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## BENT SPOON

by

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“Watch your step, Bub. Put it over there on the table.”

Caution, steadiness and patience: the three cornerstones of a man’s good character, according to Bub’s grandfather, to which Bub had added a fourth to ensure the symmetry and soundness of the foundation on which the edifice of his own disposition would be displayed. Bub called this fourth element “a tight rein,” something he knew he needed to apply to a lot of things, but mostly to the chatter in his head – gossip, judgment and memory – that filled his waking and dreaming hours. These thorny countervalences to his spiritual growth were always hovering, threatening to burst free of their

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unconscious constraints and sweep away the few efforts he'd actually made towards achieving any self-improvement at all.

Today he had unassailable proof of those efforts. Today he'd caught the fish.

"You hear me?"

He still didn't respond, not because he didn't want to see the tiny flower of concern blooming on his mother's face, but for the more immediate need to keep his hands and eyes focused on the mahogany silverware chest that she'd enlisted him to take down from the top shelf of the cabinet by the refrigerator. His focus was especially critical for the fact that he'd just come in from scrubbing his hands with the frizzy-haired fingernail brush in the big sink in the laundry room, and they were still wet.

As he started his descent from the top step of the stool, his sweaty bare foot slipped, causing the stool to swerve sickeningly onto two legs and his heart to thrash against his ribs like the wings of a bird caught in a trap. This momentary glitch served as a reminder that when it came to him, there was never a dearth of opportunities for both improvement and destruction. The list stretched out before him like the twin rails of a railroad track converging on the horizon. He regained his balance and clutched the heavy silverware case more tightly to his chest, silently vowing to carry out the rest of his mother's instructions *to the "T"* despite the blood roaring in his ears and the skittery flailing of his bony arms.

As his bare feet touched the cool linoleum floor, his mind took flight again,

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landing this time on the image of the heavy-stock coutelier's card (his mother pronounced it *coot-lee-er*) that was tucked into the bottom drawer of the chest, identifying its contents in neat 19<sup>th</sup> century Art Nouveau font: "*61 Piece Flatware Service, International Sterling Silver Company, Pattern of '1810', Introduced in 1930.*"

"It's called the French engraver's font," Bub's grandmother had told him once when she'd caught him studying a spoon from her own collection as she was setting the dining room table for Christmas dinner over at the house next door where she and Bub's grandfather lived.

Bub set the box down (surreptitiously sliding the bottom drawer out to confirm that the card was still there) on the kitchen table as he'd been instructed to do. His mother, having stood by watching her son navigate the tricky waters of her request for what seemed like forever, smiled with relief and lifted the lid of the box. Her eyes fixed on the red velvet interior and the engraver's Fiddle Thread design imprinted on the sterling silver utensils resting in their felt-lined slots. She drew a breath, stage-whispering for Bub's benefit, "*Tres, tres eleganza!*" her salutation still carrying the weight of its original mystery because the chest was taken down so infrequently, and when it was, only for special occasions. She seized the topmost utensil in the first slot – a fork – by its handle, and held it up, gripping it just above the engraved "S" (for "Stanfield") cradled in its cartouche, then set it down on the bleached-white tablecloth that covered the kitchen table.

Bub pressed himself against the edge of the table, inhaling the faint scent of his

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mother's perfume *Chanel No. 5*, Bub. *L'eau de toilette of the finest ladies in Paris*, giving himself over to its pale, musky odor, his eyes fixed on her slim fingers and the flashing splendor of red nail polish each time she held up a utensil for inspection. *Revlon. Fire and Ice*. Bub knew she had the full set because he'd spent long hallucinatory moments ogling the little bottles on her dresser, unscrewing their caps and sniffing their brushes. "Orchids to You," "Pango Peach," and "Ultra Violet" never failed to intoxicate, but "Fire and Ice" with its hint of bitterness was his *tres tres* favorite.

His heart jumped again, his reverie broken this time by the snapping sound of butter and fat in the heated skillet on the stove behind them. The air was charged with the smoky scent of the trout he'd hauled onto the lakeshore at Encanto Park turning brown in the pan. He pressed his lips together, his mind pulling him back around to the trashcans behind the carport, where minutes ago he'd stood in the hot sun, naked except for a pair of ragged cut-offs, gripping the fish by its tail with one hand and his father's K-Bar knife with the other as he stroked the fish's back with the knife's blade, shearing off the silver scales, mesmerized by their sparkling fineness as they jumped in the sun, armoring the backs of his hands.

As the beating in his temples wound down, he went over again the verifications of his high standing on this day. That smoky smell, along with the silver chest sitting on the table in one piece with its lid open and his mother's rapturous devotion to the unveiling of its contents, confirmed *beyond a shadow of a doubt* both the importance of the

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occasion and his status as honoree.

He returned his attention to the utensils his mother had placed on the table. They were lined up by group – knives, forks, spoons – in close formation, like soldiers awaiting orders to march into battle. His mother absently raised her hand and stroked the back of Bub’s head with her fingers. He knew she was admiring their beauty and thinking again about how much the set had cost. They didn’t have to talk about that anymore. He’d asked her how much it was worth so many times he already knew the answer: “I don’t know. Your grandmother won’t tell me. Quite a bit, I expect.” It was enough for him to know something his mother didn’t, information on that subject that he would sift over in his mind but would never mention to save her from any further embarrassment. It was a comment his grandmother, Regina Dart, had made to his grandfather one day, that Bub’s mother’s set wasn’t worth nearly as much as her own, an even older and more elegant collection that had been passed down to her from her own mother when she and Clayton Dart were married. Bub knew this because he’d overheard his grandparents talking in the study at the other house, his grandfather hidden behind his newspaper in the big armchair by the bookcase, smoking his pipe, his grandmother standing in the doorway to the kitchen, wiping her hands on the hem of her apron, preparing her response to his grouching about how she was going to *Drive us all back to the poor house with your gewgaws and gimcracks!*

“Just so you know, Clayton,” she’d said, “I paid a fraction of what the set originally cost at the Brophys’ estate sale over on Central Avenue.” She went on to

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remind him that she'd shown him the announcement of the sale in Trinity's weekly bulletin shortly after old man Brophy had passed. "I'm sure if you put your paper down for a minute you'd remember." When her riposte had gone unmet, she'd followed up with the inarguable declaration, "For heaven's sakes, Clayton, it's for your daughter." Bub knew that his grandmother kept her own silver set displayed in a glass-fronted case in the dining room of her house so that anyone passing through on his or her way to the living room could admire its singular elegance.

"As long as it's not for that deuced husband of hers," had been Bub's grandfather's response, the words buoyed aloft by the plume of pipe smoke rising above the taut, inky pages of *The Arizona Republic*.

Bub thought his mother's silver set was every bit as beautiful (as much for what it represented – moments like this between the two of them – as for what he imagined he might get for it on the local black market, a term he'd plucked from a book he'd read somewhere and applied to the clumsy, loose-knit community of petty thieves and juvenile delinquents that roamed the streets north of Glendale Highway). He peeked into the chest again, cutting his eyes away as the afternoon sunlight streaming through the kitchen's floor-to-ceiling windows flashed hard off the copper alloy in the silver, sending bolts of light zigzagging up the walls and along the ceiling. He blinked once and poked his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Remember the first time you saw these?" his mother replaced one of the forks in its cushioned slot. "Remember what you said?"

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“My house.” He was three years old. He’d dragged a chair over to the kitchen table, climbed up on it, and was staring into the dark interior of the box, absorbed in the dazzling array of silver utensils, the velvety blood-red environs, and the shadowed sturdiness of the case that protected it all.

“You want to live in there?” By this time Bub had been on the property long enough that his adopted mother felt comfortable telling him what he was trying to say even if his vocabulary hadn’t caught up. She brushed his hair with her fingers. “Me, too. It is cozy.”

“Cozy.” He placed his hands on the sides of the case. He leaned in, his face barely over the lip of the alluring chamber. Indeed, it looked so welcoming he would have climbed right in if he could. “Spoon.” He pressed forward, up on the balls of his feet. He stretched out his arm, struggling to touch the top spoon in the first row with one chubby finger. “See, that’s me, Mama.”

“Uh-huh,” her voice softened. “Look how neat and straight you are.”

“Neat and straight.”

“Just like all the rest.” She leaned in. “They fit perfectly, one on top of the other.”

“Per-feckly.”

“That’s right.” She laughed. She stroked the back of his head again. “But you don’t fit. You’re too big.”

“I’m small!”

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She laughed again, surprised at the ferocity of his reply. “And look,” she pointed. “They’re all the same. You don’t want to be like everyone else, do you?”

