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Wapakoneta

I can still hear Wapakoneta that September evening we came riding under the face of the moon against a corn silk wind.

“Listen,” I said, pulling up next to Jonah and Sky Hoof.

In twenty years, the village would be gone. But that night, caught in the air were the sounds of families, laughter and dogs, drums and pots, ocarinas and chants, the prayers of old men rising up like smoke to that face in the moon, and like many of the men down there in the village, I wanted to believe that the Spirit had returned to us and that, just like the seeds in the spring soil, we were all about to be reborn.

As we rode into camp, I heard the sound of a bottle breaking against a tree. And then another. We followed the split-rail fence until the fence opened through a latch and a black dog leapt out and started barking at our heels. That dog followed us for a piece as we passed the smoking cottages of my elders, the gaunt and smiling faces of my past. I could see my father’s home on the far side of the village beyond the sawmill and the gristmill and the acres of corn. I could see the melons and pumpkins like the severed heads of war returning peacefully to the earth and I could hear the wet clicking of the hogs in their mud. My wife’s sister and her kids came running up to us as we dismounted our horses outside the council house where I noticed a

white trader talking to one of our people, a short rat-faced man I'd never seen before.

"If you don't want it, that's fine, but you can't just destroy it and not pay for it," the trader said.

The rat-faced man threw a curse at the white man. We were busy hugging and telling our stories to my wife's sister and her children, and a good part of my mind wanted nothing more than to ride a little longer to my father and just bed down for the night after dinner. But there was something wild in the eye of that young rat-faced man and something terrified in the face of that trader, and I could see the shards of brown glass all over the ground and could smell the sweet stink of the liquor in the dirt.

"My god, Jonah. Is that you?" said the trader.

"McKee," Jonah said.

Jonah was my friend. He was the one who had returned to me my daughter from the American traitor, St. Clair, and he was traveling with me because he wanted the bounty as much as I wanted the scalp. Jonah shook hands with the white man and I felt warm listening to them talk about the war and the weather and how it was always so much more interesting here in our village than down south at the place they called Fort Amanda.

"So you wanted to get away from the old coop?" Jonah said.

"I bring a case of whiskey," McKee said, "because I pay my debts and that was how they wanted them paid. I offered meat, but they asked for whiskey. They're the ones who asked."

"You came alone?" Jonah asked.

McKee nodded. Which was a testament to the peaceful spirit of our people. There was a war raging up along the map lines to the northwest and there was a military supply fort—Fort Amanda—just twenty miles away from us to the south, but that white man, McKee, rode his horse on his own to visit my people and that is the truth to remember.

"Where you headed?" McKee asked, walking alongside us.

"North," Jonah said with a smile.

McKee understood that smile in the same way I understood the way my wife's sister ran her tongue under her lower lip. I knew

that look real good. That tongue was saying the exact opposite of what McKee's smile said. Men and women have different minds when it comes to war.

"Redding lost an arm back in April," McKee said. "Darrow's dead."

"We ran into a man who told us we nearly lost Fort Stephenson," Jonah said.

"But we didn't," McKee said.

I studied the face of McKee. I've seen millions like him and suspect I'll see a few more before I die. Some men talk about death with a warrior shine in their eye that tells you they know there are things on this earth far scarier than losing your life. It's like they, too, know the great secret that none of us will ever die.

"Sheekeetha!"

My father called out to my brother first. I left Jonah and McKee to talk about war and I ran to my mother who was hugging Little Moon, my daughter, and thanking The Great Spirit for returning her granddaughter.

"Hahkawisalawsimama," my mother said, asking my daughter if her spirit was still with us. And I felt my daughter nodding her head into my mother's breasts the way I must have when I was feeding as a baby. My relatives came running out of their cottages and wigwams to greet us, and soon enough I was back in my father's house hearing all the stories I'd missed about the hunts and the harvests, the new babies and the new drunks, my father taking us all inside the house to pour whiskey for the men. I watched him greedily sniff the mouth of the bottle. On the table I noticed a calfskin bible.

"Here," he said.

