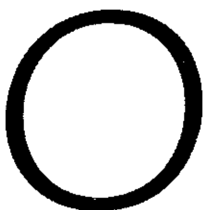
tinue to exist with or without him. Was the story true or false? Was that the question Spencer needed to ask?

Inside, an old woman kneeled in a circle with her loved ones and led them in prayer.

Outside, a white man closed his eyes and prayed to the ghosts of John Wayne, Ethan Edwards, and Marion Morrison, that Holy Trinity.

Somebody said nothing and somebody said amen, amen, amen.

# ONE GOOD MAN



utside the house, Sweetwater and Wonder Horse were building a wheelchair ramp for my father. They didn't need a blueprint, having built twenty-seven ramps on the Spokane Indian Reservation over the years, including five ramps that summer alone. They knew how to fix such things, and they knew how to work quietly, without needless conversation or interaction with their employers. Sweetwater was known to go whole weeks without uttering a single word, opting instead to communicate through monosyllabic grunts and hand gestures, as if he were a very bright infant. Consequently, on that day when my father's wheelchair ramp needed only a few more nails, a coat of paint, and a closing prayer, Wonder Horse was deeply surprised when Sweetwater broke his unofficial vow of silence.

"Jesus was a carpenter," said Sweetwater, trying to make it sound casual, as if he'd merely commented on the weather or the game (What game? Any game!) and then he said it again: "Jesus was a carpenter."

Wonder Horse heard it both times, looked up from his nail and hammer, and stared into Sweetwater's eyes. Though the two men had worked together for thirty years, building three or four generations

of outhouses, picnic tables, and front and back porches, they'd never been much for looking at each other, for seeing. God forbid one of them ever turned up missing and the other became the only person who could provide a proper description to the authorities.

"*Jesus was a carpenter*," said Sweetwater, this time in the Spokane language, to make sure that Wonder Horse understood all the inflections and nuances (the aboriginal poetry) of such a bold statement.

"What?" asked Wonder Horse, as simple a question as could possibly be tendered, though he made it sound as if he'd asked *Where's the tumor?*

"Jesus was a carpenter," said Sweetwater. He would have said it in Spanish, Russian, and German if he could have.

Wonder Horse could think of no logical reply (in any language) to such a complicated statement, especially coming from a simple man like Sweetwater. The whole conversation reeked of theology, and Wonder Horse wanted no part of that. Confused, maybe even a little frightened, he turned back to his work and pounded a nail into the wood, then another, a third, a fourth. He was a middle-aged man made older by too much exposure to direct sunlight and one-and-a-half bad marriages. He knew the cost of wood (six bucks for one standard two-by-four, by God!). With dark hair, eyes, and skin, he was fifty or eighty, take your pick. A small man with large hands, he had to resist the daily urge to get in his pickup and drive away from the reservation, never to return. Sure, the people, the residents of the reservation, be they Indian or white or whatever, certainly needed him to build *things*, but he also believed the whole of the reservation—the streams, rivers, pine trees, topsoil, and stalks of wild wheat—needed him, even loved him. And so he remained because he was loyal and vain.

"What did you say?" Wonder Horse asked again, hoping that Sweetwater would change the subject, take back the complicated thing he had said, and make their lives simple again.



They were building a wheelchair ramp for my father, who was coming home from the hospital without his diabetic, gangrenous feet.

"Jesus was a carpenter," said Sweetwater for the fifth time. Surely, it had become a kind of spell, possibly a curse.

"I don't care," said Wonder Horse, though he cared very much about carpenters and carpentry, about those artists whose medium was wood, and about the art of woodworking itself. Wonder Horse respected wood. He touched it like good lovers touched the skin of their loved ones. He was a Casanova with the hammer, wrench, screwdriver, and circular saw. But now, he felt clumsy and desperate.

"Harrison Ford was a carpenter, too," said Wonder Horse. It was all that he could think to say.

"Who?" asked Sweetwater.

"Harrison Ford, the guy who played Han Solo, you know? In *Star Wars*, the movie?"

"Oh," said Sweetwater. "But Jesus was, you know, a *real* carpenter."

Wonder Horse stared into Sweetwater's eyes (Blue eyes! A half-breed who had never considered himself white, or been considered white by other Spokanes!) and wondered why his best friend had decided to become a casual enemy. Wonder Horse hoped it was an impulsive and individual act and not part of a larger conspiracy.

"So, what are you saying?" asked Wonder Horse. "Are you telling me that Jesus was a good carpenter?"

"You'd think so," said Sweetwater. "Yeah, I bet he was."

"But does it say that, anywhere in the Bible, in those exact words, does it say Jesus was a good carpenter?"

"I don't know. I mean, maybe, yeah, of course. He had to be."

"Have you ever read the Bible?"

"No, not really, but I know all about it."

"Now you sound like a Christian."

"Hey, that's dirty."

"Yeah, you're right, I'm sorry," said Wonder Horse. He wanted to get back to work. He wanted to jump in his pickup and drive away. He swung his hammer again and again, missed the head of the nail once, twice, three times, and drove it sideways into the plywood floor, splitting the two-by-four that lay beneath.

"Damn," said Wonder Horse and punched the wood. He studied his bloody knuckles.

"Are you okay?" asked Sweetwater.

