennes use their colorful breast and wing feathers in ceremonies. He walks around the car looking at how dirty it’s gotten on this little backwoods road trip. Nothing but a little mud splatter along

the sideboard on the passenger's side and red road dust covering the midnight-blue paint all around.

Across the field, haze shimmers off scorched grass, and winged grasshoppers fly near a pond, which is oval like a skating rink, shiny like a dime. It's likely full of copperheads and cottonmouths, stocked with baby bullheads and perch. Skinny white cattle birds stand storklike in the shallows, plunge their heads in. There's the regular buzz of crickets and crackling sounds like cellophane unraveling. It's as if the earth is frying. Diamondbacks, chiggers, ticks, scorpions, centipedes, fiddleback spiders: He knows what lies underneath. Caught Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever when he was a kid out of a field like this. Had him seeing rats and giant rabbits on top of hospital TVs, and running a 103 temperature for days.

A bull moans from far off. Jordan's Indian, but not much of a nature boy. He likes to fish is about it. Rather see a play than kill animals, which is what he did a lot in San Francisco, go to the theater. He usually went on the last day of previews, when admission was a few canned goods for the homeless. He lived there while he was in a creative-writing program, writing short stories, which is really what he'd rather do than work at a paper, even though it pays good and has benefits. He's published a few stories in literary journals that come out two or three times a year. Couldn't buy them anywhere within a thousand miles even if you wanted. Meanwhile, he writes a colum for the *Trib* and it comes out the next day all over the state.

Taking a leak, he aims at several fuzzy-headed dandelions and wipes them all out. He remembers when his grandpa challenged him to shoot one and on the first shot the BB popped it dead center and all the fuzz vanished. Poof! They never got over that

one. Drank two or three beers in his honor. This is his first time in the Oklahoma countryside since his grandparents died two years ago within months of each other. He died from lung cancer; she from cirrhosis compounded by a broken heart.

He tries to find a radio station, but there's nothing but AM country and static, so he pops in a tape, turns it down low, though. It's so peaceful out in the country. When he first returned from San Francisco he was aghast at how slow life moved here. It took a while to get used to the slow traffic, the hem and haw at the grocery store, the chit-chat, the wide-open spaces. He could actually see the stars!

Dropping down toward Tishomingo Creek, which runs into the Canadian, which runs into the Arkansas, which runs into the Mississippi, he sees an Indian family fishing at the corner of the bend. He recognizes the place as where his grandpa took him fishing once. He goes real slow over the cement-slab spillway so to not create a lot of racket for the fisherman. The angler raises his hand and they stare at each other quickly, checking to see who knows who. The whole family, woman and three kids, wave, and he throws them a peace sign. He's sure if he got out and talked to them they'd know each other, or have some common kinfolk or friends, but he drives on in respect of their privacy. It's a narrow but deep stream, full of tasty channel catfish and bullheads, willows forming a canopy over the creek. You don't even need to bring bait here, you can flip logs and root around in the sand with a stick for the type of worm known as the Red Wiggler. He's hard to get on your hook, but you roll him in the sand and he becomes manageable. The wiggler curls and twists and is irresistible to the cats, carp and drum – nigger fish, he'd heard the latter two called.

Crossing the bridge and back in the dirt he hears mud slapping the undercarriage, then it lessens and quits. The sun in the rearview says about two hours till dark, and it's cool in the shade of the big oaks and elms, the latter what old-timers call "ellem." It's more woodsy here, the buzz of locusts a continual surround-sound rattle as they rage at the dying of the day. He stops to relieve himself but has to cut it off short when a pickup approaches from the opposite way, a family waving, kids in the back. Everybody waving. He'd forgotten that part about the country after living in the big city. He's starting to feel a little melancholy, a little buzzed, a little generous, a little sorry for everybody. He takes another swig of the Seagram's and decides to head on to the Dusk Til Dawn. He punches the pedal and makes the big car fishtail into the road, hears ice and cans slosh in the chest. He turns the music up full blast.

He'd never had many problems at black clubs, but at Reflections in Muskogee this older drunk came over to where he and his cousin had started in on their catfish specials, and asked for a piece of fish. He'd said sure, but before he could get the words out the drunk started digging in his plate, big-knuckled ashy-gray fingers with grease under the nails, and the owner hustled over and told the guy to get out. He offered a little fuss at first in a whiny voice, but the owner pulled out half of what was obviously a very heavy and very chrome pistol from an inside vest pocket – just half to make everyone aware. The drunk shut up and left meekly. He had to admit to a little leg-shake after that event, but nothing a couple 7-and-7s didn't knock down.

So even though there was that little trouble at the black club, it was the black owner come over and rescued them. He didn't think it had anything to do with being an Indian in a black spot. True, some of the girls acted a little snobbish, and some guys a

little tough, but truth be known it's the girls who get more upset when they see a brother with a white girl/Indian girl mix, rather than vice-versa. But no one messed with him. Heck, he grew up playing baseball and basketball with half of them. Spent the night in their houses. It was a black girl, Anthila Craft, that gave him his first "frog," telling him when they were kids to make a muscle. He did, thinking she wanted to see how big it was. Then she popped it hard with her knuckles and a pointed knot of tendons jumped like something was inside.

None of his friends would go to the black clubs with him, telling him he was crazy, would get shot, rolled, beat up. But in that town it was country or R&B and he'd take the R&B any day. Not that he doesn't like a little Willie Nelson or George Strait now and again, but all the new stuff sucks. You'd ask, Aren't there any Indian bars in Muskogee? Wouldn't he rather hang around his own kind? The answer is yes and no. Sure, he'd like to mingle, but the only place he can tell they gather is downtown by the tracks on Okmulgee Street: The Roundhouse, Villa Cantina and American, which are the three seediest bars in Muskogee – even the paper said so. He went there once and gnats landed in his beer. People so drunk they were drooling. No thanks, he'll pass. True, he'd like to find a nice Indian girl around his age. But chances are they're related and she'd already have two or three kids. No thanks, he'll punt.

He sees a wooden sign shaped like an arrow pointing right nailed to a post. Faded gray, it says simply, "Blues Club." He follows this dirt road for about a mile and comes to a wooden, one-story unpainted house with chicken hutches and a shack out back with smoke puffing out of rusty piping. There is a big porch covered with green shingling only two or three steps off the ground but as wide as the house and extending in front about

five yards. He turns off the music. It looks like someone's residence and he's about to keep driving when he hears percussion and guitar – real live music. Cymbals jangle, bass thrums. Quick snare roll. Unmistakable. This must be it. There are three or four cars in the grassy front yard so he pulls in. He brushes his hair, looks in the mirror, sprays his Coolwater cologne, hits the lock button, makes sure an extra twenty is tucked in his sock.

Four or five black folks turn around and look at him after the screen door slams and all turn back around just as fast. Like they'd do anybody, he tells himself. It takes a second for his eyes to adjust. There's lines of booths along the walls left and right, and small square dining tables with red-and-white checkered tablecloths – like a regular restaurant. Ahead is the bar with mirrors in back and bottles of liquor – gold, silver, and clear. To the right is a dance area and at the very back a guitar player is goofing around, tuning up and laughing. The bartender, a slender black woman with breasts straining against a T-shirt that says "Check out my rack" over a cartoon of racked pool balls, has her head wrapped in a traditional blue bandana. He takes a seat in front of her and asks, "Is this the Dusk Til Dawn blues club?" He still hasn't seen any sign.

She stares at him wide-eyed for a beat, then backs away and points to a digital screen that has been programmed to read, in flashing red flanked by two big treble clef symbols, "DUSK TIL DAWN BLUES CLUB!" It flashes again: "TONIGHT! THE TISHOMINGO CREEK BLUEZ BOYZ WITH GUITARZAN AND JANE!"

"Sorry," he says, "my eyes are still out of whack. But I can see you're going overboard with the exclamation points."

“That’s all right, honey,” she says, wiping off the area in front of him and slapping down a stack of napkins. “Take off those glasses might help. What’ll it be, lover?”

He’d forgotten to remove his sunglasses. He orders beer in a glass and gulps it down before she has a chance to turn around. He slaps a five-dollar bill on the counter.

“Make it a couple bottles of Michelob this time,” he says. “Why they call it Dusk Til Dawn?”

“After two we close the bar, but you can bring your own drinks in after that. We don’t close till the sun comes up, sugarchild.”

In all of San Francisco he’d never seen anything that stayed open all night. She brings the beers and he lights a cigarette, observing the guitarist. He’s classic looking, down to the sunglasses and faded ivory fedora with a small red feather. He wears glossy black wingtips with the perforated holes forming a classy swirling pattern at the toe, and thin, nearly transparent blue dress socks. A couple inches of shiny brown flesh glisten under overhead lights until his sharp-creased slacks begin. He’s even by God got a toothpick jutting from his mouth! He hasn’t played a note but is already looking like a legend. Jordan feels he’s come to the right spot.

He turns around and barks to the bartender, “I’m a columnist at the Tulsa Trib!” loud enough for anyone in earshot. Normally, he never told anyone unless he had to, preferring to stay anonymous.

“What do you write about?” she asks.

“Anything interesting. You know, ‘HOUSECAT RAISES LITTER OF PUPPIES,’ ‘BLIND MAN FASHIONS OWN FISHING LURES.’ Real quirky, slice-of-life fluff,” he says.

“You should write about this place, then,” she says, and points to a wall covered with framed newspaper articles. Figures in hats hold guitars and horns.

“Two more, youngblood?”

“Yes, ma’m,” he says, “and while you’re at it make it a round for the house!”

He makes a circular motion in the air with a finger like an umpire signaling a home run.

He thought it would be just for the four folks over in the corner playing dominoes, but she cracks two for herself and the guitar player, and three for the musicians out under an old-fashioned tree arbor, which he sees through the back door, a tunnel of light in the murkiness. Shit, there goes that \$20. Oh, well, maybe he can do a column on the place and expense it. He’ll need to write down his mileage from here and double it. Looks quirky and down-home enough.

“Guitarzan” is only tuning up as he plucks a few strings and twists the pegs before going out back, lifting the beer at him in thanks, teeth flashing. Jordan takes a look around now that his eyes have grown accustomed. At least it looks authentic with “Jax,” “Brown Derby,” “Old Milwaukee,” “Schlitz,” and “Hamm’s” beer signs nailed to the walls, along with car tags from various decades that say “Oklahoma is OK,” Dutch Masters cigar boxes behind the counter, the smell of woodsmoke wafting in from out back and the owner in a white apron chopping brisket and onions on a big wooden cutting board just off the bar with a shiny cleaver. It beat the place he’d seen in Japantown in San

Francisco. It had been the excellent “Wok Around the Clock” 24-hour Asian restaurant before it became the “Boom Boom Room.” He had taken some visitors from Oklahoma there to scope it out, but all they had done was thrown up a bunch of framed photos of all the customary blues legends, put blues on the jukebox and called it a blues club. Way too much vinyl and plastic. Even the barbecue had been nuked and served in Styrofoam. The Dusk Til Dawn seems mostly solid, well-worn wood, he thinks, pounding the counter with a fist. He looks up and sees dozens of one-dollar bills and the odd two-dollar bill pasted to the low ceiling. Some of their corners have come loose and flutter occasionally from the slow-whirring ceiling fan with blades like boat paddles, dirt furred on the edges.

He’d been a big blues fan as a teen. There was a radio program came on every Sunday night out of Tulsa called the Smokehouse Blues Show that he listened to religiously for a few months, and he even wrote a bunch of blues songs, bought some tapes. Went to the library, checked out a mountain of books: Ledbelly, Blind Lemon, Muddy Waters, Big Alabama Jefferson, Howling Wolf, the Crossroads, all that. Fancied himself the moniker Bull Alligator. Never wrote any music, just lyrics, about 20 songs before he quit. Wrote them all on two or three pieces of paper. Just a formula. Too repetitious. Too depressing. He reminded himself of the young actor Ralph Macchio trying to play a homeless, grizzled Vietnam veteran in the movies: Pasted-on moustache and beard, no experience.

The screen door slams. Everyone turns and checks out the young black girl in the frame. She’s sort of muscular; a strong bicep forms at the simple exertion of shielding her eyes. She wears short-shorts and a yellow tank top, scans the room like she’s looking for someone. Looks toward the players in the corner, the stage area and the bar, where he

raises a beer bottle to her for the hell of it. He thinks she's about to turn around and walk out, but she saunters over and plops in the next barstool.

"I thought you was someone I knew," she says to him.

"We can remedy that," he says. "Stay a while."

"Deader than a doorknob."

"But it's dark and cool in here. Like you. Care for a beer?"

"Shoot, yeah," she says, fanning herself. "Hot as hell out there."

The barmaid yells out, "YoYo! What's up, girl? You come for some pie?"

"A cutie pie, maybe," she says. "Let me get my drink on first, Rosie."

Jordan thinks this is a good thing. Why do they wear their shorts so short if they don't want anyone looking? She has the physique of a track sprinter, long toned legs and meaty thighs. She's wearing tiny socks that have a puff of cotton like dandelion fuzz above the heel. They're yellow, match her Asics Tigers. Good taste in shoes, he thinks.

Finally, she says, friendly enough, "Take a picture, it'll last longer."

"Innkeep, bring us a couple Michelobs here. Michelob OK?" he asks, and she nods.

He listens to the jukebox crank out something called "Crawling Kentucky Kingsnake." He taps his feet on the pole brace below and plays a little leg guitar for her benefit.

"I'm a crawling kingsnake, baby, crawling on back to you," some bluesman croons.

Keyboards take over and he switches to bar-counter piano, then to air drum as the song ends with a dramatic cymbal crash.

“You likes this old shit?” she asks, angles her bottle toward the juke.

“I’m an old bluesman myself,” he tells her. “I write the songs that make the young girls cry.” Fuck, he’d say anything with a few drinks in him.

“Ha!” she blurts, but raises her bottle to cheer. “You barely look 21. I’m surprised they let you in. Babyface.”

He looks over at Rosie, who’s chatting with the owner, waving the beer bottle in the air for emphasis.

“Look who’s talking,” he says, leans over and squeezes her shoulder quickly. She doesn’t complain. He gulps from his beer.

“How do you know Rosie?”

“She my auntie,” she says, rhymes it with “Montie.”

They grow quiet a minute, staring ahead, drinking their beers. Dominoes slap, a blade chops through ribs, the chain on the wobbly fan clinks against a light bulb. She gets off the stool, jerks her head toward the porch. He looks around to confirm it was directed at him, then follows her out and lights a cigarette, leery of what she wants. To keep from staring at her so much he looks down the dirt road stretching around the bend into darkness created by the oak grove. The sun is setting, a few golden spears jab a purple sky.

“Damn, you’re taller’n I thought,” she says, looking up at him with her hand out wanting a cigarette. He gives her one and lights it.

“Six-two. I was six-one two years ago. Guess I’m still growing,” he says, and looks in her eyes, which are honey yellow against her light-brown skin. But she’s definitely black.

She puffs smoke and bounces on the tips of her toes like a boxer readying for a fight, or like she's nervous. Yellow marbles dot the ends of two braids that each arch over her head like horns. She looks like a big yellowjacket, the nastiest and angriest kind of wasper. Yellow and black, might attack.

"You Indian or something?" she says, extending her arm alongside his to compare skin tone. Her's isn't too much darker than his.

"Dots or feathers?" he says.

"Cause I am too," she says, ignoring the question. "Creek. Got the card and everything." She nods affirmatively. "My grandma was full blooded. Makes me a quarter."

She's as much Creek as he is, although he's also half Cherokee. He's thinking she's becoming more attractive by the minute. The sun illuminates the turtle-shell clouds golden from underneath. He points at it and she looks, blowing smoke through her nostrils and tapping ash on the gray planking.

"What you doin here with all these old folks? Ain't nothing happens here till late at night. You gotta car?"

"I could ask the same question."

"I only lives about a mile from here. I was about to go back home, then I saw you."

Direct hit, he thinks.

"So, you got a car? I know you didn't fly out here or ride no horse."

He points. "Right there."

It's smoldering blue, almost black and growing shinier as it gets darker.

“Ooh, that’s pretty,” she says. “That a Lincoln ain’t it?”

“Showl is,” he hears himself say, parroting the distressed motorist.

A red sedan comes slowly from around the corner, muffler growling, hesitates, then pulls into the lot. An older black couple get out, climb the short steps and go in, arms around each other, laughing. She’s tall and slim and he’s short and stocky, wearing an OU ball cap.

“Hey,” he says to the girl, palm extended, finally deciding that she’s cool. “My name’s Jordan. Jordan Coolwater. I’m a columnist for the Tulsa Tribune.”

She takes his palm and they shake. “Yolanda. Ledbetter. My friends call me YoYo. You can call me Yolanda.”

This catches him off-guard and she giggles.