“Yeah. Me on top.”

“But you’re not.”

He paused, puzzling this out. “Yes. I am.”

“No. You’re not like anyone else, Bub.” Her voice changed. “You’re your own original spoon.” She tipped his face up, her hand under his chin. “You’re a bent spoon.”

“No, I’m not!”

“That’s not a bad thing.” She let go of his chin. “I’m a bent spoon, too.” She hugged him. “You belong in a box with me.”

He pulled away. “I’m not a bent spoon, Mama!” He pressed his naked chest against the side of the blood-red chamber and stroked one velvet wall with his fingers. “*My cozy red room.*”

“Hands clean?” Bub’s mother closed the lid on the silver chest, and looked once more at the utensils she’d put out on the table. Bub held up his hands for inspection. She took them in her own, turning them over, scrutinizing the bits of sand still showing underneath one or two of the bitten down fingernails. She brought his hands up to her nose and sniffed. “Daddy showed you the drinking fountain trick again?” Bub nodded. She let go of his hands. “Okay. Forks and napkins on the left.”



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“Aye, aye, Cap-ee-tan.” Bub raised his arm in a clumsy salute that turned into pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose again. He followed his mother with his eyes as she exited the kitchen, heading out to the living room. He brought his hands up and sniffed his fingers. Satisfied, he picked up the forks and began setting them in their proper places where they would each sit: his father at the head, his mother at the foot, and himself between them, facing the stove. He remembered again his mother telling him how thrilled she’d been on the day his grandmother had brought the set over, a belated wedding gift to her and her new husband, Carroll Stanfield, shortly after the two of them had mustered out of the Navy and arrived on the property in the fall of 1947.

Bub heard the toilet flush and the creak of the bathroom door opening. His mind swerved. *Honor’s all we’ve got, sport.* Images of what had happened at the lake that morning flitted through his mind’s eye as if ink-stamped on the pages of a flipbook that had fallen apart and been rebound without regard to their original sequence or meaning. By now Bub knew it wasn’t just the pictures that were worth seeing; there was something else, too, something even more important that he couldn’t quite capture. In fact it would be years before he would be able to put a name to the thing that smashed through the hardpan of his unconsciousness with such velocity it gave purpose and meaning to everything else. For now, he saw only the images, fluttering by on their ragged, rebound pages: *kerplop!* the man at the water’s edge sitting down hard in the mud; *whack!* his father knocking the man down with a swipe of his hand; an empty room, its walls aflame, collapsing in on itself as the picture melts away. And finally, Bub himself, four years old,

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naked except for a sodden diaper, crawling down the hallway of the house on Glendale Highway, pushing his fire-engine-red Tonka dump truck. He stops in front of his parents' closed bedroom door, his head cocked, listening as they talk about an event that had taken place on the patio in his adopted grandparents' east yard years before he was born, shortly after Susan and Carroll Stanfield, his adopted parents-to-be, had arrived on the property from the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida.

“What are your prospects?”

“My what?” Carroll Stanfield shifted uncomfortably on the pink vinyl cushion of the wrought iron patio chair, causing the air to rush out of the vents like the last gasp of a man approaching the gallows.

“Plans,” Clayton said. “What kind of work do you do?”

“I don't know,” Carroll Stanfield shrugged. He looked over at his new wife, then followed the sound of ice cubes clicking together as his mother-in-law poured iced tea from a pitcher. *I could use a couple of pops.* “I guess I like working with my hands.”

*You guess.*

Regina offered him a glass. He wrapped his fingers around it like he was choking a cat.

“Your hands?” Clayton studied his new son-in-law who still had not looked him in the eye. “You mean like a hobby.”

Regina gave Clayton a warning look. “We like to work with our hands around

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here, too.” She sat down next to her daughter. “Don’t we, Clayton?”

Her husband didn’t answer. He kept looking at the younger man with the oiled pompadour wilting in the chair across from him, *this sharper* who’d pranced in and usurped his position as protector of his daughter’s precious life, and who as far as he was concerned hadn’t shown a lick of sense or anything else to recommend him on this stifling hot day. *Shiny, like a counterfeit coin.*

Carroll Stanfield rolled the glass of iced tea across his forehead.

Susan interrupted, “He worked in the boiler room before he was a corpsman.”

“Corpsman?” Clayton glanced at his daughter, then back at her husband, more watchful than predatory now. “You like the medical profession?”

“Naw,” he shifted again on his cushion, generating another whistle of defeat. He stared at the glass in his hand. “Too much blood and guts.”

Clayton looked over at his wife. She had set the pitcher down and was leaning back in her chair. Her eyes were closed, the sun on her face.

“I like tinkering on cars. That Streamliner in your garage —.”

“Not much of a future in *tinkering*.”

“Yeah, well,” Carroll Stanfield let the sentence hang there unfinished. He finally looked at his new father-in-law straight on. “Guess I’m not a suit-and-tie stiff.” He set the tumbler down on the glass-topped side table with a *crack*. “You got any beer in there?”

“Nothing wrong with a suit and tie.”

“Nothing wrong with my hands, either.”

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They held each other's silent, furious gaze, two bulls in a *pasto de cria*, neither one backing down.

Susan stood. "Why don't we all go inside where it's cooler?"

Oceanic weightlessness.

Pictures, memories, and dreams:

A shadow. His birth father. A trembling, unstable beam of light. His birth mother. White linen uniforms floating like ghosts through the day rooms of the Family Services Home. That corrupt foster family. And finally: Susan and Carroll Stanfield, and Regina and Clayton Dart on the old property on Glendale Avenue.

Pre-historic geography. Electrons sparking in the cave of his vast unknowing. Toronto. Los Angeles. Buckeye and Phoenix.

All of these strands – stitched together or shredded beyond repair – led back to him now, their ravening luminescence unbounded by science and worldly laws.

*Rules were meant to be broken, sport.* His father's voice through the door to the room behind the workshop. Then, from further away, a caveat to his benediction: *But not for you.*

For what had seemed like forever, and with such grave effort, Bub had gone to the well, only to come away empty-handed, his bucket a leaky vessel, his quest to fill the unfillable void annulled, his place in the world buried. Night after night he'd peered into

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the abyss, his heart pressed against his throat, his mood frantic at having once again discovered *nothing*, until one night, while lying in bed, his heart winding down from yet another misadventure of botched thievery, he found himself thinking of his friend and accomplice Dewey Tegland, whom he'd just left standing under the stuttering mercury-vapor street lamp on 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue with nothing to show for their efforts but an oily brake cable and the bent kickstand of a 50cc Honda Super Club clutched in his hand. Dewey was known to respond to pretty much any adverse situation with *Fuck it*. Yes, Bub thought. Fuck it. Fuck the rules that kept the world spinning on its wobbly axis, fuck the big ideas that had proven so baffling, so arbitrary, so unnecessary despite the vast conspiracy of self-assured ignorance that swirled around him. There. It was done. He'd cast them out. All a useless waste of time. And although this revelation didn't set him free, it allowed him to break off a piece of that wobbly world and hold it up as a recognizable reflection of himself, an image he could inhabit and use to his own ends. And if by chance he didn't like what he saw or what he'd done, he at least would know that *he* had done it, and could change it, or tear it all up and start from scratch again, leaving it to others to puzzle out the remains of his abandoned archeological digs. If they even cared. Most hadn't, and that was fine, too.

Ergo his scrapbook recollections. It didn't matter who was or wasn't there, or if a *there* even existed. He saw what he saw and so it was true. There was no other way he could know what he knew.

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“Has anyone seen my Harry Belafonte record?” his mother called from the living room. Bub stopped, his heart rabbiting in his chest. He put down the fork he was holding and glanced quickly across the kitchen through the doorway into the living room. She was kneeling in front of the hi-fi, her back to him, thumbing through a stack of record jackets that was leaning against the cabinet. *She’s not looking at me. Good.* His heart slowed down. “Who moved it?” she turned her head slightly as she said this. The rabbit in his chest bucked again. *Is this a test?* He push-broomed the unwelcome thought from his mind like he was sweeping coyote scat off the floor of the carport after a rain.

“Put ‘Bloody Mary’ on, honey!” Bub’s father’s voice rang down the hall, bouncing off the tightness of his mother’s questions. “I’ll make us a couple!”

