

Worrel
Angie
Hollis → her husband still

My Hand Is Just Fine Where It Is

William Gay

WORREL WAS SITTING on the stone steps drinking his third cup of morning coffee when he saw the Blazer turn off into his driveway. The softwood trees were beginning to green out in a pale transparent haze but the hardwoods were bare yet and he could see the red Blazer flickering in and out of sight between their trunks, the bright metal of its roof flashing back the sun like a heliograph. He'd seen it come a hundred times before, but its appearance was still as magical as something he'd conjured by sheer will, and he hoped the magic held through even such a day as this one threatened to be.

He rose from the steps when he heard Angie downshift for the hill and drank the last of the coffee and tossed out the dregs. He set the cup on the edge of the porch. When she parked the Blazer in the yard he was standing with his hands in his pockets. It was March and the wind still had a bite to it around the edges and he leaned slightly into it with his shoulders hunched.

She cut the switch and got out and stood by the car. She wore dark glasses and pushed them up with a forefinger as if she'd have a better view of him. She looked at him with a sort of rueful fondness.

My Hand Is Just Fine Where It Is

I didn't know if you'd be ready to go or not, she said.

Yes you did.

Well I don't know why. I can't see why you want to come with me.

I don't want to even talk about it, he said. Are you ready?

She smiled. Ready as I'll ever be, she said.

She slid back under the steering wheel and he came around to the passenger door and got in. She had the motor going but was waiting for him to kiss her and he took her into his arms and kissed her mouth hard. When he moved his face back from hers, her green eyes were open. She always looked at him as if he were the only one who had the answer to some question she had been thinking of asking.

Well, she said. I won't even ask if you're glad to see me.

She felt thin in his arms. He could feel the delicate bonework of her shoulder through her flesh, through the silk of the blouse she wore. She'd been thin ever since he'd known her and he always tempered the strength with which he held her but now she seemed thinner. If he held her as tightly as he wanted, he felt he'd crush her. Yet the flesh of the face turned toward him looked new and unused, scarcely touched by the abrasions of the world or its ministrations.

Where's Hollis?

He had to work. They didn't want to let him take off.

The son of a bitch, Worrel said.

* Don't say that. He offered to take off anyway and go with me.

The son of a bitch, Worrel said again.

He doesn't know the whole story anyway, Angie said. He just thinks it's tests. I couldn't say the word *malignant*. You're the only one who knows everything.

She said she loved him and he had no cause to doubt it. They

were like a drug in each other's veins. A crazy bad-news drug, their hands trembled with the hypo, the needle prodded for an uncollapsed vein. The drug they used was rare and dangerous with unknown and catastrophic side effects—you couldn't buy it, it had to be stolen under cover of darkness when other folks were asleep or their attention had wandered.

If he didn't call or if he made no effort to see her, she came to see about him. She always seemed a little harried, almost distraught, glad to see him still there. It was as if she expected to see the house open to the winds and him gone without a trace or a word of farewell, gone to Africa to search for diamond mines or to South America to save souls. But Worrel had given up on prospecting and had come to feel each soul responsible for its own salvation and he was always there. In bed she'd cling to him and call his name as if she were trying to call him back from the edge of something. Warn him.

There had been a time when she was going to leave Hollis for him but the violence of his own recent divorce had sobered her, given her pause. There were other lives to be considered. Hollis had said in no uncertain terms there would be a custody battle. She was not in a good position for one. Hollis was in an excellent position. He was a good provider and a steady worker, and he was also faithful, or at least discreet. Angie and Worrel had started out careful and discreet but the power of the drug had surprised them and things had gotten out of hand: at some point, like drunken teenagers trashing a house, they had kicked down the doors and smashed the windows and sprayed their names on the walls in ten-foot-tall graffiti.

