MEDICINE RIVER

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chapter

one

Dear Rose,

I'll bet you never thought you'd hear from me again. I've thought about calling or writing, but you know how it is. How are you and the boys? Bet they're getting big. Bet you're probably mad at me, and I don't blame you. I'm going to be in Calgary for a rodeo. Thought I might drop in and see you. . . .

Medicine River sat on the broad back of the prairies. It was an unpretentious community of buildings banked low against the weather that slid off the eastern face of the Rockies. Summer was hot in Medicine River and filled with grasshoppers and mosquitoes. Winter was cold and long. Autumn was the best season. It wasn't good, just better than the other three. Then there was the wind. I generally tried to keep my mouth shut about the wind in Medicine River.

Harlen Bigbear was like the prairie wind. You never knew when he was coming or when he was going to leave. Most times I was happy to see him.

Today I wasn't. I had other things to do. There were photographs in the wash and three strips of negatives that had to be printed. But that didn't stop the wind from blowing, and it didn't stop Harlen.

"Hey-uh," said Harlen, which is not the way Harlen normally says hello.

"What?"

"Hey-uh . . . what do you think, Will?"

"Real busy, Harlen. Somebody in trouble?"

Harlen had a strong sense of survival, not just for himself but for other people as well. He took on a lot of weight, and the one thing he enjoyed more than helping someone out with their burden was sharing it with others. "If you pass misery around and get everyone to take a piece," Harlen liked to say, "you won't throw up from the taste of too much grief." It wasn't something I went around repeating.

"Nobody's in trouble, Will. Hey-uh . . . time I took you out to lunch. Thought we could go on over to that new place with all the posters and plants."

"Harlen, it's ten o'clock."

"Beat the crowd. Give us a chance to talk. Hey-uh, good friends should do that, you know."

Dear Rose,

Boy, you should see the weather around here. Snowed like the blazes last night. How's the weather down south? Sorry I didn't stop in. I called a couple of times, but you must have stepped out. I want to come down and see you and the boys, maybe take you out to dinner and a show. Write if you can, chick. If you have someone else, you should let me know. . . .

There was no one else in Casey's. The woman at the

counter told us that lunch hadn't started and that all we could get was coffee or tea.

"Tea's fine. Just had breakfast. How about you, Will? Not hungry yet, are you?"

She put us at a window table. Casey's was on the third floor of the old Merchants' Bank Building. You could see the Medicine River Fire Station across the street. The fire-engines had moved to the new fire house on Sixth Avenue, leaving the station with its turn-of-the-century round bell tower to the pigeons and the seagulls.

"Say," said Harlen, "what a great view. What do you think? If we stood on the table, we could probably see the river. Reserve is just over there."

It was going to take Harlen until noon just to get to what he wanted to tell me. The tea arrived, and Harlen dipped the bag up and down in the pot, long easy strokes, like he figured on staying through until supper.

"Will, you remember Wilma Whiteman? Hey-uh, she passed away last week."

I nodded.

"Wilma used to look after Granny Pete all those years. You know, everybody used to leave their stuff at Granny's house, whenever they went somewhere. Reserve storage. Should have seen the folks come by when Granny died. Those who were still around picked their stuff up, and Wilma took and stored the things that were left over."

"I remember."

"Lots of memories. Louie Frank's wife went over to help Wilma's family. One of her girls found them, in a cardboard box. Edith gave them to Bertha over at the centre, and Bertha gave them to Big John, and Big John gave them to me."

Harlen reached into a coat pocket and pulled out a package. It was a thick rectangle wrapped round with blue velvet and tied with yellow yarn.

"Letters," said Harlen, "hey-uh . . . from your father."

Dear Rose,

I'm going to stop by and see you and the boys soon. Sorry you had to leave the reserve, but Calgary's a better place for a swell girl like you. Stupid rule, anyway. I'd send some money, but I'm short right now. Got to save up for a new saddle. Man's got to work, you know. Hey, could you send me a picture of the boys. Yourself, too. . . .

I had seen the letters before. My mother used to keep them in a wooden chest in her closet. The chest was always locked, but that's what bobby pins were for. James and me had listened to countless detectives pick countless locks with bobby pins. I found the key and the bobby pins in the same drawer.

There was a box of photographs in the chest. Most of the photographs were of groups of men and women standing against the prairie and the sky. The men were tall and dark in white shirts and cowboy hats. The women wore long dresses. There were several pictures of George Harley on a horse. I recognized him. There was one of an old man with braids sitting in a straight-backed chair on the edge of a coulee. Years later, Granny Pete showed me a picture of the same man and said he was my grandfather.

My mother was in most of the pictures, and while I didn't know who the rest of the people were, I supposed they were family. There was one picture of my

mother. She had on a pleated skirt that was fanned out like a blanket on the ground in front of her. Kneeling behind her with his hand on her shoulder was a man in a uniform.

Dear Rose,

I got a new job with a real-estate company. Nothing to it. Beats the hell out of rodeo, and it pays better, too. Figured I'd try it for a while till my leg heals. If I like it, I may just give up the circuit and settle down. You know, my boss drives one of those big Chevrolets. You got to have money to buy one of those things.

Thanks for the pictures of the boys. Good-looking boys. I didn't know I had such good-looking boys. Well, you had something to do with it, too, chick. Maybe you could send me one of our wedding pictures. . . .

The letters were in the trunk under the photographs. I was reading them when my mother came home.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I said. "I was just reading."

She stood there, and I could see her hands clench and tremble. "Those are my letters," she said.

"I was just reading."

"I don't want you in my things."

"They're from . . . my father . . . the letters."

"Just put them down. Damn! You keep out of my things."

And she slapped me. Hard. "Stop reading those letters! You hear me!" And she began to cry. "They're private. You never heard of private?"

Then she slapped me again. I tried to jerk out of the way, and I scattered the letters on the floor. I lay beside the bed, my tongue clamped between my teeth to keep my lips from shaking. I remember her on her knees, crying and trying to gather up the letters and the blue velvet cloth and the yarn.

I ran past her and down the stairs.

"Will!"

I spent the rest of the day at the river. She had never hit me. Never. James found me that evening.

"You better come home. Mom's real upset. She's been crying, Will."

"Let her cry. I'll come home when I feel like it."

"She said I was supposed to bring you home."

"Tell her you couldn't find me."

"What'd you do to get her so mad?"

"I just read some of her dumb old letters."

We ate dinner in silence that night, my mother, my brother and me. Afterwards, she took me into her bedroom. "I don't want you ever to go in my chest again. Those things in there are mine. Do you understand?"

I didn't say anything. I kept my eyes on the yellow throw rug beside the bed.

"I don't want you reading those things."

I could feel my lip begin to shake. "I don't see what's so wrong," I said. "The letters were to me and James, too. They're not just yours!"

My mother sat on the edge of the bed for a long time. I knew I was to sit there, not move. And I did. I thought she was going to hit me again for talking back like that, but she didn't.

"Do I have to burn them?" she said very quietly, almost a whisper. Her eyes were hard, and her face didn't move. "Do I have to burn them before you'll

leave my things alone? Is that what I have to do?"

"Those are my letters, too."

"Go to bed," she said, in that same quiet voice. "Just go to bed."

I ran home from school the next day. The letters were still there. I opened the blue velvet wrap just to make sure. Then I got some tape from the kitchen and taped them to the bottom of the chest.

Dear Rose,

Merry Christmas. I would have sent a cheque, but real estate sort of drops off round Christmas. The leg is one hundred percent. Soon as the season comes around, I may do a little rodeo on the weekends just to keep in shape.

How old are the boys now? Maybe I could come on down and visit. I could take the boys out for the day and give you a break. I bought one of those musical tops at Zellers. You think the boys would like it? I think about you and the boys. They've probably forgotten me by now. . . .

"You ever see your father rodeo, Will?"

"No, he took off when I was about four."

"He and George Harley were good friends. George says your father was a real good bronc rider." Harlen looked out the window towards the river. "You know, it was Harley introduced your mother to your father. Caught hell for it too, from Granny Pete."

"Harlen, I don't even remember what my father looked like."

"George says he was real good."

I must have seen my father, heard his voice. But there was nothing. No vague recollections, no stories, no

impressions, nothing. He was from Edmonton. I knew that. Granny Pete blamed George for the marriage, because he got them together and stood up as best man at the wedding. "Damn bottle Indian," she said. "Just got to show off his relations to whites. No more sense than a horseshoe."

But George was only trying to be polite. Years later he told me, "Your mother was real pretty, and Bob just wanted to meet her, so I said okay. Granny was awful mad with me, especially when they got married. I didn't know they'd do that. Your mother had a mind of her own."

We grew up in Calgary, James and me. Granny Pete came over by bus every month or so, but none of my mother's brothers ever came by. Granny talked about the rest of the family, so James and me knew we had relations. We knew about Uncle Tony and Uncle Rupert and Uncle Frank, but I never met them until the day my mother came home from work and began packing. "Get your things together," she said. "We're going home."

My uncles all showed up the next day in their trucks to help us move. They shook hands with James and me and talked like we had never been away. "You're the man of the house, Will," Uncle Frank said, and he offered me a cigarette. "Look after your mother and brother. You got to do that now."

"I can look after Mom, too," said James.

"Bet you can," said Uncle Frank.

We didn't have much, and Uncle Tony's pick-up went back empty, except for me and James and Uncle Tony's boy, Maxwell. The three of us rode in the back wrapped up in a tarp.

"We going back to the reserve?" James asked.

"Maybe," I said.

"No," said Maxwell, "you can't. You guys have to live in town cause you're not Indian any more."

"Sure we are," I said. "Same as you."

"Your mother married a white."

"Our father's dead."

"Doesn't matter."

I could feel my face get hot. "We can go to the reserve whenever we want. We can get in a car and go right out to Standoff."

"Sure," said Maxwell. "You can do that. But you can't stay. It's the law."

I pulled the tarp around me and told myself that we *were* going back to the reserve. But I guess I wasn't surprised when we stopped at Medicine River. It wasn't so much the law as it was pride, I think, that let my mother go as far as the town and no farther.

Dear Rose,

Things are going swell up here. How about you? I called the post office, and they've put a trace on that top I sent. Boy, doesn't the mail drive you nuts. They're always losing things. If they can't find it, I'll try to buy another one. It was a red one with those cute animals along the side. It had a real nice sound, too. I've got some bills to pay off first, so it may have to wait a bit. Hope the boys had a good Christmas. I sure miss you all. . . .

"Hey-uh, Will. Your mother must have loved him. Keeping all those letters."

"The guy was a jerk, Harlen. I don't know why she kept the letters."

"Hey-uh. Maybe you should go see him," said Harlen. "Maybe take him out to dinner."

"He's dead. He died in a car accident. He was drunk."

Harlen poured some more hot water in his cup. "Too bad that. He wrote a good letter. Bertha said they made her cry."

"Bertha read these?"

"You know Bertha."

"Shit."

"She didn't mean any harm, Will. She says your father loved your mother a lot."

"Had a damn funny way of showing it."

"Hey-uh. Maybe he was just young. Hey-uh. What do you think, Will?"

"About what?"

"*Hey-uh.* Saw Will Sampson on television. It was a movie about him being a sheriff. That's what he said all the time. *Hey-uh.* He's a real Indian, too. What do you think?"

I couldn't help it. I started to laugh. "Harlen," I said, "it sounds dumb as hell."

"Hey-uh," said Harlen, loud enough for the cooks in the kitchen to hear, and he began to laugh, too. The two of us sat there laughing.

As we walked out of Casey's, Harlen handed me the letters. "You should read them, Will. Your mother must have kept them for you and James."

Harlen stood there with the packet of letters in his hand. The velvet had cracked at the edges, and the yellow yarn had lost most of its colour. And I remembered the picture of the two of them. My mother with her dark hair and dark eyes, the pleated skirt spread all around her. She was looking back, not turned quite far enough to see the man behind her. His hand lay on her shoulder lightly, the fingers in sunlight, his eyes in shadows.

chapter

two

Harlen Bigbear was my friend, and being Harlen's friend was hard. I can tell you that.

Just before Christmas, Harlen came by my studio wearing a basketball jersey pulled tight over his plaid jacket and carrying a brown grocery bag. "Morning, Will," he said. "Wind's coming up. Good thing, too. Cold as hell. You remember Wilton Joe?"

"At the Friendship Centre?"

"That's right. He used to coach the team."

The jersey was bright blue and there was an orange number seven on the front. "So," I said, "what's in the bag?"

"Wilton left. Martha Bruised Head called around to find another coach, but nobody wanted to do it. So I said I would."

"So, what's in the bag?"

"Your uniform, Will." And Harlen opened the bag and took out a blue jersey just like the one he was wearing, orange shorts, and a pair of white socks with two yellow stripes around the top. "Medicine

River Friendship Centre Warriors," he said. "All-Native team, Will, and we need a centre. You know Clyde Whiteman?"

I shook my head.

"Great player, Will. He can jump. Slam-dunk the ball. Quick as a Cree. Boy, you ought to see him play. Probably the best centre in all of Alberta."

"Then you don't need me."

"Clyde can't play right now. We need a centre. Someone big, like you. Be a lot of fun. You got a talent for it. I can tell."