Bub’s thoughts returned to the fish, this time to its glistening iridescent back as it broke the oily surface of the lake. In a moment, the first strains of Rogers and Hammerstein’s “Bloody Mary” from *South Pacific* filled the house. Bub hummed along, thinking of the fight he and the fish had put up: the fish’s last gasp; his sneakers clotted with mud. He put a knife down on the right side of his father’s place setting, its cutting edge aligned with the plate, the way his mother had shown him. He stepped back, looking at the “S” engraved in the cartouche of the knife’s handle, willing it to remind him of where he belonged now.

“Where the heck is it?” Bub’s father was looking down at the other end of the table, winking at his wife, his voice a little outside of itself now, its hint of brusqueness bending

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Bub's ear, causing his stomach to flop again. He shoved the feeling aside and studied the meal his mother had prepared and arranged on the Crown Ducal dinner plate (one of three that remained of the original twelve that had comprised the dishware part of his grandparents' wedding gift) and put before him. On the left side of the plate at ten o'clock was a handsome, glistening portion of Birdseye frozen peas and carrots; on the right, at two, a dollop of mashed potatoes, a serving-spoon-sized puddle of canned brown gravy pooling in the depression at its center. In the middle of the plate, garnished with a sprig of parsley, was the proof of the prize they were celebrating: a two-inch square of freshwater trout, Bub's portion of the nine-inch-long fish he had caught, flayed and gutted, tasks that had been both mortifying *Grab that bloody intestine, sport! Yank it out!* and gratifying *Atta boy! Good job, sport!* Their completion having led to the final, perfect, hallucinatory moment when he'd pressed the bloody piscine carcass against the lid of the trashcan and sawed off its head.

"I think I see it!" Bub's father poked at the mound of vegetables on his plate with his fork. "Naw," his voice eddying with disappointment. "Peas and carrots." He scraped the tines of the fork over the gilded crest on the plate's rim to make his point. Bub cringed as the china shrieked like a drill at the dentist's office. "Peas and carrots! Peas and carrots!" his father sing-songed. Then: "Wait! There it is!" He let his jaw go slack; his mouth gaped as he stared goggle-eyed at the glistening piece of fish in the middle of his plate. The fork slipped from his trembling hand, the theatricality of this act overruling all else. He recovered as quickly; he scooped up his highball glass, which was almost

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empty now of what Bub reckoned was his fifth Bloody Mary, and raised it, his eyes wandering to a spot in the middle of the table. “Any-hoo, here’s to you, sport!” His eyes stayed on the spot. “To our fisherman par excellence!”

“To Bub,” his mother picked up her glass, the look on her face so freighted with sadness Bub could not hold it. He blushed. *What’s the big deal with Harry Belafonte anyway?* She set her glass down. Bub sneaked another look: her eyes had already turned inward, her expression folded in on itself.

His father’s glass was still in the air. “And to family!” he went on portentously, pointedly ignoring the shift in his wife’s countenance, his own eyes darting now from wife to son, fish to drink. “Here’s to the best *fam damly* a palooka from Podunk ever landed!” He brought the glass down, clipping his elbow on the edge of the table. “Ooh! Whee!” He barked out a short hard laugh. Bub put his hands in his lap and squeezed them into fists, rubbing them over his bare thighs in a simulacrum of how he’d flayed the fish. “Goddamned crazy bone!” his father laughed again. “Hey, don’t anybody get up! I’m all right!”

“You sure about that?” Bub’s mother was watching her husband now, the flatness in her voice a lure bobbing on the opaque surface of their conversation.

Bub’s father’s eyes focused. *What the hell are you aiming at now? A man’s entitled to a snort once in a while.*

Bub was used to his father laying the blame for his drinking squarely on his



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mother's shoulders for her constant grinding regarding the two bugaboos that defined him even more than his unreliable temper: drinking, which he excelled at, and getting a job, at which he did not. *Grind, grind, grind! You're a goddamned grinder!* Bub had heard him admonishing his mother more than once. This was usually followed by something like *And that son of a bitching father of yours riding me like a goddamned draft mule to do whatever the hell he wants.* There were never any clear exits from these conversations once they got started, so Bub settled in to do his part: change the subject, foam the runway, and try to deflect the inevitable. He unclenched one fist, took his hand out of his lap, and picked up his fork. "The peas and carrots are good, Mama."

"Thank you, dear." Her shoulders shuddered, a slow, hypodermic tremor, as she glanced over at the untouched pile of peas and carrots on his plate.

"Peas and carrots! Peas and carrots!" his father toodle-loo'ed. Whether it was the effects of the fifth Bloody Mary, his fury at his impotence regarding the job market, or just his *plain old sonofabitching cussedness* (Bub's grandfather), he chose to ignore the lure. He picked up his drink again and leaned back in his chair, tipping the front legs off the floor. "You can bet your Kings and Queens on that! Right, sport?"

"Right, Pop," Bub smiled gamely. His mind kept dragging him back around to his mother on a recent sun-bright day, the two of them digging in the iris garden next to the covered breezeway that connected the house to the carport. A bead of perspiration dangled from the end of her nose as she knelt next to him, extending one bare arm and gloved hand to turn the soil with her trowel. She had the same look on her face now that

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she'd had when she plunged the trowel into the swollen thorax of a ferocious-looking stone beetle that had waddled out of the loam, its pincer-like mandibles extended as it shuddered the dirt off its horny back like a workhorse shaking off the lather at the end of a long day.

*Workhorse.* Bub's mind swerved again. He looked down at the other end of the table at his father propped in his chair, its front legs still off the floor. His lips were moving but the static in Bub's ears was canceling out whatever it was he was saying. Bub followed his father's blasted eyes across the table to his mother again, her posture conscripted by his words, her eyes on the gardenia-patterned wallpaper behind him.

*Workhorse. Coffeepot.* Sixteen hands high. *A blue eyed Apache Paint with one white stocking. One helluva workhorse.* That's what his grandfather had told him. *The two of us went through hell together.*

It was August, 1913, one year after Arizona had become the forty-eighth state in the Union. Wind-driven wild fires were gobbling up the Mogollon Rim, killing wildlife, livestock, and anything else in its path. Clayton Dart was twenty-two years old, the foreman of the Aztec Land & Cattle Company, an outfit better known as "the Hashknife," a ranch covering a million acres outside of Flagstaff in the northern part of the state. On the day the fires broke out, he'd been ordered by the Hashknife's owner, Charlie Babbitt, to move one of the herds off the rim into the Verde Valley and out of harm's way.

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Clayton had just come in from the Bellemont pasture where his horse, a big gray Appaloosa with white spots across its rump, had gotten a piece of shale lodged in the frog of its left front hoof. The stone was so impacted Clayton quickly saw the only way he was going to get it loose was if he cut in deep and dug it out with his knife, a painful, delicate process the Appaloosa had made clear it wasn't going to have any part of. After a few skittish kicks (some landed, some not), the horse had bared its big yellowed teeth and snatched Clayton's hat off his head. Then, to add insult to injury, he'd head-butted the foreman in the face as he stood up. Damned near knocked him out cold. Clayton had had no choice but to halter-lead him back to the ranch on foot.

When they pulled up at the gate, Babbitt was standing in front of the main house, staring at the sky to the east, its bluebell palette streaked with orange. As they got closer, he could see the Appaloosa was limping badly. He could also see by the way his foreman's canteen was bouncing against the saddle skirt that it was empty. He took in the bent brim of his foreman's Stetson and the discolored mark on the side of his face. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Ask him. Thanks." Clayton took his boss's proffered canteen and pulled the cork out with his teeth. He poured water into his cupped hand and held it under the Appaloosa's soft muzzle. As the horse's long pink tongue stroked the palm of his hand, Clayton spat out the cork; it bounced on its short chain against the canteen's blanket-covered side. He took a swig of water, then tipped his head back and drank deeply. He stopped, gasping for breath. "Picked up a piece of shale. I tried to dig it out. He wouldn't

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stand for it.” He took a last swig, rolled it around in his mouth and spat it into the dirt. He smacked his lips, pleased with the sweet metallic taste of the water and his joke regarding the limping Appaloosa not ‘standing’ for his ministrations.

“I bet,” Babbitt looked at the shiner swelling like a bruised plum on his foreman’s face and took back his canteen. “Well, put him in the barn. Lester’ll take a look at him later,” he said, referring to the Hashknife’s remuda man. He looked at the sky again. The orange streaks were being replaced by dark fountains of black smoke. “We gotta get those beefs off the rim before this thing –” he took a swig from the canteen himself. The unfinished sentence hung in the air between them.

Clayton looked around. The ranch looked like a ghost town. A lone dog lay in the dirt at the bottom of the steps to the bunkhouse, panting. “Where the hell is everyone?”