“Just joking,” she says, slaps her thigh, laughing. “Shoulda seen the look on your face. You full already? Are you really an old bluesman yourself?”

“Twenty-five and already a bluesman, yes, ma’m. How old are you?” he says.

“Old enough,” she says, flutters her eyelashes at him. “I used to run track in Arkansas.”

“You look it,” he says. “What happened with that?”

“I blew out my knee and they dropped my scholarship,” she says and lifts a knee.

“That’s where they cut on me.”

He grimaces and turns away from the surgical pink scar, a vertical slash along the knee. He can’t even stomach the injury replays on TV. He wants to admonish her for smoking like his uncle does to him, but they grow quiet. The locusts have shut down, too. Then one starts up, another joins in and soon every tree around is rattling again. Jordan

stretches his arms above him, tiptoes, touches the roof of the porch. He guesses he did come a little early. But how was he supposed to know? He stifles a yawn. It's the alcohol. Second-wind time.

“Can we sit in your car for a minute?” she asks.

He pops the trunk and grabs a couple beers and unlocks her side. He gets in and starts it for the AC, plugs the Zeppelin back in, punches on the equalizer. Red and green dots jump up and down along the face. He turns it down low:

*“With a purple umbrella and a fifty-cent hat (Livin', lovin', she's just a woman)
Missus cool rides out in her aged Cadillac (Livin', lovin', she's just a woman)”*

He shows her how to adjust her seat. There are about a dozen controls: Seat down or up, back or front, tilt. It must have been ahead of its time in the 70s. She plays with it a while and gets settled. They look ahead, to where the sun has sank; the horizon is a vivid mauve, but fading. YoYo looks around, rubs the velvet, the fake-wood paneling. She has a smile on her face and is acting like she could get used to the car. Flips the visor to see if the lighted mirror works. It does. She checks herself out, widens her eyes, bares her bright teeth. Then she snaps it shut and, leaning toward him, reaches into her tight pocket and withdraws a joint.

“You get high?” she asks, running it back and forth underneath her nostrils. “This is some potent shit. Homegrown. But it does the trick.”

So this is why she wants to sit in the car. She is smiling at him, holding it in the air. He guns the motor to give the AC some juice. He doesn't smoke much dope, has bought one entire quarter-ounce sack his whole life. Never failed a drug test. He might

have a toké or two when he's drunk, but, even as he tries to explain it away to himself, he knows he's going to smoke it with her.

She lights it above a little red Bic. The twisted end flames and glows red, the smoke seeps out serpentine, a seed pops with a small flare as she sucks. Oh, what the hell, he thinks, relax and enjoy it. So he turns up the music a little, eases the seat back, and hits it every time. It's harsh, scorches the back of his whisky-coated throat, but he nearly chokes himself holding it in as long as he can. They sit there as it grows dark, under the big oaks. He only gets out to get beer from the trunk. Now for sure he can't take his eyes off her, she seems so fascinating. Her smooth skin, cute face with the high cheekbones. Long lashes above slanted eyes. Mysterious smirk like she knows something he doesn't. He keeps staring at her to see what it is that makes her black besides the skin, which could be anybody's. The hair? But it looks silky. He reminds himself she's Indian, too.

"Who was your grandma?" he asks as she takes another puff.

She holds up a finger for him to wait, her cheeks balloon, then she exhales. Smoke rolls out like clouds before a thunderstorm. Nothing wrong with her lungs, he thinks. All that track.

"Maxine Tigertail. She's still alive. Lives in Wildcat Junction."

Jordan thinks about this as a swarm of sparrows wheel and swoop over the fenceline in silhouette against the sunset. They stay amazingly together in formation, like a school of darting black minnows, then zoom away.

There are many Tigertails. Some work at the tribal headquarters, and their name or picture is always in the tribal paper doing something magnanimous like cutting a

ribbon with enormous scissors or holding up a giant cardboard check. The photographers usually stand 10 yards back instead of filling up the frame so all the figures are tiny, wearing their stupid suits and ties, acting white as possible. Ninety percent of their constituents don't own a suit and tie.

"How'd you become Ledbetter?"

"Momma married a Ledbetter. You know there's a ton of those."

He remembers a few Ledbetters from school. They were neighbors with some when he lived with Granny.

"I knew a CoCo Ledbetter in Muskogee," he says.

"That would be my cousin. About my age? Yay tall?"

He nods.

"Yep, that's her."

They've smoked the joint to a roach, and he lets down her window so she can flick it. Thankfully, she doesn't eat it like he'd seen people do. He pounds his chest with his mouth open and more smoke leaks out. Full to the gills. He inches closer to her figuring now or never and leans in and they kiss for a minute or two. He rubs the tip of his index finger lightly along the raised welt of her scar after they break away.

"There's a lot more where that came from," she says.

This was going to be less complicated than he thought.

"The smoke I mean."

They both laugh at this for an unusually long time, he thinks. Her lemon-scented perfume slices through the burnt-leaf smell.

“No, really, I don’t want any. That there should hold me. But thanks,” he says, thinking she wants to sell him a bag. She must think he’s rich, with the Lincoln and newspaper job.

“It’s free. Right down the road here, growing wild.”

He takes another drink, trying to get his cool-act back together, shakes his head, looks around. Next to the shack in back is a tumbling stack of hickory split into firestove lengths. It hits him that this is the smokehouse where the brisket and ribs are cooked. As if on cue the owner in the white apron walks out carrying a platter of steaming meat. It seems Jordan can smell the smoked food from inside the car. Suddenly, he’s powerful hungry.

“Oh, well, thanks, Jordan,” Yolanda begins, and opens the door to get out. The light and buzzer come on. He can’t let her get away that easy.

“Wow,” he says, getting his attitude back. “Let’s go check out that patch if you want. Hell, I know a guy who’d take some, if you’re not bullshitting me.”

She puts her fine leg back in the car and shuts the door.

“Dang, that’s a heavy-ass door,” she says.

He passes her the bottle. She takes a swig without delay. Yep, she’s got a little Indian in her. She grimaces and waves her hand back and forth in front of her mouth. He figures there’s a mountain of time before 2 in the morning, which is the action he wants to see. Right now there’s four cars in the lot and no live music, just a few brisket eaters and beer drinkers. He’s taken a liking to YoYo, so it wouldn’t hurt to drive around a little with her, show off the Lincoln. Never know, could get lucky. But who would actually be getting lucky? Him or her, or both of them? Lucky? Why is it called lucky? He’s thinking

too much, he thinks. He observes her coolly as she's got the mirror down again, patting her hair, smacking her lips.

"You look good," he says. "Smell good, too. Don't worry."

"Thank you," she says, closes the visor. She's got good manners, he thinks.

"Now, where's this place at? I ain't gonna get shot am I?"

"Hell, naw. You think I'd take you to a place like that? It's just up here along Tish Creek. I found it one day going fishing with my brother. He pulled up some plants and dried them out."

YoYo says "clear" and the gravel crunches when he gets on the road. She fiddles with the seat some more, getting comfy. There's still plenty of light, unlike in winter when after sundown it's pitch black within minutes. He turns down the radio and hears the locusts buzzing, crickets chirping and tree frogs burping. The pot plays tricks on him; he looks at the speedometer and is going only 10 miles an hour, but what's the hurry? His face feels flushed and by that feeling knows his eyes are bloodshot. He stops the car and looks in the mirror, but can't tell. He leans over and sticks his face in YoYo's.

"Are my eyes shot?"

She looks him in the eye, bobs her head like a boxer to get another view.

"They ain't crystal clear, put it that way. It don't matter, who cares?"

She rubs his leg up and down. He feels the stirrings of a hard-on, turns the music back up, drives on. He smells dope on his fingers every time he puffs on his cigarette, blowing smoke out the side of his mouth opposite YoYo. It's cool this evening, a much-appreciated respite from the hot, humid day. The biggest thing he dislikes about Oklahoma is the summer heat and humidity. Even at night it's hot and sticky. Growing

up in the Creek Indian housing projects, they were officially the last ones to cave in and get air-conditioning. They were also the last to get cable and a telephone. Forget about carpet. The little window unit only cooled half the house and that was after hanging a blanket to cut off the hallway and back bedrooms.

He begins to wonder how much dope YoYo smokes. She doesn't look like a typical stoner.

"Do you smoke a lot?" he asks her.

She holds up the cigarette and arches her eyebrows. He shakes his head.

"More than I should, probably," she says. "I never smoked when I ran. But this shit's free. You try living out here, stuck in the country, nothin' to do."

He thinks if they got together maybe he could wean her off it. But damned if she doesn't reach down in her sock and pull out another.

"We'll wait till we get to the woods," she says.

"That's good."

They enter the thick shade canopy that leads to the creek. They say Oklahoma's No. 1 cash crop is marijuana. There was a story about it recently in their paper. And the stuff does grow wild. When he was a kid they saw a big patch by the side of the road. Grandpa said "looky there" and pulled over. It became one of those stories you heard so much it became lore. Grandpa said it was from people throwing "left-handed cigarettes" out the window with seeds in them. It was ironic because when Grandpa rolled his Velvet or Prince Albert, people always thought he was rolling doobies. A pickup full of teenagers pointed and laughed outside a QuickTrip once while Grandpa, oblivious, arms

braced on the steering wheel, filled an OCB paper and rolled it, slowly licked it back and forth.

They cross the creek slowly, water spraying in arcs on both sides. YoYo has her arm hanging out the window and gets some on it.

“Just go on up a little ways and stop off to the side,” she says.

They stand together at the trunk and take another shot apiece.

“Now where’s it at and how far?”

She does the fan-and-grimace routine, points right.

“I’d say about 10 minutes in, if that far.”

On the road it’s twilight, but midnight in the woods.

“Will it be hard to find? It’s dark in there. I don’t have a flashlight.”

“Simple,” she says and sparks her lighter, holds it in the air like a torch as the flame wobbles across her face.

They jump across the ditch and wade through some Johnson grass. He’s right behind her, wondering what the heck he is doing walking into the woods with a strange black girl (Indian, too, he reminds himself), stoned drunk, hunting a marijuana stand. She reaches for his hand as they duck under a limb, and instantly they’re cloaked in darkness. She lights the lighter, holds it in front to get her bearings.

“C’moan,” she says.

With every step they crunch twigs, snap branches. The going is fairly easy, though; in fact it’s a relief to get out of the open into some secrecy. She heads straight for a while, then veers east, toward the creek. A barn owl hoots eight notes from across the

road: “*What’s up with you, what’s up with youuuuu?*” Locusts have quit, but crickets pick up the chorus. It smells damp and like hay.

“Do you ride horses?” she asks.

He can only see her heart-shaped rump in front of him.

“Hardly ever. Every time I do, they take off and won’t mind me when I try to get them to stop.”

She laughs.

“They know you’re scared. We got three of them: Blaze, Smoky and Peaches. I ride Smoky every day. Over to the club sometimes.”

He envisions a horse tethered to the porch, like something out of Gunsmoke. He laughs. “Damn, you *are* country, aren’t you? Where do you keep them?”

“We got 32 acres. Let’s take a break,” she says.

They hug and kiss, he feels her stiff tongue in his mouth. It tastes like Seagram’s. He rubs up and down her back, squeezes her bottom, traces an eyebrow with a thumb. She doesn’t resist. After a while she lights the joint.

“How much farther?” he croaks, cheeks full of air, smoke oozing from his mouth and nose.

“Right up ahead. Got to be quiet, though.”

They start off again. He hears a buzzing that he realizes is coming from inside his head. He laughs out loud, stops and takes a drink.

“Shhhh,” she says.

He catches up to her. She has the lighter going again.

“We’re here. There it is,” she whispers, pointing.

“Why are we whispering?”

“Shhhh!” she answers, irritated.

It stands out even in the dark: a circular patch in a clearing obscured from above by foliage. She walks up to the edge and squats next to a plant, pulls at it with both hands. She has to tug a few times, then she hears the roots tear. It comes out and she bangs it on the ground to break off clots of dirt, roots dangling like white worms. She raises it to her face and inhales deeply.

“My brother call this here Tishomingo Spider Tops,” she whispers, hands it to him.

There is the unmistakable skunky smell, the leaves bend and hang down like spider legs. It’s much heavier than it looks, he thinks, as he strokes it through his hands, sniffing it. She’s bent over pulling plants as fast as she can, grunting, throwing them to the side. He strolls through the head-high growth, yanks one up. He breaks off a stalk and gets a fragrant, sticky substance on his hands. She tells him he’s supposed to pull it out at the base.

“Like this,” she says, rips up another.

She wastes no time, going stalk to stalk, uprooting plants until she’s got about two dozen in a heap. She’s breathing heavy. He whips his back and forth, making zipping sounds.

“OK,” he says, “fuck it. Let’s get out of here.”

“A couple more,” she says, then collects her booty.

“What you going to do with those?” he asks.

“Take them home,” she says, which he gathers involves his vehicle, but by this time he doesn’t care, just wants out.

“I’m coming back after all these motherfuckers tomorrow, watch,” she says.

The dope is making him paranoid. He pictures electric fences, poles with tips sharpened into picks, jungle traps that sling you upside down, potheads with pistols. He hears splashing and thinks someone is coming after them, but it’s only the rushing creek. A bullfrog croaks. They tramp back the way they came and she lays the plants in longways behind the ice chest. He gets a beer out of the cooler. The ice has turned to mainly water, but it’s still cold, so he empties the other case into it so he’ll have something to carry into the club at 2.

“Satisfied now? Got your plants,” he says, rubbing his hands down her sides and over her hips. She leans into him and they begin to kiss again. He has to bend down a little and she’s on her tiptoes. Stars speckle the sky. It’s completely dark now but he thinks she’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. Their teeth click. He tells himself not to forget to get her number, which reminds him to give her his card. He imagines showing up to clubs or parties with her at his side. Everyone going around saying how Jordan has a black girlfriend now. Indian, too, he keeps reminding himself. Miss Homegrown.

“Here’s my card. It’s got both my numbers on it.”

It says: *Jordan Coolwater/Columnist/The Tribune*

“Oh, how romantic,” she says, laughing, with a hand over her heart, goofing. She puts it in her pocket.

“Here, you drive,” he says and gives her the keys. She turns around in the middle of the road. The parking lot is full at the club, and he hears music and shouting from the road. It’s morphed into a jumping little juke joint. She finds an open spot near the front.

“Damn, this a long-ass car,” she says after backing up three times to angle the car in.

They listen to the music and the tangled voices, punctuated by abrupt laughter and shouts. Someone on the mike tries to talk above the clamor. A neon-blue bug zapper zaps every \$few minutes on the porch. He flips the armrest to slide over to her, then through the mirror sees a truck crawl by behind them. It could have been any truck until he sees a dog, a pit, hanging out, paws on the window frame. It’s Sheriff.

“Hey, there’s that dude I helped out today. Gave him a jack,” he says, thinking it seems like last week instead of hours ago.

YoYo turns then ducks, buries her head in his lap.

“Oh, fuck, don’t let him see me,” she says.

He sat at the office disbelieving that less than 36 hours ago he had awakened behind the steering wheel of his Lincoln as it navigated smoothly up and down hilly but straight I-40 in predawn darkness. No dramatic bobbing or snapping upright of the head, just a slow coming-to-consciousness like he’d emerged from under water. He had no idea how many miles he had traveled in this drunken condition until the green mileage sign sharpened into focus: Fort Smith 45. He was aimed the wrong direction toward the wrong state on the wrong highway. At least his hands were at 10 and 2, and thank God the

vehicle was aligned. Monday at the office, which was actually a desk and a computer among rows of others. He had departed the elevator with a frowning visage and cellphone at ear, thwarting unwanted conversation. Sitting red-faced and sweaty, snippets of the weekend flew by him like flipped pages of an animated book. He sloshed coffee on his slacks while taking a sip.

The newsroom was about half full, and he was surrounded by reporters, editors and designers tapping at keyboards, surfing the Web, cradling phone receivers to their ears while typing. The rapid clicking never bothered him - it was the people who couldn't type with their one-fingered jabbing who drove him crazy. Especially on a hungover day like this. You could almost hear their chugging trains of thought. Normally, he enjoyed being in the newsroom, felt at home, could eat at his desk, watch games on the high-def flat screen, shop and pay bills online, shoot the shit with his brethren. He'd once worked on a project so long that it was sunup when he left. He'd gotten free tickets to Robert Cray and Pink Floyd. Sometimes he had to ask himself why they called this work. Having to come in on Mondays with a hangover was one good answer. On days such as this the never-changing cast of characters with their irritating habits annoyed him: Loudmouthed Eberlin bragging on his Florida Gators, the ad nauseum budget meetings, the constant clashing of oversized egos, the newsroom humor.

Someone read out loud from a news bulletin, only a crown of reddish-blonde hair above a monitor: "L.A. mom accidentally drops tot from amusement park ride."