Every person born has a talent. My mother used to tell me that. Some people have three or four, but everybody has at least one. Sometimes a talent is hidden, and other times you can just look at someone and see it as if it were stuck up there on their forehead. Granny Pete liked to say that my father had a talent for lying and drinking, but that wasn't what my mother meant when she was talking talents. Talents were good, things you did well, things you could be proud of.

My brother James had all the talent in our family. He could draw any animal you wanted: moose, bears, tigers, giraffes. Sometimes I'd watch him to see how he did it. He'd draw a line and then another. It never looked like much, and then there was the lion, just like magic. James kept the drawings in a shirt box under his bed, and whenever Granny Pete would come over, he would bring them out and show them to her one by one.

"Them beavers look like they're alive.

"Look at that antelope!

"Not even your Uncle Tony draws elk this good."

I tried drawing too, but it was useless. My lines were stiff and crude. James tried to help me, but I just

couldn't see what he saw.

"Will's the athlete in the family," my mother said. "James is the artist."

I played basketball. Mr. Bobniak, who taught math and coached basketball, told me he could see that I had a talent for the game, that I owed it to the school to come out for the team. I told my mother what Bobniak had said, and she went out the next Sunday and came back with a pair of black canvas high-tops she had found at a yard sale. They were almost brand new. And they fit. Damn, they were good shoes. I put them on, tied them down tight and jumped up and down on my bed. Shoes like that helped you jump higher, run faster. And you never got tired.

I wasn't very good, but Bobniak promised me that I'd get better. A little more time, a little more practice. Fact is, I got worse. By my fourth year, the guards and the forwards stopped trying to feed me the ball inside and took their shots from the perimeter. I was left to grab rebounds and block shots. The last four games of the season, we played a three-guard, two-forward offence, and I spent most of that final year watching the games from the bench. I was big and I was tall, and that was it.

"Harlen," I said, "I can't play basketball worth shit."

Harlen laid the jersey on the table and smoothed the shorts out next to it. "Number four, Will. That's a sacred number. Lucky, too. Person always looks better in a basketball uniform. Team needs you. You don't have to be real good, Will. You can get those rebounds, you know. Use your weight. Intimidate those little guards. Block some shots. You must have played ball in Calgary."

I said no. No time. No interest. No energy. No shoes. I said my knees were gone. I said I was too old.

"Hey, Will, forty's not too old. A few work-outs, and you'll be fine. I can get you a discount on shoes at Bill's Sports. Women love basketball players, Will. You know Louise Heavyman comes to most of our games. So does Thelma Simpson and her cousin Rosemary. You know Rosemary?"

It wasn't the flattery as much as it was the memories and the guilt.

"Make a comeback, Will. Be a star," said Harlen, holding the jersey against his chest. "You know what they say about basketball players."

So I said yes and somehow I managed to compound the original injury, adding the embarrassments of middle age to those of adolescence. But Harlen was good to me. I missed easy shots, fumbled rebounds, dribbled the ball out of bounds, and Harlen sat on the bench, twisted his towel and yelled encouragement.

"Next time, Will.

"Way to move the ball.

"Nice try.

"No sweat, we'll get it back."

We had a good team. Elwood and Floyd had played a little college ball, and Frankie and Leroy had been starters up in Edmonton. Most weekends during the fall, we'd travel around to the money tournaments. We'd drive out to Gladstone Hall on the reserve or up to Siksika or Gleichen or Hobbema. Sometimes we'd drop across the line and play some of the reserve teams around Great Falls or Browning or Missoula. Friday nights, we generally won. Floyd would put in those jump shots of his, and Elwood would muscle in on the boards. But after the game, the boys would go out to a bar and drink until closing. We generally lost our early game on Saturday, and the afternoon game wasn't much

better. The championship game was played on the Sunday, and by then, most of the time, we were driving home.

One Sunday, as we were coming back from a tournament in Browning, Harlen pulled the van to the side of the road.

"Come on, boys, hop out. I want you to see something."

There wasn't much to see, just the river and the prairies stretched out gold and rolling. Harlen stood with his back to the wind. It blew his hair out into a spiked fan. He looked like a thistle.

"You boys don't try hard enough," Harlen began, which was the way he always began when he was going to give us one of his coach's talks.

"Christ, Harlen," said Floyd, "it's cold and blowing like hell."

"You boys look around you," Harlen shouted, ignoring Floyd and the wind. "What do you see? Go on, look around. Where are you? What are you standing on?"

Elwood and Floyd looked down. "Looks like a road to me," said Floyd. "What about you, Elwood?"

"That's why you miss them jump shots. That's why you get drunk on Friday night and can hardly get your shoes tied on Saturday. That's why we lose those games when we should be winning . . . cause you don't know where you are."

"Couldn't we do this next week?" Floyd and Elwood and Leroy jammed their hands in their pockets and began to walk around to stay warm.

"You're standing on Mother Earth." Harlen looked at Floyd hard. "That's right, go ahead and smile." Harlen gestured with his chin. "You see what's over there?"

"Give us a hint," Floyd said, under his breath.

"Ninastiko."

You could see Chief Mountain clearly, its top chiselled back at a slant, its sides rising straight off the prairie floor. There were no clouds, just the Rockies, and above them, the sky. The wind was gusting, strong. Harlen rocked back and forth as he talked. We stood there, our heads pulled down, our eyes closed to slits, and we slowly turned away from the wind and Harlen and the mountain.

James's best drawing was an eagle, its wings spread, riding the wind. It was my favourite. Henry Goodrider who lived on the floor below us figured he could draw as well as James. "Anybody can do that stuff. Nothing to it," he said.

"You ought to see the rhino James did."

"Nothing to it."

"I'll bet you've never seen an eagle like the one James drew."

"Bet you can't draw at all."

"I'm not an artist. I'm an athlete."

"Hear all you play is the end of the bench."

"Hear all you can draw is flies."

Henry and me were always talking like that. Just fun. And to tell the truth, Henry was a pretty good artist. He didn't draw pictures like James. His were more cartoon characters with big noses, bushy eyebrows and huge bellies. Most of them had cigars sticking out of their mouths and stuff dripping out of their noses. Henry drew them in chalk on the basement floor and the walls by the washers and dryer.

"Who cares about drawing eagles?" Henry would say.

Henry was up in our apartment one day, and he

saw one of James's drawings on the refrigerator. "Hey," said Henry, "what's this one supposed to be?"

"It's an elephant. Anyone can see that."

"Looks like a big, grey turd."

"You must be blind."

"Know a turd when I see one."

I knew where James kept his drawings. I got the box and put it on the kitchen table.

"You want to see some real art?" I said.

Henry looked at all the drawings, and when he was done, he said, "Your brother draws okay, draws better than you play basketball. But you know, there's still something missing." And then he grinned at me and pulled out his pen.

I was in the darkroom on Monday when Harlen came by. I could hear him prowling about just outside the door. "Will, I got to talk to you."

We had had these talks before. I put the prints in the wash, turned on the lights and opened the door. Harlen was leaning against the frame. "What am I going to do with those boys, Will?"

"They're just young."

"We could have a good team, you know. We've got talent. You know what we need?"

At the first of the season, we needed new uniforms, something to give us pride. After the first three losses, we needed to be in better shape. The last time Harlen had dropped by to talk to me, we needed discipline.

"What we need, Will, is a leader. Someone the boys respect. Someone with maturity."

"You got someone in mind?" I don't know why I thought Harlen was talking about me.

"Me," said Harlen. "I'm going to have to play. Used to be a good athlete. Need the exercise anyway. Set a good example for the boys. Team drinks too much."

"I don't drink."

"Course you don't, Will. You're too old for that. You know better. It's those young boys I'm worried about."

"I'm not old."

When Harlen came to practice that night, he had on a red T-shirt that said Indian Power. He looked taller in shorts.

"Where'd you get the shoes?" asked Elwood.

"Antique store," said Floyd. "Must of had a sale."

"Ten laps around the gym," said Harlen. "Come on, we got to get in shape."

Harlen took off, and the rest of us hung on his tail. Most of the boys could have passed him at any time, but the pace was comfortable, and all of us were content to let him lead. By the eighth lap, he was struggling. The back of his shirt was dark with sweat, and the old black canvas high-tops were smacking the floor, all the spring gone out of his legs.

Floyd ran alongside me and motioned towards Harlen. "A beer says he doesn't last the night."

Harlen was horrible. His jump shot was a brick. His hook shot, which he liked to shoot from twenty-five feet out, reminded me of John Wayne throwing hand grenades. He had a set shot from half-court that occasionally went in. But he ran and he jumped and he sweated with the rest of us, and Floyd bought the beer.

"He's just trying to compensate." Floyd signalled to the waitress for another beer. "He can't dance any more, so he figures to make his name in basketball."

"Harlen doesn't dance."

"Used to. Harlen was one hell of a dancer. Won all sorts of prizes at the powwows. Used to hoop dance, too . . . exhibition. Elwood's auntie says that there was no one could work those hoops like Harlen."

"Hoop dancer, huh?"

"Back when he was young. But he don't do it any more. One night at Gladstone, he was giving an exhibition. He'd had a little to drink, and half-way through, he fell. Hard."

"Did he get hurt?"

"Hurt his foot, but mostly it was his pride. That's why he's always trying to compensate."

"Harlen's not trying to compensate."

"All you old guys are trying to recapture the past. You knew Pete Johnson, didn't you?"

"Rodeo?"

"Yeah. Got busted up by a bull in Calgary. Couldn't rodeo any more, so he took up stock-car driving."

"So?"

"So, he killed himself. Couldn't rodeo, wasn't much of a stock-car driver. One night he just drove his truck off Snake Coulee."

"Floyd, I saw Pete last week."

"What? . . . Oh, yeah . . . I remember now, it wasn't Pete, it was Jimmy Bruised Head."

"Jimmy's in law school."

"Well, you get the picture. Harlen's trying to compensate, make up for that mistake with the hoops. He made a fool of himself that night, and he's going to make a fool of himself again. First game we play, you watch."

That Friday, we drove out to Siksika. We had the six-o'clock game.

"Will, need to talk to you for a minute." Harlen

walked over to the bench. "I been thinking, and I figure I won't start you tonight. Save your legs the first game. Keep you fresh for Saturday."

"I don't mind. I feel good."

"It's nothing like that, Will. You'll get to play. Just want to try a few new things."

Harlen started in my place. I got to play the last two minutes of the first half, and that was it. We won. Floyd put in thirty-two points. Harlen didn't make a fool of himself. He played well and even scored six points—two half-court set shots and one John Wayne hook. I generally scored eight points. But there it was—my past. The same solicitous tone, the same concern. Mr. Bobniak had said much the same thing in much the same way when he put me on the bench.

We showered, talked about the game as we dressed. Harlen reminded the boys not to get drunk, that we had a big game tomorrow. I was standing at a locker when Harlen came by and swatted me with a towel. "Good game, Will. Hell of a move on the base line."

I had brought my own car. I finished dressing, threw my uniform in the team bag and left. It was a two-hour drive back to Medicine River. I turned the radio on and rolled back the sun roof to let the night in. The moon was out, and you could see Ninastiko standing alone against the Rockies.

James found the drawings right away and showed Mom.

"Henry did that," I said. "I tried to stop him, but I couldn't."

My mother shook her head. "You're the oldest, Will. You should look after James."

"I can look after myself," said James.

The next day, James went down to Mr. Pugh's butcher shop and got a long piece of brown paper. He drew another eagle on that paper and hung it out our bedroom window. I helped him tape it to the ledge.

"I can make them as big as I want," he said. "And I can draw eagles over and over again."

"This will show Henry, all right," I said.

The eagle hung on the side of the building until the rain and the wind tore it apart, and there was nothing left but the tape and shreds of brown paper.

I figured that Harlen would come by on Monday. I had all my lines rehearsed. Harlen came by on Tuesday. He looked shorter draped over the crutches.

"What happened?"

"Twisted my ankle pretty bad, Will. Went after a rebound and landed on someone's foot. Hurts like hell. Elwood had to drive the van home."

"How'd the team do?"

"Lost Saturday's games. Close scores though. Could have used you, Will."

I tried smiling. "Had to come back . . . forgot about it, the photographs. Couldn't stay if I wanted. You'd already gone. I left a message with Buster . . . you know . . . at the registration desk. Didn't you get it?" Lies are hard things to smile through.

Harlen smiled back and shifted his weight. "Figured it was something like that. Floyd said you left because you were mad I didn't play you more."

I shook my head.

"You know, after the game, Louise Heavyman came over and asked where you were. Good-looking woman, Louise."

"Sure."

"I must be getting old, Will." Harlen leaned over the crutches. "I haven't hurt this ankle since high school."

"Dancing?"

"What?"

Harlen's face was a blank. I was still angry. Playing dumb wasn't going to help. I wanted a piece of him.

"You know, that night at Gladstone Hall, hoop dancing, wasn't it? You fell and hurt your foot."

Harlen's face tensed up, and he shifted around on the crutches. It was a cheap shot.

"Dancing? Hell, I'm a horrible dancer, Will. Hurt the ankle playing basketball. My cousin Billy, he's the dancer in the family."

"Billy?"