“Bright Angel. Crazy Jug. Jacob Lake,” Babbitt ticked off the grazing parcels where the other herds were stationed. “Hate to say it,” he fixed his foreman with a look that allowed no room for argument. “You’re on your own on this one.”

Clayton didn’t say anything. Babbitt turned his attention to the pen next to the horse barn where a dun and gray Apache Paint with one white sock was circumnavigating the enclosure, switching its tail back and forth to keep the flies off. It stopped at the water trough by the gate and hung its shaggy head over the top rail of the fence, staring balefully at them with its pale blue eyes.

“Take Coffeepot. He’ll let you keep your hat.”

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After Clayton led the Appaloosa to the barn, he put him into a stall and wiped him down. When he was finished, he went out to the pen and threw his saddle on Coffeepot.

“Adios, Boss,” he touched the bent brim of his hat as he rode out through the gate. Babbitt nodded as he swung it closed after them.

Clayton turned Coffeepot south toward the veiling tree line. They entered the Coconino forest, horse and rider keeping an eye on the blackening sky to the northeast.

When they reached the rim Clayton spotted the Hashknife cows scattered amongst the ponderosa pines. Some were still grazing on the soft green shoots that were pushing up around the roots of the trees. Others were already spooked, moaning and milling about. He looked back the way he’d come, at the tree line on Stoneman Ridge where the air was suffused with winking, crimson sparks. He could see flames moving like glowing ghosts between the trees. In spite of that, where they were the air was still clear, and eerily calm. He listened to the stillness, looking up through the branches of the tall trees at the smudged blue sky. It was then he realized all the birds were gone. He did some calculations in his head and reckoned that as much of a harbinger as that was, they might still have a few hours before the wind picked up again in earnest. He nudged Coffeepot towards the milling cows. If they were going to get to the West Fork before all hell broke loose they would have to move fast.

By late afternoon, Clayton had driven the herd down through the smoke-veiled pines of Oak Creek Canyon towards Sedona, a Wells Fargo way station that was protected by the West Fork of Oak Creek. By the time they reached the breaks at Pocket

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Tank the wind had picked up and Clayton was choking on the windblown smoke and ash leaking through the sooty bandana he'd tied to his face. He turned the herd west, towards the creek. The previous winter had been a long one; Clayton remembered how he'd spent it stuck in a tiny cabin on the Bellemont, waiting to dig out after the last snowfall in late May. By now most of the snow that had capped the San Francisco Peaks had melted and the water table was high. He nudged Coffeepot forward, pressing the herd from behind. Once they got to the creek they would be all right.

It was not to be. As the herd came out of the tree line onto the gravel bar, the first missile landed at Coffeepot's feet with a muffled crack, spooking him sideways. It was followed by another, and then another. Clayton looked up. Birds, dozens of them, were falling from the sky, dead of asphyxiation before they hit the ground. He turned in his saddle, his eye drawn to a small bright thing emerging from the tree line. It was moving fast: a rabbit, on fire, running for its life. Halfway across the sand, it stopped and lay still, a tiny burning pyre.

Then he heard the sound, a sustained shriek as the gale churned through the forest towards them, shearing off burning branches and ripping up the forest floor, sending a flaming carpet of needles and pinecones airborne. A wall of heat struck his chest and then the flames were upon them. The already unstable herd panicked and scattered in every direction. He tried to contain it, turning as many of the beefs as he could, cutting in others that had bolted and run.

In the end, one horse and rider wasn't enough. Only a handful of cows made it

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across the silver ribbon of water. The rest of the herd was lost. Some ran directly into the flames. Others drowned in the swollen creek. Finally, Coffeepot bolted into the water, taking Clayton with him in spite of the foreman's efforts to pull him up short and turn him around. Later, Clayton admitted it was the thing that saved his life.

Bub's grandfather had told him that the smell of scorched cowhide and the bawling of the burning and drowning cows still woke him up at night. While he knew that he and Coffeepot had done everything possible to save the herd, he would never forgive himself for losing those beefs, nor accept that he couldn't have done something more to save them.

If it's true, what some say, that the story belongs to the teller, the tale of the Mogollon Rim fires was owned *en total* by Clayton Henry Dart, who necessarily saw it as one of tragedy and regret. Still, those of a more democratic bent would say that a story once told belongs to the world, its language transformed into a reflecting pool in service to whomever stops and looks, each one welcome (according to his own strengths or limitations) to see a reflection of his or her own history, a piece of their soul.

This was the case for Bub, for whom his grandfather's tales were not only mythic, but pyrrhic, too, each story an analog for a conversation in the Stanfield household like the one they were having now: a mare's nest of dislocation and human fragility, arrived at

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out of nowhere, changing course abruptly, revealing its true self only after a conflagration had broken out. Bub knew that eventually the arbitrary, ill winds fueling these exchanges would die down, but not before everything in their path had caught fire and burned. He knew this as surely as he knew each time he tapped the first tile in the row of dominoes he'd laid out on the floor of his grandparents' study, that it would tip the next one, then the next one, and so on, until they'd all fallen over.

*Pin, axle, wheel.*

Bub's grandfather had driven out to the agricultural fields in Glendale to make his annual inspection of the eighty acres the Russian was leasing from him to grow his beets. He'd taken Bub along with him to get the boy out of the house.

*“Hallo, Clayton! Give me a hand with this *Sukin syn*, ne mogli by vy?”*

That was last summer. Or had it been in the spring? Bub couldn't remember which, but the phrase would always conjure the taste of insecticide in his mouth and the image of himself riding shotgun in his grandfather's dust-caked Oldsmobile as it barreled down a dirt road for what seemed like forever, the serried rows of red-veined leaves stretching out on either side as far as the eye could see. Suddenly, the old man had stomped on the brakes, causing Bub to pitch forward and smack his head on the dash as the car shuddered to a stop under the iron archway at the entrance to Mr. Kusnetsov's dairy farm.



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“You all right, boy?” Clayton had thrown out his arm, too late, a worried look on his face.

“Yes, Grandfather.” Bub rubbed his forehead with one hand as he peered over the dash through the windshield where he could see the Olds’s fat chrome snout pressed up against the tailgate of an ancient dray, its box yawed to one side, the naked end of its rear axle protruding from the big box spring underneath, one of its wheels lying in the dirt.

“*Da*, sure as *zavtra svetit solntse* that *sukin syn* cotter pin falls out.” Kusnetsov’s bald head appeared around the side of the wagon. He spat into the dirt and kicked at the wooden spokes of the wheel with the toe of his boot, his heavy-lidded eyes focused on something in his hand. “Looky here.” He held up a grease-caked metal ring for inspection. “Quick as you say *Bob tvoy dyadya* that sumbitchin’ axle ring falls off.” He kicked the wheel again in disgust. “Pretty soon, the whole *prokleyaty* thing’s gone to hell.”

Call it the indomitability of youth, or an unflagging faith in humanity, but Bub would not give up on his parents. He’d always try to get in the way of the unstoppable thing he knew was coming. “To me!” he raised his glass now. “A fisherman par ex-cell-ance!”

“Kings and Queens, Carroll?” Bub’s mother directed this at his father, ignoring Bub’s toast. “Putting our cards on the table are we?” She pursed her lips in a show of concentration.

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*Too much water under the bridge.* Bub had heard her say that more than once. He set down his glass and picked up his fork. He stabbed at his fish and stuffed a piece into his mouth. “Mmm –.”

“That’s right, honey!” Bub’s father bullied through his wife’s opaque message. “Kings and Queens. On the table –” suddenly the grin on his face vanished, replaced by a sour squinch, like he had gas. Bub couldn’t tell if his father had just thought of something more important to say or if he’d just lost his train of thought again. His father looked down at the other end of the table. “What’s that you say, honey?”

“The fish is good, Mama.” The piece of half-masticated flesh had lodged itself halfway down Bub’s throat. He tried to swallow. If he wasn’t careful it was going to come back up.

“I forget.” Bub’s mother seemed to be struggling with a thought of her own. She brightened. “Oh. I know.” She reached down to the side of her chair, then brought up her hand.

The ill wind ruffled the back of Bub’s neck.

He was running down the hall on another one of his scavenging hunts, sure he was alone in the house, his mind on the Harry Belafonte record his mother was always playing.

Earlier that day, Bub had overheard his mother telling his grandmother that she was going over to her friend Harriet LeBeau’s house to play bridge. He hadn’t seen his father

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since breakfast. As he headed towards the living room he looked behind himself down the hall at his parents' bedroom door. It was open. His eye ticked on something. A shadow. He held his breath, and in the silence he heard a faint shushing sound. He retraced his steps, his bare feet pressing softly on the carpet. He stopped at the doorjamb to the bedroom and peeked in.