"I bet she's going through a roller coaster of emotions," some overhearing wiseass answered from Sports.

He tried three times before logging in. Couldn't remember the password he'd had for a year. Must have been one hell of a weekend. The first thing that flashed on his screen was an instant message from the executive editor:

"I suppose you still have that interview today with the blind gentleman. How fast can you turn that around?"

Shit. Shit-shit-shit! He had forgotten about meeting with the fucking blind dude who hand crafted bass plugs. That sounded familiar. Wasn't he just talking about that recently? He remembered mentioning it to the waitress at the blues club. When? Last year? Horrified, he realized it was only two days ago, on Friday. He quickly typed a response, "Yep, meeting him at 4. I'll have something in by Thursday for Sunday."

"Roger that."

Worley, the executive editor, was a Vietnam vet. They say he was a former copy editor in Nashville who couldn't spell cat, but Jordan got along with him OK. Jordan's salary negotiation in his office - a real office with glass walls, giant desk, leather chair, paintings, palms - went like this:

"Looking at your experience, we're prepared to offer forty-five."

"I was thinking more along the lines of sixty-five."

"How about fifty-five?"

Jordan agreed and they shook hands. That was painless. But this blind-fishing-lure-guy thing was Worley's baby. Normally upper-echelon editors didn't assign stories, but some bigwig on the Trib's executive board mentioned it to him, and he'd promised he'd relay it to the new columnist Coolwater, the native son freshly back from Berkeley, who of course had no option other than do the story. He felt like shit, wanted nothing

more than to veg out in the office, maybe work on one of his short stories, then go home and take care of the YoYo and homegrown situation. But now he had to visit the blind Michelangelo of artificial baits an hour away at Grand Lake during his off hours, which would put him behind schedule, getting home late and losing sleep and having to get up and do it over again, still hung over. He called blind man to confirm and get directions.

“Yes, sir, I’ve been looking forward to it. See you soon,” blind man said without irony.

“Hey, Eberlin, have you seen Ronnie Milsap’s new piano?”

Eberlin grunted no.

“He hasn’t either.”

Since Jordan had left the wrecked Lincoln at home and taken the bus, he checked out one of the Tribune’s nondescript Buick sedans and gassed up at the company pumps. It might not look like much, he thought, but at least it didn’t have five pounds of homegrown marijuana plants in the trunk. Blind man wouldn’t be able to tell if it were a Rolls-Royce or Gremlin hatchback anyway.

Taking the Crosstown Expressway out of the city and onto the turnpike which led to the lake, Jordan thought about how the man would look. Most of the blind he’d seen were in San Francisco, tapping their white sticks along sidewalks, or getting onto buses with their Seeing-Eye dogs. He’d always admired the dogs and their unwavering loyalty, fierce dedication, single-minded sense of duty. Their official-looking harnesses were always snug and form-fitting as the dogs sat stoically next to their owners, alert, unperturbed. No tongue-lolling, goofy smiley faces. He’d seen one check his master

trying to walk across Larkin at Eddy against traffic before Jordan could say anything. Later, he'd lost an argument to a blind man at a crosswalk in Berkeley across from the university when he heard what sounded like metallic birds.

“It's the crosswalk. It lets you know when it turns green, when it's safe to go.”

“Oh, come on,” Jordan had told him.

“Just watch.”

When the sound came again, sure enough, it was attached to the street light and a flashing white “WALK” sign above an orange digital image of a walking man, legs moving, arms swinging to and fro.

The suburban towns outside Tulsa wheeled by, all the same: churches, barbecue joints, Subway restaurants, Korean nail manicures, Renta-Centers, Dollar Stores, EZ Loans, cellphone shops, Christian bookstores, Wal-Marts, Lowe's, KFCs, a theater complex. And on the side of town just outside official city limits: porn shops with sedans, sports cars, pickups and 18-wheelers parked out front. On the other side of the highway was always a Quick Trip and an adjoining truck plaza. There'd be nothing but pastures and cows and ponds for 10 or 15 green miles, then the same tableau repeated. Outside Claremore he passed a black-and-yellow sign for beware of the Amish: silhouette of a horse-and buggy piloted by a figure in a giant stovepipe hat. But around here they also captained towering John Deere combine tractors. Outside a grocery store once he'd seen some teenage Amish rocking out to the John Deere stereo and air conditioning while ma and pa shopped.

He turned up the Buick's own AC. He thought about the only blind person he had personally known: Weezer was a kid his first girlfriend's family had adopted. They lived in a six-bedroom, two-story, three-car garage house on the edge of Muskogee and had adopted Weezer, who was about 6, and Michael, 10. Michael could see, but Weezer was born blind. Dana's brother, Chris, who played linebacker in high school, would clutch Weezer in his arms while jack-knifing on the springboard, and at the apex of his leap heave little Weezer as far up into the air as he could, and the kid would scream with delight forever it seemed, kicking against the blue sky, until kerthunking like a watermelon, spraying a fountain. He'd arise wheezing and gasping and begging to do it again. Weezer's eyes rolled in his sockets and his head swayed back and forth, yes, like Stevie Wonder at the keyboards. On their way to school each morning they dropped off Weezer at the Oklahoma School for the Blind on Gibson Street. All you had to do was walk him to the door, and from there he could guide himself by handrail to his home room.

Northeastern Oklahoma is a land of huge lakes: Tenkiller, Keystone, Spavinaw, Eucha, Oologah, Greenleaf, Grand, Fort Gibson and Eufaula - one of the largest manmade reservoirs in the country. He began to see bait shops, boat rental and storage businesses and liquor, beer and ice huts. Weathered signs with peeling paint showed green arching bass leaping out of water with lures dangling from their jaws. He glanced at the directions he had scribbled down and gauged lure guy to be alongside the lake in a series of lots outfitted for mobile homes and RVs. Since he had fished this area since he was a kid, he'd probably often been by the place. He turned off the turnpike onto a state highway,

and left onto a county road. The asphalt highway led toward a dense row of trees and across a cattle guard, which rattled underneath. At the campgrounds, the roads wended in sweeping arcs which encircled the private lots, separated by pines and evergreens.

In the distance, between the boughs and branches, he saw the blue glimmer of the Grand Lake o' the Cherokees. It was within easy walking distance. He was about to consult his directions again when he spotted the black '65 Impala the blind man had told him to look for. Pulling into the gravel driveway behind the two-door rag-top, he saw a pair of rust-colored squirrels chase each other up a big elm, swirling around the trunk like stripes up a barber pole.

He was tall and slim with slicked-back white hair, a large intelligent forehead, and bushy eyebrows angling down in grim concentration. The grey brows matched his walrus-like mustache. He was at the top of the doorway with the door open before Jordan had a chance to knock.

"I heard you out there circling around," he said, hoarse and raspy. "But I knew an eagle-eyed young reporter such as yourself couldn't miss the black convertible."

He aimed these words just slightly over Jordan's head. Odors of food swept out and Jordan realized he hadn't eaten all day. The blind man must have just finished, Jordan thought. The heat was pressing and the atmosphere muggy, accompanied by a soundtrack of monotonous locusts.

Jordan didn't know if he should extend his hand, slap him on the shoulder, or what, so he blurted out his usual on-the-job greeting, "Jordan Coolwater. Tulsa Tribune." He felt the air conditioning wash over him.

“Jonathan Wolff,” the man said, extending an arm for a hard handshake. “How old are you, son?”

Jordan weighed whether to fib to him or not, but figured he could trust a blind man, so told him the truth. “Twenty-nine going on fifty,” he said.

Wolff chuckled while glancing down his hooked nose and just over the top of Jordan’s head as if someone was behind him. His left eye stared straight, immobile, but his right eye wobbled and jerked like a trapped bird. His eyes were porcelain blue, milky turquoise like china or cat’s-eye marble. Wolff wore no dark sunglasses, tapped no cane, apparently trailed no Seeing Eye dog. Wearing wrinkled gray slacks, scuffed oxblood loafers and a faded black polo, he looked like a scatterbrained, rumped professor or journeyman writer.

The table was set for two. Jordan realized Wolff had made dinner: roast beef in a platter with half already sliced, buttered wheat bread, mashed potatoes, gravy, salad, roasted asparagus. Wolff rotated around the table, using chair backs to orient himself, setting dishes, aligning silverware. He handed Jordan a cold bottle of red wine and a corkscrew. Embarrassed, Jordan told him he didn’t know how to open it. Without a word Wolff retook the items and popped the cork with a bright thunk.

“I figured we’d get ourselves a bite to eat, then you can fire away with all the questions you want,” Wolff said. “I guess you know your shutterbug was here last week.”

Jordan was astounded Wolff had fixed supper. He hadn’t realized this was in the offing, but wasn’t complaining. He set his satchel on a grey suede divan. In two corners of the room were wood sculptures of a flock of geese in a staggered V formation, and a trio of galloping horses, walnut looking. The faux oak-paneled walls were bare, but

everything was neat and orderly. A Navajo rug sat beneath a bubbling aquarium in the dining room. Angular rainbow-colored fish darted from corner to corner. A orange and white cat bounded in from the kitchen, scrunching itself into a sideways arch when it saw Jordan.

“That’s Lovey,” Wolff said, laying out white cloth napkins. “She’s never met a stranger she didn’t like - even reporters. That was a joke, son, lighten up.”

They sat across each other at the oval table. Outside the window above the aquarium, violet hummingbirds flashed around a sparkling red feeder. Wolff ate hunched over, close to his plates, slurping his soup. He’d stop and straighten, tug his mustache. Poor old man, Jordan thought. He felt disgusted for thinking of him as a greedy old geezer who only wanted to plug his fishing-lure gig. He seemed lonely, living alone with a cat, no pictures on the walls. Like many elders, he probably had few close friends, and his relatives were likely scattered around the country.

“You’re not from Oklahoma are you?” Jordan asked.

“Is it that obvious? No, I’m from Iowa. Wound up here through my wife, God bless her,” Wolff said between bites. Unlike many people who had vision, Wolff at least attempted to look at you when he talked.

Wolff must have worked hours in the kitchen while Jordan cussed him in the newsroom. All because he had a hangover. Wolff had obviously cleaned up and brought out the fancy dinnerware.

“Thanks for the dinner Mister Wolff,” Jordan said. “This was a big surprise. I appreciate it.”

Through the kitchen window above Wolff’s shoulder, a boat with flapping indigo sails drifted slowly into, then out, of view on the lake. Wolff wiped his mouth with a napkin and pulled on his moustache again. He looked in deep thought.

“I don’t see how you do it,” Jordan said. “Isn’t it hard cooking not being able to see?”

“You get used to it,” Wolff said. “Or you eat out a lot. And they don’t deliver pizza out here. I’ve thought about moving but dread getting familiar with a new place. Besides, I love it by the water. Now, how about some blackberry cobbler?”

Jordan stacked dishes in the sink while Wolff produced a pie that had been cooling on the kitchen window ledge. When Wolff moved around, he placed his hands on landmarks like a kitchen counter, refrigerator handle, back of the Lazy Boy, hood of the aquarium. He did this so routinely he didn’t seem blind. But then you saw bread crumbs on his shirt or half his tucked-in shirt hanging out.

“There’s fresh coffee,” Wolff called from the kitchen. “Make you a cup.”

They sat down to their pie in the living room. Wolff took the recliner, placing his mug and saucer on an aluminum folding table. His place mat had an orange, flying-pheasant design. He picked up the remote and snapped on the national news. Tanks and rockets and desert terrain flashed while the anchor narrated the latest Iraq war news.

“Well, you can start firing away with your questions any time you like,” Wolff said hoarsely, lifting the cup to his lips. Jordan saw liver spots on his arm, and the sagging flesh under his triceps.

He learned Wolff, a petroleum engineer, had been blinded in both eyes by accident at a natural-gas plant in Tulsa. A steam cooler cracked and melted gaskets created a methane explosion. After a few months some vision returned, but his condition regressed until near total blindness. He could distinguish between light and day, or when a light bulb was off or on, but that was about it. He retired with a full pension and a workman's comp settlement he said he'd rather not talk about. His wife died of diabetes complications a few years ago. Jordan skipped to the lure business. Wolff said he'd always loved to fish, and wasn't going to let his injury stop that. Ninety percent of fishing with lures was sense of touch anyway, he said. Growing tired of replacing lures snagged on limbs and rocks, he began carving his own. He was a wood sculptor anyway, he said. Gradually word spread, and summertime resort friends encouraged him to start selling to local bait-and-tackle shops.

"You're a wood carver?" Jordan asked, writing in his pad.

"See those things over in the corner?" Wolff said, pointing to the geese and horses. "Those are a couple recent pieces."

The geese and horses weren't anatomically correct, photographlike portrayals, but stylized representations. The long-necked geese were soaring chevrons, while the lean ponies sprang in the air with twisted necks.

"That's stained and varnished walnut," Wolff said. "How's it look?"

The story isn't blind man whittles lures, it's genius sculptor can't see, Jordan thought.

Jordan followed Wolff into the little studio attached to the carport. Wolff didn't use a cane, instead following the hood of the car and with his feet feeling for the flattened bottoms of cat food cans he'd glued to the slick concrete. He turned on an overhead light. Unlike Jordan's uncle's studio, there were no grinders, air compressors or hydraulic saws, just knives and chisels and flathead screwdrivers hanging from nails on plywood. At his workbench were strewn raw, wood forms. With a red pocketknife he showed Jordan how he whittled them into minnowlike figurines as long thin strips of balsa curved up around the blade, falling into a pile on the bench or in Wolff's shirt pocket. Checking for defects, he spun the lures back and forth in his hands, like a squirrel jerkily handles an acorn. He had several in progress, and showed Jordan ones that had tiny scales already etched onto their sides. Between versions there was a lot of sanding, with each stage getting a finer and more microscopic grit until the final plug was smooth as a pebble.

Next he attached silver spinners, like tiny airplane propellers. He sat on a stool, bent over close to his work like he could actually see it. He flicked a blade and it flashed and whirled under the fluorescent light. Then he fastened brightly colored plastic streamers or squirrel or horse hair.

"The bass around here knock the snot out of the chartreuse," Wolff said. "Bite the squirrel fur right off."

Screwing treble hooks into them was the final step after Wolff sharpened each barb with a worn and oiled whetstone. Up to four sets of hooks depending on the length of the lure, but usually one front and back. Wolff turned on a small fan in the corner and Lovey darted out the studio. A black chow puppy trotted down the street dragging an orange leash.

“This is just a sideline hobby, really,” Wolff said, holding up a crawdad-colored lure. “My real passion is over there.”

At the other end of the room on a separate workbench lay a round, red cedarlike log on grey flannel. Above hung chisels of varying length and ball-peen hammers, and next to the log was a glossy cedar box of woodcarving tools lined with green felt. Jordan picked up the wood and sat it upright and was astounded to see the head of a dolphin staring back at him, bottlenosed smile and all.

“How’d you do this? Where’d you get this at?” Jordan asked.

Wolff lay a hand on Jordan’s shoulder.

“I was out walking and stumbled over the damned thing,” he said, eyeball twitching. “I picked it up and, well, it just felt like a dolphin for some reason. I stripped the bark and let it dry out over winter, and this spring it was ready. Black walnut, though. Hard as hell to carve, I must have busted my knuckles on it a dozen times. But nothing prettier when it comes out. See, check it out.”

Wolff took Jordan’s hand and rubbed it over and around the dolphin’s snout.

“See, the grain swirls going away from you. It’s cutting against the grain that makes it tough.”

Jordan felt calluses and nicks on Wolff’s chapped palms and fingers as he let his hand travel around sculpture.

“Feel that ridge? That’s his smile,” Wolff said. “Right there? That’s his eyes. Should be squinted.”

“How do you know about dolphins?”

“From what I remember before I lost my sight,” Wolff said. “Same thing with geese and horses. You want to sand him? Start under his neck and go down.”

Wolff fumbled among several squares of sandpaper before handing Jordan a smooth brown one. It felt like a cat’s tongue.

“Here, like so,” Wolff said, taking Jordan’s hand and making small concentric circles up under the nose and down the neck. “Don’t be afraid to get a good grip on him, he won’t break. Just go one direction with the sandpaper, though.”

Wolff released his grip and Jordan continued to sand, around and down, around and down. It didn’t feel like he was accomplishing much, but Wolff kept telling him he was doing a good job.

“That brings out the grain, makes him shiny, like a wet dolphin,” Wolff said, chuckled, and began coughing. He spat a hocker toward a trash barrel in the corner.

“So you just take a piece of wood and make it whatever you feel like?” Jordan asked.

“Sort of. Each piece speaks to me. There’s a form in there struggling to escape. I just help it get out. It’s nothing like the lures, let me tell you. That’s paint-by-numbers. I do that normally so I can think on this.”