"Always," said Wonder Horse as he tugged at the wayward nail.

They were building a wheelchair ramp for my father, who was coming home from the hospital with no more than six months to live, according to most of his doctors, and as little as two weeks left, according to the others.

"I mean," said Wonder Horse. "What's with all this Bible talk?"

"Ain't Bible talk," said Sweetwater. "It's just something I learned. Jesus was a carpenter."

"Well, hell, anybody can call themselves a carpenter," said Wonder Horse. "I mean, those Tulee boys built themselves a tree house over yonder. I guess that makes them carpenters, but it sure don't make them good carpenters. That thing is going to roll out of that tree like a bowling ball."

"I suppose, but the thing is, Jesus was Jesus, enit? I mean, Jesus must have been a good carpenter. I mean, he was Jesus, enit? That's pretty powerful right there."

"You know," said Wonder Horse. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Why is that?"

"Come on," said Sweetwater, his voice cracking with one emotion or another. "He was Jesus. He could walk on water and, like, conjure up fish and bread and stuff."



"Is that it? Stuff? Stuff? Is that your whole proof on this thing? All that proves is that Jesus might have been a good magician. He might have been a good fisherman. He might have been a good baker. But it absolutely does not prove that he was a good carpenter. I mean, there Jesus was, running all over the place, trying to save the world. Do you really think he had time to study carpentry? Do you really think he had the time to study his tools, to memorize them, to understand them? Do you really think he had the time to devote himself to wood?"

"He was the Son of God. I think he could multitask."

"Multitask!" shouted Wonder Horse. "Multitask! Where do you learn that shit?"

"Television."

"Television? Television? Is that all you have to say to me?"

"I guess," said Sweetwater.

They were building a wheelchair ramp for my father, who was coming home because he didn't want to die in the hospital.

Inside the house, I was looking for those things that could kill my father, for those things that had already killed him, or rather had already assigned to him an appointment with death, an appointment he would not and could not miss. Among the most dangerous or near-dangerous: two boxes of donuts buried beneath Pendleton blankets on the top shelf of his closet; a quart of chocolate milk lying flat in the refrigerator's vegetable drawer; a six-pack of soda pop submerged in the lukewarm water of the toilet tank; hard candy stuffed deeply into the pockets of every coat he owned; and then more hard candy stuffed into the pockets of my late mother's coats, my siblings' long-abandoned coats, and the coats I wore when I was

a child, still hanging in the closet in the bedroom where I had not slept in ten years. Together, these items represented my father's first line of defense. He knew they would be found easily. He intended them to be found easily. Decoys. Camouflage. My father was smart. He'd sacrifice a few treasures in order to distract me from the large caches. In the garage, I poured out ten pounds of Hershey's chocolate kisses one by one from an aluminum gas can. In the attic, I wore gloves and long sleeves when I pulled seven Payday peanut bars from between layers of fiberglass insulation. I flipped through fifty-two westerns, twelve mysteries, and nine true-crime books, and discovered one hundred and twelve fruit wraps pressed tightly between the pages. Inside the doghouse, a Tupperware container filled with Oreo cookies was duct-taped to the ceiling. I gathered all of it, all of those things that my father stupidly loved, and filled seven shopping bags. Most people would have quit searching then, assured they'd emptied the house of its dangers, but I knew my father. I could see him. I could read his mind. I found three pounds of loose sugar waiting beneath three inches of flour in the flour sack. Carefully hidden beneath a layer of frost, popsicles were frozen to the freezer walls. How could my father accomplish such a thing? What were the mechanics? I had no idea, but I found my father's sweet treasures, proving once again that the result is more important than the process. In his bedroom, I lifted the northwest corner of the carpet and found more candy bars, moldy, apparently forgotten. But then, remembering my father's clever mind, I pulled the carpet back a few more inches, and discovered new chocolate bars carefully wrapped in aluminum foil. I filled more shopping bags (two, nine, thirteen bags) and carried them outside, past Wonder Horse and Sweetwater pounding the last few nails into place, and tossed the bags in a pile on the road. There, with the sky clear and



blue, I doused those bags with kerosene and dropped a burning match on the pile.

Later that day, I lifted my father from the passenger seat of my van, a Ford with more than two hundred thousand miles on the odometer. My father carried sixty-five years on his odometer and had lost forty pounds in the last few months. I carried him easily over to his electric wheelchair (purchased for five hundred dollars from a white woman whose paraplegic husband had died) and set him in the worn leather seat. He looked so frail that I wondered if he had the strength to move the joystick that powered the chair.

"Can you make it?" I asked.

Of course he could. He was a man who used to teach ballroom dancing, back when he was young and strong and financing his communications education at the University of Washington (he'd always meant to start his own radio station on the reservation). He was the man who had taught me how to waltz about fifteen minutes before I'd left to pick up my date for the high school prom. I'd always wondered how we looked: two tall Indian men, father and son, spinning around the living room of a reservation HUD house.

My father guided the wheelchair up the ramp. I wasn't nervous about its construction. I trusted Sweetwater and Wonder Horse. I knew the ramp would hold.

"Sweet and Wonder?" asked my father, using the nicknames only men of a certain generation were allowed to use.