Everything fled from Worrel in the aftermath. Everything: house and car and vindictive wife. Disaffected and disgusted children fleeing at a dizzying pace like animals scuttling out of the woods from the mother of all forest fires, little scorched and smok-

ing Bambis and Thumpers hell-bent for elsewhere, and Worrel himself seized in the soft grasp of her flesh scarcely noticing.

He studied her profile against the shifting woods of late-winter sunlight, a little stunned at the price he had paid for so tenuous and fragile a portion of her life, though he never doubted she was worth it.

THEY WERE DRIVING out of Ackerman's Field and nearing Nashville when she glanced over at him. Did you find a place yet? she asked.

Since the affair had begun Worrel had become an addict of shading and nuance, decoding her speech as if there were always hidden meanings. What she'd asked could have meant, *Have you found a place for me and the kids?* or it could have meant, *Have you found a place we can be without your ex-wife coming and screaming at us?* But it did not mean either of those things. All it meant was, *Have you found a place?* and he discarded it.

I may move in with you and Hollis, he said.

She glanced from the road to him, half a smile, half a grimace. It's not funny, she said. When are you going to stop treating everything as if it were a joke?

Maybe when everything stops being a goddamned joke, he said.

The last of the traffic lights had fallen away now and she didn't need her right hand for shifting, so she reached and grasped his left, pulling it over to the console between them. Her hand uppermost, her fingers laced with his. She squeezed it hard, then just drove clasping it loosely, her fingers calm and cool against his own. There was something oddly comforting about it, and Angie seemed to feel it as well, for climbing into the hills where perhaps

she should have downshifted, she just drove on, the transmission laboring and vibrating until they'd made the grade.

If you need your hand to drive just take it back, he said.

She smiled at him, her face an enigma behind the dark glasses.

* My hand is just fine where it is, she said.

He turned away and looked at the countryside, aware of the scarcely perceptible weight of her hand, and watched Tennessee roll up—bleak trees, buttercups on the shoulder of the road, the leached funeral silks of winter, the cusp of promised spring the world hung on to.

* They had been friends before they had been anything else and they could talk or they could ride in comfortable silence. Mostly they rode in silence, Worrel's mind turning up images of her as you'd turn up pages in an album of photographs and, in the one he looked at most, her eyes looked as they did in the moment before he kissed her the first time. He'd known he was going to and was glad he'd waited until her eyes looked the way they had. As if they'd been simultaneously asking and answering a question. They'd stepped together and Worrel felt as if she'd slammed against his chest, as if they'd stepped onto some narrow ledge of unreckonable height. Looking down made you dizzy and you might plummet later in the next second, though not now; now seemed not only enough but all there was. Later there were other kisses: in hallways, in the moment before a closed door opened, in the moment between the wash of headlights on a wall and the slam of a car door, in the moment when footfalls announced someone was coming but he wasn't here yet. In these tawdry moments are worlds, universes.

The night before they went to the motel for the first time she twisted his mouth down to hers and said against his teeth, I think you're trying to corrupt me. He didn't deny it.

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IT WAS SEVENTY MILES to Nashville and today it seemed too short a distance. After a while they joined the insectlike moil of traffic and she needed her hand back. She was a good driver, effortless, unpressured, and she didn't even have to look for street signs to find the medical center. She'd been there before.

In the thin watery light, the Athens of the South perched atop its hills like something from a dream. The red Blazer went through the narrow canyons between the buildings with ten thousand other red Blazers negotiating the narrow canyons and everything began to look unreal. *urban*

The pale transparent light off the facades of the buildings imbued them with meaning so that they looked to Worrel like monuments erected and fled by some prior race finer than the present folk who milled about like maggots working in flesh.

She parked in front of the medical center and they got out. She looked at her watch. We don't have time for lunch before my appointment, she said. Do you mind waiting until we get through here?

Of course not, he said. I'm not even hungry.

Well, she said, uncertain, looking at the building.

They walked toward it. The marble veneer glittered in the sun. It looked like an enormous mausoleum. The statuary on the lawn looked like relics replevied from a tomb so long hidden from the daylight that the thought of time and its unspooling made Worrel dizzy.