"Yeah, real good, too. Funny you know about that. Happened . . . damn, happened years ago. Just bad luck. Billy stepped on a hoop and went down hard. Real embarrassing. Hurt his arm, but that wasn't the worst of it. You know Thelma Simpson? Billy drove her out to Snake Coulee that night . . . a little romancing. Well, Thelma got mad, pushed him out of the truck and drove off. And it was February. Billy almost froze to death."

"Damn it, Floyd . . ." I caught myself saying it out loud.

"Floyd's okay," said Harlen. "He's got a great jump shot."

It served me right, it damn well served me right. I wanted to laugh.

Harlen laughed instead. "Floyd bet me a beer you were quitting the team. How I love those easy beers."

I looked at him, standing there on his crutches. "Look, I appreciate your coming by to talk me into staying with the team."

Harlen raised his hand and shook his head. "Serious now, Will. I came to talk to you about the team. Team gives the boys something to belong to, something they can be proud of. The boys look up to you, Will. Like a brother. Floyd said it wasn't the same, driving into the key and not seeing you standing there under the basket."

"That's about all I do."

"You give the boys confidence, Will. They got respect for you, and we got a good team. We can win the league championship. You know what the team needs?"

What the team needed, Harlen said, was a better grasp of the basics. He was going to bring some folding chairs down to the gym, so we could practise dribbling around them. He'd also bought some record on how to be a successful coach. It came with a book of plays and a poster of Bobby Knight.

I knew what the team really needed. A new centre. Someone young, fast, good hands, strong jumper. But I wasn't going to tell Harlen that. Not yet, anyway.

I had expected James to be angry about his drawings, but all he talked about was the eagle and how he was going to do a whale next. The eagle looked great hanging out the window. You could see it all the way down the block. Even Henry said it looked good.

"James say anything to you?"

"Nope."

"Figured he'd be angry."

"He didn't mind. He thought it was funny."

"If my brother did that to me, I'd stuff his face in the trash."

"I didn't do anything. You did."

"Hey, you helped, Will. You drew the cigar on the

eagle and that stupid hat on the buffalo, too."

"It was just a joke."

The rain came first and soaked the butcher's paper and plastered it to the side of the building. The wind came a few days later and tore the drawing loose. Some of the ink bled through, and for a long time after, you could see a faint outline of the eagle in the brick. James could draw. He really could.

I caught up with Floyd at the American Hotel a couple of days later. He was having a beer with Elwood.

"Hey, Will," said Floyd, and he pulled out a chair for me, "don't see you in here much. Sit down. You seen Harlen? Really twisted that ankle. Christ, it looked like a purple grapefruit."

I was still looking for a piece of someone. "Great hoop dancer, huh? Trying to compensate, huh?" Chewing on Floyd was going to make me feel better. "Why don't we talk about Harlen's cousin Billy?"

"Billy?" Floyd looked at Elwood and then back at me. "Harlen doesn't have a cousin Billy."

chapter

three

"You know," said Harlen, "they got people who get paid for figuring out ways of breaking things down into little pieces."

Harlen always talked like this around tax time.

"Categories, that's what they call them."

Harlen would spend a good month musing about the wonders of taxes, and then he would take his T4s over to Louise Heavyman.

"They got names for those categories that I can't even pronounce. You know why they do that, Will?"

I took my tax forms to Louise too. Neither of us could be trusted with the mysteries of simple addition.

"Bank called me up, Will. Said I was overdrawn again. You know, they must have made a mistake."

Before Louise opened her own office in Medicine River, Harlen and I took our tax business to Jerry Peterson. Jerry ran a finance company, but he did taxes on the side, when the loan business slowed down just after Christmas.

"You ever read any of those brochures Jerry used to give us, Will? One of them said I should be making a thousand dollars for every year I've been alive."

Jerry gave out free pens in plastic wrappers.

"You know, I really liked those pens. I told Louise she should give out pens too."

"What did she say?"

"You know Louise."

Jerry liked to get paid at the same time he did your taxes. "Not good business giving out credit," Jerry told Harlen once. "It'll just lower your self-esteem." And then he'd give you a pen.

Louise wanted to be paid at the same time she did our taxes, too. But she wasn't worried about our self-esteem.

"I've got rent to pay. I can't be spending my time chasing out to the reserve or tracking you guys down."

Harlen, who sees the good in everyone and is always trying to help, told her that he really didn't mind her not giving out pens, but that now that she was a successful businesswoman, she should think about getting married.

"What did she say to that?"

"She said she'd consider it."

Which wasn't exactly what Louise had said. Elwood had been there with Harlen.

"Should have heard her laugh," Elwood told me. "Big tears in her eyes. Had to blow her nose six or seven times."

Louise had never been married.

"Real smart though, Will," said Harlen. "Even in boarding school, she was real smart. Has a great sense of humour. Good personality, too. What do you think?"

I liked Louise, and I told Harlen I liked her, but that wasn't what Harlen meant.

"Good-looking woman, Will. Strong hips. You know, for children. Tall, too. Always good to have a tall woman."

Harlen and I had had this conversation before. "You must be forty or so, Will. Don't look it, though. You're a handsome man, good job. Good teeth. Good personality, too. You ever think about getting married?" Then he would drop hints about the way a life should be lived.

"A man's not complete until he has a woman by his side.

"Nothing more important than the family.

"A son of yours would probably be a sports star of some sort.

"Beats the hell out of eating your own cooking."

I didn't mind. Harlen meant well.

"Seeing a man live alone is sad, Will. You get all drawn out and grey and wrinkled. Look at Sam Belly."

"Sam's over ninety."

"And he's not married."

"Sam was married for over fifty years, Harlen."

"Course he was. Wouldn't have lived this long without a good woman. But do you think he'll live another ten years?"

Every so often, to keep these conversations from being one-sided, I'd throw out a few statistics of my own.

"You know, Harlen, I was reading an article on marriages, and it said that at least fifty percent of marriages end in divorce."

"Hell, Will. If you could get odds like that in Vegas, you'd be rich."

That was Harlen.

Harlen kept up on all the gossip. Nothing happened on the reserve or in town that Harlen didn't know about. When he stopped by the studio on Wednesday, I could see he had something big on his mind. He was smiling inside, and it was leaking out the sides of his mouth and his ears.

"Morning, Will." And he helped himself to a chair.

I had a stack of order forms in front of me, and with any luck, I figured I could get through them before Harlen got around to what he wanted to say.

"Morning, Harlen."

"Nice day outside, Will. You remember Louise Heavyman?"

"She did our taxes last month."

"That's the one."

The corners of Harlen's mouth started bending up, and his head began bobbing up and down like a turkey's.

"You know, Will, I don't really mind that Louise doesn't give out free pens."

"Hmmmmmmm."

"Those pens Jerry gave out never did work too well, you know."

"Hmmmmmmm."

"A couple of them leaked all over my shirt. Skipped a lot, too."

"Hmmmmmmm."

"And the colours . . . black and yellow . . . looked like you had a shiny bumblebee stuck in your pocket."

"Hmmmmmmm."

"The next time I see Louise, I should tell her that."

"Hmmmmmmm."

"What do you think, Will? You think she'll invite

us to her wedding?"

"Who?"

"Louise."

"What wedding?"

Harlen looked all around the room. "Louise is probably getting married."

You never knew just how far Harlen's *probables* were from *actuals*, and most of the time, neither did Harlen.

"That was pretty sudden."

"Fellow from Edmonton. Leroy and Floyd saw them at Casey's. Leroy says that they both sat on the same side of the table."

"When's the wedding?"

"Leroy says he thinks the guy is Cree."

"When's the wedding?"

"Probably soon. You don't sit on the same side of the table unless it's serious."

For the next month, Harlen brought me all the new information about Louise and her boyfriend.

"Should have seen them, Will. Walking hand in hand. Daylight, too.

"Rita Blackplume saw them at the movies . . . off in a corner by themselves.

"His name is Harold. Drives a Buick. Comes down from Edmonton every weekend. Floyd saw his car in front of Louise's place . . . all night."

After the second month or so, Louise and her boyfriend slipped into third place behind Mary Rabbit's divorce and Elgin and Billy Turnbull's driving their father's truck off the Minor Street Bridge into the river. Elgin broke his arm. Billy put his head into the windshield and broke his big toe. Louise and her boyfriend were interesting, but Harlen was intrigued by Billy's toe.

"Can't figure how he did that, Will. Broke his toe. Can you figure that? Hit his head and broke his toe."

Billy's toe healed, and Elgin's arm was out of the cast in two months. And Louise didn't get married. Harlen called me at two in the morning to tell me that.

"Will, you awake?"

"Harlen?"

"Will, wake up. It's important."

"Harlen, it's the middle of the night."

"Louise isn't getting married, Will. Betty over at the hospital told Doreen that Louise and her boyfriend broke up about three weeks ago, and Doreen called me. You awake?"

"I'm in bed."

"Will, Louise is pregnant. I'll be by in ten minutes."

"Harlen . . ."

"Okay, twenty."

I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth, when Harlen let himself in.

"Coffee on, Will?"

Louise was pregnant all right. Betty at the hospital had seen the results of the tests. About two months along.

"Louise told Betty she had planned it this way. Said she wanted a baby, but didn't want to get married. That's Louise, isn't it?"

"She's a strong woman."

"No, I mean the front. You know, Will, lying like that, so everyone will think you're okay."

"You think . . ."

"Sure. She's all alone. Made a mistake. Scared to death. Family will probably disown her. Probably lose all her friends."

"What about the boyfriend?"

"He's Cree, Will." And Harlen held his arms out and shook his head. "We got to do something. What do you think?"

Helping was Harlen's specialty. He was like a spider on a web. Every so often, someone would come along and tear off a piece of the web or poke a hole in it, and Harlen would come scuttling along and throw out filament after filament until the damage was repaired. Bertha over at the Friendship Centre called it meddling. Harlen would have thought of it as general maintenance.

"People are fragile. Doesn't take much to break something. Starfish are lucky, you know. You break off one of their arms, and it grows back. I saw it on television."

Harlen poured himself another cup of coffee.

"Most women would just fall apart, you know. You got to admire Louise. Betty says you could never tell she was on the edge of a mental breakdown."

I couldn't imagine Louise on the edge of anything.

"We got to help her, Will. Somebody's got to look after her. Be with her. Take her out, so she's not ashamed to be seen in public. You know what I mean?"

I was afraid I did.

"Harlen, you're not suggesting I should start seeing Louise just because she's pregnant?"

"No, I wasn't thinking that. Course you are single, so your wife wouldn't get upset, and you're not doing anything anyway. And you are good friends with Louise."

"I like being single."

Harlen smiled. "You know, Will, your mother and Louise's mother used to be good friends."

"I don't want to get married."

"Who said anything about getting married? Louise is going through a bad time. Some Cree gets her pregnant and then runs away. All her friends and family desert her. She's afraid to be seen in public. She's your friend, Will. Couldn't hurt to help out. Take her out to lunch."

"I've got a lot of work to do."

"You know what they say, Will. Lunch is the most important meal of the day."

I felt like a real ass walking into Louise's office the next day. I probably wouldn't have gone, but Harlen knew me too well. He picked me up and drove me over.

"You can go now, Harlen," I said. "I can get across the street by myself."

"I'll just wait here, Will, in case you need to ask any questions."

Louise was in. She didn't look pregnant, but she caught me looking. "Yes, Will, I am pregnant. God, you guys are the biggest bunch of goats."

"I didn't come here about that."

"And Harlen didn't send you."

"Harlen? No. Just thought I'd come by and say hello. See if you wanted to go out for lunch."

"The same Harlen who just happens to be parked across the street. Will, Harlen's already sent over Floyd and Jimmy and Jack Powless."

"Jack Powless?"

"All three hundred pounds of him. They all wanted to say hello and take me out to lunch."

Sometimes you get into situations where you can do nothing but lie. It's the fear that does it, I think. "Really, just came by to say hello."

Louise smiled at me the way you smile at a two-year-old. "Thanks, Will," she said, and she went back into her office.

"Is it okay if I use your bathroom?"

"Help yourself, Will."

I let myself out the back door and walked home. I unplugged the phone and lay down on the bed. When I woke up, I felt better. I was still angry with Harlen, but I felt better. So I called Louise. What the hell. "Louise," I said, "it's Will. About the lunch date . . ."

There was one of those long pauses when you think you might have lost the connection.

"Will . . ."

"This has nothing to do with Harlen or your being pregnant. How about tomorrow? We can go to Casey's."

There was another pause.

"How about I pay for my own meal?" she said.

"You eat that much?"

I was sweating when I got off the phone, and my heart was racing. And I didn't call Harlen.

Casey's was crowded. The hostess jammed us into a corner, and between the lunch crowd, the music, the dishes clacking in the kitchen and the waitress dropping by every two minutes to ask us if everything was okay, we could hardly hear one another. We were reduced to either yelling across the table or just smiling and nodding.

The food made me brave. We passed the Paramount Theatre on the way back to Louise's office. *Revenge of the Nerds* was playing.

"You got plans for Saturday night?"

"This about a date?"

"Good movie, that one," I said.

Louise laughed.

I got braver. "How about it? See the early show

and grab some burgers at Baggy's after."