“What do you do with the sculptures?” Jordan asked.

“Sell ’em,” Wolff said without hesitation. “Got some in Gilcrease in Tulsa, Wichita Art Museum. Hell, all over the country. Helps out a man on a fixed income.”

“What would this dolphin run?” Jordan asked.

“I’m asking a thousand for that one. Same with the geese and horses. But I’ve got something for you.”

He slid open a cabinet against the wall, fondled several boxes, then handed Jordan a carved owl about a foot tall, the same coffee-brown walnut. Its eyes were dramatically open wide, the size of a pair of 50-cent pieces, and seemed to take up half the sculpture. Wolff executed it so the head from the neck up was angled about 30 degrees to the right, so while the breast and talons were aimed directly at the viewer, the head was cocked slightly. It had little catlike ears, and one wing was tucked hard against its flanks. The other wing, however, was lifted to reveal a baby owl peering out with the same wide eyes, carved into the mother figure's side.

"This is spectacular," Jordan said, "but I can't afford anything, I have to fix my car and - "

Wolff cut him off by raising a hand like a traffic cop. "She's all yours," he said, jabbing his chest with a gnarled forefinger. Jordan could have sworn that he winked at him. "Keep her in a good spot."

Dusky orange light glanced off the carport and chrome and bathed the studio walls. Jordan felt that he had enough to write a couple stories. Art was already in the system. The whole Sunday centerpiece had been designed - it just awaited words to fill it. Wolff replaced tools and tidied the studio, using a little hand broom to dust off benches. Jordan peered in the Impala: only 65,000 miles on a 25-year-old car.

"Hey, old sport," Wolff said with his back to him looking up. "How about a quick spin around the lake?"

Jordan looked at his watch. If he left now, he'd be home in an hour and still have time to do something with YoYo and get rid of the homegrown before taking the car to

the shop tomorrow. On the other hand, it'd be nice to cruise around the lake. It was cooler and there was a nice breeze floating through the trees, delivering a subtle pine scent. Wolff stood with hands on hips, head raised at a slight angle as if getting a whiff of the fragrance.

“Why not,” Jordan said. “Let me clean out my passenger’s seat.”

“No,” Wolff said, rapping a knuckle on the Impala’s hood. “In this. I’ll drive.”

Jordan began to stammer a response.

“Gotcha,” Wolff said, jabbing a finger at him again. “Seriously, though, we’ll take my hot rod. You drive a stick, right?”

“Sort of,” Jordan said. “Well, really, no.”

“Oh, hell, there’s nothing to it. We won’t even get it out of second gear.”

Jordan backed his car out of the way onto the yellow and brittle grass in the front yard. The milder weather had brought more people to the lake. Trucks pulling boats were circling the roads, and families of swimmers stuffed into sedans and wagons were heading toward the sandy beach, already-inflated toy rafts and floats jammed inside. Jordan felt more positive about the unplanned detour. Old guy probably hasn’t aired out in a while, he thought. It was the least he could do.

He was surprised at the condition of the vehicle. Its red leather interior was worn, but supple and shiny, with no cracks on the dash or seats. The glass was spotless, even the housing around the gauges. The speedometer maxed at 160, but he didn’t plan on breaking 16. Wolff came out wearing a straw-colored fedora. Jordan mashed in the clutch

and it started on the first turn, a low throaty growl. Wolff told Jordan he had bought the car a few months before the accident, and that his wife had put most of the miles on it.

“I don’t think the engine’s broke in yet,” Wolff said.

Wolff put his hand over Jordan’s on the gear-shift knob.

“OK. Keep your foot on the clutch,” Wolff said as he began to move Jordan’s hand and the stick down and to the right. “All the way down, and all the way to the right.” Jordan felt the gear lock into place.

“Now, ease back on the clutch.”

Jordan let off on the pedal, but too fast, and without applying gas. The car choked and died.

“A little slower on the clutch, and you got to give it some gas. It’s OK, you’re a quick learner.”

On the third try Jordan backed the car out and was able to slide it into first, which was easy enough. The speed limit was 20, so second gear was all they needed anyway.

“Take this curve around by the beach and just keep going,” Wolff said.

The line of pines and evergreens gave way and Jordan saw people splashing around in the swimming area, which was roped off by red, white and blue barrel-shaped buoys. A young couple stood off to the side in an embrace, while kids with brightly-colored floats on their arms leaped and yelled.

“Sounds like they’re having a good time,” Wolff said.

The Impala rumbled slowly past the swimmers into a straight stretch that went past weathered old docks and an indoor fishing structure, locked up for summer.

“OK, at the four-way, take a right, then your first left,” Wolff said.

Jordan waited as a pickup with fishing rods extending from its bed passed, then made the turns.

Along this stretch the shore was rocky and bordered with wispy cattails and fern. The rocks were flat grey slabs, some covered with shiny, slippery-looking moss. It was less populated here. They passed a man wearing shorts and a Gilligan's cap manning three big surf rods with their butts jammed between rocks, spaced out evenly along the bank. Their tips bowed toward the lake, tightly wound, ready to indicate a strike. The man lifted a hand at them.

"It's a great day out," Wolff said. "Right around here is where I pick berries. They're all gone now. I picked what was there and the drought took care of the rest. Couple bears got into me and my neighbor's back yard looking for food. Just young ones, got into the trash and got it all over the place. Rangers came out and took a little report."

Wolff told him to pull into a boat-landing lot that faced east toward the lake. Pickups with empty trailers were parked near the ramp.

"Face the lake where you can see out over it," Wolff said.

Water stretched endlessly left and right. He could see the opposite shore about five miles away, bordered by a golf course he played a few times a year. A skier trailing a revving speed boat languidly swept back and forth, jumping creamy white waves in an inverted V-formation created by the vessel. Here and there bass boats were anchored and anglers cast near shore. Jordan wondered why anyone in a boat would want to fish near shore.

After the droning of the ski boat faded, he heard water sloshing against shore rocks. Wolff was quiet, always with the cocked head, like he was tuned for some far-off

signal. They absorbed the sounds and fishy smells off the water as wind ruffled the feather in Wolff's hat. Wolff dug in his pocket and withdrew a pipe and tobacco, stuffed a load into it and lit it with a silver Zippo, opening and closing the lighter by whipping it across his thighs. He puffed on it with a hollow sucking sound until the mound of tobacco glowed crimson red. The cherry-smelling smoke drifted across Jordan's face.

"There's whole towns buried out there," Wolff said.

Giant tangerine-colored fingerlings of clouds reached out, mirrored along the surface. Right, to the south, he distinguished cars crawling antlike above the dam. Occasionally sun winked off chrome or glass like a distress signal.

"I've surveyed this from the air," Wolff said. "Whole towns. One of our scuba people said it's like the towns were buried with volcanic lava, only it was water. Gas stations with the gas pumps still out front. Old-time general goods stores. Most of the lumber is still in place, waterlogged. Of course hardly nothing's made of lumber anymore."

Jordan tried to picture underwater towns. As far as he'd ever known, it'd always been just a lake. On the far shore he saw a golf cart vanish over a hill near the ninth hole, where he'd knocked more than a few balls into the drink.

"This was when they damned the Verdigris River," Wolff said. "See how wide this is? Used to be just a fairly narrow but deep river. Town called Wildcat Junction. Bordered by what they called then Nigger Creek of all things. Can you imagine? They gave folks plenty of notice, but what could they do? Most just left with their animals and stock and furniture. Left their outbuildings behind. Cemeteries too."

Wind brought thin laughter and cries from children at the beach. Wolff puffed his pipe for a minute, brought it to rest in the ashtray after some fumbling. The smoke twirled and twisted in thin lines before the wind caught it and swept it out of the car.

“You ought to do a story on it,” Wolff said. “You’re an old newshound aren’t you? No one knows about it anymore. No one cares about the past. I guarantee you, you ask 100 people down at the beach, maybe a couple old-timers like myself know about it. And that’s if they’re from around here.”

“That does sound interesting,” Jordan said.

“You can still see the grid of the streets. And there’s more than this town. Closer toward the dam was Gibson Station, and upriver was Gentry, the biggest of them all. Thousands uprooted, displaced. But they say it was for the best, huge floods every other spring, hundreds drowned. Crops wasted. Progress, son. Progress.”

Jordan ran his hands around the steering wheel. In his mirror he saw a black Dodge Ram pull into the lot. A fisherman in an obvious hurry backed his boat into the water, rushed out and flipped some levers and within minutes was zooming off to a secret honey hole.

“Cemeteries?” Jordan questioned, as if Wolff had just mentioned it.

“What could they do other than dig up all the caskets? Thousands of them.”

“I wonder what,” Jordan said, and let his thought trail off.

He’d run the idea by his editor first thing in the morning. He was already getting excited over the story. Nine out of 10 people in the newsroom were seemingly from out of state, so he knew most of them knew nothing about underground towns, buried cemeteries, and the past. He’d need to locate some descendants.

“Well, hell,” Wolff said. “I guess I’ve kept you long enough. I need to get back and finish my dolphin.”

When Jordan drove off Wolff was at the steps of his front door, waving bye like the old-timers still do, waving until you’re completely out of sight. Jordan blared the horn back at him. He almost felt bad, leaving him like that.

THE DEMONS

Sing with me, sing for the year, sing for the laughter and sing for the tear

– Aerosmith, “Dream On”

Clyde the Glide lit the fuse on a long winding snake of Black Cats and with a crow-hop fired them skyward. The bandolier soared, tail flapping, until exploding and flashing in midair over the oval pitcher’s mound rat-a-tat-tat. People gawked, covered their mouths. Daddy Rich, having already sparked a menthol and slipped into alligator loafers, launched sidewinders that whistled and curled across the grass before popping like twenty-twos. Redeye lobbed plastic grenades that rolled toward the other dugout, thundered, and belched smoke. Meanwhile, Tommy, still in his shin guards, said to the home-plate umpire, who leaned against a cane near the backstop in awe: “Sir, I’d just like to say that on behalf of the team and I, your umping sucks as bad as you walk.”

I looked back from Daddy Rich’s 280Z as our caravan left. Smoke layered the air and paper littered the field like confetti. Groups huddled and pointed. We blared horns and shot fingers, cussed and cracked beers, lit more firecrackers. Hindu already had the water bong gurgling. There was a trophy ceremony commencing and I could see our little plaque lying in the dirt on the infield, wrapped in plastic. It was the end of our season and the Good Sportsmanship Award would have to fucking wait. But in our case the axiom was true: *There was* a next year, for we were only 16 years old.

We destroyed two motel rooms the previous night and fled to our knuckleballer’s uncle’s house in the country 30 miles out. We stood in the blinding black asphalt parking lot blinking our eyes or hiding behind sunglasses while Big John surveyed the damage like a Tornado Alley governor. We had ripped phones out of walls, crushed lampshades, bashed in TV screens and smeared eye black on mirrors. Then we transferred to the other room

and started drinking. Tommy, in his long curly locks and perpetual fat lip, rolled a turkey-foot joint, shredding redhead sense onto a Sonic tray and twisting a monstrous doobie with a pair of prongs at bottom. You could hit either or all three, but I preferred cigarettes and liquor. Tommy, Winger and Jaybird, the coach's son, shot Tequila/7-Up slammers, then began drinking it straight. That led to armwrestling, slap boxing and sucker punching, and next thing you know that room was toast, too: blood on the walls, toilet flooded, closet door caved in, barf on carpet, beers sprayed like fire extinguishers. This was all *before* the championship. No telling what we would have done had we won. Big John said later he kept watch for the cops to show all during the game.

"Whose father!" Tommy shouted as the team stood with hands linked in a circle in right field in our pregame ritual.

"Our Father!" we shouted back, then chanted loudly in unison: "Who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen!"

The coaches worked out a strategy to start the game. The Devils' leadoff man was a spray hitter with speed enough to stretch singles into doubles or doubles into triples. He was obviously a base-stealing threat, but not against Tommy, who had thrown out 90 percent of runners that season. So Shack drilled the batter in the thigh on the first pitch, and, sure enough, the runner tried to swipe second and Tommy threw him out by five steps, standing up. Wasn't even close.

It began to unravel on a bang-bang play at first where I was called safe by the base umpire. The dugout exploded in cheers, rattling the fences, and the tying run was at third with one out. I slapped the patented high-five, low-five with Curls, coach at first. But the

plate ump walked out onto the field, pointed at me, then rang me up with a fist. Big John over at third slammed his clipboard. It stuck in the ground whanging vertically like a knife. He ran in to confront the ump, yelling at me to stay on the base.

“Come on, blue! You kiddin’ me? You can’t call him out from there! He was safe already! Goddam, are you nuts!” he yelled.

The umpire saw him coming and yanked off his mask, shaking his head.

“Stepped on the plate during the bunt,” the ump said, pointing at Jimbo at third and ordering him back to second. “Dead ball, runner cannot advance. Batter is out. Two down. Play ball!”

Coach wasn’t prepared for that one. He yelled across the field for confirmation, but I sort of shrugged and turned my hands palms up, like, *Hell if I know*. Big John stretched the argument mainly for show because the ruling was irreversible. That ignited the dugout. We banged the tin roof, whistled, yelled that the umps sucked, were blind, were crippled, were crazy. Our other assistant Stan the Man threw a yellow Igloo water cooler onto the field and got ejected. Big John argued against that, too, and *he* got tossed. The crowd *boooooed* in the July 4 heat, one hick yelling, “Go back to Muskogee and eat another hog you tub of guts!”

Our home-run king Tommy walked up to crush one out. He swung at the first pitch, a solid clank, driving it to deep center, small as a golf ball in the chalk-blue sky. We emptied out of the dugout with our hands in the air, yelling and screaming, because he’d done it a million times all season, but the ball died at the warning track and the centerfielder caught it against the wall. The Devils dogpiled at the pitcher’s mound. We refused the traditional postgame shake.

I hardly saw any of the guys over the fall and winter until spring as I was the only one still in high school at Muskogee. The rest of the team went to school on the other side of town, had already dropped out or were going to vo-tech. Tommy worked full time. He

would show up to practice in jeans and steel-toed boots, just getting off at the cattleyards. The high school coach wanted to know why I didn't play American Legion that summer like the rest of the team, and I said I had moved out of town. Our team was persona non grata to him. To him we were a bunch of renegades who didn't know proper baseball, didn't practice enough, weren't disciplined, weren't drilled in the fundamentals, weren't in shape, smoked, drank, didn't go to school, stayed out late, stayed in bed all day, didn't treat our bodies like the temples they were. Some of us already had kids. Many times Big John would call the high school coach to schedule a game against the American Legion, but the high school coach always refused. For the high school coach it was a lose-lose situation: Beat the renegades, and you should have; lose to them, and it was a demoralizing embarrassment. But during that high school season (on the bench mainly because I didn't play for Legion that summer) I contrasted our summer outlaws against the current high school lineup and the summer guys were as good or better at every position. So after I graduated and the option came up again on which summer team to play, I picked the renegades.

Curls rolled up in his four-door Catalina on the first day of practice for the new season. With the bill of his cap jammed down over his shades and a cigarette dangling from his mouth, he unlocked his trunk to show us two prone fighting cocks. One had just won, he said, and one lost, but both looked half-dead to me, lying on their rust-colored feathers, chests heaving, wattles vibrating, staring with tiny eyes that changed colors chameleonlike: black, red, pink, blue. Curls grabbed the equipment bag and unceremoniously shut the trunk as we peppered him with questions: How much he had won, where did they fight, what are you going to do with the roosters? A thousand dollars, none of your business, bury them.

We took the field, playing catch until Big John showed up, fresh off work from Oklahoma Gas & Electric. He gathered us around the dugout, wrote down our names,

said we needed to provide birth certificates and buy a cup and insurance, both protections for the family jewels.

“We’ve got most everybody back this year except Indian and Youngblood,” he said, puffing on a blunt cigar, which he threw down and ground out with the tip of his shoe. “Does anyone know a decent second baseman?”

I took that as an affront as I played second. As if reading my mind, he quickly added, “You, Cordell, we’re looking at you in right this year.”

There was general chuckling and eye averting. Someone said AC had moved back to town, and they’d contact him to see if he wanted to play. We were loaded again.

Sure enough, they played me in right and batted me seventh. Right field is where teams usually stick the sorriest player, but in our case that wasn’t much of a weak link as I caught anything hit my way and threw out my share of runners. In youth baseball, you can usually gauge teams by how good their right fielders are. We rolled along again, crushing and run-ruling opposition, until we finally met up with the hated all-black-except-for-one loudmouthed Muskogee Aces, our stoutest competition from last year. Their only nonblack player was a white kid called Casper.