→ replevied: to regain possession by a writ of replevin

HE SAT IN THE WAITING AREA with a roomful of other people. Nothing looked right. Maybe he was coming down with something. The pictures on the wall were wrong. A Dalí print, a Bosch.

Watches melted, marvelously detailed folk were flared. The pictures seemed part of some surreal scheme to acclimate him to the horror to come.

The people did not seem right either. Everything about them rang false, even their clothing seemed strange, either years out of style or years ahead of its time. When they spoke some of the voices were pitched too high, others dragged endlessly like audio-tape moving slower and slower. Their emotions were out of sync, their anxiety too hyper, their stoicism simply cold indifference.

She'd left her purse for him to mind and dangling it by the strap he went outside and smoked a cigarette. He seldom left the country and his eyes were drawn almost against his will to the jumbled skyscrapers and high-rise apartments. Everything seemed leaned toward some common center, the hazy pastel buildings collapsing on themselves. In the sepia light the city looked as strange as some fabled ruin on the continent of Lemuria.

He put the cigarette out in an urn half filled with sand and went back inside the waiting room and took up a copy of *Newsweek*. He tried to read an article on a new survey of sexual habits but the sheer amount of work that had gone into producing the magazine he held in his hands made him tired. Lumberjacks had felled trees that had been shredded and pulped to make paper. Ink had to come from somewhere. Other folks ran presses, stacked the glossy magazines, delivered them; the U.S. Mail shuttled them across the country. Not to mention the people with cameras and word processors, people with curiosity and the knowledge to ask the questions to satisfy it. The magazine grew inordinately heavy, all these labors had freighted it with excess weight. He could hardly hold it. All the information was encoded in bits that swarmed like electronic insects and the words flew off the page like birds. He sat staring at an advertisement for a red Blazer that

he was convinced was the very truck that had brought him to Nashville.

When she came through the doorway back into the waiting room, days seemed to have passed. He'd laid the magazine aside and sat clutching her purse. Reaching it to her he pretended not to study her but he did all the same. Having learned nuance and shading he'd become adept as well at interpreting her body language. Her smile was a little bright, her movements a little mannered: she'd put on the restraints and maybe screwed them down a notch too tight.

Ready? she asked.

More than, he said, scanning the room one last time as if he'd mark it as a place to avoid, remember all these miscast faces should he ever encounter them in old movies on late-night TV.

They went out. The cars in the parking lot glared under the sun. He felt hollow and enormous inside.

She was reaching for the door handle of the Blazer when he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

Wait, he said.

Wait? For what?

He was silent a time. Tell me something, he finally said.

I guess there's not much to tell.

Was it bad?

She had her lower lip caught between her teeth. About as bad as it gets, she said.

He thought for a moment her eyes looked frightened then he saw that more than fear they showed confusion. She looked stunned, as if life had blindsided her so hard it left her knees weak and the taste of blood in her mouth. He wanted to cure her, save her, jerk her back from the edge as she'd tried to do for him.

But all he could say was, Do you want me to drive?

I'm fine, she said. I can always drive. I like to drive.

Behind the wheel she searched her purse for the keys. I'm starved, she said. Are you hungry?

✓ Yes, he lied.

Where do you want to eat?

She had the keys, the Blazer caught on the first crank, then sat idling. She studied him intently.

I don't care, he said.

You must care.

I don't care, it's nothing, it's just food. Hell, it's just food. He knew she thought that was a barbaric notion but that was just the way he felt.

Where was that little Italian place we went to? You had the veal, they had these great salads there. Terrific salads. What was the name of that place?

I don't know.

You must know. The salads had the little cherry tomatoes?

✓ Goddamn it, he said, suddenly angry. They all have the little cherry tomatoes.

She knew him, she wasn't fooled, she didn't take offense. She smiled. I can find it, she said. We'll just drive around, I'll know it when I see it.