His eye fell as it always did on his mother's desk, his mind tallying the untouchable pieces it held: her bird's egg blue Remington portable typewriter; a Hollywood Regency desk lamp with its yellowed drum shade and tinkly teardrop prisms; the heavy glass ashtray, full of cigarette butts and ashes; typewritten papers in various stages of completion or abandon.

Satisfied, he looked across the room at his parents' unmade bed, and beyond at the far wall where there was another open doorway, this one leading into a laundry room. He was startled to see his mother standing with her back to him in front of the washing machine. She was taking clothes out of a laundry basket that sat on top of the new dryer that had just been delivered from Sears. She held up each piece of clothing, leaned forward, sniffed it, and then dropped it into the washer. For a moment Bub was lost again in how beautiful she was; her bare feet framed in a loose *plié* on the linoleum floor; the casual balletic gesture of her wrists and hands as she snapped the clothes out in front of herself; the sensuous bow of her arms as she dropped each article of clothing into the washer. His stomach flopped once at the thought of her seeing him, and again at the thought that followed – still surprising even after all these years – that she loved him and

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had since the day he'd appeared on the property a decade before. She cocked her head to one side, another habit he admired, and continued digging around in the basket. The particulars of her face were in profile now: her wavy brunette hair, pulled back with a barrette, one or two strands fallen loose to her shoulders; her fine straight nose with nostrils that flared like exclamation points when she laughed; her sharp high cheekbones; and the shivery untouchable look in her eyes, their color the reflection of a sun-faded Arizona sky. Whenever she turned those eyes on him his chest felt as if it would burst from the feeling that he was the sole object of her attention, although right now he was glad he wasn't.

She picked up a bath towel and sniffed it. Bub smiled. *Dyed-in-the-wool sniffer*. For as long as he'd known her, she'd sniffed everything she considered suspect: clothes, dishes, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, damp towels that had been stuffed between the towel rod and the wall in the bathroom, pots and pans in the dish drainer in the kitchen, even food at the dinner table, although Bub hadn't seen her do that for a while, probably out of a wary respect for Bub's father who hated it when she did it.

"What's the matter?" she'd said the first time she'd caught Bub watching her in this ritual. "Haven't you ever seen anyone sniff something? Animals do it all the time. If they don't, they could eat the wrong thing and die." Bub couldn't imagine what she'd eaten, worn or seen in her life that had inspired her to start sniffing. But he'd admired the habit so much he'd started doing it himself. It was another thing he reckoned they shared.

She picked up a pair of his father's trousers, the khaki ones that went with the

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navy blue sport jacket that Bub's mother had brought home from Goldwater's Men's Department Store a year ago. She'd bought the two pieces for Bub's father to wear on all the job interviews he'd never gone on. She held up the pants by the waist, the front towards her at face level, and sniffed. Her head came back. She leaned in again, this time more tentatively, and sniffed again. This time her head recoiled, along with her neck and shoulders. She stood there, still holding the pants up, looking at something Bub couldn't see. Finally, she let her arms drop. She reached one hand in and checked the pockets, one by one. When she got to the last one, the left front pocket, she hesitated. She took her hand out, holding what looked like a wadded up facial tissue. She sniffed it, blanched again, and stuffed the tissue back into the pants' pocket. She folded the slacks and put them to one side.

Time to go. Bub started walking backwards down the hall, his bare shoulder brushing the orange-peel wall, his bare feet pressing down on the short nap of the carpet, his eyes still on his mother as she scooped and dumped detergent into the washer. She closed the lid on the washing machine and turned it on. He smiled again. *Sniffer.*

Now she placed the folded pants on the table next to her plate. "No card muckers at this celebration. Right, Bub?" She looked at him with a tight smile.

Before Bub could answer, his father tipped forward on his chair. The legs came down with a *crack!* on the linoleum floor. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Baarrnt!" Bub's mother barked out what Bub had to admit was a pretty good

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imitation of the buzzer that sounded when a contestant blew it on *Jeopardy*, a new television game show they'd been watching after Bub got home from school before *Sea Hunt* came on. She followed this up with her own version of new-game-show-host-in-town Alex Trebek's indisputable baritone, "Wrong question! The correct one is..." She paused, fixing her husband with that same tight smile. He didn't respond. She spoke again, her tone switching to sweetness and light: "Why, Mr. Stanfield. Don't you want to play?" She looked over at Bub and winked. "All righty then. Here we go." She returned to the oratorical voice of Trebek reading from a cue card. "If a card sharp's holding Queens and Kings, would he be wise to throw those cards away on the slim chance he's going to get something better?" She picked up the pants by the waist, the front facing out, and let them unfold so the contestants at the table could get a better idea of what was at stake.

From where Bub sat he could see the faint grayish discoloration of something spilt or splashed, a stain along the left side of the zipper at the crotch. *Oh*. He thought of her ritual in the laundry room on the day he'd filched the Harry Belafonte record. Then he thought of something else. His face burned.

For over a year, Bub had been masturbating every night and leaving the sticky discharge in his white cotton Superman pointers to dry and evaporate on as he fell off to sleep.

"Make sure you shake your penis after you urinate," his mother had told him one

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day while she was pulling laundry out of the dryer. She'd held up a pair of his underwear, front side towards him, so he could see the gray, discolored stain by the pee-flap. He'd blushed, mortified, unable to answer. *At least she didn't sniff it*, he'd thought. *That would've been even worse.*

But the conversation they were engaged in now wasn't about mistaken identification, nor was it the result of a pubescent boy following his fantasies in the privacy of his own bed. This was irrefutable forensic evidence of his father's moral failing, its discovery hanging over the table like one of those massive steel beams Bub had seen dangling from a crane over the Westward Ho Hotel construction site downtown, threatening to snap its cable and smash everything below it to pieces.

Bub looked over at his father who was staring mutely at his wife as she held up his pants for public inspection. Bub could almost hear the wheels in his head turning. A thought that didn't even make sense floated up: *Did he beat off?*

"Baarrnt!" his mother's game show bark again. "Time's up!" Her voice dropped to the conciliatory tone that Trebek used when he was trying to reassure a not quite bright contestant. "But don't worry! There's plenty of more questions to go! Would you like to try another?" Off Bub's father's numbed expression: "Sure you would!" Bub's mother reached into the front pocket of the khakis. She pulled out the tissue and held it up for inspection. "Ta-da! I'll bet this makes a full house!"

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Still no response from the other end of the table.

She cupped the tissue in the palm of her hand and with two fingers tapped an imaginary microphone in front of herself, like Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*.

“Testing, testing. Is this thing on?”

Bub looked at his father again. The image of the bug that he and his mother had encountered in the iris garden flitted through his mind.

“Well, whether it is or not, we can all go home today knowing you did your best.” The game show voice was gone; it was all her now, the aggrieved sarcasm of her words a burr in Bub’s ear. His mother shuddered again, her eyes locked like a *Twilight Zone* tractor beam now on her husband. “Because we all know that you always follow your worst angels.”

Bub had to give her credit. Poetic even in heartbreak.

She huffed once then, like she was breathing through some obstruction, a tactic Bub knew she used when she was trying to keep her thoughts in order. “Isn’t that what all your pals tell you down at that goddamned gin joint you go to on Van Buren? *A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do?*”

*Goddamned.* The only other time Bub had heard his mother curse was over at his grandparents’ house the year before. It had been Christmastime, and he was perched on the landing at the top of the stairs that led to his deceased uncle’s room, lost in the



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winking strand of Christmas lights his grandmother had strung along the banister. He'd overheard his parents arguing down in the study, but hadn't been able to make out what they were saying. Then he heard his mother call his father a *cad*. At first he'd thought she said *cat*. *You cat*.

"You cad!" she'd gasped again, the word choked off, her throat constricted from crying.

Whatever she said, Bub could tell by her near-hysterical tone that it wasn't a compliment, so he'd figured it must be an insult – or a curse word – and therefore something worth following up on. The red and green Christmas lights on the banister winked in the silence that followed. Then he heard the creak of the floorboards as his mother crossed the study into the sunroom. His father's footsteps followed.

After the shriek of the screen door sliding on its metal track in the sunroom had faded, the stillness in the house punctuated only by the ticking of the clock on the mantle in the living room, he'd hurried downstairs and gone straight to the dictionary table to look up the word. *Cad: a man who behaves dishonorably, especially towards a woman*. So it wasn't a curse word after all.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Bub's father finally broke his silence, taking the offensive. *Like he always does*. "Those aren't my pants!" He waved his hand at them dismissively. "I've never seen them before in my life!"