The game was held under the lights and the whole town came out. The bleachers were full, split right down the middle blacks on one side and whites on the other. Cars lined the fences along both foul lines and around the outfield, fans honking and flashing headlights when their team executed a good play. Sometimes the ump had to call timeout if a driver left the lights on, distracting a batter. The newspaper was even covering the game, a rarity as it usually dedicated all its coverage to the American Legion games, which on an average night might have fifteen fans.

The night games had a different vibe. For one, not many fans came out for the day games: too hot, or if it was midweek, they had to work. The field even looked different. Freshly chalked, the lines stood glaring against the recently wetted red clay dirt; new-cut

grass was an emerald green, the bases seemed bleached white, the pitcher's rubber freshly painted, even the baseballs had a particular glow under the fluorescence, stark against the bright red stitching. Stan the Man had cleaned and polished our gear, so our red helmets shone, Tommy's catching helmet and shin guards sparkled, and even our uniforms seemed brand new, freshly washed and layered underneath with bright-white sanitary socks that made our red stirrups flash.

For other games, ones we knew we were going to win by big numbers, say a 15-0 run-rule or 23-3, we horsed around before the game, slapping each other's crotches with our gloves to make sure we had our protective gear on underneath in what is known as a "cup check." Players smoked cigarettes while playing toss, or didn't even warm up, staying in their vehicles and cranking rock music like "Panama" or "Sister Christian" while the other team went through its pregame infield drills, trying to whip the ball back and forth, catching pop flies. Guys chatted with their girlfriends between fences, still barely half-dressed, walking around in sliding shorts, loafers and wife-beater T-shirts, gold chains winking. One time Big John blew his stack and told us to get our shit together or we could coach ourselves. Then we went out and won 20-0. But for the Aces game, players paced the dugout spitting sunflower seeds with a vacant glare, or sat with their heads bowed, concentrating in benediction. There was no grab-ass. Except for an occasional pep cry of "Let's shut their fucking mouths," or quiet routine strategy like going over who were their fastest guys, there was no talk until the prayer. We warmed up silently with our no-fucking-around looks, playing catch, stretching, doing quick wind sprints.

At our level of baseball, most had been playing since they were five. At five years old, Muskogee is full of teams, say fifteen or twenty. But as the players get older, many quit, becoming disgruntled that they are sorry and play for weak teams. Some choose other sports or quit athletics altogether and start working on cars or doing jigsaw puzzles, maybe Dungeons and Dragons. ROTC, whatever. So at age 10, you have half those initial

twenty teams. At age 15, another half. Then by 17, Muskogee only has three or four teams left. So most of us knew the guys on the Aces, if only because we went to school together. Some of us actually played on the same teams when younger. But that didn't mean we were over at their houses having cookies and tea. There was real racial animosity back then, even though we had our "own" black players: AC, Daddy Rich, and Gandy.

We heard the biggest of their mouths, Victor Tollett, say, just loud enough so that we could hear him, "Those motherfuckers ain't shit!"

Shack told Tommy on the bench, "If I hit him and he charges me, throw the ball back and I'll hit that fucker again."

"Don't worry," Tommy said.

We lined up along the first base line and the Aces lined third while the press box played a scratchy rendition of the national anthem. I stood with my cap off and hand over my heart watching the American flag on the pole in left field flutter in the southern cool breeze, thinking all the Aces looked huge, like college football players. The umps even looked more official, with creased gray slacks, shiny black Spotbilts, patches on the arms of their short-sleeved blue shirts. My throat felt dry and I was already sweating, although the temp had cooled drastically with that breeze. I had talked Big John into batting me leadoff, and after we lost the coin toss I was the first batter. Curls nodded and clapped at me, giving me encouragement as I took practice cuts to the left of the plate.

"Light my fire, one-seven!" he yelled.

On the mound, their pitcher looked like he was standing on a mountaintop, his warmup pitches whistling by in a blur. Taking swings, I scanned the crowd for my girlfriend but there were too many faces. I stepped in the box, holding up a hand for time as I dug a little trench with my spikes like I'd seen the major leaguers do on TV. The first ball whizzed past, popping the mitt like a gunshot.

“Steerike,” the umpire said dramatically, crouching and pointing a finger toward our dugout. The Aces fans clapped and cheered.

“First ball strike,” I heard the PA man say, even though the wind was whistling through the earhole on my helmet.

“That sounded high,” I said in a moment of levity, backing out of the box, taking a swing, saying it mostly to the ground for fear of showing up the ump.

“Right down the middle, jack. You cain’t hit what you cain’t see,” catcher Tollett mouthed off.

I grounded out weakly to shortstop, but the butterflies were gone. Winger, our second batter, drove the first pitch into the left-center gap, stole third, and scored when Jaybird singled to right. We led 1-0. Horns blared and lights flashed.

We knew we were in a battle, our first of the season. Their pitcher had an overpowering fastball, great curve and a nasty slider. Unlike other teams, who booted ground balls or let them skip through their legs, the Aces scooped them up slickly and in one fluid motion fired bullets to first, or turned double plays like college teams. While other squads let fly balls drop over their heads, or let them pop out of their plastic mitts, the Aces camped out under them, gloving them one-handed, like pros. Or they made running, diving catches, sliding on their chests on the slick grass while holding up the ball for the umps to see. Other teams hacked at balls over their heads or in the dirt, looking like golf swings. Oftentimes Tommy would call time and walk to the mound because he was laughing. He and the pitcher would fake a strategy session with their gloves hiding their faces. But the Aces were well-coached, selective at the plate, hammering balls into opposite-field gaps, drawing walks, dropping down deftly-placed bunts. However, we were game, too. Winger made his own circus catch in left, initially going back a step on a sinking liner before recovering and making a fully-extended diving snare to end the fourth with the bases jammed, saving at least two runs.

“Winger!” I yelled from over in right while horns blared.

So it was tied when I stepped up to lead off the fifth. I had the pitcher's timing down now and surprised myself by lining the first pitch over the right fielder's head where it rattled against the chain-link fence. A standup double had the dugout fired up and the fans clapping. Like I'd seen on TV I looked heavenward and pointed, seeing moths and bugs swarming the lights. I was so stoked my chest was heaving and my heart thumped like a caged rabbit's. Curls at third clapped and pointed at me.

"You the man!" he yelled.

I was, however, a little too jacked. I should have called time and dusted off my uniform or something, anything to calm down, catch my breath. But on the first pitch, when I saw the pitcher's lead leg leave the ground and point home, I streaked towards third, hoping to catch the Aces off guard. Later they told me the pitcher calmly backed off the rubber and fired to the bag. All I knew was the ball was waiting for me when I got there. Eggy Ledbetter, the third baseman, tagged me forcefully during my futile slide, shoving his glove hard into my gut with two hands, saying "Fool!"

This enraged me. I got up and pushed him as hard as I could, nearly toppling him. I'd known this skinny rat since grade school and for him to call me a fool PO'd me. I'd been shown up in front of all those people, in the biggest game of the year. The quickness with which Eggy retaliated, throwing down his glove and rushing me, caught me flat-footed. He tackled me like a football blocking dummy, driving me into the turf. From then on, it was mostly a blur. Their shortstop ran over and dove on top of us while Curls tried to break it up. My face was mashed into the dirt as I reached up to get purchase on anything I could and got a big handful of Eggy's greasy shag. I began to pull to get traction when Tommy came racing over and knocked both of them off me. When I stumbled up both teams were swinging and kicking at each other right in front of the Aces' dugout. Eggy and I stared each other down, panting. The umpires yelled for everyone to cut it out while coaches from both teams got in each other's faces, pointing fingers and yelling whose fault it was. The fans hooted, yelling "Kick their fucking

asses!” When the melee ended Tommy and I, and Eggy and their shortstop were ejected. Big John put his arm around me and walked me off the field. It made me almost feel like crying.

“What the heck happened?” he said.

“He balked, John. He lifted his front foot,” I said, looking down at my ripped jersey, tonguing the inside of my split lip. I spit blood, lied and said Eggy had called me a faggot.

“It’s an emotional game, son,” Big John said, and scruffed my hatless head. “But sometimes you’ve got to keep it in check.” The Aces captured my cap; it was never seen again.

We had to watch the rest of the game from behind the dugout, eyeballing Eggy and the shortstop on the other side of the bleachers. Instead of a man on second with no outs, there was no one on with one out. We wound up losing our first game since the Devils loss the previous year, 6-5. I blamed it on myself, but to a man every player came up and said shake it off, they would have done the same thing, we’ll beat their rears next time.

“I wouldn’t let that skinny fag call me a fool, either,” Roger said.

Big John took up for me in the article in Sports the next day: “He got tagged unnecessarily hard and retaliated. My guy says their kid balked. I believe my guy.”

It was the summer of 69 – the year was 1984. Most everyone on the club had a girlfriend, or girlfriends, and Daddy Rich and Clyde the Glide had kids already. Sometimes Daddy Rich would bring his to games or practices with most people thinking it was his little brother. Baby Rich, we called him. Tommy’s girlfriend was always around: games, practices, parties, the lake. It was like they were married. It affected the way he played, too. If they’d had a fight, he’d be pissed off, grouching or being short with us, not talking much, being an asshole. But if things were going well, he was the normal Tommy we

knew outside of his relationship: rock steady, confident, offering encouragement, picking you up if you were down. Some began to resent his girlfriend, but most of us accepted her because we knew she wasn't going away. Then there were the five or six girls who made it a point to come to every game and practice, hanging around the periphery, even renting hotel rooms for out-of-town games or tournaments, inviting us over. They'd get drunk and we'd want to screw. Each had their favorite players, embarrassing them by constructing pink and baby-blue posters in curly handwriting saying "JAYBIRD ROCKS! MARRY ME!" "BRUFF TUCKER IS ONE HANDSOME MOTHER—" or "I LOVE SHACK!" Many of the guys had been with one or all of them, but would deny it vehemently if accused.

I carried a certain distinction because my girlfriend was much older, had already dropped out of Oklahoma State as a sophomore. She operated an art gallery that sold original paintings and lithographs of her father's, one of the most famous artists in the state who had died at age 26. Digging through her closet I found a diary I didn't know she'd been keeping. Naturally curious to see if I was noteworthy, I flipped through entries until finding the following: "*Cordell has another game today. He looks so cute in his baseball outfit!*" I stood staring at the word "cute," thinking it made me sound like a little kid, not a world-weary 17-year-old. I'd much rather have been described as one handsome motherfucker.

Since the local league only had three other teams, Big John was constantly on the horn arranging competition or getting us into tournaments. When he told us before practice we were traveling to play Stilwell, everyone high-fived, shouted and got in a great mood. It wasn't that we were stoked for decent competition finally, it was because it meant party time on Lake Tenkiller. Stilwell, near the lake, thought it was in position to make a run at a state title, and was skippered by an ex-Cincinnati Reds scout and minor league coach. But they could have worn clown shoes and been coached by Mickey Mouse for all we

were concerned. Practice was a blur as we went through the motions, more focused on when we were leaving for the lake, who was going to be responsible for getting the kegs and staking out a camping spot. The game was Saturday at 1; we left Thursday to spend that day and all of Friday at the lake. It was another major holiday for the team – even some parents tagged along, but camped in tents and trailers away from the squad in a see-no-evil approach. Friends, girlfriends, siblings and hangers-on trickled in over Thursday and Friday as word spread like grassfire around town that the Demons were partying at Lake Tenkiller.

At its height, the gathering had about 50 people, not including parents or relatives who had their own thing going on, and really kicked into gear when Nate the Skate's big brother showed up towing a ski boat and a pair of Jet Skis. I had never water-skied before and about drowned myself trying to get up into standing position, crashing and gulping water until I managed a decent two-minute ski. I was content to kick back in the boat and drink cold beer, feeling the cool spray on my sunburning skin. Tommy and Winger were naturals, sweeping back and forth effortlessly with their sunglasses on and gold chains flashing, jumping the creamy waves, doing one-legged tricks. The black players said Hell naw, I ain't getting in no damn water, but Rich finally waded up to his thighs, smoking a Kool and carrying a Colt .45 quart.

Half of us were still up when the first icicle of light stabbed the sky and laid a golden smear on the still water. The other half were asleep or passed out in cars, some in the backs of pickups. The players that actually brought tents were the ones who were still awake at dawn, standing around a pit fire, drinking, joking and laughing. I finally cashed in my chips and sought refuge in a sleeping bag in the bed of Winger's truck. It was Tommy, with a two-day growth of scruff, who went around waking everyone, saying we had an hour to get to the game. We followed Parrot in his yellow Firebird since he formerly lived in Stilwell and knew how to get to the field.

When we arrived, the Cardinals were already doing drills like catching fly balls shot from a pitching machine, hitting cutoff men, and warming up four or five pitchers while we weren't even dressed. Coaches in sharp uniforms wore whistles around their necks, blowing them when it was time for players to switch stations. We dressed out of our vehicles, looking for mismatched socks, missing spikes, cussing for forgetting gear at home or at the lake. Our coaches showed up a few minutes after us, obviously hung over and wearing their usual attire: bluejeans, team T-shirt and cap. I knew it was going to be a long, hot day when warming up playing catch I totally missed a perfectly thrown ball, sticking out my glove but missing it by a foot. We looked like shit in warmups, throwing balls over heads, kicking easy grounders, missing cutoff men. I heard some of the Cardinals snicker. But we ground through it.

Word was their starting pitcher was already a professional prospect who had been drafted in the 14th round by the Pittsburgh Pirates but turned it down to improve his position in next year's draft. And looking at him I didn't doubt it. He made the Ace's pitcher look like a peewee player, standing about 6 foot 3 and 220 pounds, solid muscle with thick adult arms and huge thighs, wearing the brim of his cap down over his eyes, snarling. I was intimidated by those types, but to the credit of my teammates, they weren't, treating him like any other pitcher we'd pounded all season.

I struck out on three straight pitches I barely saw to open the game. The stud was throwing gas, the sun blinding, my vision bleary from staying up all night. But slowly we wore down the intimidation factor. Tommy homered to deep center in the fourth inning, and Jimbo and Gandy both doubled in the fifth. I drew a walk, and several other guys had singles. We had Shack on the mound, who never drank, thank God, and actually had a solid eight hours' sleep. He gave up a few big hits, but wiggled out of jams thanks to our solid defense. It seemed as the game progressed we became sharper, more focused, intent on beating these pompous Cardinals who thought they were from Saint Louis with their fancy pro drills, new equipment and about a dozen coaches and a training staff.

It was 3-3 in the bottom of the ninth with two outs and the winning run on second with the pro prospect at the plate. I was standing in right, yelling at Shack to keep it up, rock and fire, put him in the books. He kicked and dealed, and the prospect took one of the hugest cuts I'd ever seen taken, missing and corkscrewing himself into the ground, tripping on the unwind and falling on his ass as bat and helmet went flying. Had he connected, that ball would have left even *Yellowstone* Park. If it weren't so fearsome looking I'd of been laughing. Apparently the prospect twisted his ankle in the process, and there was a lengthy timeout while their trainers – dressed in matching tan slacks and red polo shirts – looked him over for what seemed an eternity. They knelt above him, prodding and touching, twisting and poking. Then the giant got up and ran a few light sprints down the third base line before everyone deemed him good to go. I had taken a knee and was pulling and chewing at grass, looking at the swimming pool and new gym behind me. Stilwell had one of the best high school athletic programs in the state. Even the field we were on was pro-like, with walls in the outfield instead of fences, and towering stadium lights, bullpen areas, wraparound seating with armchair seats instead of bleachers. Painted on the wall behind me was the advertisement: CHIEF'S BARBERSHOP, DOWNTOWN STILWELL, LOWERING YOUR EARS SINCE 1966.

The prospect took two more balls from Shack to work a full count. The runner on second bluffed a steal and Tommy almost nailed him as he dove back to second. I was thinking about the sign because my dad was a barber when I heard a loud aluminum clank. I swam out of my daydream and spotted the ball sailing at me high, over my head. If I had been focused, I would have anticipated the ball's direction, got a jump and got in position. Instead, I had to make up for lost ground by turning and running full-speed directly at the wall. The ball was coming fast and seemed to gain velocity the closer it came. I leaped in the air, caught it, crashed into the Indian head on the wall, bounced off and dropped it, head spinning. I staggered after it hearing wild cheering and fired it in but the runner from second had scored easily, sprinting all-out on the 3-2 swing. I dropped to

a knee with my head bowed, then rolled to the ground, trying to get my bearings. The next thing I saw were the matching slacks of the Cardinals trainers, come to check on me, along with Winger, Tommy, and Big John. I was OK after a few minutes, but had sprained my own ankle, so Big John and Tommy walked me off, elbows hooked under each of my arm pits. I hobbled through a line good-gaming the Cards. When I reached the towering prospect, he slapped my rear and said in a deep voice, “Great hustle, one-seven.”