I still don't see what it matters.

It matters to me, she said. It was the first time we ever went out to eat. You know, in a nice place. You bought me a bottle of wine you couldn't afford.

As she drove back into the street, she kept looking at the buildings, cutting down narrow crooked alleys, taking side streets that seemed to go nowhere you'd want to be—as if the place where they had the cherry tomatoes would materialize before her, between the tacky country music souvenir stores with their ce-

ramic Roy Acuffs and price-tagged Minnie Pearl hats and the interminable pawnshops in whose dust-moted windows guitars hung by their necks like arcane beasts taken as trophies.

The day was waning, the light stingy and oblique. The sun flared behind the buildings and lent them a stark undimensioned quality. After a while they were hopelessly lost. The city looked strange even to her. They didn't speak. It began to seem to Worrel that they had sought and found their own level.

They trickled down sunless corridors and burst capillaries until they were in the city's dark heart. A city within the city where the blood slowed and thickened and clotted in viscous smears of alizarin crimson dried to burnt sienna around the edges. The tires of automobiles bore it away in fading hieroglyphic slashes. Neon flared, the air had grown heavy with the drone of flies. BAR BAR BAR, the neon repeated. 20 NAKED GIRLS 20. Brands of beer seemed to have the significance of the names of prophets on graven tablets.

Finally she pulled the Blazer to the curb and cut the switch and stared uncertainly about her. They had parked next to a vacant lot. Dead weeds tilted askew by the winds, the sun caught in broken wine bottles. The husk of an Eldorado sat so stripped and demolished it seemed to suffer obsolescence on an epidemic scale. A brown dog came out of the weeds and stood staring at them as if it had news of their coming. It was starved to the point of emaciation, just something that stood for a dog, a concentration that might possibly reconstitute a dog, a dog decocted in smoking electric chambers by a mad doctor who'd seen a dog once long ago and conjured one up with only the vagaries of memory as a recipe.

Adjacent to the vacant lot was a row of buildings constructed of umber-colored brick. Between two of them a narrow two-story house was wedged so tightly it seemed to have no sides of its own,

10:30 AM
two weeks
dr. even

simply its wooden frame front and tin-roofed porch hung parasitically between the brick walls, the rococo gingerbread trim of the porch paintlorn and rotting. A swing dangled motionless from rusted chains. The front window had been stoned out and covered with a metal sign that read CLABBER GIRL BAKING POWDER. A cracked sidewalk led to the street through packed earth encysted with bottle caps. Venus flytraps grew in car-tire planters serrated as if pinked by enormous shears.

homeless!
The streets were full of drifters who seemed to be looking for something that they had lost. The homeless by choice and by circumstance held in common their disconnectedness and the self-same look of threat in their faces, danger loosely contained like lightning in a voltaic jar. They looked listless and numb as sleepwalkers, they moved as if the air itself offered hindrance to their passage. A man with shoulder-length blond hair stood on the high concrete steps of the parasite house and had occasional commerce with these streetfolk. He wore a quilted vest from whose cargo pockets he dealt glass vials of some iridescent liquid, smoky and volatile as nitroglycerin. The drifters paid him with bills that he folded onto a thick sheaf of like bills and he treated the money casually as if it were of no moment in itself but simply some happenstantial by-product of the transference of the vials. Occasionally he'd speak into a cellular telephone while watching Worrel with narrowed blue eyes.

Worrel looked away. He felt the uneasy knowledge that at any moment everything could alter. The air felt heavy and volatile, the way it does before a summer storm.

He turned to look at her. Her head was lain back against the upholstery. Her eyes were closed. Perhaps she slept.