"Yeah," I said. "But they got in a fight about Jesus. I don't think they're on speaking terms now."

"They're like an old married couple, enit?"

"They'll kiss and make up."

"They always do."

My mother had died ten years earlier from a brain tumor. She had been a librarian, a lover of books. By the end of her life, she could no longer speak, let alone read, so she had no last words from her deathbed, only the slow blinking of her eyes, and then the fading of the light behind them. It had been a quiet death for a woman with such a large vocabulary.

I followed my father and his chair into the house. He had not been here in some weeks and so was surprised to see the amount of home improvement I had done myself or had paid others to do. Or rather, he was surprised at the improvements he could see, since his vision was impaired by the blood that flowed from the broken veins in his eyes. The walls were painted a fresh white, a new carpet had replaced the twenty-five-year-old shag, and family photographs were fitted with new frames. Cosmetic changes, really, but my father acted as if I'd built him a mansion.

"You're good to me," he said. I didn't know if that was completely true, or if it had ever been true, even in part.

"You didn't have to do this," he said. "I'm not going to live long enough to get it ugly again."

"Hey," I said. "They always underestimate Indians. You're going to make it until next Christmas, at least. You eat better and you'll see Paul graduate high school."

Paul was my son. He lived with his Lummi Indian mother in Seattle, exactly two hundred and seventy-nine miles from my house in Spokane. She'd remarried a white man who made a lot more money than I did. He was a consultant for one thing or another—one of those jobs that only white guys seem to get. Consultant. He consulted. Others paid him to consult. They wanted to be consulted. He wanted



to consult. All around me, white men were consulting other white men. My son lived with a consultor, or was it spelled differently? Did my son live with a consulter? The whole world could live in the space between that *o* and that *e*. My son lived in that space. My son asked another man for consultation. He was an Indian consultantee loved fiercely by a white consultant. Sure, my vocabulary was bitter (She'd chosen somebody over me!) but I was happy the white man, the stepfather, was able to provide my son with a better life than I would have on my high school English teacher's salary. And I was happy that my son was living in Seattle, where twenty percent of the city was brown-skinned, instead of Spokane, where ninety-nine percent of the people were white. I'm not exactly racist. I like white people as a theory; I'm just not crazy about them in practice. But, all in all, ours was a good divorce. I still loved my ex-wife, without missing her or our marriage (I'm a liar), and spent every other weekend, all of the major holidays, and most of the minor ones, with the three of them in Seattle—all of us having decided to *make it work*, as the therapists had said. The nontraditional arrangement, this extended family, was strange when measured by white standards, but was very traditional by Indian standards. *What is an Indian?* Is it a child who can stroll unannounced through the front doors of seventeen different houses?

"How long before Paul graduates?" asked my father as we stood (I was the only one standing!) in our house. No, it wasn't my house anymore. Only my ghost lived there now.

"Nine months," I said. "In June."

"Six to five against me making it."

He always knew the odds. He'd always been a gambler and had lost more than one paycheck to the horses and the dogs and the Sonics and the Seahawks and the Mariners and the dice and the playing cards.

"I'll bet twenty bucks you make it," I said.

"I expect you to throw that Andrew Jackson in the coffin with me."

"I expect you to buy me lunch in July."

He wheeled himself into his bedroom at the back of the house. I hadn't changed anything about his personal space, knowing that he would have resented the invasion.

"What did you do in here?" he asked.

"Can't you tell?" I asked.

"Son, I'm mostly blind in one eye and I can't see much out of the other."

"Everything is the same, " I said (I lied) and wondered how long it would be before his vision left him forever.

His room had been the same for the last ten years, since my mother's death. (His wife! His wife! Of course, that's how he remembered her!) The same ratty chair, the same bookshelf overflowing with the same books, the same bed with the same two-by-fours holding it together. I'd been conceived in that bed, or so the legend goes. Of course, according to my father, I'd also been conceived in the front and/or backseat (and trunk!) of a 1965 Chevrolet Malibu; in a telephone booth in downtown Seattle; on the seventeenth floor of the Sheraton Hotel in Minneapolis; on the living room couch during halftime of a Duke–North Carolina basketball game; in a powwow tepee in Browning, Montana; and amid the broken eggs and expired milk of a 7-Eleven walk-in freezer in Phoenix, Arizona.

I missed my mother like crazy. During all of my childhood bedtimes, she'd read me books (Whitman! Dickinson!) I could not understand and would not understand until many years later.

*What is an Indian?* Is it a boy who can sing the body electric or a woman who could not stop for death?

My siblings, three brothers and two sisters, were scattered in the indigenous winds, all of them living on somebody else's reservation



with lovers whose blood came from a dozen different tribes. I'd lost track of the number of nieces and nephews I had, but I didn't feel too guilty about that because I'm quite sure that my brothers had also lost track of the number of kids they'd helped conceive (the Fathers of our Country!).

Though I didn't see my siblings much, perhaps two or three times a year at family and tribal gatherings, we'd always been happy to see one another and had easily fallen back into our comfortable patterns: hugs, kisses, genial insults, then the stories about our mother, and finally the all-night games of Scrabble. None of us had ever found the need to chastise any of the others for our long absences from each other. We'd all pursued our very different versions of the American Dream (the Native American Dream!) and had all been successful to one degree or another. We were teacher, truck driver, logger, accountant, preacher, and guitar player. Our biggest success: we were all alive. Our biggest claim to fame: we were all sober.