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“The scoundrel doth protest too much, methinks!”

Bub groaned. He'd hoped he would never have to hear that hoary old chestnut again, even in his mother's slightly altered version. It had been a favorite of hers, from that awful book she'd insisted they read aloud together after the principal of Phoenix Country Day School had called and told her that *Hamlet* was one of no less than five assignments her son had never completed for his seventh grade English class. “I hate fucking Hamlet!” Bub had finally blurted out in sheer exasperation at having to say a bunch of stupid words in an even stupider language, whereupon she'd marched him into the bathroom and washed his mouth out with soap.

*Stick to your guns*, Bub's father had counseled him after an incident at Glenex Market, the little mom-and-pop store across the highway from the property. The episode had involved the disappearance of a box of jawbreakers. The stooped, catarrhal owner of the market had shown up at their door, accusing Bub of theft, “He bad boy! He take box!” and something else they couldn't make out from his mucousy, broken English rant.

“He bad man! I no take box!” Bub had barked back, affectedly appalled at the man's accusation. Later, his mother had found the empty jawbreaker box under his bed.

“You just can't do it, can you, Carroll?”

“Do what?” Bub's father scowled darkly and picked up his glass. “Listen to you flap your gums all day?” It was empty. “You're damned straight, crazy lady.”

“Crazy. Lady. Crazy. Man. Goldwater sleeps in a garbage can.” She hummed

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softly as she looked down at the utensils on either side of her plate, touching each one with a *Fire and Ice* fingernail to confirm their proper spacing and position, the way she'd instructed Bub to set them.

When she'd finished her appraisal, she looked up and nodded approvingly at her son. Bub's father made a face like he was puzzling out a pithy follow up line that would finish the conversation once and for all. Then he narrowed his eyes, and Bub could tell he'd landed on something else. "You sniffed it, didn't you?"

The wind that fans the flames. Bub slumped back in his chair.

"Don't try to make this about me, Sergeant Friday!" her voice suddenly rose. "You... swinger!"

"What did I say about the next time I caught you sniffing?"

"Who was it this time?" Bub's mother pressed on, undeterred. "Janet Porter? Or that little chippy who likes to *help you* in the *produce section* down at A. J. Bayless?"

"Look at you!" Bub's father pressed back. "All high and mighty, waving your pants around like a lunatic on the day of our son's achievement." His eyes clicked over to Bub for confirmation, then back. "You need to get a hold of yourself and join the party." "Join the party?" A thin smile flickered across her lips again. She lowered her voice. "All right. I'll join the party." She raised her arm and threw the pants across the table. It was a good throw – she could throw a ball across both front yards of the property – and they landed on Bub's father's face, the legs over his head. As he scrabbled with his hands to

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pull them off, she picked up the tissue and threw that, too. Even in its used and wadded up condition it had no weight. It landed in the tureen of gravy in front of Bub, floating there like a poisonous flower. “You bastard! You should be goddamned ashamed of yourself!”

*“Bastard!’ ‘Goddamned’!*

“Me? Look at yourself!” Bub’s father dragged the pants off his head. “You’re the one who should be ashamed!” He wadded them up and threw them back at her. They fell short, landing on the table next to her plate. “You’re embarrassing our son! You’re embarrassing yourself!”

“You don’t give a damn about our son! Or me! Or anything else except your goddamned chippies!”

“Sniffer!” Bub’s father pounded the table with his fist, sending the silverware bouncing off the tablecloth. He stood up. His chair reeled sideways and clattered onto the floor behind him. “You’ve got no proof! There’s a million pairs of pants at Goldwater’s!”

“So where are they? The ones I bought you? The ones you’re supposed to be wearing to all the job interviews you’re supposed to be going on while you’re out fucking your hussies!”

*Fucking your hussies?*

*Never in his wildest dreams.*

She stood up now, too. “Why don’t you go back to your Friday night whores and

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tell them your sob story!” She held up her hands, the long, slender fingers and blood-red nails splayed into hooks, and clawed at the air between them. “Eerr-rowww!” She spat it out like a curse.

*She’s a cat?* Bub could feel the fish coming up. He stayed rooted to his chair, a member of the audience at a horror movie, unable to leave his seat.

“All right you!” Bub’s father lunged around the side of the table. In two steps he was on her. With one hand he grabbed a fistful of her hair and yanked her head back.

“Dad! Stop!” Bub knew he should stay out of it, but as they did so often, the words just flew out. *Better that than the fish.* He looked at his father, who was looking back at him now like *Shut your pie hole or you’re next.*

“Come on everyone! Let’s all join the party! Join the party!” Bub’s mother chanted in a high broken voice. She flailed her hands until she found her husband’s forearm and dug her nails in, dragging them down to his wrist.

“Goddamnit!” He batted her hand away and looked down at the tracks turning crimson on his arm. “Fuck!”

“Who’s the big man now, blasphemer!”

In spite of her bravado, Bub could see the tears in his mother’s eyes. It looked to him like his father was going to rip the hair out of her skull. Suddenly Bub jumped up.

“Stop it! Please stop!”

“Honey.” His mother’s voice had changed tone. She was kneeling on one knee

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now, the other leg splayed out on the floor. She twisted her head to look at him. “Go to your room. Daddy and I are having a little fight.”

“Stay out of this, sport! This is between your mother and me!”

“No! Let him see!” Just as abruptly, the taunting hellhound was back. She was struggling now to get up. “Let him see what a real wife beater looks like!” She managed to get her feet under herself. She stood up. She settled one hand on the back of her chair. For a moment she looked like a guest waiting to sit down, except that her head was still yanked back, her hair still wound into a tight knot in Bub’s father’s fist. “Take a good look, son! See what I have to put up with every day of my life —!”

*Wife beater.* The phrase pinned itself to the raw wall of his brain, its meaning self-evident, but still worth looking up in the big Merriam-Webster dictionary in his grandparents’ study the next time he was over there.

Deep in the ether of their violent struggle, Bub’s father raised his other hand and slapped Bub’s mother across the face. He let go of her hair. She spun around once, like a lopsided ballerina, a slash of blood running from her lower lip. When she stopped, she pitched forward, her stomach plowing into the edge of the table. Her fingers scrabbled at the edge of the tablecloth as she pulled it towards her. Bub’s plate and a dish of black olives collided and slid off the table, the china smashing to pieces as they hit the floor. Despite the car-wreck attraction of his parents’ battle, Bub’s eyes followed the olives as they rolled across the linoleum. The image of the little egg-shaped savories wobbling along like tiny drunks turned over in his mind, tugging him away.

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By the middle of the afternoon, they had reached the outskirts of Window Rock, a whistle-stop on the Atchinson, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad line in the northeastern part of the state. Window Rock served as the seat of the Navajo Nation. An air of defeat hovered over the town. As Bub and his grandfather drove down the nominal main thoroughfare, Bub stared out the window at a man, pitched forward, half-running-half-walking down the wide, cracked sidewalk, his arms outstretched like he was trying to catch his quicksilver reflection in the sunblasted plate glass window of a hardware store. In spite of his odd carriage, he held his shoulders erect; his long gray hair was pulled back into a neat braid, his berry-brown, deeply lined face sprouting from the crisp collar of an ironed snap pocket cowboy shirt. He clutched the wadded neck of a paper bag in one knotty fist. He continued on with addled intent.

As the Oldsmobile rolled by, the man tore his eyes away from his rippling reappearance in the mirrored casement of a threadbare five-and-dime. He swiveled his head and looked over. Bub pressed his face closer to the window, and for a moment their eyes met. Suddenly the man spat into the gutter. Bub dropped his eyes. When he looked up again he saw another man squatting in the shadowed entryway of a Laundromat, then another exiting a liquor store.

One more weather-streaked display window, this one cracked diagonally across its face and patched with tape, offered Bub a startling tableau: hardbound books strewn across its dusty rostrum, their buckled spines and unglued pages sprawled akimbo

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like murdered guests at dinner table. *This is your grandmother's library. In this family we read.* Posted against the glass like a sentry informing passerby, a sign, its sun-faded letters barely legible: "Librarian Wanted." Next to it, jockeying for equal space, another, taped at three corners, its fourth curled up like a tongue: "For Sale or Rent."

After they passed the last building – a moribund Bashas' Market – they drove by a bullet-riddled official government sign proclaiming "You Are Now Entering Navajo Nation," and turned onto the reservation. Once inside the rez, they pulled into a Shell gas station to fill up.