He had no doubt that at some point he'd be confronted; it was a given, a law of nature. If she did not drive away, if he did not get

under the wheel and take charge himself. Apparently he ~~was not~~ going to. Apparently he was going to sit here and look blankly back into the eyes that locked momentarily with his then slid away, until someone motioned for him to roll down the glass and he did and someone said, in a spray of spit, a reek of splo whiskey, in white-hot crackhead clarity, *What is it with you, motherfucker? And who the fuck do you think you're looking at?*

Until the day waned and the light pooled and drained westward and the streetlamps came on and until the pace of the streets altered and moved in a loose disjointed rhythm and fierce chromatic colors that seared the eye and until the day's possibilities became probabilities and then dead certainties and they were hauled from the Blazer and humiliated, made to plead for their lives, urinating on themselves and soiling their clothing while the last vestiges of human dignity fled. Credit cards gone, money gone, pristine Blazer stripped and burned. Surely they'd slit his throat and rape her fair white body, slit her throat and rape his own fair white body, shoot them full of drugs that would send them at warp speed past any conception of reality the mind was prepared to deal with, snuff them in a bending flash of light that was the very essence of ecstasy. Their bodies would be found in garbage-strewn alleys, septic hypodermic needles dangling from their veins like fey ornaments, or their bodies would drift pale and bloated in the currents of the Cumberland River until they turned up stranded on silt bars like worn-out whores their pimps had no further use for.

Bring it on, Worrel told their sullen faces. Let me have it, you sons of bitches. You goddamned amateurs. There's nothing you can do to me half as bad as this.

He thought of the people waiting for Angie, beginning to wonder where she was. The kids at the grandmother's, the hus-

band probably wondering why there was no supper on the table. He suddenly felt weary and omnipotent, like a troubled god: he knew something they did not yet know, something that was waiting for them like a messenger with a finger on the doorbell and a telegram in his hand. They did not know, any of them, that they were living in the end times of bliss. The last belle époque. Not the kids at Granny's, whining where is Mama, not the husband bitching about the fallow table.

They did not know that they were going to have their world blown away, walls flung outward and doors ripped from shrieking hinges, trees uprooted and riding the sudden hot wind like autumn leaves, the air full of debris like grainy old 8-millimeter footage of Hiroshima. A cataclysm that would leave the floor of their world charred and smoking, inhospitable for some time to come.

Just for a moment, though, he was touched by a feeling he could not control, that he had not sought and instantly tried to shuttle to some dark cobwebbed corner of his mind. He wanted to forget it, at the very least deal with it later.

He had felt for an instant a bitter and unconsoling satisfaction that terrified him. When she sat eyes closed with her fair head against the seat she seemed to be fading in and out of sight like someone with only a tenuous and uncertain reality, going at times so transparent he could see the leather upholstery through her body, her face in its temporary repose no more than a reflected image, a flicker of light off water.

At these moments, all that was real was the grip of her hand, the intent focused bones he could trace with the ball of his thumb. Nothing was holding her back save the fingers knotted into his own. She was sliding away, fare-thee-well-I'm-gone, vanishing

through a fault in the weave of the world itself, but until ~~this mo-~~ment ended and whatever was supposed to happen next happened, he was holding on to her. Everybody was hanging on to her, all those gasping hands, but for the first time no other hold was stronger than his own.

SHERMAN ALEXIE

(1966-)

—∞—
**This Is What It Means to Say
Phoenix, Arizona**

JUST AFTER VICTOR lost his job at the BIA,¹ he also found out that his father had died of a heart attack in Phoenix, Arizona. Victor hadn't seen his father in a few years, only talked to him on the telephone once or twice, but there still was a genetic pain, which was soon to be pain as real and immediate as a broken bone.

Victor didn't have any money. Who does have money on a reservation, except the cigarette and fireworks salespeople? His father had a savings account waiting to be claimed, but Victor needed to find a way to get to Phoenix. Victor's mother was just as poor as he was, and the rest of his family didn't have any use at all for him. So Victor called the Tribal Council.

"Listen," Victor said. "My father just died. I need some money to get to Phoenix to make arrangements."