In his bedroom, my father spun slow circles in his wheelchair. In his wallet, he kept photographs of all of his children, and pulled them out three or four times a day to examine them. He thought this small ceremony was a secret. Those photographs were wrinkled and faded with age and the touch of my father's hands.

"Look at me," he said as he spun in a figure eight. "I'm Mary Lou Retton."

"Ten, ten, ten, but the East German gives him a three," I said, reading the imaginary scores.

"Damn East Germans," said my father. He stopped spinning and tried to catch his breath.

"I'm an old man," he said.

"Hey, aren't you tired?" I asked.

"Yeah, I could sleep."

"You want to help me get you into bed?" I asked, carefully phrasing the question, setting down the pronouns in the most polite order. Of course, it was a rhetorical question. He couldn't have made it by himself but he didn't want to admit to his weakness by asking for help, and I didn't want to point out his weakness by helping him without asking first. The unasked question, the unspoken answer, and so we remained quiet men in a country of quiet men.

"I am tired," he said.

I picked him up, marveling again at how small he had become, and laid him down on his bed. I slid a pillow beneath his head and pulled a quilt over him. He looked up at me with his dark, Asian-shaped eyes. I'd inherited those eyes and their eccentric shapes. I wondered what else my father and I had constructed in our lives together. What skyscrapers, what houses, and what small rooms with uneven floors? I had never doubted his love for me, not once, and understood it to be enormous. I certainly loved him, but I didn't know what exact shapes our love took when we pulled it (tenderness, regret, anger, and hope) out of our bodies and offered it for public inspection, for careful forensics.

"Go to sleep," I whispered to my father. "I'll make you some soup when you wake up."

I'd left the reservation when I was eighteen years old, leaving with the full intention of coming back after I'd finished college. I had never wanted to contribute to the brain drain, to be yet another of the best and brightest Indians to abandon his or her tribe to the Indian leaders who couldn't spell the word *sovereignty*. Yet no matter my idealistic notions, I have never again lived with my tribe. I left the reservation



for the same reason a white kid leaves the cornfields of Iowa, or the coal mines of Pennsylvania, or the oil derricks of Texas: ambition. And I stayed away for the same reasons the white kids stayed away: more ambition. Don't get me wrong. I loved the reservation when I was a child and I suppose I love it now as an adult (I live only sixty-five miles away), but it's certainly a different sort of love. As an adult, I am fully conscious of the reservation's weaknesses, its inherent limitations (geographic, social, economic, and spiritual), but as a child I'd believed the reservation to be an endless, magical place.

When I was six years old, a bear came out of hibernation too early, climbed up on the roof of the Catholic Church, and promptly fell back asleep. In itself not an amazing thing, but what had amazed me then, and amazes me now, is that nobody, not one Spokane Indian, bothered that bear. Nobody called the police or the Forest Service. None of the Indian hunters took advantage of a defenseless animal, even those Indian hunters who'd always taken advantage of defenseless animals and humans. Hell, even the reservation dogs stopped barking whenever they strolled past the church. We all, dogs and Indians alike, just continued on with our lives, going to work or school, playing basketball and hide-and-seek, scratching at fleas, sleeping with other people's spouses, marking our territory, while that bear slept on.

During that brief and magical time, "How's the bear?" replaced "How are you doing?" as the standard greeting.

*What is an Indian?* Is it the lead actor in a miracle or the witness who remembers the miracle?

For three or four days, that bear (that Indian!) had slept, unmolested, dreaming his bear dreams, until the bright sun had disturbed him one sunrise. Bob May happened to be there with his camera and shot up a roll of film as the bear climbed down from the church, stretched

his spine and legs, and then ambled off into the woods, never to be seen again.

But all of that was years ago, decades ago, long before I brought my father home from the hospital to die, before I left him alone in his bedroom where he dreamed his diabetic dreams.

*What is an Indian?* Is it a son who can stand in a doorway and watch his father sleep?

Just after sundown, I woke my father from his nap, set him in his wheelchair, and rolled him into the kitchen.

"Do you remember that Catholic bear?" I asked him as we ate tomato soup at the table, which was really just a maple-wood door nailed to four two-by-sixes. The brass doorknob was still attached. The tomato soup was homemade, from my father's recipe. He'd once been the head chef at Ankeny's, the best restaurant in Spokane. I'd waited tables there one summer and made fifty bucks in tips every shift. Good money for an eighteen-year-old. Better yet, I'd lost my virginity on a cool July evening to a waitress named Carla, a white woman who was twenty years older. She'd always called me sweetheart and had let me sleep with her only once. Any more than that, she'd said, and you're going to fall in love with me, and then I'll just have to break your heart. I'd been grateful to her and told her so. I never saw her again after that summer, but I sent her Christmas cards for ten years, even though I'd never received a response, and only stopped when the last card had been returned with no forwarding address.

"The one that climbed on the church?" asked my father, remembering. His hand trembled as he lifted his spoon to his lips. He'd slept for three hours but he still looked exhausted.



"Yeah, what do you think happened to it?" I asked.