"Not supposed to be eating things like that. Not good for the baby."

She caught me flat-footed.

"I better eat at home," Louise said. "But the movie sounds fine. What say I pick you up around six-thirty?"

"Where am I going to eat?"

Louise was a pretty good cook. I'm not big on vegetables, but I suppose they were better for the baby. Her car was more comfortable than my truck, and it still had most of its paint. I'd been on dates where the woman used her own car. Normally, though, they always asked me if I wanted to drive.

The movie was awful. But about half-way through, I realized that, while the audience was snorting and laughing, Louise was crying. She caught me looking and laughed and wiped her eyes and said, "It's all right, Will. It's just hormones. Watch the movie."

I had a good time. I called Louise the next week, and we began to go out regular. She told me about Harold.

"He was real nice. But I didn't want to get married. I think he thought when I got pregnant that I'd change my mind."

But most of our conversations were about babies.

"You got to watch what you eat, get a lot of exercise. You can't drink coffee or take any aspirin. I don't smoke, so that's okay. Babies are sensitive."

I wasn't able to avoid Harlen for long. He came into the studio with his mouth all bent around his nose.

"Haven't seen you around, Will. Some of the boys on the team were asking about you."

"Been busy."

"You got to get out every so often, you know." Harlen shifted around in the chair. "You doing anything for lunch today?"

"No."

"How about tomorrow?"

"No, nothing then either."

"Thursday?"

"I'm busy Thursday."

Harlen shifted back. "Business?"

"Not exactly."

"Anyone I know?"

"Yes."

Harlen stood up and smiled and shook his head.

"You know, we're friends, Will. If you have any questions, you just call, even in the middle of the night."

"Thanks, Harlen."

"That's what friends do, Will. Even in the middle of the night."

When I saw Louise later, I told her about Harlen.

"God, yes," said Louise. "Betty and Doreen and Shirley are convinced we're going to get married."

Louise got bigger and bigger, and I guess I began getting protective. I started opening car doors. I held her arm when we had to cross an icy street. After dinner one night, Louise took my hand and put it on her belly. "Here, Will," she said, "you can feel her kick."

I was just helping, like Harlen said. I helped her watch what she ate. I even gave her a little help with some names.

"What about Wilma?" Louise said. "I had a granny named Wilma."

"God, no."

"Jamie?"

"No."

"Elizabeth?"

"Maybe."

"Sarah?"

"It's okay."

"Will, you're a big help."

We never got around to being lovers. There didn't seem to be the time for that. We were friends. Louise was good to be with, but there was a distance and Louise kept it. I figured it had to do with Harold.

I was dead asleep the night Louise called.

"Will, I need to go to the hospital. Don't know if I can drive myself. Can you give me a ride?"

It took the hospital over an hour to get Louise admitted. Every so often, she'd have to stop and bend over and take a deep breath. They finally got her into a room, and a doctor looked at her while I waited outside.

"I'm only dilated four centimetres, Will. Probably won't have the baby until morning. Thanks for the ride and all the attention. I'll have them call you when she's born."

"I got nothing better to do. Don't mind waiting. Maybe it's a boy, and you'll need some more help with names."

"No sense, Will. It'll be a long wait. You've got things to do."

"Maybe I'll wait for a little while. Just in case."

"I'll be okay."

The waiting-room was small, and it didn't have any windows. There was a big No Smoking sign stuck on the wall, and a fellow in a suit sitting on the couch smoking a cigarette. I walked over to the other couch, waved my arm around, coughed a couple of times, and stared at the sign.

"It sure takes a long time for women to have

babies," he said. "I've been here three hours already."

"I think this is a no smoking area," I said.

"They just leave you sit here. The nurse came by once to say that my wife was okay. They want you to be in the delivery-room these days, but, hey, what do they expect me to do? Catch the kid, right?" The guy laughed and put the cigarette out on the floor and shook another one out of the pack. "You don't mind, do you?"

I said that I did, and he put the cigarette back. We sat across the room from each other and looked at the walls. Finally, he stood up and said, "Our doctor said it might be better if Karen had the baby Caesarean, but she got all upset. What's your wife's name?"

"I'm not married."

"Oh . . . right. Well, look, I'm going to walk around. Maybe grab some coffee. If the nurse comes by, tell her I'll be back in a while. And if they want to do a Caesarean . . . hell . . . they can page me, right? Sometimes they don't have a choice, right? I mean, they do those things all the time. I told her it would be okay."

The first four hours weren't bad. Someone had left an old Nero Wolfe novel under the magazines. I had read it before, but I had forgotten who the murderer was. The guy with the cigarette never came back. After six hours, I caught one of the nurses who was coming out of the maternity area, and I asked her about Louise.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I thought I'd wait."

"I'll bet your wife would love to have you with her. There's lots you could do."

"Right."

"Sitting in a waiting-room is a little old fashioned.

Most men like to be there when their wives deliver. Is this your first?"

"Ah . . . yes."

"She's just down the hall, first door on the right."

Maternity was in the south wing of the hospital. South Wing was printed in large letters above the double doors. I stood in the hall for several minutes and thought about wandering down to say hello. One of the doors was slightly open, and I leaned against it and slid into the corridor just as another nurse came out of a room.

"Can I help you?"

I didn't have time to get the lie right. "She's just down there . . . Ms. Heavyman . . . Louise."

"You her husband?"

"Sure . . . I'm her . . . a . . . I'm a friend . . . in a way. . . ."

"Friends of the family have to wait outside."

I finished the novel, sat on the couch and watched the doctors and nurses going back and forth through the doors. I don't know what time it was when the nurse woke me.

"Mr. Heavyman, Mr. Heavyman. Your wife has gone to delivery. Shouldn't be too long now." She smiled at me and shook her head and left before I had any chance to explain.

The cafeteria was closed. I had to get my coffee from a machine. I took two sips and threw the rest away. I went back to the room and sat and waited. I began thinking about Louise, and for the first time since I had come back to Medicine River, I felt good. Clean and strong. Maybe we could give it a try with the baby and all.

I was thinking these thoughts when Harlen and Floyd and Elwood and Jack Powless came in.

"I told you he'd be here, Floyd," said Harlen. "You owe me a beer."

Harlen and Floyd and Elwood sat down on the couch across from me. Jack took up the rest of the couch I was on.

"What are you guys doing here?" And I tried to sound pleasant.

"Just checking up on Louise. How's she doing?"

"She's doing fine. Nurse said it would probably be eight, nine hours, yet. No sense in you guys waiting around. I'm probably going to go myself in a bit."

Harlen settled into the couch. None of them looked like they were going anywhere.

"Hell, Will," said Floyd. "How's it feel to be a father?"

Elwood roared and pounded on Floyd's shoulder. Jack leaned over and patted my knee. Harlen settled deeper into the couch.

We were all sitting there in the room pretending to read, when the nurse returned.

"Mr. Heavyman?"

"That's him," says Elwood, and he dropped the magazine and put his face in his hands so the nurse couldn't see how hard he was laughing.

"Your wife just had a baby girl. We'll get her cleaned up and weighed, and you can come in the nursery and see her. Your wife had a few minor complications, but she's all right, just tired. You'll be able to see her soon. Don't worry, she's fine."

All hell broke loose as soon as the nurse was gone. Floyd and Elwood got up and started dancing around and slapping each other on the back and coming over and shaking my hand and saying things like, "It's a girl, Mr. Heavyman," and "Your wife is just fine, Mr. Heavyman," and "You can see your

daughter in a little while, Mr. Heavyman."

Even Jack Powless, who seldom says anything, shook my hand and said that children were a wonderful blessing. For the next twenty minutes, I had to sit with four grinning assholes. I was rescued by the nurse.

"You can see your daughter now, Mr. Heavyman."

Whereupon Elwood and Floyd collapsed into one another.

"She's a big girl," the nurse said, "eight pounds, seven ounces."

They made me put on a gown before they would let me hold her. She was wrapped up in a blanket, and all you could see was her face and eyes. I thought they would be closed like puppies' or kittens', but they weren't. They were open, and she was looking at me.

"I'll bet you have a name all picked out for her."

All I could see was the big sign outside the maternity ward. "Yeah," I said, feeling really good with the baby in my arms, "we'll probably call her South Wing." I guess I expected the nurse to laugh, but she didn't.

"Is that a traditional Indian name?"

"I was just joking."

"No, I think it's a beautiful name."

That little girl kept looking at me, and I just sat in the rocking-chair in the nursery. I would have sat there longer, but the nurse came in to tell me that my wife was awake and wanted to see the baby.

"Give us a second," said the nurse, "and we'll put her in a bassinet, and you can take her down."

I'd forgotten about Floyd and Elwood and Jack Powless and Harlen. As I pushed the bassinet down the hall, I looked into the waiting-room, but it was

empty. South Wing was still awake and staring. I thought about Louise and her not having anyone, family angry with her, all her friends gone. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, I thought. Maybe it could work out.

There are times when I don't know why I bother to listen to Harlen. Louise was in 325C. So were her mother and father, two of her brothers and all of her sisters, three of her aunts, a couple of people I didn't know, and Harlen, Floyd, Elwood, and Jack Powless, who was squeezed up against the radiator.

"Hey, Will," said Louise's father, "what you doing here? Hey, you got my little granddaughter. Boy, she sure is small."

Louise was sitting up in bed, but she wasn't comfortable, and she wasn't trying to fool anyone, either.

"Here," said Louise's mother, "let Louise hold the baby, and we'll get a picture. You be fast, Carter, cause that baby needs a lot of quiet and a lot to eat. Here, Will, give her to me."

Carter Heavyman got his Instamatic. "Hey, Will. You should have brought one of your cameras." He looked over at me and smiled. "Where'd you get that gown?"

Carter took the picture, and everyone crowded around to see the baby. On the card on the bassinet, the nurse had written "South Wing Heavyman". No one noticed me leave.

I left the hospital, and thought I would just walk in the dark and look at the stars, but it turned out to be ten in the morning. The sun was up and hot.

I stopped off at Woodward's and bought a stuffed penguin for the baby. I slept the rest of the day. I took the penguin to the hospital that night.

"Will, I'm glad you came by. That was a madhouse

this morning. Mom had to drag Dad away, so I could get some rest."

"I got this for the baby."

"Her name's Wilma, Will. She's down at the nursery, but you can see her if you want. The nurses think you're my husband. Where'd you get the name South Wing?"

"It was supposed to be a joke."

"Dad really liked it."

"Wilma's better."

"She's beautiful, isn't she, Will? As soon as we get settled, I'll make dinner. Maybe we can go to a show, too."

"Sure."

"You understand, don't you, Will?"

"Sure."

The nursery was bright and alive with light. Some of the babies were awake and crying. A mother sat in the rocking-chair in the corner nursing her child. The plate-glass window was hard and cool, and I lay my face against it and watched South Wing sleep.

The nurse at the desk smiled at me and came over to where I was standing. "This must be your first," she said. "Which one is yours?"

Harlen and the boys were at basketball practice, and Mr. and Mrs. Heavyman had probably gone back to the reserve. Louise was in her room. South Wing lay in her bassinet wrapped in a pink blanket.

I looked down the corridor. It was clear.

"That one," I said.

chapter

four

I drove January Pretty Weasel out to the reserve for the funeral. Her arm was still in the sling, and Doc Calavano said the medication might make her drowsy. I didn't want to go, but January was kin, and it was her husband's funeral.

Jake had shot himself. January found him in bed with his shotgun. Harlen gave me all the details.

"Harlen, I don't need to know everything."

"Sorry, Will, hard to tell half a story. RCMP wouldn't let anyone touch a thing for two days. Made the clean-up even harder. Everything had dried, you know. Why would they do that, Will? Make it real hard for Thelma and Bertha."

"Evidence, I guess."

"You think January shot him?"

Jake Pretty Weasel used to come out every so often and scrimmage with the team. He even went to some of the tournaments with us. He was a good player, one of those natural athletes they tell you about on television.

"You know about these things, Will," Harlen said. "Why'd you suppose Jake did that? Such a good friend to you and me and the rest of the boys. You know, he'd always buy the boys a beer or loan them a few dollars if they were short. Always telling a joke and laughing."

"That was Jake."

"You know, maybe he drank a little too much sometimes, but he wasn't no drunk. Good worker, too. Had that job at Exchange Lumber for what . . . eight, nine years? What do you think?"

"That was Jake."

"You think January shot him?"

James and me grew up in an apartment on Bentham Street in Calgary. Mom worked at the Bay cleaning up, and I guess we had enough money. There were other Indian families in the building, mostly mothers and children. We all spent a lot of time playing in the basement, and Henry Goodrider, who was a few years older than me and who was always doing something funny, made up a big cardboard sign that said Bentham Reserve, Indians Only. Henry didn't mean that the white kids couldn't play in the basement. It was just a joke, but Lena Oswald told her mother, and Mrs. Oswald came downstairs carrying a blue can with little animals painted on the sides. She put the can on the bench and took the sign off the door.

She gathered us all together and asked us our names. Then she shook hands with us and said we should all be friends. "White people do not live on reserves," she said. "And no matter what your colour, all of us here are Canadians."

Then she opened the can and gave each of us two big chocolate chip cookies.