It felt great to get back to Muskogee and start dominating again. Problem was, after running through the remaining three league teams, we had no more opposition and there were two weeks until state playoffs. So Big John got on the horn again and invited the Devils, Cards and Aces – the only teams to beat us in two years and 46 games – to a round-robin tournament at our place. Everyone considered it a chance to stay sharp during the lull. And since it wasn’t league-sanctioned, Big John could charge a three-hundred-dollar entry fee – a chance to make a little money for playoff travel. But the Devils, remembering our farewell fireworks show and decidedly unsportsmanlike display of a year ago, said Hell no. So it was us, the Cardinals and the hated Aces with a winner-take-all shot at nine hundred dollars and a split of the gate.

It was a lose-two-and-you’re-out format with the Aces and Reds playing first and the Demons waiting for the winner. Big John recruited some of us to help run the tournament: getting ice water for the umps between innings, selling admission tickets, raffling off a Pendleton blanket Tommy’s mom had donated. I had the unglamorous job of making sure kids who chased down foul balls returned them. The kids got a free Coke, but many preferred the ball, so it was a chore to stay on top of them.

The Aces beat the Cards, so we had 30 minutes before first pitch. Big John was ready to fill in our lineup, but couldn’t find the scorebook. After much searching and cussing, he figured he left it at home, so sent his son Jaybird, our shortstop, to get it, and

Tommy rode with him. After we stretched and threw long toss, we took the field for warmups. Midway through, Curls walked out and said something to Big John, who was about to hit me a fly. Big John dropped his fungo bat, hustled off the field, and Curls waved us in. We pow-wowed near the dugout.

“Hey guys, Jaybird just wrecked going home for the scorebook,” Curls said.

“He’s en route to the hospital but he’s going to be OK.”

Curls dropped his head then looked at us behind his shades. His face quivered.

“But Tommy died at the scene.”

“Tommy’s dead?” Daddy Rich asked.

Curls only nodded.

“What happened?” Rich said.

“All I know now is they hit a tree over by the house,” Curls told us. “Tommy was in the passenger’s side and got the worst of it.”

Some guys slammed their gloves on the ground, some squatted with heads down. Winger walked off alone onto the field with his hands on his hat. Shack jammed his cap over his eyes. AC took off at a dead sprint toward right field, dropped to his knees. Some of us stared at the coach, not hearing what we just heard. Curls took off his glasses and wiped tears with the sleeve of his jersey. His arm shook. Initially disbelieving with a blank face, Beck burst into tears and stalked away, slamming his fists, looking skyward. Curls gave everyone a few minutes, then huddled us again.

“When Big John left for the hospital, he told me to leave it up to you guys. Do you want to keep playing or not? He said he’d understand either way.”

Our backup catcher Beck took over.

“Hell, yes, we’re playing. For Tommy. End of discussion,” he said. “Link up.”

Stan the Man joined us and we waited for Winger and AC.

“Whose father?” Beck said softly.

“Our Father,” we answered in a hushed tone, “who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Some players sniffled, wiped back tears. We walked into the dugout in a trance. There on the bench neatly folded lay Tommy’s jersey, spikes and glove. He had only half-dressed for the game before leaving with Jaybird. Everyone – even the Aces, with caps in hands – watched as Beck, spikes and shin guards scraping the fencing, scaled the tall backstop holding Tommy’s jersey in his left hand. He climbed to the very top and hooked the hanger on the uppermost link, then twisted it shut.

There was some lineup shuffling with Skunk and T-Bone coming off the bench to fill holes, but with Tommy’s yellow number seven flapping in the breeze behind us at the plate and in front of us on the field, there was no way we would lose. I tripled into right-center to lead off, and after I slid under a close throw at third Eggy said, “Yo, man, Cordell, sorry about Tommy.”

The celebrations that day were not raucous, but mild. We beat the Aces 7-3, then took care of the Cardinals 10-2 to win the round robin, even though the prospect was on the hill. We hit four homers off him that, granted, would have been routine outs in his spacious yard, but, hey, both teams were playing on the same field. We saved both winning game balls and Curls had us sign them. This time they let me climb the fence and take down Tommy’s jersey.

Me, Winger, Beck, Jaybird, Gandy and AC were pallbearers, and the entire team was honorary. Jaybird was still in crutches, so Shack filled in. Tommy’s mom and dad agreed to have him dressed out in full Demons uniform, but in lieu of a cap he wore a classic red bandana. Inside his catcher’s mitt that was fitted on his left hand and angled across his

chest was one of the signed game balls. Also lying next to him on the maroon satin was a pack of Marlboro reds and a bottle of Jack Daniels.

His service was held outside at an Indian Baptist church near Okemah, in the shade of massive oaks filled with buzzing locusts. The myriad leaves rustling in the breeze made kaleidoscope shadows over Tommy's body. He looked like Tommy, down to the perpetual fat lip. All the Demons were there, some in suits if they had them, but most in their best bluejeans and shirts. It was odd to see them assembled in street clothes. I wore jeans and a new blue Oxford my mom bought me. After the preacher said his words a cassette player was produced and "Dream On," Tommy's favorite song, was played: *"Every time that I look in the mirror,"* it began, *"all these lines in my face getting clearer. ... Sing with me, if it's just for today, maybe tomorrow the good Lord'll take you away."* As pallbearers the entire team sat with the family in front under the tent while the song played. When it finished, the cassette, inside its case, was placed into the casket. Then the church bell rang 17 times, each succeeding peal not beginning until echoes of the last faded. The locusts grew silent, only starting up again after the long silence of the last bell.

We loaded Tommy into the hearse and got in for the caravan to the gravesite. Mortuary workers lowered Tommy into the hole and everyone filed by to drop the red dirt onto his shiny silver casket, with the occasional yellow flower tossed in. Then the team took turns with three or four shovels until the hole was filled, sweaty work in the baking sun. Some of us stood around talking as the funeral dissipated.

"Man, I've never *not* known him," said Beck, still tearful. He was shaven and wore a tight-fitting suit. "Same team since five. I lost a brother." He had spoken for all of us.

That was the end of the Demons. Even though the state playoffs began in a week, the consensus was we were burnt. Our starting catcher and best hitter dead, starting shortstop

with broken bones. Emotionally whipped. No heart for it. There was a team meeting and a show of hands of who wanted to continue and there were no hands. Too old for summer league I was forced to play American Legion the next year, and it wasn't the same. Too organized. Everybody lumped into two Suburbans for away games. Highlight of the road trips: stopping at Quick Trip on the way back. Riding pine. No fans. No girls. No caravans. No one slept at each other's house on the floor or couch. No one called their teammate's mother Mom. No one helped you fix your car, picked you up for practice, invited you in for a bologna white bread sandwich. That was my last year of baseball. I was getting sorrier and sorrier anyway.

RICKY

Cordell stopped by the Gallery to drop off more of their clothes and gather his baseball gear. He parked in back after seeing a shiny black Jaguar in the front driveway, and went in the kitchen door. Dina's mom, Peggy, had tossed him the keys to her car, saying, "Take the Mercedes." It was December, high school winter break, but he still had practice every day. He hung up the clothes and hunted through piled up boxes in the bedroom for his long-sleeved Bulldogs shirt while down the hallway he heard Dina explaining the details of one of her dad's lithographs, that it was a numbered limited edition which would instantly double in value when the last print sold. That it came wrapped in parchment in a gold-embossed 100 percent yellow rag folder, with all the papers, also collectible. Matting and framing could be arranged. Her tone was cheerful and businesslike. Being nosy, Cordell crept into the front room and sat behind the desk in the squeaky high-backed swivel chair. Dina was on the edge of the couch with a tall blond lady viewing the "Seminole Fisherman" litho laid out on the glass coffee table. He could see the colorful squatting figure and the long spear. They both looked up at him so he smiled apologetically and gave a quick just-me wave so they'd go on with their business. He saw *The Fountainhead* open face-down next to the phone. Peggy had been pushing him lately to read it so he picked it up and was astonished to see drawings of a man and woman in a twisted sexual position that looked like the letter 'X.' Different views on facing pages. Over the cover of the book he saw Dina watching him out of the corner of her eye while looking down at the print with the customer. She giggled suddenly, a contained burst as if she were about to laugh hysterically, and the lady laughed too, apparently thinking they were both amused at something in their

conversation. Cordell riffled through the book. Someone had gutted *Fountainhead* and inserted *The Joy of Sex*.

When Cordell looked again, the woman, holding a black leather clutch, was writing a check with a slim gold pen. Dina winked at him over her head. Before leaving, the woman, slipping on her leather gloves, asked if he was an artist, too.

“Not really,” Cordell said. “I try.”

“He’s a friend of the family,” Dina said, smiling, in her mint green skirt next to the lady. “He writes for the *Chronicle*. Goes to school with my little brother. Kind of looks like him, too.”

“A writer?” the woman said, then saw *The Fountainhead*. She nodded toward it and said, “That’s a classic, but kind of hard - at least it was for me. Don’t mind me saying you look so young. Read it again in 10 years.”

Cordell was terrified she would ask to look at it, to read him a passage or something.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “It’s been kind of tough so far.”

“Where’s my baseball shirt?” Cordell asked when the customer left.

“You should have seen your face when you saw that book,” Dina said, laughing, then mocked the open-mouth look. “Wish I had a camera.”

She was behind the desk scribbling in the red-covered ledger.

“Where’d you get that book?”

“How did you get here anyway?” she said.

In a theatrical display she covered her eyes with one hand and with the other flipped the pages, pointed and said, “That one.”

“The Mercedes. Uncle took the truck so I couldn’t bring much stuff,” he said, studying the “Seminole Fisherman” print hanging on the wall under track lighting. In her father’s graceful and elegant style, the Seminole is squatting in profile, poised in intense concentration, gripping a long, slender sharply-barbed spear. Delicate, wispy palmetto is low on the foreground. The figure is dressed in a purplish-blue turban with flamingo feathers, which match his psychedelic-looking shirt. In the background three palms sway in a gulf breeze. A pair of slanted, curved fish swim away from the viewer but into the path of the fisherman’s patient gaze. There’s the unmistakable signature in the lower right corner in angular, fluid script that incorporates a small feather: Quicksand, 1967, it read. Jerome died from an accidental gunshot injury later that same year when Dina was 5. “Seminole Fisherman” was his last completed painting. In the 18 years since, he had become one of the most famous Indian artists in the world, certainly in Oklahoma, where museum curators, collectors and art historians referred to the “Quicksand style.” She still called him “Daddy.” It struck Cordell that this was the reproduction of the original he and Dina had taken to Tulsa earlier that summer to show buyers who owned an ancient, million-dollar Brookside home. The couple surveyed the painting, which Cordell had propped on their kitchen island under an overhanging lamp, with their hands cupping their chins, mumbling to each other, until ultimately deciding against the \$35,000 price tag. Cordell helped wrap it up and stow it in the trunk of her uncle’s Corvette. The original was now hidden somewhere back at their house. All around the walls of the Gallery were other limited-edition framed prints and smaller originals by Jerome, and woodcarvings and bronzes of stickball players, owls and horseheads perched on pedestals.

Dina went to see if he was serious about the Mercedes and he followed her down the hall. She had been an athletic high school cheerleader and was still toned with taught thighs and muscled calves. She parted the curtain they had hung on nails the previous day. The Mercedes crouched in back like a jungle cat next to a beige Dempsey Dumpster, shadows swirling on the glassy maroon hood. The three-pointed gold emblem glowed in its silver ring.

“Mom let you take it? That’s good,” Dina said, running her fingers through his hair, then pinching his butt. He playfully swatted her hand but had been hoping she would do that.

He helped her draw drapes and shut and lock doors and flip the “Open” signs to “Closed.” She had her sale for the day.

She stripped her sweater. “Here’s your shirt,” she said.

They had been banished to the Gallery after Peggy walked in on them in Dina’s bedroom at her house. Cordell had looked around just in time to see her startled expression and watch her turn and leave the room with a hand hiding her face. Dina pulled the quilt over her head. Only Cordell had been left exposed. Later mother and daughter had a “discussion” and a day later they began moving their stuff into the Gallery, a squat brick house that had been remodeled and rezoned commercial/residential. The sign in front said “Quicksand Gallery.” In the back bedroom, they had lain a mattress on unopened boxes of gilded leather art books about her father, on which they now lay. Now that Women’s Studies at Northeastern was on the backburner, she could run the Gallery and give Peggy

time to work on another book.

While they did it he concentrated on the big framed photograph of Ricky in the center of the wall above the bed. Dina was a few months away from marrying him when he was killed in a wreck with an 18-wheeler on an icy interstate highway. Dina told Cordell that there had been no viewing at the funeral. In the photo Ricky's straight sandy-blonde hair feathered in the middle and fell to the shoulders of a powder-blue tux that matched his eyes. A pink boutonniere dotted the left lapel. His lips were parted in a confident half-smile that left a dimpled streak from cheekbone to jutting jaw, and he appeared as if he might have just begun to acknowledge someone with a cool upward nod of his chin. Cordell thought he looked much older than a teenager; the aquiline nose lent a regal bearing as if he were a famous British rock guitarist or film star. His Adam's apple wasn't overly prominent but pronounced in a way that highlighted a muscular, lean neck like a pro wrestler in the lanky, long-haired Eric Von Erich vein. The picture was one of the first things she had brought from the house, where it had stood atop her bookcase in the bedroom. Cordell felt like he had seen it every day for the past few months.

At night as they lay in bed, Dina talked about him in a reverential near-whisper, and even called him Ricky once. She said she was sorry for that right off, but Cordell didn't mind. Her voice always got quiet and serious, there in the dark, unless the topic was something crazy Ricky had done, like a double backflip off Big Daddy. They would lay so close he could feel puffs of air on his face when she talked and absentmindedly picked at his sparse chest hair. She never talked about him in the daytime, only at night in bed.

"Was he ever mean?" Cordell asked once.

"Never. Not even when he got drunk," she said.

Over a series of nights he learned that Ricky liked to work on hot rods, and raced a car Friday nights at Thunderbird Speedway. He was from the small town of Keefton. They had met at a Stevie Ray concert in Tulsa. He proposed on a knee at Honor Heights Park when the azaleas were blooming. He hunted deer and fished for catfish. He liked pinball and playing the drums. He would sing “Waiting for a Girl Like You” to her.

Cordell took his eyes off the portrait and watched the pulse on her neck thrum as they tried something from the book called the “Apache Twist,” which he recognized as the contorted maneuver he had seen earlier. Untwisted, he went into the bathroom to shower and turned his back to the mirror, craning his neck to check her “cat scratches.” Angry red marks angled from his backbone across both shoulders. He faced the mirror and struck a few poses, practicing his Ricky look. He tilted up his chin slightly and said, “What’s up?” a couple times in a deep bass. It didn’t work. His dark hair was short and curly, he had a pug nose, oversized ears from a habit of twisting them when he was a kid, and was skinny. He had no rear to speak of - a girl at school told him that rather than an ass, he had a hole in his back.

When he came out of the bathroom Dina said, “Are you talking to yourself?”

“No. I was talking to the mirror. Are you giving us the same amount?”

She was watering two potted ferns along the window sill. She had named them Cordell and Randy. Randy was her gay friend that Cordell was jealous of to the extent that Cordell snuffed cigarettes and poured beer in the Randy plant to kill it or at least stunt its growth because it was outgrowing the Cordell plant and he couldn’t stand it. When Dina discovered this she laughed so hard she pooted, and as usual went around

telling everyone the story.

Cordell sat back down on the bed and changed into his workout clothes.

“Come right back after practice,” she said. “We need to go out and bring back some more stuff.”

“Do you just want to take me, then?”

“No, no. I need to open back up.”

She kissed him before he left, saying he looked cute in his baseball outfit. Ricky was always “handsome.”

The clouds had turned oily gray and the wind rattled the antennae that raised automatically when he turned the key. He drove toward the school holding the wheel 10 and 2 like in driver’s ed, signaled way in advance, and stopped before the imaginary crosswalk at the intersections that didn’t have them, which was one of the reasons he flunked his first driver’s test. He took it in the Corvette, and knew he was going to fail when he goosed it taking off, snapping the trooper’s head back and jamming his Smokey Bear hat down over his face. He wondered how teammates would react when they saw him driving the Mercedes, or anything for that matter. He was always riding the bus, or getting rides home after practice until he’d moved in with Dina. He’d known her cousin, Chris, since they were kids in Knothole baseball. That summer they went to Lake Tenkiller checking out the cliffs, three or four carloads of them. They were at Big Daddy. The other two popular cliffs farther up the inlet were Twisted Sister and Yer Momma. But Big Daddy was the highest and most hellacious, and Cordell had never worked himself up to jump off of it, as he had the other two. You climbed over a locked gate to

get to it, and ignored the warning sign about how many people had been killed there in jumping-diving incidents. Their friend Fat Jack had just jumped. Fighting vertigo, Cordell peered over the edge as Jackie fell knife straight with his hair flying above him, hands covering his crotch. Just before he reached the surface he drew his knees to his chest and struck with an explosion like a muffled cannon shot, a heavy thump! that sprayed up a white fountain of water which hung still at its apex then splashed back down. No way, Cordell thought again, turning to go back to the car. Chris, who had been watching with him, grabbed a fistful of Cordell's shirt, yanked and leapt. Flying through the air, they both yelled, windmilling their arms and scissoring their legs. It seemed that he would never hit, and when he did an icy pain shot up his leg at the ankle. After emerging from the cold bottom into the sunlight gasping for air and dog-paddling to the rocks, he found that he couldn't put weight on his foot.