I held my cup like intended to drink. I beheld my father in his European shirt and his silver necklace studded with red trade beads, a brown blanket belted around his waist above his breech-cloth, his belly poking out like my daughter wasn't the only one pregnant. He wore new buckskin leggings and new moccasins and I wondered how much he'd traded for his beads and cotton and if maybe the traders had thrown the bible in for free as they sometimes did.

I pretended to drink from my cup. The smell alone made me

wild. It felt good to be home, to see my daughter safe again in her grandmother's arms. Women can be funny. My mother was undoing my wife, Koku's, braids from the night before as Koku tried to talk to my cousins, but I could see Koku eyeing my mom the way a dog will watch another dog eating out of its dish. Meanwhile, Sheekeetha drank down a second glass of my father's whiskey and was telling everyone about how I was going to bring war to the doors of every house in the village by doing what I was about to do to that man named St. Clair.

"Little Angry finally got angry and the white man's now selling him on joining the Big Knives," Sheekeetha said.

"That's a lie," I said.

"You're not angry that your daughter is pregnant with a white man's child?"

"You speak like they do when you drink whiskey," I said.

"Is it a lie?"

I took a good long smell from that clay cup. My eyes angled toward that calfskin bible. I looked at my father and his cloudy wizened eyes. Seven years earlier he had visited Thomas Jefferson in the White House. He was one of only a dozen men in our village who could both speak and read the white man's tongue. I felt I could speak my brother's snake mind if I drank that devil's drink my father had given me and I also felt that maybe it would be good to release the demons, as the white men often say. Maybe sons and fathers, after a long time apart, need to do what is necessary to bring the spirit into the room.

"You tell the half truths," I said to my brother.

"What part is a lie?" Sheekeetha said.

Talk makes fools out of men. I wanted to tell Sheekeetha and everyone in that room that what brings war to homes is the same thing that brings babes into the world. I wanted to throw my cup across the room and tell them all about how The Prophet was right. Some have already forgotten him, but there was once a Kispoko who lived among us and built a village beyond our village in a town called Greenville. Some called him Lalawethika. Some called him Tenskwatawa. This prophet was given visions by the very spirits that

took our visions away and these visions showed him our people in a dark hot realm drinking endless cups of liquid lead, the white man's whiskey turned to the very hot river of rock that forges the guns and bullets we all still use to kill each other. The prophet saw it all as one—the whiskey, the bullet, and the gun. And so he ceased drinking the liquid bullets and built his village and just as he saw the metals and the rums as one, he knew that all people were one, and so he invited the Delaware and the Wyandot and the Potawotami and anyone else who shared his vision to listen to his prophecies, and I journeyed to that village by myself one summer. I met The Prophet and his brother, Tecumseh. I heard his words. I sat at his feet by the council fire and tore off the trade beads I wore around my neck. I promised The Prophet I would never stop hunting and would never surrender to the spirits that were dividing our people. I embraced him under a moon like a fisherman's hook and he whispered into my ear:

“Your father was a good man,” he said. “But he is no longer a man.”

I never returned to Greenville after that night. But I wanted to use The Prophet's words to fight back my brother's lies. I wanted everyone in my father's house to feel how foolish words can make us when you divide them up the way we'd been dividing the Kispoko and the Maykujay, the Miami and the Delaware.

“Have more,” I said, dumping my cup into Sheekeetha's.

And it was only then, as I burst out the door and stormed up to the edge of the corn the white men mash into whiskey that I realized I hadn't seen Jonah or McKee inside my father's house. I stood there under the tossed kernels of stars and stared at the tassels and the stalks and listened to the crickets and the drums, and even though I wasn't drunk, I swayed in the wind like the maize and I called out for my friend. I saw his sawbones tied up next to my mustang, his binoculars hanging off his saddle. And I walked back into my father's house to make sure my eyes hadn't been playing tricks on me. But there were no white men in my father's house. And outside, in the night, it was just the lines of corn standing and swaying like some kind of army beneath the stars, like the war was already right outside my father's door.

I looked up at the sky and saw an arrowhead falling apart, like it was shedding feathers. I felt it all coming. And I was afraid. A part of me wanted to walk back inside my father's house and call for the bottle, let that spirit wash back my confusion. It was strange to be home and feel so far away. I walked over to Jonah's horse.