It didn't make much sense, and after Mrs. Oswald and Lena left, Henry explained that Mrs. Oswald was really very nice, that she just seemed strange because of her illness.

Jake beat up on January. It was no secret. We played a tournament out at Gladstone Hall one year, and January and the kids came out to watch us. Jake hadn't had a good game, had fouled out, and afterwards, January had come over to the bench and sat down beside Jake and put her arm around him to make him feel better, I guess. Jake took hold of her arm real slow and started to twist it. January, you could see that she was trying not to cry, trying to make everything look normal, like the two of them were playing. Then Jake let go the arm and hit her—right in the face with his fist. And then he got up and walked away. January's mouth was bleeding pretty bad, and she was starting to shake. The rest of us just stood there, Harlen, and Floyd, and Leroy, and me. January tried to smile, and she waved her hand as if everything was okay.

"Jake was always good to us."

"That was Jake."

It was the only time I ever saw Jake hit January, but Betty down at the hospital said that January was a regular in the emergency ward. Betty told January to file charges, but she never did.

Mrs. Oswald was a tall woman with long blond hair. From behind she looked like a young girl, all slim and fragile. But when she turned, you could see her face. My mother said that the long dresses she wore were rich people's clothes and that Mrs. Oswald probably had had lots of money, but didn't now. People who were born rich could never learn to be

poor, my mother said. It was too hard on them. They just shrivelled up from bad luck and bad times.

When Mrs. Oswald and Lena first moved into the apartment building, Mrs. Oswald told everyone that her husband had recently passed away and that she wouldn't be staying long, just until the estate was settled. To watch her in her long dresses, moving around the neighbourhood, perched on her toes, gesturing and calling out in her singsong voice as if she was in a movie, you'd think that she was filled up with herself. She was always laughing about something, her hands and arms constantly in motion, like a bird trying to fly.

James and me were on the roof one day, and Mrs. Oswald came up and walked to the edge and lifted her arms over her head as though she thought they were wings. When she saw us, it startled her. She smiled and waved at us and yoo-hooed the way she did, standing on her toes and leaning forward. Wasn't it a beautiful view, she said. Wasn't it a fine, manly wind, too, and how it blew and made your eyes water.

"You hear about the letter, Will?"

"What letter?"

RCMP found it on the bed. Jake still had the pen in his hand."

"What'd it say?"

"It was a long letter, Will. Seven or eight pages. Written on some fancy stationery. Thelma said it was neat with nice handwriting, all the lines straight."

"What'd it say?"

"Must have taken Jake an hour to write that letter. Thelma said it made her cry, Jake saying all those nice things about January and the kids, just before he shot himself. You know why he'd do that, Will?"

"Probably depressed. People kill themselves when they're depressed."

"No, I mean the letter. Why'd he write a letter like that. You know, those suicide notes you see on television just say 'I can't go on, please forgive me,' you know, like that . . . short."

Everybody was at the funeral. All of Jake's brothers and sisters came, and all the boys from the team were there. Jake was popular. Most of January's family stayed away, except for her sister, Irene. January had left the kids with her mother. Louise would have come, but South Wing had run a fever the night before. I was there because of January, and Harlen was there because there was a funeral. It was Harlen's way of keeping track. And seeing him at funerals and weddings, bad times and good, was somehow reassuring.

The service was short. The priest wouldn't come because it was a suicide, so January got this fellow she knew from the Mormon Church. Harlen made a little speech about how life was like basketball and how Jake had just fouled out of the game. The Mormon guy came over after and told January how sorry he was about her husband's death, and he told Harlen how much he enjoyed his life-is-like-basketball talk and would it be okay if he used it some time.

It was Lena who told us that her father hadn't really died, that her mother was hiding from him because he beat her. The last time, Lena told us, he had hurt her mother so bad, she almost died. My mother just nodded when I told her about Mrs. Oswald, and she told me I should leave such things be, that it was best to let white people work out their own problems.

One day, after school, Lena came downstairs to our apartment and asked my mother if we could help her.

Mrs. Oswald was sitting in a chair by the window. She had a towel pressed against her face, and it was covered with blood. There was blood all down her dress, and her face was bruised and swollen. Her left arm lay on the arm of the chair at a funny angle. My mother looked at Mrs. Oswald for a long time, and then she called the ambulance.

I drove January back to town. She leaned against the door. The clouds were beginning to pile up against the Rockies. In the distance, you could see the rain squalls moving out on the prairies.

"You okay?"

"I'm okay, Will."

We drove along in silence. January was crying. People have ways of doing that—crying without making a sound. I could see the tears staining her lap, but she wasn't shaking and she wasn't making any noise.

"I guess you'll miss him." I was just saying that to myself. "At least you've got a good job. Good kids, too. Things will get better. Give them a chance. Everything looks bad now, but they'll get better."

January turned to look at me. She had on dark glasses, so I couldn't see her eyes. Her lips were drawn tight against her teeth. "Will, you think they'll arrest me?"

"They don't arrest people for suicide," I said. I was glad she had the dark glasses on.

"You think they'll arrest me for writing the letter?"

I dropped January off at her mother's. When she got out of the car, she took off her dark glasses, and I could see the yellow and purple bruises around her eyes and the deep, black cuts across her nose.

"I'll be okay, Will. Things are better already."

Harlen wasn't surprised when I told him about the letter.

"Jake wasn't much of a writer. Thelma said the handwriting was too nice for a man. Woman's hand is what she figured. January said that, huh?"

I didn't tell Harlen everything January had said on the ride back from the funeral. I don't know that I understood it all.

"I found him like that, Will. Lying on the bed with that shotgun. I don't know what happened. Maybe he was just fooling around. There wasn't a note. So, maybe it wasn't suicide. Maybe it was a mistake.

"You know he beat me. Broke my arm the last time. I was coming home from the hospital when I found him. Everybody else he was good to. He hit the kids sometimes, but not like he hit me. I don't know why he did that. Sometimes he'd apologize.

"Last few years, he stopped apologizing and just beat me. I had to wear these glasses at work. Then . . . he's dead. He should have apologized before he died. It must have been an accident.

"So I did it for him. Wrote that letter. Pretty silly, huh? He says some real sweet things. You think the RCMP will give it back? I want it for the kids . . . when they're older."

Mrs. Oswald stayed in the hospital for about four days. Mrs. Wright, who lived two floors up and who had two girls of her own, looked after Lena. The police came around a couple of times, and they asked about Mr. Oswald, but no one I knew had seen him.

When Mrs. Oswald came home, she was her old cheery self, though her arm was in a cast and her face looked like it still hurt a lot. Her lower lip was all split and some parts had been sewn together. The

little black ends of the thread looked like bug feelers hanging out of her mouth.

Lena told James and me that, when she got home that day, her father was in the kitchen drinking coffee. There was blood all over, but he was just sitting there. Mrs. Oswald was on the floor in the living room, and by the time Lena had helped her mother to the chair, her father had left.

Mrs. Oswald finally got her arm out of the cast, and it looked okay, except it was bone-thin and white. Her face took a while longer to heal and her lip hung off to one side like part of it had died. She smiled and talked about her "accident". If you looked, you could see where there were teeth missing.

The RCMP called Jake's death a suicide. Elwood and Leroy said they figured that January had shot him because Jake was a hunter and knew his way around guns and wouldn't have made a mistake like that. And besides, they said, he had everything—good-looking wife, nice kids, good job.

"People like that," said Elwood, "don't shoot themselves. Shit. Only mistake Jake made was turning his back on January. That women's liberation's what's doing it. Fellow puts a woman in her place once in a while don't give her any call to shoot him. Hell, we'd all be dead."

Leroy's sister was married to one of January's brothers. "Sure, Jake pushed a little bit. That's what men do. But January should have said something. Jake would've stopped. No good letting things build up like that."

Everyone had an opinion, and most of them got back to January. Harlen and me figured that Jake

probably shot himself maybe because he hated himself for beating on January or because he was angry at the time and didn't have anyone but himself to hit.

It was funny, in a way. Jake's suicide, I mean. For a month or so after the funeral, everybody mostly worried about him, as if he were alive. We all had Jake stories, and even January was anxious to tell about the times Jake had taken the kids shopping or made a special dinner or brought her home an unexpected and thoughtful present. I wasn't sure how, but she seemed to have forgotten the beatings and the pain, and in the end, all of us began talking about the letter as if Jake had written it.

"Jake really had a way with words."

"You can see he cared for his family."

"Hard for a man to say those things."

You could see that January wanted it that way, and when you thought about it long enough, I guess it wasn't such a bad thing. After a while, we all forgot about the Jake January found lying on the bed, his head hard against the wall, the shotgun pressed under his chin, one hand on the trigger, the other holding a pen, trying to think of something to say.

chapter

five

Big John Yellow Rabbit was Evelyn Firstrunner's blood nephew. Her father had married Rachael Weaselhead, which made Harley Weaselhead Big John's great-grandfather on his grandmother's side, which meant that Eddie Weaselhead, whose grandfather was Rachael's brother, was blood kin to Big John.

Evelyn's sister, Doreen, had married Fred Yellow Rabbit just long enough to produce Big John before Fred went off to a rodeo in Saskatoon and disappeared. Doreen married Moses Hardy from Hobbema, who wasn't related to anyone at Standoff, but that doesn't have anything to do with the trouble.

"You know John Yellow Rabbit, don't you, Will?"

"Director of the Friendship Centre?"

"Know Eddie Weaselhead?"

"Charlie's cousin?"

"You been down to the centre lately?"

Whenever Harlen had something important he wanted to tell me, he'd sort of float around the subject for a while like those buzzards you see above

Blindman's Coulee all the time. He'd start off cold and slow and have to warm to whatever he had to say.

"Martha Bruised Head came to see me yesterday. You know Martha?"

I nodded. "Sure."

"She's the secretary at the centre. Her mother's Rita Blackplume, Mike Bighead's granddaughter. You know, she married with Buster Blackplume who used to call all the rodeos on the reserve and over in Cardston."

Sometimes Harlen would circle for hours.

"Martha was there when it happened. She called the police."

Three years ago, the Friendship Centre was in bad financial straits. An Ojibway fellow from back east had been the director before Big John. The guy was nice enough, but he didn't watch the books—great ideas, no sense of money. Spent more than the centre had. Big John turned all that around. Most everyone was grateful because he had kept the centre from closing. There were a few complaints. Some of the traditional people didn't care for the three-piece suits that Big John liked to wear.

"Them suits make us think of Whitney Oldcrow over at DIA," Bertha Morley told Big John at one of the powwows. "And why'd you cut your hair?" And the staff at the centre grumbled about the no smoking signs Big John put up around the place.

"People going to mistake you for a Mormon." Bertha had a whole armload of opinions. She'd go around and collect them and give them to you all at once. "You maybe should get rid of that poodle, too."

"Will, do you know why two friends would be trying to kill each other?"

"Who?"

"Big John and Eddie."

"They're not friends."

"They're related. Like you and James."

"But they're not friends."

"Maybe not good friends, but that's no call for Eddie to go and throw a knife at Big John."

My mother's best friend was a white woman she worked with named Erleen Gulley. Once a week, on Thursday, Erleen would show up at our apartment in a good blue print dress and high heels. She would bring the newspaper, and the two of them would sit at the kitchen table and cut out the coupons for Safeway's and IGA and Woodward's. Then my mother would put on her green dress and her good shoes, and the two of them would go grocery shopping.

Most of the time, James and me had to go along. But it wasn't much fun. Mom and Erleen would get a cart, and both of them would push it up and down the aisles. They'd go up and down those aisles from the meat section at the one end to the fruits and vegetable section at the other. The first time through, they wouldn't put anything in that cart.

"You guys didn't get anything."

"We're just getting started," said Erleen. "You can't just grab the first thing you see."

Erleen would wink at Mom and toss her head like she owned the world. My mother would laugh and tell James and me to run along and play.

"In a grocery store?"

The two of them would go back to pushing the cart, and James and me would sit by the magazine rack and read comic books. Later, we'd help Erleen and my mother carry the groceries to Erleen's car.

The two of them would laugh, tell stories, and sing songs all the way home.

I didn't mind going with them. James was always willing to stay home.

Eddie Weaselhead was the social director of the Friendship Centre. He had been there a long time. When the Ojibway fellow left, Eddie applied for the director's position. He thought he should have got it, but Indian politics are complex. Eddie wasn't raised on the reserve like Big John, and he didn't speak Blackfoot either. At least, not very well. Eddie was raised in Red Deer, which wasn't his fault. And he was a half-blood, which also wasn't his fault. But you can see how things just pile up sometimes. And then there was the way he dressed. He always wore a ribbon shirt to work and a beaded buckle. He had four or five rings and an inlaid watch-band that he wore all the time and a four-strand choker made out of real bone with brass ball bearings, glass beads and a big disc cut from one of those shells.

"You look like a walking powwow poster," Bertha told him. "You got more jewellery and stuff than that queer guy used to play piano on television. You maybe give us a bad name."

"How about it, Will? What would make two good friends act that way?"

"A woman?" I was guessing. I figured that Harlen had the answer all along.

"A woman? Damn, Will. How come I didn't hear about her? Who is she? Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess."

Well, I guess it could have been a woman, but it wasn't.