Chris helped him back up the arduous route - made doubly precarious by his injury - and Dina, who watched it all, slung his arm around her shoulder and led him, hopping, to her Ramcharger, released the tailgate and helped him into the back. She scooped ice from the cooler into a plastic bag and rested it on his swollen ankle. She told him she'd had dozens of sprains from cheerleading, and that it would be OK. Her breasts strained out while she bent over and applied the ice while everyone yelled and splashed at the cliff. He saw Chris and Jackie jump over again. He had always seen Dina around, sometimes at their games in years past but she had never paid much attention to him. Back then, he was probably in junior high and she was already in college. She told him he should ride back to town with her instead of climbing back into Chris's car. At home, she helped him out of the truck, her hair silky under his arm around her shoulder, and him leaning on her

harder than needed. Sitting on a stool with his foot between her legs, she carefully took off his sock and shoe and wrapped his ankle in flesh-colored gauze, whipping it over and up and around his foot several times. Looking down, her dark hair had fallen around her face. She squeezed and asked him if it was too tight then propped his leg on a pillow on the stool and set a fresh bag of ice on the wrap. He watched her breasts again. She kissed him on the cheek. He felt like a king. No one had ever shown him so much attention before - maybe a nurse when he'd twisted his knee when he was a kid.

After that, they were joined at the hip. All his time was free after baseball season until school and there were no games to cover for the paper. He went with her every day to the Gallery, to Tulsa to sell art, camping, grocery shopping, fishing at Hopewell Park, where she caught a bass she didn't know how to clean. At Safeway, she went up and down the aisles indiscriminately throwing things into the cart, barely looking at items twice. He snuck into bars with her and if he got ID'd he sit out in the truck and wait on her. One day they went to his grandparents' house in the country and he grabbed a bunch of clothes and stuffed them in a garbage bag. His grandma thought it was a great idea.

"There's nothing out here for him anyway," she'd said, and helped him pack as if he were moving overseas instead of 15 miles on the other side of the county.

At first, they'd crash anywhere in the big house: in the library on the thick carpet if they were reading to each other, in her sister's room upstairs if they were watching movies, by the fireplace in the den, in the game room where they shot pool all night. Peggy never questioned anything until walking in on them that night. They had fallen asleep on the big lounge chairs by the pool while gazing for shooting stars and went into her bedroom for the first time. He wasn't a virgin, but may as well have been. The only

other time he'd been drunk and the girl kept crying afterwards for no apparent reason. Not sobbing uncontrollably, but steady sniffing and wiping tears with her jacket cuff. They had parked on a dirt road in Uncle's pickup and managed the act there on the seat. He remembered handing the girl tissue as he drove her home, but it was probably square napkins from a McDonald's sack. It was memorable for all the wrong reasons.

Some players were milling around in the parking lot bundled up in jackets, hopping to keep warm, when they saw him pull into the lot outside the gym. He heard their centerfielder Clyde say, "Is that Candyfire?"

"No way!"

"Light my fire, Candyfire!" Clyde yelled, and gave him the Hendrix Salute, pumping his fist with the index and pinky fingers extended.

"Hendrix!" the others yelled, then yapped like hounds. Their team's mascot was the Bulldog. Their field was the Dawg Pound. Their chant was "Bow-wow-wow yippy-yo yippy-yay."

With the sharp, biting wind it was too cold outside so they practiced in the gym where batting nets and the pitching machine had been set up on the concourse. It would be a fairly easy practice, lounging around waiting to hit while the wrestlers, wearing layers of hooded sweats, ran laps. Each time they went by their backs were even more stained with perspiration. On the shiny honey-yellow parquet below, boys basketballers scrimmaged, punctuated by coaches' whistles, shouts and squeaking of shoes. A sneering cockeyed bulldog wearing a spiked collar was painted at midcourt. Nearby, the pitching machine's tires whirled and thumped when the ball shot out, and there was either the loud whanging

of aluminum if a batter connected, or a soft shuffling if the green nets caught it. Nearing his turn, Cordell took off his shirt to change into a tanktop.

“Goddam, what happened to your back!” Clyde shouted, then instantly there was a gaggle of players hustling over to look.

Cordell stopped midway through pulling down his tank so they could all get a look. He said he scraped it helping his grandpa cut wood.

“Bullshit. Look like some bitch tore your ass up!” Clyde said, and went stomping off laughing, telling everyone. “Whoo hoo! Pussy be tearing him up!”

Clyde stuck his black bat between his legs, caressing it, hopping along acting like he was whipping a galloping horse. Everyone laughed and pointed at him.

After Cordell took his swings, practice was cut short when the athletic director showed up saying there was a storm moving in and everyone needed to get home, they were closing the gym. Clyde was the first one to ask him for a ride home, issuing the Hendrix Salute as they pulled out, happy as hell to be riding in the Benz. It began to drizzle rain and turned dark after he dropped him off on 17th Street. He had to stop at a convenience store and fiddle with dashboard knobs and wheels to find controls to the lights, heater and wipers. On the way to the Gallery the wind blew so hard it buffeted the car. Unlike his grandpa’s Buick, which had a steering wheel that swung wildly back and forth, just a slight nudge would turn the Mercedes.

Dina was at the window wearing sweats and another one of his baseball shirts, smoking a Virginia Slim when came into the bedroom. She must be drinking beer or worried about something, Cordell thought.

“I thought you went back and left me here,” she said, tapping ash into a sun-bleached white turtle shell.

“They let us go early. I took someone home.”

He looked at her carefully but she hadn’t been drinking.

“It’s supposed to sleet or some shit,” she said. “Maybe we shouldn’t go. I called Mom.”

They stretched out on the bed and Dina picked up her Gloria Steinem book from the lamp table. The TV was on, but the sound off. A redheaded weatherman was pointing with a wand of some sort to a radar image that had a dotted sweeping line like the second hand on a watch. Every time the line made a revolution the image shifted slightly. Concentric lines formed a bull’s-eye on Muskogee County. Dina rubbed his back and he flinched. He took off his shirt to show her.

“Did I do that? I’m sorry,” she said in her baby voice, and kissed up and down the abrasions. They started doing it again and he was glad it was regular this time as the Apache Twist felt kind of stupid. Maybe they hadn’t done it right. She fell asleep as if drugged as soon as they finished, regular as medicine, and he got up and ate a cold pizza slice standing in the kitchen, washing it down with Mountain Dew. He lay down beside her listening to the wind gust and the rain patter and fell asleep too. He dreamt of white wolves howling under pink sunlight in the Arctic, and then they were scratching at the window.

As he awoke the scratching became sleet pecking at the glass. He raised up on an elbow, feeling like he was still dreaming, but Dina snoring lightly beside him snapped him out of

it. A strand of her hair had hooked over her mouth and drew in and out. Wind blew hard suddenly, delivering a spray that slashed across the windows and showered the roof. The lamp in the corner and the kitchen light both flickered out and the fridge motor clattered and went silent. The radio quit and only when it stopped did he realize that it had been on. Thunder shook the house and Dina woke up. She hugged him tight, they lay quiet, listening to sounds that came plainly: gusts soaring through trees; branches scraping the house; ice crunching as a car sped by on the street outside the window - too fast, it seemed. Cordell heard her swallow. His eyes adjusted and began to make out the form of the curtains, the TV, the picture frame above the bed. The walls seemed to contract and crack ever so often, and over all this came a distant deep rattling like a slow drumroll. He felt her sigh as his arm rose and fell on her back. He was about to ask her how long she thought it would last when she sniffled heavily as if she was catching a cold and was congested. It took a moment to realize she had been crying. It alarmed him; he had never seen her cry. She was always in charge, the center of attention, calling all the shots.

“It’s OK,” he said, touching her shoulder, but his voice sounded loud and like a lie in the silence. She shook her head. He wondered what he had done to make her cry. He rubbed inside her thigh and tickled the spot behind her ear, beginning the things that usually got her going, but she just lay there with her face in the covers.

“What’s wrong?” he said in a conspirative hushed tone.

She shook her head.

“Come on,” he said.

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said, patting him on the back.

This angered him, but he held it in, propped himself on an elbow and tried to meet her

eyes. She was talking out the side of her mouth, face still buried in blankets. He leaned and kissed her on the cheek, tasted the salt in her tears, smelled the cigarette smoke in her hair.

“It’s the ice and all, the winter, I never can handle it.”

“What about it?”

“Ricky,” she said.

“Yeah?”

Sleet raked the glass again. He waited for her to continue. She turned to face him and again her mouth was near his ear.

“It’s Ricky,” she said quietly, as if Ricky was close enough to overhear. “It was me he was on his way to see when he wrecked. Sideswiped by the semi. It was a night like this.”

He was glad it wasn’t something he had done. Impulsively he looked up at the photo, but all he could make out was the frame and a dull shine around the middle of the glass.

“I told him not to come that day. Even if he made it out of town he wouldn’t have made it up all the hills and curves to the house.”

Her voice had evened out and she had quit crying, which relieved him. She seemed to feel better the more she talked about it. She’d never cried about Ricky before in front of him and he sensed it came from some part of her she’d never delved.

“You know Ricky, he wouldn’t listen. Bullheaded. I kept waiting and waiting and measured out the time that it would take him, even with him going way slow, till it was long past and I called his house. Their phone was out. The storm. I’m glad you don’t mind me telling you this.”

She pecked him on the cheek again. It took a second to realize the last sentence had

nothing to do with the story. He was picturing Ricky in sunglasses in a throaty fire-engine red T-Bird, blond hair flapping out the window even though it was winter, racing through snow and ice, professionally veering in and out of 18-wheelers.

“Me and Mom went to the wrecker yard to see the car. Something I had to do that I wish I hadn’t of now.”

In the resigned sigh that followed Cordell thought he heard a tone of submission. She got up and sparked another cigarette at the window and they shared it. He felt sorry for her, wished he could make her forget it all or something. Like he felt the time she caught a bad cold, and he wished he could have been sick for her, waiting on her around the clock, boiling soup, spooning her cough syrup, massaging her feet, reading her Stephen King. She lighted a candle and set it on the sill; the orange flame flapped then settled to a straight line. They got back under the covers. He tried to make her forget.

They awoke when the sun, shattering off all the ice and snow, gushed in, lacquered the room with light. Their breath steamed in front of them because the furnace had shut off with the electricity. They dressed and went outside, Dina wearing his sunglasses and Cordell squinting. He looked all around, shielding his eyes, trying to take it all in at once. The sun glared in the bright blue sky and fat icicles descended from the eaves on the east side of the house, a dozen or so, all in a line, sharp as picks at their bottoms. Smaller ones hung like rows of fangs from street signs. Ice was thick on the roads, in parts seemingly frozen mid-splash, like sculpture, and coated everything: branches, power lines, wires. The ice magnified these objects slightly, dazzling the eye. A pickup rumbled by, tire chains slapping a rhythm. The wind gusted and flakes flew off the trees and drifted

around them, like someone had shaken a desk paperweight. Dina pointed, said look. A cardinal, siren red against all the snow and ice, chattered a quick series of calls inside an evergreen, loud and piercing in the frozen air. It looked like it had a Mohawk hair-do with its swooped-back crest. It fluttered and hopped to a lower branch, knocking a little pile of snow onto its crown. The bird let it sit there until rattling its head fiercely, shaking it off. They both laughed. "Cute little thing," she said, and threw a snowball at Cordell, which he ducked.

Ricky's photograph eventually came down; he couldn't remember exactly when, but one night that spring he realized it wasn't there. Dina and Randy were sitting cross-legged in front of the TV watching a rerun of "Soap," their favorite show. Randy needed glasses and had to sit close and Dina liked watching it with him so she could reach over and punch him on the arm playfully or slap his leg when something was funny. Cordell had softened on Randy after a time. He did a lot of things for them, ran errands, and watched the Gallery if Dina needed him. At least he was someone he could talk books with. Cordell was on the bed finishing the real Fountainhead, finally, under lamplight. It had taken months. The heroine's sporty roadster is smashed in an explosion, and described, and instantly Cordell thought of Ricky, of his demolished car at the salvage yard. He looked up for the photo. It wasn't on the wall behind the bed, or on the bookcase. He looked in both bathrooms, and all around the room, even in the closet. He was a breath away from asking her about it when on the show a woman appeared at a dance in obvious disguise, wearing a fedora and a handlebar moustache, and Dina and Randy laughed, and

she looked back at him, smiling, eyes sparkling from the screen reflection. She seemed in such a warm mood. He decided not to bother her with the question then, or ever. He was sure she had put it away somewhere safe.

GRANDPA OLD BULL

Lisa tip-toed to grab the next-highest knot and began to swing, dipping nearly to the surface before rising up and over the narrow but deep river, which glittered musically in the sun. When the rope reached its apex, she hung frozen for a moment before releasing and dropping knife-straight, hair flying above her like a shroud, toes stabbed at the river. Slowly, she bent at the waist and vanished into the water with a small splash and an aquatic thunk! followed by spreading rings as if a big fish had tailfanned the surface. Jerome watched her from the high bank, scanning to predict where she'd emerge, but she sprung up directly in front of him, whipping her hair and creating a mist that briefly caught the colors of the spectrum before crumbling.

They had just finished playing in an all-Indian co-ed softball tournament near Little Kansas. The team – players, wives, girlfriends, friends, relatives and children – was camped along the Illinois River at a place where someone knew there was a good rope swing hanging from a tree along the bank. They had been knocked out of the tournament when Jerome, dizzied from beer, overthrew first base, hitting a woman in the bleachers as the winning run scored. Lisa of course outshined him again by slugging two home runs and making a diving catch in center. Since meeting the previous semester of college she had established dominance in tennis, golf, softball, basketball and diving, but Jerome bested her in arm wrestling, typing speed, snooker, drawing and putt-putt golf.

They had both taken turns on the swing with Jerome merely dropping off the rope into the water while Lisa did gainers and twists and even some sort of reverse-type dive. They were toweling off as fishinghawks skimmed the sparkling river like curved darts when Lisa said she wanted to go see her aunt and grandpa, who had been sick. Jerome

was surprised; he didn't know she had relatives living in the eastern part of the state since she was from the other side of Oklahoma City.

"Coming out here the roads started to look familiar," she said. "Grandpa took us to play volleyball once up by that college."

They told everybody they'd be back in a couple of hours and took the narrow road back to the main highway – a crazy tree-lined stretch of repeated blind curves that followed the course of the river, which was crowded with canoeists, rafters and fishermen that time of year. They drove it slowly, creating a small traffic jam behind them, with Lisa constantly craning her neck, looking up hillside driveways. Scissortails looked down on them from the highline wires, tailfeathers spread like peace signs. Finally she spotted it and Jerome turned onto a grassy lane, which led up a small hill to a neat, two-story, green-trimmed house with a chicken coop and garden in the back. A woman wearing pink curlers met them at the door.

"Well, Lisa, what on earth?"

They hugged and went inside and Jerome looked for a resemblance between the two. Although Linda was almost as tall as Jerome and big-boned – Lisa was considerably shorter – they shared the same light-brown skin tone and high, prominent forehead. Linda was a sister of Lisa's father, Leonard.

Linda brought glasses of iced tea into the living room.

"So," Linda said, "you guys are camping out down here?"

"We were playing ball and we all stopped at the river to cool off," Lisa said.

Lisa told her that she was attending college nearby, where she met Jerome in a Native American art class.

“How’s grandpa doing?” Lisa said.

“About the same,” Linda said. “I gave him his foot massage just a while ago. Come on, let’s see if he’s awake.”

Jerome stayed in the front room with Linda’s husband, Lloyd, who was watching golf on TV. Jerome heard Lisa say, “Hi, grandpa.”

While they were gone Jerome looked at their collection of Indian artwork. There were dozens of framed original paintings on the walls and marble sculptures on pedestals in the hallways. It looked like a mini-museum. He was looking at a oil painting of an Indian atop a bucking bull when he was distracted by a shrill noise that said in a questioning tone, “Cuppa coffee?”

“That’s Pretty Boy Floyd,” Lloyd said. “Old Bull likes to hear him sing. Usually we keep him in the den or hang him outside. He knows how to say ‘Cup of coffee.’ ”

“I thought I was hearing things,” Jerome said, then noticed the framed photograph on the wall. “Who’s this?”