"Hello, Patrick," I said.

I could tell Wolf, my horse, was getting jealous, sniffing and stomping at the way I was whispering and petting on Patrick. I heard an owl not too far away, an old man singing and changing his song at that exact moment to ape the call of the owl, and I decided to follow the song, to take a walk through the village. I didn't want to go back inside and pretend everything was okay with my father. And it was funny the way my son walked out of my house just as I was walking away. It was like he was feeling me the same way that old man was feeling that owl, and when he asked me what I was doing outside, I told him to just look around and listen. When I could tell he wasn't satisfied with that explanation, I told him half of the truth. I told him I was worried about Jonah.

"I saw them," he said. "They went off with that man we saw when we arrived."

"What man?"

"The one with the teeth."

"The one that looked like a rat?"

Sky Hoof nodded. I looked up at that arrowhead cloud. Its point was all gone.

"I want to go with you to Canada," he said.

"You can't," I said. "I need you to stay here and watch over your sister. She needs you."

"I want to kill the man that put the devil in her," he said.

"She doesn't have the devil in her," I said.

"She says she does," he said.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go for a walk."

It hurt me to think about my daughter. We skirted the corn. I kept looking through the vents in the rows, like I might find Jonah there on his back, looking up at the stars, singing a song. But the feeling I had was getting worse and it was not only because I didn't

know or trust that rat-faced man I'd seen breaking the bottles, but it was also on account of having to hide the truth from my son. I didn't want him worrying about my journey north. I was glad when our silence was broken by the old man.

He had milkstone eyes like I do now. He was singing his songs in front of Black Hoof's house, a young girl studying the chants at his feet and staring at the glowing wafers of wood burning in the fire, a doll in her hands. I knew the old man. He was the brother of the one we called Waweyapersenwaw. Blue Jacket. I could tell you a million tales about the worlds that man had seen before he stopped seeing. His name was Flying Jack. He jumped atop a deer and cut its throat and rode its dying body down the Hocking Hills. He could run as fast as a mustang and some say faster. My grandfather told me that Flying Jack once put an arrow straight through the ear of an American from a thousand feet away and then licked the fletching on a second arrow and put another in the opposite ear as that man was twisting down to the earth in his final death dance. As Sky Hoof and I stood over his fire, I asked Flying Jack about the state of the Spirit.

"Little Angry," he said, remembering me just from my voice, some faint thread of song still carrying on in his throat, a wheezy moan not entirely unlike the shrill hiss a wet log makes when the fire starts to scare out the water.

"The Spirit is strong," he said. "Maybe too strong tonight."

"What do you mean too strong?"

A silence fell. The old man now lived in a wigwam next to old Black Hoof's house. I wondered if the girl with the doll was his granddaughter and if her mother and father were near. I looked for light behind Black Hoof's door. He was our Chief and he was a good man.

"I heard you calling the white man's name," Flying Jack said.

"You heard right," I said.

"Jonah! Jonah! Jonah!"

Flying Jack changed his voice. I'd never heard my voice so high like a child's. I tried to smile away my fear so my son wouldn't see it, but there was no fooling Sky Hoof. He could feel what the old man was feeling. He and the little girl with the red-faced doll that was

made out of the white man's sacking both stared into Flying Jack's cobweb eyes.

"I hear that name all the time," Flying Jack said. "The Christians who come here to cut our hair and give us pigs—they talk about this Jonah. They say he got swallowed up by a big fish and lived in the belly of that beast beneath the faces of those seas we've never seen. Well, they are right about one thing. We are all like that man, Little Angry. Waiting to be released. Waiting in the dark. Waiting to be coughed up onto a bright beach where we might see again. But tonight I am afraid because I hear you calling that name and I hear our people all day calling another name and the names are all different, Little Angry. But it is all the same cry. All the same prayer."

He closed his eyes and drummed his lids like he might grace his eyes with the vision of youth if he struck the right beat. He opened them again real wide and smiled.

"Jonah is my friend," I said.