"It owns a small auto shop in beautiful Edmonton, British Columbia."

"Bear's Repairs?"

"Exactly."

We laughed together at our silly joke, until he coughed and gagged. My father, once a handsome man who'd worn string ties and fedoras, was now an old man, a tattered bathrobe on a stick.

"Excuse me," he said, strangely polite, as he spat into his cup.

We ate without further conversation. What was there to say? He slurped his soup, a culinary habit that had irritated me throughout our lives together, but I didn't mind it at all as we shared that particular meal.

"When are you heading back to Spokane?" he asked after he finished eating and pushed away his empty bowl.

"I'm not."

"Don't you have to teach?"

"I took a leave of absence. I think the Catholic teenagers of Spokane, Washington, can diagram sentences and misread *To Kill a Mockingbird* without me."

"Are you sure about that, Atticus?"

"Positive."

He picked at his teeth with his tongue. He was thinking hard.

"What are you going to do about money?" he asked.

"I've got some saved up," I said. Of course, in my economic dictionary, I'd discovered *some* meant *very little*. I had three thousand dollars in savings and maybe five hundred in checking. I'd been hoping it would last six months, or until my father died. By the light in his eyes, I knew he was guessing at exactly how much I'd saved and also wondering if it would last. He carried a tiny life insurance policy that would pay for the cost of his burial.

"It's you and me, then," he said.

"Yes."

He wouldn't look at me.

"What do you think they did with them?"

"With what?"

"My feet," he said. We both looked down at his legs, at the bandaged stumps where his feet used to be.

"I think they burn them," I said.

*What is an Indian?*

That's what the professor wrote on the chalkboard three minutes into the first class of my freshman year at Washington State University.

*What is an Indian?*

The professor's name was Dr. Lawrence Crowell (don't forget the doctorate!) and he was, according to his vita, a Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian Indian from Hot Springs, Kentucky, or some such place.

"What is an Indian?" asked Dr. Crowell. He paced around the small room—there were twenty of us terrified freshmen—and looked each of us in the eyes. He was a small man, barely over five feet tall, with gray eyes and grayer hair.

"What is an Indian?" he asked me as he stood above me. I suppose he might have been trying to *tower* over me, but I was nearly as tall as he was even while sitting down, so that bit of body language failed to translate in his favor.

"Are you an Indian?" he asked me.

Of course I was. (Jesus, my black hair hung down past my ass and I was dark as a pecan!) I'd grown up on my reservation with my tribe.



I understood most of the Spokane language, though I'd always spoken it like a Jesuit priest. Hell, I'd been in three car wrecks! And most important, every member of the Spokane Tribe of Indians could tell you the exact place and time where I'd lost my virginity. Why? Because I'd told each and every one of them. I mean, I knew the real names, nicknames, and secret names of every dog that had lived on my reservation during the last twenty years.

"Yeah, I'm Indian," I said.

"What kind?" asked Dr. Crowell.

"Spokane."

"And that's all you are?"

"Yeah."

"Your mother is Spokane?"

"Full-blood."

"And your father as well?"

"Full-blood."

"Really? Isn't that rare for your tribe? I thought the Spokanes were very mixed."

"Well, my dad once tried to make it with a Cherokee-Choctaw-Seminole-Irish-Russian, but poor guy, he just couldn't get it up."

My classmates laughed.

"You know," I added. "My momma always used to tell me, those mixed-blood Indians, they just ain't sexy enough."

My classmates laughed even louder.

"Get out of my classroom," Dr. Crowell said to me. "And don't come back until you can show me some respect. I am your elder."

"Yes, sir," I said and left the room.

Of course, my mother's opinion about the general desirability of mixed-blood Indians had been spoken mostly in jest. She had always been a funny woman.

"I mean, there's so many sexy white guys in the world," my mother had once told me. "There are white guys who like being white, and what's not to like? They own everything. So, if you get the chance to sleep with a real white guy, especially one of them with a British accent or something, or Paul Newman or Steve McQueen, then why are you going to waste your time on some white guy who says he's part Indian? Jeez, if I wanted to sleep with part-Indians, then I could do that at every powwow. Hell, I could get an orgy going with eight or nine of those Cherokees and maybe, just maybe, they would all add up to one real Indian."

"And besides all that, listen to me, son," she'd continued. "If your whole mission in life is to jump an Indian, then why not jump the Indian with the most Indian going on inside of him? And honey, believe me when I say that every last inch of your daddy is Indian."

She'd laughed then and hugged me close. She'd always loved to talk nasty. For her, the telling of a dirty joke had always been the most traditional and sacred portion of any conversation.

"If I'm going after a penis only because it's Indian," my mother had said, "then it better be a one-hundred-percent-guaranteed, American Indian, aboriginal, First Nations, indigenous penis. Hey, I don't want to get into some taste test, and realize one of these penises is Coke and the other one is Pepsi."

Tears had rolled down her face as she'd laughed. At that moment, I loved her so much that I could barely breathe. I was twelve years old and she was teaching me about sex and all of its complications.

Her best piece of sexual advice: "Son, if you're going to marry a white woman, then marry a rich one, because those white-trash women are just Indians with bad haircuts."

The last thing she ever said to me: "Don't take any shit from anybody."