"Go on in and use the head, boy," Bub's grandfather spoke. "I'll check the radiator."

Bub looked at the shabby building hunkered next to the gas station's one-bay repair garage. He read aloud its identifying sign, "The Happy Indian Trading Post."

"It's not a trading post, boy," his grandfather told him. "And there aren't any happy Indians. We made damned sure of that."

Bub got out of the car and headed across the asphalt to the store. As he placed his hand on the hot metal handle of the glass front door he looked up at the depthless blue sky suspended like an upside down bowl over the scrubby red hills in the distance. His bladder ached, his mind unmoored by the vastness of the land. He quickly swung open the door and stepped inside.



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It had been a last minute decision on Bub's grandfather's part to take his grandson with him on this trip, its purpose a meeting the old man had set up weeks ago with Henry Chee, the son of Clayton's old friend Henry "Red Boy" Chee Dodge. The elder Dodge was dead now, but when he was alive he'd been the long-standing chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council.

Although Clayton and Henry senior had come from very different worlds, their friendship had been rooted in a commonality of gratitude and trust. After many years of serving as representatives of their particular groups (a decade after Clayton left the Hashknife to start his own brand, the Seven-Anchor, he'd served two terms as a state legislator) they'd each had occasion to question the intentions of both his own and the opposing side. Each man hewed closely to an introspective sense of justice, a characteristic they'd found lacking in some of their colleagues and fellow tribesmen. Because of this hesitancy to jump on the bandwagon of whatever issue they were expected to pass judgment on, they'd been able to keep their friendship intact long after the initial curiosity of the Indians and the homicidal larceny of the whites had carved itself into the bloody walls of history. They had remained likeminded colleagues throughout the dark years after The Long Walk, until 1947 when Henry died.

It also hadn't hurt that the first time the two men met, Henry had stumbled upon a horseless, half-frozen Clayton buried up to his ears in a snow bank deep in the northern reaches of the Bellemont Range, near the south rim of the Grand Canyon. He had dug him out, tied him onto a makeshift travois and brought him home, but not before Clayton

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was able to return the favor when they were met by a posse of armed angry white men who had decided that the redskin dragging the clearly abused and nearly dead white man was responsible for his condition.

On that day, according to family myth, Clayton had managed to get his half-frozen hand on the Colt Paterson strapped to his belt under the blanket Dodge had wrapped him in and disabuse the vigilantes of their mistaken conviction.

After Chee Dodge's soul had passed over to the spirit world, his heir apparent, Henry, Jr., had taken up his position. Clayton's reason for this visit was to help the son of his old friend survey and dig a half-dozen much-needed wells for the small herds of sheep that still grazed on the sunburnt tufts of grass that sprouted amongst the red sandstone formations towering above the volcanic, wind carved landscape of the Navajo and Hopi Indian reservations.

While Clayton knew he could never right the wrongs that his kind had done to Henry's people, he would not accept that he could do nothing at all. When he'd gotten wind of the young chief's intention to dig the wells and that the state had refused to help him in his endeavor, he knew he had to go. He'd brought Bub along to help with the heavy lifting, as well as his Theodolite and tripod, which he planned on leaving with the chief after they finished the job.

It was biblical. Apache tears rained down like frogs from Exodus onto the floor of The

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Happy Indian Trading Post (*What was it about things falling from the sky? His grandfather's stories – first birds, now frogs – or his own memories and imagination?*), each tiny black tear smacking the scored linoleum with the staccato crack of a bullet finding its mark. The sound bounced off the trampolines of Bub's ear drums and echoed down the narrow aisle where he'd stopped in mid-traverse between the wall of walk-in beverage coolers on his left, their glass front doors fogged over with condensation, and the dusty bank of metal gondola shelves cluttered with tattered boxes overflowing with cheap touristy gewgaws on his right.

He'd never made it to the restroom, so absorbed had he been in his inspection of the inventory piled atop the shelves: tomahawks with balsa wood handles and rubber axe heads, festooned with feathers and daubed in Day-Glo paint, dominated a shelf at eye level; a serpentine pile of once-tried-on and discarded beaded belts, one of which Bub had discovered to his surprise with his name, "Russell," stitched along the back, commanded attention from another; worn out cardboard display boxes overflowing with wafer-thin fake-leather wallets, their beaded edges attached to nickel-chromed key fobs that had been stamp-cut into the shapes of saguaros, buffalos and tepees had been scooted in behind; beef jerky tubs full of spiders and scorpions suspended in amber; pieces of petrified wood; Etch-a-Sketch painted deserts, and miniature kachinas; all had been crammed in willy-nilly onto the shelves above and below with no pretense of presentation or organization.

*And that stupid bag. "Authentic Apache Tears."*

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The deluge continued – who knew there could be so many! – the sound keeping a maraca backbeat to Bub’s clumsy attempts to avoid the tide of cheap paste beads rolling across the floor under his feet. Finally, outmatched by the beads’ random, scattershot direction, he stepped down purposefully, crushing as many as he could under the soles of his sneakers. He looked down at the palm of his hand, at the blown out medicine bag that had somehow returned to the place from which it had been launched, and winged it onto a shelf like it was a black widow spider.

“Sweep it or keep it, white boy!”

He swiveled his head, trying to locate the source of the gravelly chicken cluck. He craned his neck and looked over the top of the gondola, through the spiny thicket of a windshield wiper display at the cash register on the checkout counter four aisles over. Next to the register stood the biggest tub of beef jerky he’d ever seen.

“Over here, turdball!”

His head swiveled again, his eyes tracking the wall at the far end of the aisle where a big plywood sign hung anchored above a door. Loopy rope letters announced: “Restroom.” *Shit*. His bladder sang again. If only he’d kept his hands to himself and just kept on walking instead of stopping to inspect and then finger the buttery strands of faux-suede fringe dangling seductively off the lip of the shelf. It had been too alluring. He’d just had to stroke the silky derma of the plump medicine bag with its bangled drawstring, scoop it up and heft it in his hand – gently at first; more of a toss the second time – losing himself in the satisfying *smack* as the bag hit his hand upon its return; his ear bending to

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the muffled *clack* of the beads inside. On his third toss, the one with the most arm in it, the bag had sailed high up into the air and smacked the buzzing fluorescent light that was hanging from the water-stained ceiling panels and burst open at its seams, its contents raining down all over the floor. If he'd just kept on walking, down the aisle to the back of the store, swung open the restroom door, marched in and done his business, all would be well. "*Genuine Leather Indian Medicine Bag*, the tag had read. *Made In China.*" *No shit.*

"Okay, Drysdale, hit the dugout!"

As he dropped his eyes from the restroom sign he took in the source of the squawking that sounded like an angry chicken on its last pissed off leg, its owner now standing at the end of the aisle. At first it looked to Bub like a furious child of indeterminate age, its roly-poly frame stuffed into some kind of patched together, wild-looking outfit, its tiny feet angrily slapping the floor, heedless of the paste beads exploding underfoot, its head cocked to one side. A petulant scowl framed its bossy, pumpkin colored face. As she plowed towards him – it was a she, he could see that now – brandishing a broom in one hand like a cudgel, she fixed him with her rheumy-eyes, their pupils swimming like aqueous yokes in their crow's-feet nests. Bub sized up the rest of the package: a plastic name tag identifying her as "Minihaha" (sic) dangled by one pin from the pocket of her Halloween-costume squaw dress, its ragged hem leaving a confetti trail of plastic fringe as she brushed by a stack of "*Authentic Navajo Blankets – One Hundred Percent Polyester*" at the end of the aisle. A dime store headdress was mashed on her head; two black vinyl braids had been stapled to the sweatband and swooped

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stiffly off the back of her neck.

The angry slapping sound persisted as she shifted from one foot to the other. Bub's eyes followed. As if she'd thought to give the lie to the whole preposterous ensemble, Minihaha had stuffed her swollen, overworked feet into a pair of open-back kitten heels that looked like they might have been pink at one time, but were now the effluent color of week old coffee grounds, exploded microwaved burritos, popcorn cooking oil, and spilled soda pop. *She's quite a character*, Bub imagined his grandmother saying, remembering her sotto voce critique regarding one of Bub's mother's Junior League friends when she'd shown up at the house for tea one day in a wrinkled Dickey dress splashed with fuchsia horny toads and turquoise armadillos.

"I didn't do anything!" he figured he'd get out ahead of the situation before it got any worse. *Like father, like son.*

"Too late, Opie." She tapped one of the glass cooler doors with one grody knuckle. "BIA. Caught you red handed. Saw the whole thing. Right there."