"And Tecumseh was once mine," he said.

"Tecumseh?" Sky Hoof said.

Even now, that name still lives like lightning on the tongues of my people. Maybe it still echoes in you, faint as the hiss of an ember before it turns back to earth.

"He is our final eye," Flying Jack said. "Black Hoof has accepted the whiteness, the blindness. Blue Jacket is dead. Your grandfather is dead. And now your father is like the others. He accepts the pigs and the beads and the Christian stories that tell men to stop being men. But tonight, Tecumseh still fights, so tonight the Spirit is still strong."

"Is he here?" Sky Hoof asked.

"He is out there, where he will always be. Where we will always be," Flying Jack responded.

I could see the gleam in my son's eye, that warrior worship I myself fell prey to from time to time. But there is a difference between the eyes of a son, the eyes of a father, and the milk-stoned eyes of an old man.

"They will kill us all if we fight with Tecumseh," I said.

"They will kill us all if we don't," Flying Jack said.

My son looked to me for an answer and so did the little girl who fingered the blood red braid of that doll. I looked into the throbbing coals of the fire, the smooth oak log now scaled like the sloughed skin of a snake, like you could see its orange heart beating beneath its black skin.

“There is another path,” I said.

“Speak of it,” said Flying Jack.

“You heard the owl earlier. Just as we were walking your way,” I said. “I heard her call out and I heard you call back in the same way you mocked me calling out for my friend.”

Flying Jack nodded and smiled. Even if someone is about to disagree with you, I suppose it feels good to know that at least they’re listening, especially when ears are all you’ve got left. I looked into my son’s eyes as I tried to describe the path I wanted him to take.

“We need to be like the owl,” I said. “Not like the pig. Not like the sheep. Not like the geese. We cannot live our lives if we move in the fold and the flock. They tell us to fight with them, the reds and the blues. They tell us if we do, we can stay here in Wapakoneta, but it is all the same like you say. They want us where they can get us, grandfather. All of us together, so easy to trim and slaughter. Wear the red. Wear the blue. Stay inside the split-rail fence. Wapakoneta, Washington, Greenville—it is all the same, grandfather. We need to learn from the owl. We all know the owl is out there, where the Spirit is. But no one ever eats the owl because the owl is smart. She only calls out from time to time. When an owl spreads her wings and flies down out of the sky, everyone knows they are seeing the flash of the Spirit, the way. That is the path. That, my son, is why you cannot travel with Jonah and me into the north.”

“The Jonah you call out for like an owl?”

Flying Jack gave me the Flying Jack face, his tongue out like a wolf. I almost conceded the point. Maybe if my son hadn’t been listening, I would’ve given the old man that final ground. But my pride was hurt and my son was listening and so was that little girl, her eyes still unskinned by the cruelties of the world, the way the seasons and the treaties and even the words of your own brothers beat you back.

“I didn’t call out for him like an owl,” I said. “I called out for

him like a man, like a friend. There is a difference.”

“Hmmm,” Flying Jack said. “Good luck with your difference.”

That was when my son asked the old man to tell him more about the warrior we called Tecumseh.

“Hoooo,” Flying Jack said, like an owl. “Hooo hooo! Listen.”

And my son listened.

And so did I.

“Hsssssssssss,” hissed Flying Jack.

But not like a snake.

The little girl smiled and pulled her doll against her heart.

“You can hear the panther on the wind,” Flying Jack said. “Listen.”

The wind rose and, like an echo from the hissing song in the fire, it seethed like a cat when you crawl up on its den. The old man told us how Tecumseh—whose name means panther in the sky—came from the Kispoko, the panther people and how his father, Pukshinwah, a Creek, married his mother, Meethotaaske, a Shawnee.

“His mother was a turtle,” Flying Jack said. “When you cross the wisdom of the turtle with the speed of the panther, you breed the wind of the warrior into the child’s spirit. But not every child crossed with panther and turtle becomes a Tecumseh. He was one of eight kids. When he was younger than you, he saw his papa killed by the white man. He was never the same, child. Death changes people.”