Of course, my mother would have felt only contempt for a man like Dr. Lawrence Crowell, not because he was a white man who wanted to be Indian (God! When it came right down to it, Indian was the best thing to be!), but because he thought he was entitled to tell other Indians what it meant to be Indian.

*What is an Indian?* Is it a son who brings his father to school as show-and-tell?

"Excuse me, sir," Crowell said to my father as we both walked into the room. "Are you in my class?"

"Sweetheart," said my father. "You're in my class now."

After that, I didn't say a word. I didn't need to say a word. My father sat at a desk, pulled out his false teeth, tucked them into his pants pocket, and smiled his black-hole smile the whole time. My father also wore a U.S. Army T-shirt that said *Kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out*. Of course, my father had never actually served in the military (He was a pacifist!) but he knew how to wield the idea of a gun.

"What is an Indian?" Crowell asked as he stood in front of the classroom.

My father raised his left hand.

"Anybody?" asked the professor.

With his hand high above his head, my father stood from his chair.

"Anybody?"

My father dropped his hand, walked up to the front, and stood directly in front of Crowell.

"Sir," he said to my father. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Are you an Indian?"

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"So am I."

"I don't know," said my father. "Now, you may have some Indian

blood. I can see a little bit of that aboriginal bone structure in your face, but you ain't Indian. No. You might even hang out with some Indians. Maybe even get a little of the ha-ha when one of the women is feeling sorry for you. But you ain't Indian. No. You might be a Native American but you sure as hell ain't Indian."

"Listen, I don't have to take this from you. Do you want me to call security?"

"By the time security arrived, I could carefully insert your right foot deep into your own rectum."

I hid my face and stifled my laughter. My father hadn't been in a fistfight since sixth grade and she'd beaten the crap out of him.

"Are you an Indian?" my father asked again.

"I was at Alcatraz during the occupation."

"That was, what, November '69?"

"Yeah, I was in charge of communications. How about you?"

"I took my wife and kids to the Pacific Ocean, just off Neah Bay. Most beautiful place in the world."

Though I'd been only three years old at the time, I remembered brief images of the water, the whales, and the Makah Indians who lived there in Neah Bay, or perhaps I had only stolen my memories, my images, from my father's stories. In hearing his stories a thousand times over the years, had I unconsciously memorized them, had I colonized them and pretended they were mine? One theory: we can fool ourselves into believing any sermon if we repeat it enough times. Proof of theory: the number of times in his life the average human whispers *Amen*. What I know: I'm a liar. What I remember or imagine I remember: we stayed in Neah Bay during the off-season, so there were very few tourists, though tourists had rarely visited Neah Bay before or since that time, not until the Makahs had decided to resume their tradition of hunting whales. The tourists came because



they wanted to see the blood. Everybody, white and Indian alike, wanted to see the blood.

*What is an Indian?* Is it a man with a spear in his hands?

"What about Wounded Knee?" Crowell asked my father. "I was at Wounded Knee. Where were you?"

"I was teaching my son here how to ride his bike. Took forever. And when he finally did it, man, I cried like a baby, I was so proud."

"What kind of Indian are you? You weren't part of the revolution."

"I'm a man who keeps promises."

It was mostly true. My father had kept most of his promises, or had tried to keep all of his promises, except this one: he never stopped eating sugar.

After we shared that dinner of homemade tomato soup, my father slept in his bed while I sat awake in the living room and watched the white noise of the television. My father's kidneys and liver were beginning to shut down. *Shut down*. So mechanical. At that moment, if I had closed my eyes, I could have heard the high-pitched whine of my father's engine (it was working too hard!) and the shudder of his chassis. In his sleep, he was climbing a hill (downshifting all the way!) and might not make it over the top.

At three that morning, I heard my father coughing, and then I heard him retching, gagging. I raced into his room, flipped on the light, and discovered him drenched in what I thought was blood.

"It's the soup, it's just the soup," he said and laughed at the fear in my face. "I threw up the soup. It's tomatoes, the tomatoes."

I undressed him and washed his naked body. His skin had once been dark and taut, but it had grown pale and loose.

"You know how to get rid of tomato stains?" he asked.

"With carbonated water," I said.

"Yeah, but how do you get rid of carbonated-water stains?"

I washed his belly, washed the skin that was blue with cold and a dozen tattoos. I washed his arms and hands. I washed his legs and penis.

"You shouldn't have to do this," he said, his voice cracking. "You're not a nurse."

*What is an Indian?* Is it a son who had always known where his father kept his clothes in neat military stacks?

I pulled a T-shirt over my father's head. I slipped a pair of boxer shorts over his bandaged legs and up around his waist.

"How's the bear?" I asked him, and he laughed until he gagged again, but there was nothing left in his stomach for him to lose. He was still laughing when I switched off the light, lay down beside him, and pulled the old quilt over us.

"You remember when I first made the tomato soup?" he asked me.

"Yeah, that summer at Ankeny's."

"The summer of Carla, as I recall."

"I didn't know you knew about her."

"Jeez, you told everybody. That's why she wouldn't do it with you anymore. You hurt her feelings. You should have kept your mouth shut."

"I had no idea."

I wondered what would happen if I saw her again. Would she remember me with fondness or with regret?

"Before I threw up my soup, I was dreaming," he said.