Bub looked at the foggy glass doors. Sure enough, the telltale marks of two lips and the tip of a nose were still visible, pressed into the condensation on the inside of the glass. Bub's shoulders slumped.

"That's right, four-eyes. Read it and weep."

"It wasn't me! That stupid bag –."

"– was up there tryin' to change a light bulb?" she finished his sentence for him.

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“It fell off –.”

“Tell it to the judge, Jailhouse!” She swatted his leg with the bristles-end of the broom.

“Hey!” He batted it away.

“Whoa! Take it and rake it, Kemosabe!”

“You can’t tell me –.”

“Uh. Uh.” Finger wag. “You’re on Indian land now, white boy. You do what I say.” She followed his eyes as he looked up the aisle and out through the glass front door where his grandfather was still standing in front of the Oldsmobile by the gas pump island. “So you better get on it. Your big chief’s gonna be here any minute.”

“I gotta pee,” Bub said helplessly. He looked down at the floor awash in paste beads. He could feel his face burning. He poked at his glasses and swallowed hard to stop the tears from starting in his eyes.

“Simmer down, sad sack,” Minihaha relented. Her tone softened. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

For a moment, they looked at each other fretfully, neither one making a move.

Finally, she said, “So what’s it gonna be, cowboy: rez or state?” She leaned in, cupping one hand to her mouth as if preparing to impart an important piece of information. “I’d go state,” she whispered. “Rez cops get a bit tetchy when it comes to political incidents such as this. They like to set an example, if you know what I mean.”

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His face still burning, no mercy in sight, Bub took the broom and began sweeping the floor. Minihaha followed his ministrations, beaming like a proud parent. “Missed a spot,” she tapped the toe of one kitten heel in the kick space under the cooler doors.

Somewhat recovered, Bub stopped sweeping and studied the bossy, roly-poly character with the pumpkin face and persimmon grin staring up at him. *I could just fuckin’ whack her over the head with the broom.* He gauged the trajectory of his swing. The image of his grandfather intruded. He stabbed the bristles of the broom into the kick space, obeying his jailer’s command.

“That’s it, Opie. You’re really payin’ the piper now.”

As he churned the broom over the sea of Apache Tears, Bub glanced once more at the fingerprint-smudged front door of the store and beyond at the gas pump island. His grandfather was making his way across the sunbaked asphalt towards them now, his head down, touching the brim of his Stetson Open Road with one hand.

“Apostate! Unfaithful recreant! Hussy fucker!”

His mother was giving it to him now. Bub shuddered, shaking himself free of the trance where *life is held, like an arrested gesture, in photographic abeyance* (a phrase he’d heard her whisper one day in an incantation, declaiming each of its three-or-four-word elements in a discreet thought, its end bitten off and spat out the way Bub had seen his grandfather do to the tips of his Roi-Tan cigars. She had been stretched out on the



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sofa in the living room, her supine form wreathed in a veil of cigarette smoke, her face pointed upwards, tented by a book about angels; at least that's what he'd reckoned as he dashed by her on his way out the door that day, the words on the book's jacket fading in and out of smoky sight and sticking in pieces in his mind: *Something... Something... Angel*).

But now it was her own incandescent mix-up of 18<sup>th</sup> century literary speak and hardcore cursing that had freed him from his woolgathering, if only for a moment, drafting him back into the *mise en scène* that had remained unchanged in its design and would stay that way, he knew, until it had run its course – with or without him.

Still, he was horrified at what he saw. The pullulating memory of his trip to Window Rock and his run-in with Minihaha in The Happy Indian Trading Post had so thoroughly invaded his consciousness that at first sight he thought his mother had bled all over the table. In fact, he'd missed the toppling of her highball glass, and the image he couldn't bear to countenance was the ichoric, scarlet river of her spilt Bloody Mary that was running down the center of the white tablecloth.

Inexorably, his attention returned to his indomitable mother, who had once again gotten her feet back under herself. She wheeled on her nemesis. Both parents stood there for a moment, their chests heaving, their wrenched faces glaring at each other like opposing boxers after eight rounds as they caught their breath. She coughed as if she were clearing her throat. "You bastard! You tricked me! You –!"

Bub's father shot his hand out again, his fingers closing on the back of her neck.

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He pushed her face into the wadded up pants still lying on the table. “How’s that, Nancy Drew? That’s right! Go on! Sniff it! Sniff it all you want for all I care!”

Her hands flittered over the table as she tried to pull away from the offending piece of clothing. She threw out her arms. One hand landed on the oily, empty serving plate. Her fingers closed on the serving fork that had somehow stayed balanced on its edge. She turned her head sideways, swung her arm behind herself as hard as she could, and plunged the tines of the serving fork into the top of Bub’s father’s left thigh. Bub stared at the two tines’ points of entry. They were almost in the same spot as the spot on his father’s khakis, barely two inches from his groin. His father screamed in falsetto, an octave higher than his speaking voice. He let go of her hair. “Bitch! I’ll kill you!”

Bub felt something wet and warm rush into his underwear and down his legs.

“Womanizer! Whoremonger!” she orbited on one foot, still holding onto the handle of the fork that was embedded in his leg. “Burn in hell for your misdeeds!” She shoved the fork deeper into his leg, and let it go. “Take that, hussy-fucker!”

His father screamed again. The fork bobbed as he lurched away, batting his leg with his hands.

Bub looked down at the floor at the puddle of urine spreading around his feet. When he looked up, the kitchen had shrunk. The air was smudged with flying objects, the table tipped over on its side, the tablecloth with its bloody smear twisted underneath it on the floor.

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“Run away, Bub! Don’t let the dirty whoremonger get you!” this directive tossed over her shoulder as she dashed out of the room.

“Stay here, sport. I’ll be right back,” the incongruity of his tone hung in the air as Bub’s father started after her, the bobbing fork now seemingly forgotten. He took two steps and stopped. He grunted in pain. He reached down and wrapped his hand around the handle. With a strangled yelp, he yanked out the fork. He dropped it onto the floor and hobbled after Bub’s mother.

Bub doubled over and gagged. The undigested chunk of fish came up and landed on the floor at his feet. When he looked up, the wider scale of the kitchen came back into focus: globs of mashed potatoes and gravy clung to the legs of the overturned table; peas and carrots were strewn across the floor like the colorful rye grass seeds his grandfather tossed out when they planted the winter lawn in the East Yard every fall. Dinnerware – the serving plate now in shards; his parents’ dinner plates still whole but upside down; the smashed tureen lying in a puddle of brown gravy – littered the floor. The highball and drinking glasses, two of them smashed into pieces and one not, lay scattered like exploded materiel on a battlefield. His mother’s and father’s chairs lay on their sides at either end of the upended table; forks and knives winked at him from their positions on the floor by the stove, by the screen door, in the toe kick space under the cabinets by the sink. His father’s offending khakis, crumpled and spattered with gravy, hung almost casually over one leg of the overturned table.

Bub listened to his parents’ shouts and imprecations, their messages dimmed now

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by the distance down the hallway and the closed bedroom door. He could feel the urine drying on his legs. He took a step back from the table. His bare foot pressed down on something hard and sharp. He winced. He lifted his foot and bent down to pick up the offending object. He held it up to the sunlight that was pushing its spindly arms through the kitchen windows. It was a silver spoon, its handle twisted at its cartouche, the “S” for “Stanfield” now at a forty-five degree angle from its oval bowl. *I want to live in there. You can't. Bent spoons don't belong.*

His mother's tormented muffled voice rang out from the other room. Bub stuffed the spoon into the pocket of his cut-offs. He picked his way carefully across the kitchen floor through the minefield of olives, broken glass and pieces of ceramic. When he got to the screen door, he pushed out, the gasp of the pneumatic door-closer and the rusty shriek of the hinges abrading his frazzled nerves. As he crossed the patio, he doubled over again and dry-heaved. Afterwards, he stood stock-still, feeling the sun's heat on his shoulders. He looked out at the yard, at the sun dropping fast behind the oleander hedge. He caught his breath, and held it until he couldn't any longer. A gust of wind brushed his face. He took off, his bare feet propelling him over the hot bricks of the patio and across the sticker strewn surface of the backyard toward the head-high conifer by the construction pipe swing set his grandfather had built shortly after Bub's arrival on the property a decade before. He circled around the conifer and jumped down into the deep, dry irrigation ditch that bisected the property. He poked his head out and looked across the wide backyard, scouting the patchy, sunburnt lawn for any future exhumations. The bent

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spoon pressed against his leg through the pocket of his cut-offs. The sun was almost down. There was still time. He could catch it if he hurried.

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