Flying Jack gave us the Flying Jack face, but his tongue didn’t hang so long when he said what he said about death. His milkstone eyes flickered with flame. The wind turned and curled under the logs like Tecumseh was with us, just as I am with you. Stories are funny that way, the way they bring back the dead. The old man put his chin on his crossed hands.

“Fathers give sons brothers in case the fathers join the spirits too soon,” Flying Jack said. “Tecumseh was raised by Cheeseekah, his oldest brother. His younger brother, the prophet, was a triplet, another sign from Moneto, just like the earthquake and the star shot from last year, the way the spirit finally rubbed his thumb across the night. One of the last things I saw before I lost my sight. Maybe that trail of light was the thing that blinded me.”

I, too, had seen what the white men called the comet seven seasons ago. I, too, had felt the earthquake, that day when the land moved like the white men were nothing more than plates and cups the Spirit could clear away by tilting her table.

“Tenskwatawa, Tecumseh’s wisest brother, was more turtle and Tecumseh more panther, but together,” Flying Jack said, “they embodied the strongest force a Shawnee ever feels: brotherhood. Tecumseh couldn’t stay married to his wife, Mamate. Most men feel what Tecumseh felt. They don’t want to just stay home and read the Bible and feed pigs. They want to fight for the Spirit, for the earth. But they don’t have a brother to watch the moon while they watch the sun. Without eyes in your back, you’ll always be like a turtle without a shell or a cat without claws. But Tecumseh had Tenskwatawa and they built the city in the west for Moneto and the people from all the tribes all came together and even the few whites who wear the beards and want peace came to the place they called Prophetstown and they prayed together with the panther and the turtle. Thousands came. They moved like the birds are moving right now, like they could feel the heat of the Spirit’s fire. They flocked and gathered and listened. They listened.”

Just as we all listened to the wind and the hiss of the fire, the drunk noises of the village. Flying Jack could hear those loud drunk voices. You could see it in his face, the sadness. He knew he was dying alongside the ears of his people. But not on account of the bottle.

“Your own chief—the man who sleeps in this house behind me,” he said, “has told me on a number of occasions, that he, too, took the pilgrimage west to the feet of the Prophet and that he would’ve stayed there, but his legs are bad and his eyes almost as gone as mine and so his warring days are done and how can a chief tell his people to go to war if he himself can no longer fight?”

The old man knew what he was doing talking about Black Hoof like that, raising his voice with the rising wind. Sure enough, the old chief with his stiff legs walked out of his house with his hair wild and gray and his ears flopping with silver and glass, scars all over his chest.

“You’re no good,” he said to Flying Jack, which made the old man smile.

My chief wrapped me in his warm arms and gathered my son in, too. He left his door half open, but I saw the fingers of one of his wives or daughters reach out and close that door. Maybe they didn’t want to hear the men talk more about war, but that little girl with the doll sure did. She had her hand up under that doll’s dress like she was going to use her fingers to make that thing talk sure as I’m about to do the same to my old chief.

“Why are you out here telling lies?” Black Hoof said.

“That’s what words do,” Flying Jack said.

I wish I could freeze that fiery moment in ice: my son in my arms, my chief smiling like a fox, the village of my people more than just puppets and ghosts, words on a page. Real—that’s the English word for it. It was all still real in that moment. When I heard a cry down the path, I thought at first it was that arched back cry that a woman makes to tell the world the tribe will live on. Black Hoof’s face turned serious.

“Why don’t you tell the boy about what Tecumseh said to General Harrison before they killed his brother? Why don’t you tell him what his brother said about how we’ll never die just before he was killed?”

The old man slouched like a doll that had just lost the interest of the child, the hand no longer holding up the back.

“Tenskwatawa was right,” Flying Jack said. “We will never die if we do what the Spirit asks. But we didn’t do it and we never have.”

“What did Tenskwatawa want us to do?” my son asked with his eyes as fine and combed with gold and jade as the old man’s were with milk and web.

“He said we must all fight as one for all who see all as one. He walked right up to General Harrison’s white palace and stood in front of that man who bribed all our drunks into selling away the land of all of our warriors and he thundered at the American General. He said to him and all the drunk slaves the General has made with pigs and beads and rum and fear of the land of the dead, “How do you do it, Harrison? How do you sell a country? What is this word, country?”