"Did he hit him?"

"Who?"

"Eddie . . . with the knife?"

"Nope, bounced it off the wall. Not even close."

"What happened to Eddie?"

"That's the other thing I came to see you about, Will."

Eddie was looking pretty tired when I got to the jail. The police had taken his beaded buckle. They had taken all his rings, his watch with the inlaid band and the bone choker. They had even taken his ribbon shirt and given him a faded blue shirt. Eddie looked drab, like someone had plucked him.

"Will, what are you doing here?"

Which was a very good question.

"Just thought I'd see if I could help."

"I'm okay. They're just holding me till I cool off. Said I could go in the morning. No charges."

I didn't have Harlen's finesse or his patience.

"So . . . you threw a knife at Big John," was as close as I could come to gliding around a subject.

"Hell, it was just a jackknife."

"Good thing you missed, eh?"

"Blade wasn't even open." Eddie laughed and shook his head. "Just threw the whole thing. Scared the piss out of him." Eddie wiped his hand across his face. "Son-of-a-bitch called me a pretend Indian."

I really hate it when Harlen decides to help somebody with a problem. Generally, the first thing he does is to come see me. It was his idea for me to go see Eddie. And of course I had to see Big John too.

"Will, come on in. Hey, put on a little weight." Big John Yellow Rabbit had on his dark pin-striped suit with a white shirt and a burnt-orange tie with ducks stitched into it. I had seen one of those ties in Hunt's Men's Store. They called them club ties, and they

were expensive. Bertha had told him if he was going to wear a tie like that that he should stay off the reserve. Someone might mistake him for a flock of geese and take a shot at him.

"Thought I'd drop by and see how things were going."

"Heard about Eddie, huh?" Big John was more cat than buzzard.

"Saw him at the jail last night."

"What'd he say?"

"Said you called him a pretend Indian. Said the jackknife wasn't even open."

"Could have put out an eye or broken a tooth. Eddie doesn't like the truth. You see how he dresses all the time. You ever listen to him? Good thing the cops got here when they did. You know me, Will. Don't get angry much. Nobody throws a knife at me." Big John leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. "Nobody calls me an apple."

I guess Erleen was older than my mother, because she had three kids who were grown. She had a husband, too. His name was Herb, and she liked to tell stories about the time they went to Waterton Lake on a fishing trip or the time they went to Florida on a fishing trip or the time they went to Mexico on a fishing trip.

James and me liked Erleen's stories. She'd sit at the kitchen table and cut out coupons and tell stories. The one bad thing about her was she smoked. Whenever she'd start a story, she'd light up a cigarette, take a couple of puffs and set it on the edge of the saucer. She'd leave it there until it burned down to the filter. Then she'd stab that one out and light another.

One evening, when Erleen was over, James said

that her husband must be one great fisherman, and before I could stop him, he asked Erleen if Herb would take us fishing some day. Mom didn't like us doing that, and James knew it.

"Herb's dead, honey," Erleen said. "Cancer got him."

Mom gave me a hard look, but I hadn't done anything. It was James who wanted to go fishing.

Later, when the two of them got back from the store, James and me helped with the groceries. Erleen sat down in the chair and took a package out of her purse and handed it to my mother. Mom gave it back, and Erleen gave it to her again.

"Come on, Rose," Erleen said. "We're friends. Friends do things for each other." But my mother laughed and shook her head, and Erleen said okay and put the package back in her purse. After Erleen left, I asked my mother what Erleen had given her.

"Some nylons," my mother said.

"How come you gave them back?"

"You shouldn't be wasting your time watching everything people do."

"That was nice of her to get you nylons, wasn't it? I'll bet they were expensive."

"Friends don't need to get each other presents."

"Erleen must be rich or something."

"Erleen's poor, just like us."

The next Thursday, Erleen brought some photographs of her and Herb. She brought a package of cookies, too, the expensive kind that come in long, thin cartons with bright green-and-silver foil. We all sat at the kitchen table and looked at photographs of Herb and Erleen and a bunch of dead fish and ate cookies until they were all gone and it was too late to

go shopping.

I talked to Big John for almost two hours. Rather, he talked to me. I came away knowing all about the trouble he and Eddie had been having ever since Big John became director. I learned all about the centre budget, all about the new basketball uniforms, all about Big John's new car. I had to buy two tickets to the Friendship Centre annual party, and he walked me to my car so he could tell me about the new building the Friendship Centre was considering.

"Cops arrived just in time." Big John shut my door and squatted down on the curb so he could see my eyes. "Nobody calls me an apple."

Harlen came by my apartment that night.

"You sure it isn't a woman, Will?" Harlen shook his head. "A woman would be easier. You know, we got to get Big John and Eddie back as friends again."

"They've never been friends, Harlen."

"Big John does a good job of running the centre and talking with the government and those folks at the DIA. Got us a lot of money this last year. And Eddie, he takes good care of the socials. Old people got respect for him now. He got the bingo games going and organized that bus that takes them to the hockey games twice a month. Centre needs the both of them. Can't have them trying to kill each other. You got any ideas, Will?"

Harlen sat there and let his eyes wander around the room like he was waiting for me to find a good idea somewhere. He wasn't fooling me.

"Can't think of one," I said. "How about you? You must have an idea."

"Have to think some more." Harlen's eyes were

still gliding. "You doing anything Friday night? Having a social at my place. Hand game, too. Be lots of fun."

Almost anyone could come along to Harlen Bigbear's once-every-so-often, pot-luck-eating, cash-and-other-valuables hand game. For a long time, I thought the hand games that Harlen ran were why Frankie Manyfingers and Louie Frank called Harlen Bingo. But they weren't.

"We went down to Green Bay across the line for one of them Indian conferences," Frankie told me. "And the first thing we see when we get off the plane is this big sign that says, Indian Bingo! $25,000! Boy, you know, Harlen sees that sign, and he slaps Louie and says, 'That's for me.'

"So, you know, the first night after those meetings, we got some dinner and a few beers, and we grabbed a cab out to the reserve with the big bingo game. Real nice place, too, you know, not like down in the basement of the Labour Club. Real plush. Soft-bottom folding chairs and 100 percent glass ashtrays. We played a couple of cards each, and pretty soon that $25,000 game started. Harlen bought himself eight cards. Me and Louie only took two. Blackout game and damn if one of Harlen's cards didn't start to fill up. Seemed like every time they called a number, Harlen would X it out.

"Neither of us was even close, so we watched our cards with one eye and Harlen's with the other. All of a sudden, there was only one number left: B5. Harlen begins wiping his hands on his pants and shifting around as the lady who's calling the numbers sings out, 'G48 . . . O66 . . . I20 . . . I22 . . . N37 . . .' Louie and me were sweating and waiting for the next number. And then that woman, she calls out, 'B3.'

And Harlen leaps out of his chair, knocks it over and yells, 'Bingo!' He leaps up and waves his arms around and yells, 'Bingo . . . Bingo . . . BINGO . . . BINGO!!!'

"Well, you know he was real embarrassed. We left after that cause they never did call B5, and some fat guy from Tulsa, Oklahoma won. We went back to the hotel and stopped off at the café for some coffee and pie, and when the waitress came over, Louie says, 'Coffee and pie all around. Bingo Bigbear is buying.'

"We got back to Medicine River, and me and Louie went to that place in the mall and got one of them make-your-own T-shirts. Bought one says Bingo Bigbear printed across the chest."

I'd been to Harlen's hand games before, and he always wore that T-shirt. Said it brought him luck. He had it on when I got there Friday, which wasn't surprising. What was surprising was to see Big John standing in one corner of the room with his three-piece suit and duck tie and Eddie in another corner with his ribbon shirt and flashy choker.

"*This* your idea?" I said to Harlen.

"Sure, do it once a month if I have the time and money. Hope you brought some cash for the game," and Harlen slapped me on the shoulder and disappeared in the kitchen.

I never saw my mother and Erleen fight. They didn't get angry with each other, either. Sometimes I'd get angry with James, and he was my brother. Erleen and my mother weren't related. Whatever one of them wanted to do was always fine with the other. They were always playing games, you know, like kids. On the shopping trips, Erleen would dump a box of powder-sugar doughnuts into the shopping cart and

my mother would fish them out.

"You eat these, Erleen Gulley, and they'll be hanging on your hips by morning."

Erleen would pat her stomach and run her hands down her thighs. "I don't eat to please men."

"Men," my mother would say, "aren't worth the time or the trouble."

"They have no appreciation of a bountiful figure."

"They have no appreciation of anything."

"Two raisins and a noodle, and a cupcake for brains."

"There you go exaggerating again." And the two of them would start to giggle until they had to park the cart at the side of the aisle and blow their noses.

You could hear them all through the store, Erleen's voice booming up and down the aisles.

"Christ, Rose, if meat gets any higher, we're going to have to start eating cat again.

"What do you think, Rose, doesn't this remind you of Missssster God Almighty Anderson down at work?

"Rose, you ever in your entire life see a cucumber this ugly?" And all the time, there was the laughter.

It was a little embarrassing, listening to the two of them going on like that. They talked as though no one else was in the store, as though they had the world all to themselves.

One evening, I had just finished a Batman comic and was getting ready to read the new Superman, when I noticed that it was quiet. I mean, there were the usual noises, but I couldn't hear Erleen's voice. I read Superman, but I was listening at the same time. Then I got up and went looking.

I walked through the store three times. They were gone. I remember thinking that they had left me, that

they had got to the check-out stand, talking and laughing the way they did, and walked right out of the store and got in the car.

I looked at the clock. The store was going to close in another fifteen minutes, and I could see I was going to have to walk home. They had forgotten all about me.

"Your name Will?" The guy was dressed in a suit, and he looked sweaty and uncomfortable. I didn't answer right away.

"Your mother asked me to find you."

"Yeah," I said. "Her and her friend drove off and left me. Now I got to walk home."

"Your mother and her friend are upstairs. You better come along with me."

We went through a couple of swinging doors and up a flight of stairs. My mother was sitting at a small table. A policeman was sitting on the edge of a desk. "This the kid?" he asked.

My mother wasn't smiling. I stood there in the middle of the room not knowing what to do.

"You might as well sit down, son," said the policeman. "This is going to take a while."

Big John and Eddie spent the first part of the evening in opposite corners. If Eddie moved around to the right to get some more salad, Big John would move to the left to get a beer or a soda. They bobbed and wove their way through the rest of the people, keeping the same distance between them—like fighters looking for an opening.

I caught up with Harlen just as Louie and Frankie were warming up the drums for the hand game.

"Big John and Eddie don't look any friendlier."

"Give 'em a chance, Will. Things are going to be

okay. Nothing like a hand game to get people together. You watch, pretty soon they'll be singing and having a good time, and they won't remember why they were angry with one another."

"How'd you get Big John and Eddie to come?"

"That was the simple part. You know how those two love to gamble."

I couldn't remember either one of them being a big gambler.

"So I just told them that I had a new game to show everyone tonight. Northwest-coast game. Bone game. Told Big John that Eddie was going to head up one of the teams. Told him that Eddie fancied himself something of an expert on Indian gambling games. Said he could head up the other team, if he wanted."

"What'd you say to Eddie?"

"Same thing. Big John said no at first, but I kept talking about how good Eddie figured he was, and pretty soon Big John said, sure, he'd come. Maybe he would head up the other team, make some easy money."

There were dangerous curves and corners in Harlen's mind, and none of them was marked.

"You check them for weapons?"

Harlen laughed. "Will, you are a joker. Come on, whose team you want to be on?"

"I just want to watch."

Harlen got everyone's attention and announced that they were going to play a different game tonight. "Called a bone game. They play it on the coast. Got to play in one when I was out there last month. Lots of fun. You'll like it. Pretty much like a hand game, but you use bones. Trick is to guess where the unmarked bone is." And Harlen went on to explain the game.

Everybody got their money down, and the game

began. Big John and Eddie sat across from each other. Big John had taken off his jacket and loosened up the bottom button on his vest. Eddie got the bones first. He sat there straight up, moving his hands across his chest, looking right at Big John. Ray Little Buffalo had the other set of bones.

Big John put his arm out, looked over at Eddie, and pointed to the floor, meaning he wanted to see the inside hands. Eddie kept on singing some more of the song and then opened his right hand just a crack so we could see the bone, but we couldn't see if it was marked or not. Ray opened his left hand, and we saw that Big John had guessed one right. Then Eddie opened his hand up all the way, and there was that marked bone. Louie hit the drum and yelled, "Ho," and picked up the beat, and Eddie's team sang harder. Big John had to throw Eddie one of his counters and guess again. The next time, Big John guessed right, and the bones were passed to his team.

This game was tight. Nobody could get ahead. First, Eddie lost three of his sticks, and then Big John lost five of his. Back and forth. There was a good pot of money, too. Somebody had thrown in a ring. There was a watch and maybe two hundred dollars. Everyone was sweating.

"Hey, Will," said Harlen, "getting hot in here. Maybe open the windows."

Big John's team got the bones again, and he looked over at Eddie and loosened the top button of his shirt and pulled the tie down. Then he undid his sleeves and rolled them up, like he meant business. He picked up the bones and held them so Eddie could see them. Sort of a challenge. And he started singing and moving the bones from hand to hand.