"About what?"

"I was dreaming there was a knock on the door and I got up and walked over there. I wasn't walking on my stumps or anything. I was



just sort of floating. And the knocking on the door was getting louder and louder. And I was getting mad, you know?"

I knew.

"And then I open up the door," continued my father. "And I'm ready to yell, ready to shout, what the hell you want, right? But I don't see anybody right away, until I look down, and there they are."

"Your feet."

"My feet."

"Wow."

"Wow, enit? Exactly. Wow. There's my feet, my bare-ass feet just standing there on the porch."

"They talked, enit?"

"Damn right, they talked. These little mouths opened up on the big toes, like some crazy little duet, and sang in Spanish."

"Do you speak Spanish?"

"No, but they kept singing about Mexico."

"You ever been to Mexico?"

"No. Never even been to California."

I thought about my father's opportunities and his failures, about the man he should have been and the man he had become. *What is an Indian?* Is it a man with a good memory? I thought about the pieces of my father—his children and grandchildren, his old shoes and unfinished novels—scattered all over the country. He was a man orphaned at six by his father's soldierly death in Paris, France, and, three months later, by his mother's cancerous fall in Spokane, Washington. I thought about my mother's funeral and how my father had climbed into the coffin with her and how we, the stronger and weaker men of the family, had to pull him out screaming and kicking. I wondered if there was some kind of vestigial organ inside all of us that collected and stored our grief.

"Well, then, damn it," I said. "We're going to Mexico."

▲

Two hours later, my father and I sat (he couldn't do anything but sit!) in Wonder Horse's garage, which was really a converted old barn, while Wonder Horse and Sweetwater, reunited for this particular occasion, gave my battered van a quick tune-up.

"Hey," said Wonder Horse. "You've been treating this van like it was a white man. It's all messed up."

Sweetwater, having returned to his usual and accustomed silence, nodded his head in agreement.

"You see," continued Wonder Horse. "You have to treat your car with love. And I don't mean love of an object. You see, that's just wrong. That's materialism. You have to love your car like it's a sentient being, like it can love you back. Now, that's some deep-down agape love. And you want to know why you should love your car like it can love you back?"

"Why?" asked my father and I simultaneously.

"Because it shows faith," said Wonder Horse. "And that's the best thing we Indians have left."

Sweetwater pointed at Wonder Horse—a gesture of agreement, of affirmation, of *faith*.

I looked around Wonder Horse's garage, at the dozens of cars and pieces of cars strewn about. Most of them would never run again and served only as depositories for spare parts.

"What about all of these cars?" I asked. "They don't look so well loved."

"These selfless automobiles are organ donors," said Wonder Horse. "And there's no greater act of faith than that."

"I'm an organ donor," I said. "Says so right on my driver's license."

"That just means you're a potential organ donor," said Wonder



Horse. "Ain't nothing wrong with potential, but it ain't real until it's real."

"Well, you're potentially an asshole," I said. "With a whole lot of potential to get wider and wider."

The four of us, we all laughed; we were Indian men enjoying one another's company. It happens all the time.

"I mean," said Wonder Horse. "What would you be willing to give up to ensure somebody else's happiness?"

"That's a big question," said my father.

"Tell me a big answer," said Wonder Horse, and then he asked me this: "I mean, if you could give up your feet, would you give them to your father?"

"Oh, jeez," said my father before I could answer. "Now we're talking about potential. What kind of goofy operation would that be? I mean, if you could really do that, you wouldn't take away living people's feet, enit? You'd transplant dead people's feet."

"That's disgusting," said Sweetwater, then returned to his silence.

"Damn right, it's disgusting," said my father. "I mean, who's to guarantee I'd get Indian feet? What if I got white feet? I'd be an Indian guy walking around on some white guy's feet."

"Hey, Long John Silver," said Wonder Horse. "That would mean your feet would have a job, but you'd be unemployed."

We all laughed again. We could afford to laugh because all four of us carried money in our wallets.

"But, come on," Wonder Horse said to me. "Enough of the jokes. Would you give up your feet for your father?"

I looked at my father. He would be dead soon, maybe tomorrow, perhaps by the first snowfall, certainly by this time next year. I asked myself this: If I could take the days and years I had left to live, all of my remaining time, then divide that number by two, and give half

of my life expectancy to my father, thereby extending his time on the planet, would I do it?

*No*, I thought. *No, no, of course not.*

"I tell you what I'd do," I said. "I'd give up one of my feet."

"Wouldn't you be the matching pair?" asked Wonder Horse and ducked his head into the engine of my van. I saw us: two Indian men holding each other up, trying to maintain their collective balance.

"No," I said. "We'd be opposites."

Beginning in Wellpinit, Washington, my father and I traveled through Little Falls, Reardan, Davenport, Harrington, Downs, Ritzville, Lind, Connell, Pasco, Burbank, Attalia, Wallula, then across the border into Cold Springs, Oregon, and on through Hermiston, Stanfield, Pendleton, Pilot Rock, Nye, Battle Mountain, Dale, Long Creek, Fox, Beech Creek, Mt. Vernon, Canyon City, Seneca, Silvies, Burns, Riley, Wagonfire, Valley Falls, Lakeview, New Pine Creek, then across another border into Willow Ranch, California, and on through Davis Creek, Alturas, Likely, Madeline, Termo, Ravendale, Litchfield, Standish, Butingville, Milford, Doyle, Constantina, Hallelujah Junction, and then into Reno, Nevada.