Why not sell the air, the sea, and the entire earth?" After he said that, the white people laughed at Tecumseh until they turned red and then they got drunk to pretend that they never saw the red and they woke up and they twisted Tecumseh's words around in their newspapers so they could get more drunks to sign more treaties. And then they marched in with their guns and their torches into the Prophet's home and they killed the women and the children the same way they kill the black man. To teach a lesson, as they say. They burned the entire village to the ground to teach us another lesson."

I had heard this story before, but never with my son close. Every day an old man crawls into the mind of a child with words about war. I didn't want my son going to war. But I could feel what he was feeling by the fire. He was feeling the fire. And then we both heard that wild cry again, and we both knew there was no man left in Wapakoneta with enough panther in his blood to make a woman scream like that. That was no woman screaming beyond the corn. And it was no Shawnee, either.

We ran along the cornstalks until I could see what I already knew was coming. That was when I grabbed Sky Hoof and told him to run back and get his uncle. When my son said no I slapped him in the face so hard it dropped him to his knees. I'll never forget the angry way he looked into the corn while he was down on the ground, like if he concentrated a little harder he could turn into a snake and slither down the rows.

"Go!" I said.

I watched my son give up on being a snake and do what he was told, running back the way we'd come past Black Hoof who was walking as fast as an old man can, Flying Jack still back there by the fire with his milkstone eyes and the little girl and her doll, the old man probably weaving my son's running right into the end of his story.

I could see the spirit shadows in the grass. I could see the half-circle of my brothers around the playground behind the house of one of Black Hoof's nephews, a man named Red Lake. A big patch of cleared away earth where the kids played war shone like a seared scar where the comet landed, the fire down there by that crowd ten times bigger than Flying Jack's and there were no children with dolls and

there was nobody sitting. They were all standing and dancing and they had Jonah and McKee tied up to the same big oak tree, their faces painted black, both men totally naked, McKee bleeding from his chest.

I have seen the fear of death on men's faces before. But I'd never in my life seen anything like I saw in the eyes of that trader, McKee, an arrow already in his side, his white eyes wishing they were comets that could leap out of their sockets and away from what was coming. McKee saw it all, or as much as the eyes of men can see before they close. Yes, I believe he saw what I saw: a sky of helpless stars looking down like old milkstone eyes on the rat-faced man laughing like crazy while a smaller fellow I'd never seen before with a single eagle feather banded around his forehead was screaming a curse in a tongue even I didn't fully understand. To this day, I do not know how far away that man with the eagle feather flew to be in Wapakoneta that night. I wonder if he came from the lands they now call California. Did he, like the Prophet, see distant shores where the white men walked the red men into the seas of burning lead, making them drink like horses until they can't drink whiskey no more, only to keep them drinking? What had that strange man with the eagle feather seen that had filled him with such hate and wild?

"Stop!" I called out.

But when the man with the eagle feather caught my eye in the firelight, he didn't turn into a snake and slither away. He just smiled. The rat-faced man stood up straight from his laughing coil and his eyes followed bashfully down the path to where Black Hoof ambled. Everyone in that half-circle turned away from the tree where the two white men were tied the way our coastal ancestors tied themselves when the hurricanes came. Everyone seemed willing to wait to hear what we had to say before letting the killing of those white men go on. Everyone but the one with the eagle feather.

"Hsssssss!" he screamed at me, like he had heard Flying Jack's story and now aimed to live the purpose of the panther.

Spirit, I don't know why you do what you do.

What a wild cry that stranger released as he tossed his tomahawk toward the tree. And that hawk found its mark just like a cormorant

diving down for a fish. My people went quiet. I heard the sound of McKee's life going out of his body as quiet as the skitter of a squirrel up a tree. McKee's body then did the dance death makes you do when you're not quite ready to give up the shirt of your skin. Like a child shaking her fingers out of a puppet's cloth. No sooner was that dance done than that man with the eagle feather had his knees on McKee's back, his scalping knife moving in a sharp tight circle around his head, and there was a sudden slit in that killer's eyes as he cut into McKee while staring straight at Jonah.