You could actually see what hand had the

unmarked bone. But as Big John sang, he began to move the bones faster. By the time he stopped, I couldn't tell where the bone was, and I was looking hard. Eddie called the right hand, and it was there.

At two o'clock, the police stopped in to say the neighbours had complained about the drum and the singing, and could we finish up. No one was winning, and some of the folks had already left, so Harlen said we could do it again later and everyone should take their money and bring it back next time. Some of us grumbled, but most of us were tired. Everyone got up and stretched their legs. Big John and Eddie just sat there.

Then Eddie got a real friendly smile on his face, and he said so the rest of us could hear, "What say we play one quick hand, one guess, winner take all?"

Everybody had already taken up their bets, but Eddie didn't want to play teams.

"One on one," he said, and he took out five twenties and fanned them out on the floor in front of him.

Big John pulled out two fifties and laid them down. He took a twenty out too and held it up. "What say you throw in that plastic choker of yours," said Big John, pointing the twenty at Eddie's neck like it was a knife. "This should cover it. Couldn't be worth more than a dollar or two."

Eddie snapped his teeth together and waved his hand like he was getting rid of flies. "Keep your money, cousin," said Eddie. "You haven't got enough to cover this bone choker. But maybe if you put in that white-man polyester duck tie of yours and another hundred, I could think about it."

Slow as you please, Big John started to take off that tie. Just slid it out of the knot and folded it up nice and neat and put it down in front of him. Eddie, he

reached up behind his neck and undid the leather thong.

"Give us a song, Louie. You take the bones," said Big John, and he threw one of the sets to Eddie.

Eddie took those bones and held them up so everyone could see. He waved them around in Big John's face. He held them close to Big John, so he could see them. And he began to sing. And Big John started his own song, which surprised us because it wasn't exactly the way Harlen told us a bone game was played.

Eddie moved his hands back and forth. He put one on each knee; he held one up and the other down. He moved them across his chest. Those hands were always in motion. Louie had really got that drum going, and Big John and Eddie were singing and looking right at one another. I was a little afraid that the police would come back.

Big John put his hand out like it was a divining rod looking for water, and Eddie smiled and kept on singing. Big John's hand just stayed there, looking for that bone.

"Ten dollars says the bone is in his right hand," whispered Harlen, but I ignored him.

Then, slow as you please, Big John turned his hand palm up and swept his arm to the left. Eddie stopped singing and held both hands out, stretched his hands out as far as he could reach and slowly uncurled his fingers, so we could see both bones at once. Eddie's right hand held the marked bone.

"I meant *our* right, *his* left," said Harlen, whispering again. "Christ, Big John lost."

And he had. Big John looked at the bones and rocked back on his butt and shook his head. Then he smiled and leaned forward and pushed the hundred

dollars and that silk duck tie to Eddie. Eddie was smiling pretty hard, and he let Big John push it all the way over.

"Good game," he said, and Big John nodded.

Eddie picked up the tie and his bone choker, and sort of weighed them in each hand.

"Here," says Eddie, and he tossed that bone choker in Big John's lap. "Just so people won't mistake you for a white man."

Oh hell, I knew we were going to get the cops back now. I heard Harlen suck in his breath, and everybody there in the room tensed up.

Big John sat there looking at that bone choker in his lap and then back at Eddie. And then he started to smile. And then he started to laugh. And Eddie started to laugh. Those two were sitting on the floor, laughing their heads off. Even Harlen started to laugh, but it was probably out of relief that Big John and Eddie weren't going to break his place up. Damnedest thing.

Big John got to his feet and slipped the choker in his pocket. "We'll play again some time, you know." And he thanked Harlen for the hospitality and left.

"See, Will," Harlen said, after both Big John and Eddie had gone. "Blood's thick around here. Good friends, those two now. Damn, I get some good ideas, don't I?"

I wasn't sure what had happened, but I was sure Harlen didn't have much to do with it.

They had caught Erleen shoplifting. That's what the policeman said. We stayed in that upstairs room for about two hours. The man in the suit and the policeman asked my mother a bunch of questions. They asked me some questions, too.

"You ever see Mrs. Gulley take anything?"

"No."

"You ever take anything?"

"No."

"You know that stealing things is a crime?"

"Sure."

"You know you could go to jail."

"I didn't take anything."

Erleen was in another room with the police. You could hear her voice every so often. My mother sat there and didn't say a word. The guy in the suit stood by the stairs, in case we tried to run, I guess. The policeman would get up every so often and look down the stairs as if he expected someone else to come along.

You couldn't hear the other people in the room with Erleen, but her voice came right through the walls. Later, the door opened, and Erleen came out. There was another man in a suit and another policeman in the room and one of the check-out clerks.

The man in the suit who had been in the room with Erleen motioned to the policeman sitting on the desk. "Would you escort Mrs. Gulley and her friend to their car?"

"I can find my own way," said Erleen.

"The store is closed now," said the man. "We'll have to let you out."

Erleen ran her hands over her hips. "I think you owe Rose here an apology."

"I'm sure we do," said the man.

"You sure as hell owe me one."

"I think we've settled that."

"In a pig's eye."

The policeman led us through the store and let us out a back door. Our car was the only one left in the

lot. Erleen unlocked the door, and I got in the back. Erleen stood in front of the car for a moment and then turned and flipped up the back of her dress and stuck out her butt. On the way home, she couldn't stop talking.

"What a bunch of jerks. I always put nylons and cosmetics and stuff like that in my purse. Keeps them separate from the food. You know I do that."

"That's right," my mother said.

"Lots of people do that. And when I get to the check-out stand, I get them out and pay for them."

"That's right."

"That snot-nosed clerk was just trying to make a name for herself. She was just mad because the last time we were here, I told her she'd be a good-looking woman if she lost a few pounds."

"Was she the same one?"

"I was just trying to help. Take it from me, I told her. You put on weight when you're young, and you carry it around with you the rest of your life."

"You're not fat."

"Not as fat as that blonde pimple." And Erleen started to laugh. "Would you believe it? Didn't even give me a chance to take that stuff out of my purse like I was going to do when I got to the check-out stand."

"They'll probably fire that clerk," said my mother.

"It took that cute cop almost two hours to calm me down. I was really mad. Maybe I should sue them."

"You should get a thousand dollars or so."

"They do it because we're women, you know. You'll never see them treat a man that way."

We got all the way home before we remembered the groceries. "Those groceries are probably still sitting in that cart. By tomorrow, the meat will be starting to rot." And the two of them burst into waves of giggles. "And they'll make that fat clerk clean it up."

Erleen dropped us off at the apartment. Mom looked tired, and you could tell she didn't want to talk. But I did.

"Was Erleen taking stuff?"

"Just a mistake."

"Did they arrest her?"

"Nothing but a silly mistake."

"Is she going to jail?"

"Like she said, that manager was embarrassed."

Erleen came by the next Thursday as usual, but this time, they left me home.

I didn't see Harlen for about two weeks, and you know, I felt bad about not giving him some credit for bringing Big John and Eddie together. After all, it was his idea to invite them to that bone game, and it was his idea that being related was more important than some small difference of opinion or a little name-calling. So when he came to the studio on Tuesday, I felt obligated to say something complimentary.

"Harlen," I said, "you know, I've been thinking, you get some good ideas sometimes. Sometimes you really surprise me." Which wasn't exactly the way I had practised saying it, but the more I practised saying it, the more I remembered some of the ideas that he had had that weren't very good.

Harlen didn't look in the mood for compliments. "Will," he said, "you remember that idea you had about Big John and Eddie?"

"What idea?"

"The one about their being kin and all and good friends, too."

"That was your idea."

"Don't think it was a good idea, Will."

"Big John and Eddie . . . again?"

"You ever see Big John's poodle? Big black one. Damn, you know that dog can jump up as high as your arm. You ever see one of those dogs, Will? Can do all sorts of tricks, too. You ever see Big John's dog do her tricks?"

I could see Harlen spreading his wings.

"Got that poodle maybe four years ago. Called her Licorice. Not the kind of dog for a grown man."

"Harlen, I've got an appointment with the bank in two hours."

"Doesn't even look like a dog. Big John got her shaved like one of those hedges in front of the museum. Wouldn't have a dog like that. Bertha said it wouldn't even make a good stew. But can it do tricks. Sits up real good."

"Harlen . . ."

"You know what Eddie said when he saw that choker?"

"What choker?"

"The choker that Eddie gave Big John, you know, his good bone choker."

I was going to be late.

"Will, Big John went and tied that bone choker around that poodle's neck. Brought it down to the centre to show it off. It was pretty sad, Will. You know, I knew there would be trouble. I told Eddie not to wear that ribbon shirt."

There's no point in rushing Harlen. We sat there and drifted together. Harlen floated around lazily touching on this and then on that. Eddie had had a new ribbon shirt made up, and he had cut up Big John's duck tie for the ribbons. And he wore it to the centre—all those little silk ducks cut into thin strips

like jerky and hanging off Eddie's chest and shoulders.

"Will, Big John gave that poodle a new name, too. Indian way of doing things, he told Eddie. Weasel—that's the dog's new name. Do you believe that, Will? Weasel, because she sits up and begs whenever she wants attention. What do you think?"

I didn't think anything. But I tried to imagine Eddie sitting at his desk stroking those silk strips and Big John getting Weasel to jump up and down so the choker around her neck would rattle.

"Blood kin and good friends too. What are we going to do?"

Erleen moved to Edmonton to be near her daughter. "Peggy divorced that one bum and married another," Erleen told us. "The good news is this bum's rich."

"Edmonton can get real cold," my mother said.

"I got my own room and a colour television."

"Sometimes those winters last until June or so."

"I figure they want me to help out with the kids, but that's okay."

Then the two of them started to cry, and James and me headed for the basement. We heard from Erleen regular, and every so often, she'd drive down to take my mother shopping. Erleen would wait at the kitchen table and smoke cigarettes and shout out stories, while my mother got dressed up. Then they would go clacking down the stairs in their high heels. James and me could watch them from the window, as they got in the car and roared off for the supermarkets.

The next year, Erleen's daughter called to say that Erleen had had a stroke and wouldn't be coming down for a while. She died before Mom had a chance to get up north to see her.

We didn't do anything. Eddie stopped wearing that shirt. Said the ribbons didn't hang right, that that was what happened when you used polyester. Big John took the choker off Weasel. Said it hurt her neck and it made her look cheap.

The following week, things were pretty much back to normal. Big John was wearing another of those club ties with the ducks on it, a blue one, and Eddie was wearing another bone choker. All of which made Harlen happy, because it was his idea that got Big John and Eddie back together and that was the way it should be, Harlen told me, with good friends and blood kin.

chapter

six

I was standing under the basket trying to catch my breath when Raymond Little Buffalo split Frankie's head open. The two of them were going after a rebound. Frankie dove for the ball, and Ray jumped on top of him, cocked his arm and threw an elbow into Frankie's face.

Ray was all apologies. He got a towel and told Frankie to hold it against his head. He even drove Frankie to the emergency room and waited while they put fifteen stitches in the gash above Frankie's eye. The whole time Ray stood around telling jokes, offering encouragements and rubbing his elbow as though it hurt.

"Ray used to be a regular," Harlen told me. "Then he got that job in Calgary. Big oil company. Should have seen the car they gave him. And all those credit cards. Ray took me to lunch once. You know, it cost sixty-five dollars. And the soup was cold. You believe that, Will? Ray said that's the way they do it."

I tried to stay out of Ray's way. On the court, he

was unpredictable. He'd slap you on the back and tell you what a great move you had made to get by him. The next time he'd put a knee in your thigh or try to catch you in the face with the back of his head.

"Should have seen him, Will, skinny and fast. He got a little fat sitting at that desk in Calgary."

Most of the time, I got to guard Ray. He wasn't fast any more, but you had to be careful when everyone got crowded in the paint.

"People who start off skinny," Harlen told me, "have a tough time being fat because they haven't had time to develop the muscle to carry the extra weight."

Ray still had some good moves, and I generally played off him out of range of his head and elbows and took the rebounds off his missed shots as they came my way.

"People may think you're a little heavy, Will. But you been like that all your life so you got the muscle to manage it."

Off the court, Ray was as friendly as a puppy. Watching him sitting around after practice at Tino's Pizza, laughing, drinking beer, telling the boys about the time he wasn't looking and caught a basketball with his face or the time he had to sleep on the floor in a motel in Medicine Hat because Floyd was in the only bed with two women and how one of the women rolled off the bed in the middle of the night and landed on top of him, you'd never know this was the same Raymond Little Buffalo who forty-five minutes earlier had tried to put you in the hospital.

Harlen, who could always find allowances lying around, said that Ray was still angry about losing that job. "Oil bust put a lot of people out of work. Ray's working for Canada Packers in town now.

Must have been hard to give up that Lincoln." Along with allowances, Harlen always had a pocketful of suggestions. "Maybe you could talk him into coming out and playing regular, Will. Ray likes you. Basketball is a great way to forget your problems."

I never said a word to Ray about that. He'd come out about once or twice a month and play, and that was plenty.