“That’s Mr. Old Bull.”

“Lisa’s grandpa?”

“That’s him.”

“He played baseball?”

Lloyd laughed. “Baseball, football, basketball, golf, Olympic hurdler. You name it.”

Jerome tried to make out the insignia on the jersey and cap.

“What’s ‘H’ stand for?”

“Haskell.”

In the picture Old Bull was on one knee with a baseball bat and glove in front of him.

He was grinning broadly, with the bill of his cap angled up to thwart shadow. It revealed a strong, high forehead. Gripping five baseballs in one hand, he had a thick neck and muscled forearms, but was lean and wiry. Like a lot of old photographs, it had the year it was taken scrawled in the scalloped, bottom-right corner: 1920. Jerome tallied it up: Old Bull had to be at least 87 years old. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized he had read something on him in a book or saw him in a documentary a few years back. Ideas for an English Comp assignment (write about Someone Famous you know) were going through his mind. That and pure befuddlement that Lisa had never said a word about him, but then again he had never asked.

“If you think that’s something, come here,” Lloyd said.

Jerome followed him down short steps into a den.

Lloyd flicked on a light. “Look at these.”

In every corner of the den were polished, gold-gleaming trophies from various sports. The trophies were old and had a solid, brassy look to them, mounted on a thick, wooden bases. Little figurines atop the trophies depicted participation in basketball, football, baseball, golf and track. There was another series of black-and-white photos showing football players.

“Where are their helmets?”

“Helmets?” Lloyd spat out.

All along one wall were framed pictures, medals, certificates and puffy red and blue bunting-type ribbons. Jerome read:

“In honor of his record-breaking achievements in athletics both amateur and professional and in recognition of his outstanding character on and off the playing field,

Jamison Old Bull is hereby inducted into the Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame, this 26th day of October, 1966."

Jerome prowled the room reading all the inscriptions. There was an ancient catcher's mitt in a Plexiglas box, intercrossing wooden golf clubs hung along one wall, and an oblong old Rawlings football resting in a silver trophy cup bearing numerous autographs in faded, loopy script proclaiming a championship in the Big Six Conference.

Jerome read that Old Bull also was a member of the Indian Athletic Hall of Fame, the Haskell Junior College Hall of Fame and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Hall of Fame.

One trophy read:

"Most Valuable Player 1926, Chattanooga League, Jamison Old Bull, Richmond Braves."

Lisa had never said anything about him, Jerome thought, still incredulous over the fact. If anyone in his family had accomplished such feats he would have been reminding her constantly. But from his own on-field exploits it was painfully obvious he had no Olympic-type bloodlines.

Lloyd put on a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket and fumbled around in a drawer, pulling out a yellowed paperback from a zippered bag. He thumbed through it and handed it to Jerome. It was a "Ripley's Believe it or Not" book. Jerome read the bold caption:

"ON NOV. 22, 1920, QUARTERBACK RANDALL OLD BULL AND WIDE RECEIVER JAMISON OLD BULL TEAMED UP FOR AN 85-YARD TOUCHDOWN RECEPTION AS TINY HASKELL INDIAN COLLEGE UPSET NO. 1-RANKED YALE UNIVERSITY 7-6. IT WAS THE LONGEST BROTHER-TO-BROTHER PASS

PLAY IN FOOTBALL HISTORY!”

An artist had drawn a picture of a player throwing and a player catching a football in two separate frames. Underneath were two sketched likenesses of the brothers. Jerome saw the distinct foreheads, floored that Old Bull had also had an athletic brother.

After Jerome had looked over all the mementos in the den, they went back into the living room, where Lisa had spread out her beadwork on a coffee table and Linda was pawing through it.

Jerome asked them how Old Bull was doing.

“He talked to me a little while,” Lisa said. “I told him we were playing softball and he wanted to know if we won.”

Jerome saw Lisa in a new light. She was always the best female on their co-ed team and she could handle her own on the basketball court without even trying while Jerome usually got all worked up and in a huff, bouncing the ball out of bounds off his feet. He tried golf once but actually had to quit after the third hole after losing all 12 of his balls in the woods, pond and tall grass. He wondered if they had a kid together would he be an athlete like her or more of a doodler like him. Jerome asked to meet him.

In the mentholatum-smelling bedroom, Old Bull lay against a big wooden headboard, fat yellowed pillow propped behind his back. His eyes were closed and for a scary second Jerome thought he was dead. His face was deeply creased and his silver hair was separated into two long braids that ran down his chest. An aquarium in the corner made a comforting gurgling sound and threw watery shadows across his figure, while tiny angular neon fish darted corner to corner or shot to the surface. Pretty Boy Floyd began

chirping, spun around twice on one leg and bobbed up and down, a yellow blur of motion. Then he tucked his head under a wing and grew silent.

Old Bull's eyes snapped open and locked on Jerome, who stood with Lisa at the foot of the bed.

"How's the farmin'?" he barked at Jerome, unsmiling.

Jerome didn't know what to think and looked at Linda, who mouthed the words, "It's OK."

"Pretty good," Jerome stammered, trying to think of something sensible. "The corn about dried up but we got that good rain last week."

This seemed to satisfy Old Bull, who nodded in response, then looked at Lisa.

"When did you get here?" Old Bull said.

"Just a few minutes ago," Lisa answered. "Remember, you asked if we won or not."

"Who won?" Old Bull demanded.

"We did," Jerome said. "Lisa hit a home run and we won."

"Got damned right!" the old man said forcefully.

Jerome saw Julie's eyes welling. She kneeled next to her grandpa, put her hands over his. Old Bull closed his eyes.

"Remember Hawaii?" Lisa asked.

When Lisa was little Old Bull coached their fast pitch softball team and they flew to Honolulu and beat a team of all stars.

"Thirteen to two. You were the MVP," Old Bull said, and smiled, eyes shut. His chest rose and fell.

He had fallen asleep, gently snoring, a wisp of hair in the corner of his mouth.

Lloyd left briefly and returned with a glossy calendar. He opened it to August. There was Old Bull again, this time in his Haskell football uniform. The captioned summarize his career – including the Ripley’s record – and gave his nickname: “Big Skee.”

Linda bought beaded hair barrettes and a bracelet from Lisa so she would have spending money at school. While they chatted Lloyd returned from his garden with a paper sack. Inside were plump Jalapeño peppers, green peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers.

They drove silently on the way back to the campsite, the river occasionally flashing milky green between dense stands of oak and catclaw thornscrub. To their east was the notorious Big Momma cliff that had a death-toll sign that updated every summer from show-offs and drunks trying to dive off into Lake Tenkiller without actually knowing how. There were also the cliffs Big Daddy and Pure Hell. Jerome jumped from Pure Hell once and it seemed like it took an hour to resurface, choking and spewing water, lungs scorching.

“Hey Lisa. How come you never told me your grandpa was such an athlete?”

“I don’t know.”

“You didn’t think I’d be interested?”

“Oh, that was a long time ago. He’s just my grandpa to me.”

When they reached camp people were still swimming and charcoaling burgers. Some players were standing around in a circle drinking beer and smoking a joint. Getting out of the car with the calendar, he got a big whiff of it mixed with wood smoke. Someone was

cracking a joke about a guy who was always saying he had “a little Indian in him.”

“I told him, ‘Well, let’s see him, then. Maybe we’re related.’”

Jerome laughed along with everyone, then said “Hey, look at this. This is Lisa’s grandpa,” he said, handing off the calendar to the first person who stuck his hand out. It was passed around and everyone read it.

Someone joked: “Hey, Jerome, no wonder she plays better than you.” They all laughed.

As the sun sank, Old Bull was the basis for much conversation. People would stand looking, reading the calendar, then nod or point in Lisa’s direction. Lisa was polite and answered all their questions and even took one last swim. Finally, kids were gathered, trash picked up and fires put out and the cars formed a caravan for the drive back to Muskogee.

On the way home, Lisa cried.

“He only remembers me as a little kid,” she said, looking out the window.

Jerome wrote the following for his paper:

“On June 12, 1924, Jamison Old Bull won a gold medal in the 110-meter intermediate hurdles with a time of 12.25 in the Paris Olympics. Three years later, the full-blood Arapaho Indian from Calumet, Okla., became the starting center fielder for the New York Yankees, and led the league in hitting with a .347 batting average. He was the first Native American to play in a World Series and later coached generations of Indian athletes at Haskell Junior College. He played on a highly popular barnstorming basketball team

called the “Amazing Redskins” across the Midwest and East Coast that drew crowds of thousands. But Mr. Old Bull, who currently lives in northeastern Oklahoma, remembers none of this. He’s suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.”

Two weeks later Linda called and told Lisa that Old Bull had been admitted to the Indian hospital in Tahlequah. It was on a Friday and since Jerome had to travel through Tahlequah on the way to watch his nephew play football, they made plans to drop Lisa off at the clinic while he would rejoin them later.

“Tell Lloyd and Linda I’ll see them in a couple of hours. Tell them I have to be in Stilwell in 30 minutes,” Jerome told Lisa as they sat in the car outside ICU. “It’s his last game of the year and I promised him.”

He kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be back around midnight. I’m sure he’s going to be all right.”

Lisa opened her beadwork box and took out the medallion she was going to give to Old Bull. The little glass beads winked, ocean blue and orange in a starburst design.

Jerome drove to the game. Stilwell’s mascot was the “Indians.” The team was led onto the field by a galloping, war-painted white horse with a painted-up “brave” riding it. They raced to the 50-yard line where the horse reared on its hind legs and whinnied. When they came down they turned and faced the sideline and the rider slammed a spear into the turf and shook his fist at the visiting team. The crowd screamed wildly.

Jerome scanned the Stilwell roster for Cherokee names. There were plenty of them: Sixkiller, Mankiller, White Killer, Killer, Vann, White Hater, Cabbage Head, Mouse,

Cheater, Studi. His nephew hurt his ankle in the first quarter on a reverse after a someone rolled onto it on a tackle and had to miss most of the game, so Jerome drove back to the hospital as fast as he could.

Driving around looking for a place to park, he saw Lisa sitting on a bench near the main entrance. Lisa saw his car almost at the same time and got up to meet him, carrying her beadwork. She opened the door and got in.

“What’s up?” Jerome said.

Lisa didn’t answer, holding back tears. Jerome knew in his heart what had happened. He put the car in park. Before he could say anything, she blurted out, “My grandpa died.”

Tears streamed out of her and she sobbed violently, and pulled Jerome closer to her; he smelled the damp clay of her makeup. The harder she cried, the harder she squeezed. He pulled her face tight against his, and their tears mixed. Jerome couldn’t think of anything to say so he just let her cry. She cried and squeezed and sobbed – a low, anguished wailing. When she was empty, the tears came again, the cycle was repeated. The rhythmic, wrenching sobbing was the saddest music he had ever heard, and he never forgot the piercing, bitter tears on his tongue.

The funeral was scheduled for midweek. Jerome arranged to be off work and to miss school. The explanation he gave both times was that his grandpa had died. One professor told him, “Sorry to hear that, son.”

Services were to be held at a small Methodist church outside of Watonga. As they drove, they left the hilly, green landscape of northeastern Oklahoma and slipped into the

central and western portions of the state, a flatter land of sweeping, red-earthen plains and sprawling, shallow rivers.

Jerome had never been that far west in the state before and misjudged the distance. The church was located just off a state highway near the interstate exit ramp and they pulled into the grassy parking lot, which was nearly full. They were late and Jerome stayed in the car to put on a dress shirt and shoes but before he was finished Lisa and her mother came up to the car. People were already leaving the church.

Apparently these services were for anyone who wished to attend, such as Old Bull's ex-teammates, friends or players. Hundreds of people showed up from across the country and Canada, as Old Bull had went on to coach generations of athletes both at Haskell and in California and also in the Yankees organization. But the services Jerome and Lisa would be going to were for family and relatives only.

They drove into Watonga, running out of gas as soon as they pulled up to the pump. He refilled and Lisa directed him out of town and onto a dirt road. After crossing an old iron bridge Jerome saw cars parked in a field to the east of a small, A-framed wooden house and saw more cars behind him.

"What's this?" he said. "I thought we were going to a cemetery."

"This is the cemetery," Lisa said.

Old Bull was to be buried next to his wife on their land given to his parents after the Southern Arapaho had been forced into western Indian Territory. Unlike some other descendants, Old Bull had refused to sell although there had been many offers from wheat farmers in the region. Finally, after decades, they had quit asking and were forced to lease.

Lisa and Jerome were in a long line of cars now and after crossing a cattle guard, rattled up into the yard. Lisa's mother, Marilyn, came out of the house and flagged them down.

"Come on, Lisa, hurry," she said.

Lisa got out and the two walked down an old pasture trail to the mourners huddled under a rainbow-colored canopy. Jerome saw Lisa's father, Leonard, signaling him to park near the house.

"This is Jamison, Lisa's brother," Leonard said, motioning toward a teenager swinging a golf club.

Jamison wore camouflage pants and black rock-climbing boots. He was shirtless and had a dip of snuff bulging in his bottom lip.

"Hey, you play golf?" Jamison said.

"I've swung a few clubs," Jerome said. "But I'm just a Sunday duffer."

"Want to hit some balls?"

Jerome looked around, at the burial services proceeding at the gravesite, and down at his own dress pants and shoes, which seemed garish compared to what the father and son were wearing.

"I don't think so. Not right now."

Jamison teed up in front of the car, waggled his driver and drove the ball toward the South Canadian River, distinguished by clusters of cottonwoods, tops shaking in the breeze, running along the banks. The ball rocketed off the tee and climbed and climbed until Jerome nearly lost sight of it in the clouds. When it reached its apex, the ball seemed to hover a couple of seconds, then began a gentle, forward fall. When it returned to earth,

around 350 yards later, it took three big, running hops and rolled and rolled. Jerome was impressed; he would have been lucky to hit it half as far and half as straight.

Leonard shared drinks from his bottle of Old Crow. Jerome heard snatches of a low, mournful song, brought to his ears on gusts of wind. He presumed it was Arapaho.

Jamison continued to angrily smash balls toward the river, but neither father nor son made a move to join the service, which Jerome thought odd. But it was plain to see that they had dug the grave because their shoes had red dirt and mud on them and muddy shovels leaned against the house. Jerome excused himself to join Lisa at the gravesite.

The second-hand still swept on Old Bull's gold watch as he lay in his casket, arms folded neatly around his midsection, wiry coarse hair springing from the knuckles on his big athlete's hands. Lisa's medallion lay on his chest, contrasting brightly with the grey single-breasted suit and lavender satin of the coffin. Jerome sat next to Lisa and held her arm. She dabbed at her eyes with pink tissue; she had already gotten most of the crying out back home. The preacher delivered the service in Arapaho and Jerome could only discern a few English words, such as "Boeing," "jet engines" and "Gethsemane."

Later Marilyn told Jerome that the pastor had commented that although Old Bull had fought in the Argonne Forest in World War I, he returned to a country that actually denied him the right to vote. Then he'd worked in Wichita building killing planes for the next big war before being buried on land that wasn't his native country, as his tribe was forced to relocate there by the government. But the preacher said Old Bull had held no grudges and went on to use athletics to excel in the larger world and help other Indian athletes.

After it was over Jerome and Lisa stayed until all the cars were gone, then they made plans for an upcoming visit.

“Under better circumstances,” Jerome told Leonard.

On the way out, Jerome wondered why Leonard and Jamison didn’t go down to the burial, but he wasn’t Arapaho and didn’t know Arapaho ways, and didn’t feel it appropriate to ask. Jerome told her Jamison was hitting golf balls during the service.

“Oh, he’s just a goofy guy,” she said.

They rumbled across another cattle guard and turned left, east. The gravel road ran alongside the two graves. Leonard and Jamison were shoveling clay-red dirt into the hole, which was ringed by bright yellow and red flowers. He slowed the car to a respectful crawl as they passed.

He decided not to write Old Bull’s story for class because he would have to bug Lisa with a lot of questions. He looked into her window and was about to knock when he saw her sitting cross-legged on the bed looking at the keepsakes and pictures spread around her, hair hanging sadly down the sides of her face. He’d seen the group shots with Old Bull in the middle wearing a whistle and a smile, Lisa holding a bat and a trophy with her grandpa kneeling beside her; dried-up flowers and pictures of muscular natives in boats dipping oars into the choppy Pacific – something Old Bull remembered till the very end. Jerome finally decided to write about his uncle, who was a famous artist. Lisa sitting there in a dejected pose sifting through the box of memories broke his heart. It was the first time he wished he could take over someone else’s hurt for them. Especially when

Old Bull lived not an hour down the road all these days. He wished he had been there with her at the hospital instead of the game but liked to think the old coach would have understood.