"Good," I heard one man say.

"This will be bad for us," said another.

My village was divided by fear. We were like your North and South. Your Adam and Eve. We ate the fruit with you. We could see you, and so we could no longer see. But some of us believed we could. That man with the eagle feather was not afraid of me or Black Hoof or the dozen turned heads who were waiting for their chief to either praise or condemn the killing of the whites.

"Hello," said that wild-eyed stranger in English, holding his knife in front of Jonah's face.

That man with the eagle feather was not afraid of Jonah, but he did seem suddenly interested in him, like he wanted to study Jonah just a little bit longer than McKee. That cat-slit I saw in his eyes was like a mirror of what I saw in Jonah. Like it was the first time in the stranger's life he'd seen a white man prepared to die and like he wanted to savor it like a pipe of strong smoke in the winter at the top of a mountain.

"You're going to get us all killed!" I yelled as I ran toward the tree with my tomahawk drawn. I slipped into that hot hissing space between Jonah and the man with the eagle feather. I put my palm against Jonah's head and the blade of my tomahawk a hair away from the nose of the stranger. I turned toward my people and put my foot atop the bloodied ribs of McKee.

"We will all die for this," I said. "This dead man is from Fort Amanda."

"We should burn Fort Amanda!" replied one of my people.

"Like they burned Prophetstown!" cried another.

“So we become like them and burn the whole earth?” I said.

And then, just before the stranger spoke to me in my own tongue, he ran the dripping underside of McKee’s hairy scalp down my tomahawk blade like some kind of lewd act, like some kind of christening, as the white men say. Like he knew he could say something with that hairy flesh slicking my axe that no man can ever say with words.

“You,” he said.

I said nothing to that.

“You like them,” he said.

He smiled with those same cat-slit eyes, like he was trying to hide that white skin we all possess. I could feel Jonah throbbing behind me, his body at war with his face. We’re always at war.

“This man is my brother,” I said.

“I am your brother,” the stranger said.

“I have never met you,” I said.

“I have met you,” he said.

“Where? When?” I said.

“Every day,” he said. “Everywhere I go I see you sign the treaties. I see you take big laughing drinks from the white man’s whiskey. You have had whiskey with this one, haven’t you?”

I wish I could say that I maintained the same wildcat scowl as that man and Jonah. But I looked away toward the rat-faced man and all the eyes of my people and I could see a white woman that one of my cousins had married walking up on the scene and I could see Black Hoof looking older and weaker than he’d ever looked before, like he could see the next war coming and the next one after that and all of us getting marched out of Wapakoneta and into the blood of the western sun. I looked down at the scar of the earth where all the grass had been kicked away by the play of children and I saw a single silver bead in that soil, like a tear from the moon. But rather than lie to my people and tell them I’d never taken a drink with Jonah, I jumped like a panther out of its den and split that stranger in half with my tomahawk, and I took his eagle feather and planted it in the split and I took his blood and used it to redden the black on Jonah’s face and I cut Jonah free with the very scalping knife that man had used on

McKee and we walked for a moment with our faces painted in the same blood of that stranger as I said to my people:

“This man is my brother. This man is your brother. He saved my daughter. He saved your sister. And you stand and laugh and paint him black like none of you has ever taken a drink of the whiskey or received a kindness from an American.”

I held my tomahawk up to the moon to dip it into that great egg of light. I looked my people in the eye and ran the blade around the crescent of their faces, their fearful frozen bodies. I knew all of them by name. Red Lake. Big George. Little Horse. I knew them all. I knew the ones who liked whiskey and I knew the ones who had broken bread with the Quakers and the ones who had planted their seeds in the white man’s women. But I also knew the ones who, like Tecumseh, had seen their fathers and mothers murdered by the whites, the ones who had seen their brothers go crazy on the laughing waters, their sisters tied to trees and defiled in the same way they’d done to Jonah and McKee and my daughter. So just as I was realizing how no words could end the war—I returned to what I’d said in the beginning.

“This man is my brother,” I said.

And then we ran for our horses.

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