From Reno, my father and I traveled to Carson City, Glenbrook, Zephyr Cove, Stateline, and then into Echo Summit, California, followed by Twin Bridges, Kyburz, Riverton, Pacific House, Diamond Springs, Plymouth, Drytown, 10 City, Jackson, San Andreas, Angels Camp, Tuttletown, Jamestown, Chinese Camp, Coulterville, Bear Valley, Mt. Bullion, Mariposa, Catheys Valley, Planada, Tuttle, Merced, El Nido, Red Top, Chowchill, Fairmead, Berenda, Madera, Herndon, Fresno, Easton, Hub, Armona, Stratford, Kettleman



City, Devils Den, Blackwells Corner, McKittrick, Derby Acres, Fellows, Taft, Maricopa, Venucopa, Frazier Park, Forman, Pear Blossom, Littlerock, San Bernardino, Redlands, Beaumont, San Jacinto, Aquanga, Warner Springs, Santa Ysabel, Julian, Guatay, Boulevard, Campo, Potrero, and finally, just after sunrise, we arrived in Tecate, California.

Of course this was just the itinerary I had planned before our departure. Did we truly follow it? Do you think we had enough time?

Last Christmas, I woke up in my ex-wife's house (God! She might have screwed her husband while I was sleeping just a dozen feet away!) and wondered if my son understood his own life, if he realized how privileged he was. But Paul wasn't privileged because there were dozens of presents beneath the tree. (that was just evidence of his parents' materialism, and not of what Wonder Horse would call deep-down agape love!) No, my son was privileged because his stepfather was a good man. It pained me to know that; it pained me to wake up on the floor of that good man's house while he woke up with the woman who was the best part of my past tense.

I didn't love her anymore, not like I did (another lie), but I wondered what would happen if you let the archaeologists dig into my buried temples. What artifacts would they bring to the surface? What would those recovered cups and tools mean to me then? What would be redeemed, remembered, reborn?

That last Christmas, I walked into the kitchen and made coffee, a simple ceremony that white people perform just as well and as often as Indians. I poured three cups and carried them upstairs. *What is an Indian?* Is it a man with waiting experience, a man who can carry ten

cups at the same time, one looped in the hook of each finger and both thumbs? I knocked on their door (the ex-wife and her new husband) and waited for them to open it. Of course, I was stepping across boundaries. What if they had been making love at that precise moment? What if my ex-wife had been forced to push her husband (and his penis!) away from her and rush to the door? What if she'd appeared to me with flushed cheeks, racing heart, and wild hair? What if she had smelled like sex?

Instead, he opened the door, saw the coffee in my hands, and smiled.

"Oh, how nice," he said and meant it. He took their coffees inside (I could hear the surprised murmur of her voice!) and then came back to me.

"We'll be down in a few minutes," he said. "I'm sure Paul is waiting for us."

"Oh, no, he's still asleep," I said. Since birth, Paul had been able to sleep twelve or thirteen hours at a stretch, refusing to wake early even at Christmas. In this way, I felt I knew my son better than anybody else.

"Paul will be asleep when Jesus comes back," said the stepfather. We both knew my son (our son?) and kept his secrets; we both loved him. *What is an Indian?* Is it a man who can share his son and his wife? I asked myself this: Would I take them back, would I break this good man's heart, destroy his life, if I could be married again to this woman, if I could wake up every morning in the same house with this child?

*Of course, of course I would break this white man's heart. I would leave him alone in a cold house with an empty bank account and a one-bullet pistol in his hand.*

"Merry Christmas," said the stepfather.



"Yes," I said and turned to leave, but the stepfather stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. Then he hugged me (Tightly! Chest to chest! Belly to belly!) and I hugged him back.

"Thank you for being kind to me," he said. "I know it could be otherwise."

I didn't know what to say.

The stepfather held me at arm's length. His eyes were blue.

"You're a good man," he said to me.

South of Tecate, California, the van broke down. Then, five minutes later, north of Tecate, Mexico, my father's wheelchair broke down.

We stood (I was the only one standing!) on the hot pavement in the bright sun.

"We almost made it," said my father.

"Somebody will pick us up," I said.

"Would you pick us up?"

"Two brown guys, one in a wheelchair? I think the immigration cops might be picking us up."

"Well, then, maybe they'll think we're illegal aliens and deport us."

"That would be one hell of an ironic way to get into Mexico."

I wanted to ask my father about his regrets. I wanted to ask him what was the worst thing he'd ever done. His greatest sin. I wanted to ask him if there was any reason why the Catholic Church would consider him for sainthood. I wanted to open up his dictionary and find the definitions for faith, hope, goodness, sadness, tomato, son, mother, husband, virginity, Jesus, wood, sacrifice, pain, foot, wife, thumb, hand, bread, and sex.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked my father.

"God has lots of potential," he said.

"When you pray," I asked him. "What do you pray about?"

"That's none of your business," he said.

We laughed. We waited for hours for somebody to help us. *What is an Indian?* I lifted my father and carried him across every border.