I suppose if you don't like someone, you're willing to go looking for faults that most people wouldn't ever see. For instance, Floyd smoked, but I liked Floyd, so I never said much. Ray smoked too, and whenever he'd light up, even if he was clear across the table from me, I'd snort and cough and wave my hand around.

Most of the boys bragged on themselves from time to time: the games they had won with last-minute shots, the women they had slept with, the times they had outrun the cops, the amount of beer they could drink before they passed out. We'd all laugh as though we believed every story. But with Ray it was different. Anything you had done, Ray had done it before and had done it better. If Floyd had a story about a woman with large breasts, Ray would have a story about another woman with huge breasts. If Elwood told about the time the cops threw him in jail in Browning and someone in the drunk tank stole his new sneakers, Ray would have a story about the time he was in jail in Penticton and someone stole all his clothes, and when he woke up the next morning, he was bare-assed naked.

Whenever Ray would start in on one of his stories, I'd snort and cough and wave my hand around.

The stories that Ray liked to tell best were the ones where he won basketball games with incredible

last–second shots. Harlen didn't help.

"I remember that alright," Harlen would say. "You were a great player, Ray. Should come back out. Look at Will. Will wasn't too good when he started, but look at him now."

"Ain't no Clyde Whiteman."

"That's for sure. But he's got a pretty good hook."

"Ain't no Clyde Whiteman."

I can remember exactly when it started. I was flying back to Toronto. I hate flying, and whenever the plane hit a bump, I'd grab the seat in front of me. There was an older woman sitting across the aisle.

"I have a son who hates to fly, too," she told me. "And when he flies, he gets just like you. And then, sometimes, he throws up."

I laughed and told her I didn't think I'd throw up, and we started to talk. She told me about her husband, Morris, and her children. Her daughter was a doctor in Victoria, and her son was a dancer in Winnipeg. I told her I had a brother who was an artist. And then she asked me what my father did.

Maybe it was the way she asked the question, smiling, expecting that I had a father and that what he did was worth talking about. Like Morris.

"My father is a senior engineer with Petro-Canada."

"That's wonderful," said the woman. "Morris teaches at the university. English. You must be very proud of your father."

"He's gone a lot of the time. Engineers have to travel around."

"I'm sure he thinks about you and your brother all the time." And she took a plastic folder from her purse and stretched it out on her lap. There was Morris and Laura and William and Pooch the cat.

Ray got himself elected to the Native Friendship Centre board. He was popular, and it didn't hurt that he had had all that executive experience in Calgary. We didn't see him at practice for about two months after that, but when he did come out, he was driving a brand-new Lincoln.

"Didn't know the centre paid that well," said Floyd.

"Didn't know the centre paid at all," said Ray.

"No wonder you ain't been playing with us," said Elwood. "Been too busy collecting bottles and cans from behind the American."

Ray was all smiles. "Once you drive one of these babies," he said, "you can never go back to Fords or Chevys." Ray opened all four doors and turned on the stereo. "You can't buy a home system that sounds any better. Put your head in there. What you smell is leather."

It was a nice car if you liked that kind of thing.

"The salesman is still picking horse shit off his shoes. Poor bastard didn't know what hit him." Ray put his arm around my shoulder and gestured with his chin towards the car. "You still driving that truck?"

Ray said he'd drive the boys over for pizza. Harlen was going to ride with me, but Ray insisted that there was enough room. "You can ride shotgun," he told Harlen. "You can pick the first tape, too. We'll meet you over there, Will."

I had to stop for gas, and when I got to the pizza parlour, Ray's car wasn't in the parking lot. I sat in my truck and waited for half an hour, and then I went home.

I mean, I wasn't a kid. I was at least twenty-five when I told that woman on the plane that my father was a

senior engineer. And there was no reason to do that. I didn't miss him. I didn't even think about him. I had never known the man.

So, I began to invent him.

"My father's a pilot. He flies the big jets for Air Canada.

"Dad's in stocks and bonds.

"He's a career diplomat.

"He's a photographer.

"He's a doctor.

"He's a lawyer."

He was never a rodeo cowboy, and out of consideration for Morris, he was never a university professor either.

Sometimes I'd sit in my apartment and try to think up new professions for my father. And then I'd tell myself to quit fooling around. I'd laugh at myself, shake my head in disgust, promise that I'd stop the whole stupid business. What if I got caught? What if someone back home heard about my father being a rich opal miner in Australia?

Ray stopped practising with the team altogether, which was okay with me. Instead he started going to the American Hotel. The American was the local Indian bar, a tall, skinny, brick building wedged in by a surplus clothing store on one side and by an old wood-floored Kresge's on the other. The two floors above the bar were rooms that no one ever rented overnight.

The place had a lot of character. The original owner had been something of a collector, and the walls were hung with Indian artifacts from the 1920s. Before he died, he told Harlen that he had been offered almost a million for his Indian stuff by some big museum

back east, but he had told the museum people to piss off, he was going to give it all back to the Indians.

The new owner, a businessman from Edmonton whom no one had ever seen, left everything the same. Tony Balonca ran the place, and most of us thought he owned it, until the night he got a little drunk and told Floyd that if the bar were his, he'd take down the beads and feathers and the rest of the shit and put up a big mural of the Italian coast. Harlen said he'd take the stuff away for Tony, no charge, but Tony said no, the owner liked the quaintness. When Tony said quaint, he curled his lips so you could see his teeth.

I didn't go to the American much, and I wasn't particularly interested in what was happening to Ray. But Harlen's theory on information was that the more you had, the more you knew, which made good sense as far as it went.

"Will, did you hear about Ray?"

"They repossess his Lincoln?"

"His Lincoln? Why would they do that? Where did you hear that, Will?"

Ray had come up with a plan to raise money. The Friendship Centre was always needing money for their community programs, and there wasn't much in yard sales and car washes. Ray's plan was to produce a calendar that featured prominent Indian people of Canada and maybe a few from the States and sell it to companies in Calgary and Edmonton.

"Ray says there are hundreds of businesses that give away calendars every year. You know, Will, like the banks or the auto-supply stores. A lot of those businesses are always saying how much they appreciate Indian people. Ray figures you can sell the calendars in blocks of, say, five hundred for the small businesses, one thousand for the medium-sized

companies and two thousand for the oil companies and the government. What do you think, Will?"

"Beats another bake sale."

"That's the spirit, Will. Ray wants you to do the photography work. I told Ray what a great photographer you are, and he said, sure, might as well give the business to one of our own people. He's got a lot of respect for you, Will."

I told Harlen it wouldn't be cheap, that that kind of photography with colour separations and everything was going to be expensive. And then there would be printing costs.

"Not to worry, Will. Ray figures we can maybe get a grant to pay for most of the costs. That way there won't be any risk. Louise is going to do the accounting, and Elwood has a friend in Winnipeg who owns a press."

"Am I doing this for costs?"

"No, Will. Ray said that was bad business. He said to make sure you add in for your time."

"What's Ray going to do?"

"He's going to be in charge. Ray's got the brains for this kind of thing. We're driving over to Calgary next week to talk with the oil companies. Figure while we're in the city, we can look at basketball uniforms, too."

"Uniforms?"

"Sure. Big John said some of the money could go to the team. There might even be enough for new shoes and socks and stuff like that."

Ray stopped by the studio the following week. He wanted cost estimates on the photography work. He was dressed in a good-looking dark blue suit, and he didn't waste any time on words.

"Could mean a lot of money for the centre. We need a top-quality product. The big companies don't buy second-rate stuff. You know what I mean?"

I said that I did, and I said I'd get an estimate to him the first of the week. His Lincoln was parked on Third. I could see it through the window.

The cost was over five thousand dollars, and with my time, it came to almost six thousand. Ray came by with a folder with twelve photographs in it, dropped it on my desk, and said, "Do it."

Three months later, we had our calendar, and it looked good. The first print run was ten thousand. The second run was twenty thousand, and according to Harlen, they were all gone in two months.

"Ray's a great salesman, Will. Thirty thousand calendars. Do you know how much profit that means for the centre?"

"No idea."

"Oh," said Harlen. "Neither do I. I was hoping you knew how these things work."

I only told strangers, but there was always the chance that something would get back to my mother or to James.

"My father is a television producer.

"My father is an investment consultant.

"My father is a physicist.

"My father is a computer designer."

I ran out of interesting professions fast, and instead of trying to top each new career I created for him, I began to imagine long and elaborate stories that I could tell again and again, adding to them as I went along.

It was best on airplanes, where everyone was a stranger. The conversation helped to take my mind off the fact we were in the air. I even began to look

forward to the next opportunity to talk about my father and slowly, over the months and years, he began to take on a particular shape, a distinctive sound.

He was a tall man with a low, pleasant voice. I imagined him best as a free-lance journalist who roamed the world taking his own pictures and writing his stories. He had a slight limp, the result of his plane coming down in the Yucatan. (He was a pilot, too.) Most of his stories were about oppressed peoples, and he wrote about them with grace and wit. His stories had been published all over, but he generally wrote under pseudonyms because he was a shy man. You've probably read some of his pieces in *Saturday Night*, *Time*, or *Newsweek*, I told the people I met, and you didn't even know it.

Most of all, I liked to point out, he loved his family, and I was always getting postcards and letters with pictures of him standing against some famous place or helping women and children take sacks of rice off the back of trucks.

There was the time in New Zealand when he spent four months around Rotorura living with a group of Maoris. He had taken over five hundred pictures for *National Geographic* and had written a superb piece on traditional and contemporary Maori life, how the two flowed into each other, how the culture continued to maintain itself in spite of the inroads that technology had made. Two days before he was to leave, a delegation of the elders came by the house where he was staying and told him that they had talked and would prefer that he didn't put their pictures in a magazine. That evening the village had a feast, and after everyone had eaten, my father took the story he had worked on for four months and all the film and

placed them on the fire.

That was my dad.

Then, for my twenty-seventh birthday, my mother sent me a white shirt and a photograph.

By the end of the month, things were getting a little thin, and I kept hoping for the cheque to arrive. I could have called the Friendship Centre, but I didn't want to appear anxious. By the time the fifteenth rolled around, I was closer to desperate.

"Hi" I said. "It's Will. This Martha?"

"Yep."

"You know, I was just looking over my records, and I don't think I ever received a cheque for that calendar project. Have those cheques gone out yet?"

"Yep."

"Well, did my cheque go out?"

"You have to ask Ray."

"It was that bill I dropped off about a month ago."

"Ray took all that stuff. Said he was going to take care of it."

I couldn't bring myself to call Ray and ask him about my money, so I called Harlen.

"Sure, Will," said Harlen. "I can do that. Must have been a mix-up with the cheques. Could still be in the mail. Ray'll be real embarrassed."

Harlen didn't call back that day, and he didn't call back the next day either. When he did call, he told me that he had been right, that Ray was real embarrassed.

"Ray paid all the bills. But he said he didn't see your bill in the folder Martha gave him. Said he paid everyone. What was left over went to the centre."

"I can send him another bill."

"No need to do that, Will. Ray said we could just

take what you're owed out of what the centre got."

"That's fine with me."

"Boy, Ray was real embarrassed. How much was your bill?"

"Almost six thousand dollars."

"That much, huh?"

"How much did the centre get?"

"Three hundred and forty dollars. Looks like we're going to have to wait on the uniforms."

The photograph was of my father. He was leaning against a fence with four other men. He had on a pair of jeans, a work shirt and a hat that was pulled down over much of his face. There was a short letter from my mother with the photograph that said, "Happy birthday. Found this picture. Third from the right. That's him." And she signed it "love" like she always did. That was it. He had a cigarette hanging from his mouth. My mother had drawn a circle around him with an arrow pointing at the side of his head.

I had to take a loan out with the bank. Harlen spent the next two weeks apologizing for Ray.

"He feels awful, Will. Blames himself for what happened."

"What happened to all the money the centre was going to make?"

"Expenses, Will. The expenses took a lot of the profit."

"Yeah, but we sold, what, thirty thousand calendars?"

"Not quite that many in the end."

"How many?"

"Don't know. Ray said it wasn't as good as it might have been. Ray had to put in five thousand dollars of

his own money."

"Ray lost five thousand dollars on the calendar?"

"Not exactly."

"So, how much did he lose?"

I ran into Ray about a month later in the American. I had just finished work, and it was hot, and a cold beer sounded good. Ray was sitting at a table near the back. Harlen was with him.

Ray had on his suit. He looked clean and neat sitting in the chair. "Sorry to hear you had to take out a loan," he said. "Harlen and me figure that as soon as the money starts to come in next year, you'll get paid first with interest. Damn, but I wish I knew what happened to that bill."

I guess I wasn't smiling when I sat down. "Expenses will sure eat into the profits quick."

Ray wasn't smiling either. "They sure will."

Ray ordered another pitcher, and I sat there staring at him until he disappeared in the smoke and the noise of the evening.

My mother normally sent me a shirt for my birthday. She sent shirts at Christmas, too. Generally, they were used, shirts she had found at yard sales. Sometimes they were new. New or used, she would wash them, iron them, and pin them up in a neat rectangle. She didn't make a distinction between new and used. There were clean shirts and dirty shirts, and that was it. She never missed my birthday.

She had pinned the photograph to the shirt pocket. "That's him," the letter said, as if knowing was an important thing for me to have.