"Now, Victor," the council said. "You know we're having a difficult time financially."

"But I thought the council had special funds set aside for stuff like this." 5

"Now, Victor, we do have some money available for the proper return of tribal members' bodies. But I don't think we have enough to bring your father all the way back from Phoenix."

"Well," Victor said. "It ain't going to cost all that much. He had to be cremated. Things were kind of ugly. He died of a heart attack in his trailer and nobody found him for a week. It was really hot, too. You get the picture."

"Now, Victor, we're sorry for your loss and the circumstances. But we can really only afford to give you one hundred dollars."

"That's not even enough for a plane ticket."

"Well, you might consider driving down to Phoenix" 10

"I don't have a car. Besides, I was going to drive my father's pickup back up here."

"Now, Victor," the council said. "We're sure there is somebody who could drive you to Phoenix. Or is there somebody who could lend you the rest of the money?"

"You know there ain't nobody around with that kind of money."

"Well, we're sorry, Victor, but that's the best we can do."

Victor accepted the Tribal Council's offer. What else could he do? So he 15 signed the proper papers, picked up his check, and walked over to the Trading Post to cash it.

¹Bureau of Indian Affairs. (JHP)

While Victor stood in line, he watched Thomas Builds-the-Fire standing near the magazine rack, talking to himself. Like he always did. Thomas was a storyteller that nobody wanted to listen to. That's like being a dentist in a town where everybody has false teeth.

Victor and Thomas Builds-the-Fire were the same age, had grown up and played in the dirt together. Ever since Victor could remember, it was Thomas who always had something to say.

Once, when they were seven years old, when Victor's father still lived with the family, Thomas closed his eyes and told Victor this story: "Your father's heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. He is afraid of you. Late at night he sits in the dark. Watches the television until there's nothing but that white noise. Sometimes he feels like he wants to buy a motorcycle and ride away. He wants to run and hide. He doesn't want to be found."

Thomas Builds-the-Fire had known that Victor's father was going to leave, knew it before anyone. Now Victor stood in the Trading Post with a one-hundred-dollar check in his hand, wondering if Thomas knew that Victor's father was dead, if he knew what was going to happen next.

20 Just then Thomas looked at Victor, smiled, and walked over to him.

"Victor, I'm sorry about your father," Thomas said.

"How did you know about it?" Victor asked.

"I heard it on the wind. I heard it from the birds. I felt it in the sunlight. Also, your mother was just in here crying."

"Oh," Victor said and looked around the Trading Post. All the other Indians stared, surprised that Victor was even talking to Thomas. Nobody talked to Thomas anymore because he told the same damn stories over and over again. Victor was embarrassed, but he thought that Thomas might be able to help him. Victor felt a sudden need for tradition.

25 "I can lend you the money you need," Thomas said suddenly. "But you have to take me with you."

"I can't take your money," Victor said. "I mean, I haven't hardly talked to you in years. We're nor really friends anymore."

"I didn't say we were friends. I said you had to take me with you."

"Let me think about it."

Victor went home with his one hundred dollars and sat at the kitchen table. He held his head in his hands and thought about Thomas Builds-the-Fire, remembered little details, tears and scars, the bicycle they shared for a summer, so many stories.

30 Thomas Builds-the-Fire sat on the bicycle, waited in Victor's yard. He was ten years old and skinny. His hair was dirty because it was the Fourth of July.

"Victor," Thomas yelled. "Hurry up. We're going to miss the fireworks."

After a few minutes. Victor ran out of his house, jumped the porch railing, and landed gracefully on the sidewalk.

"And the judges award him a 9.95, the highest score of the summer," Thomas said, clapped, laughed.

"That was perfect, cousin," Victor said. "And it's my turn to ride the bike."

35 Thomas gave up the bike and they headed for the fair-grounds. It was nearly dark and the fireworks were about to start.

"You know," Thomas said. "It's strange how us Indians celebrate the Fourth of July. It ain't like it was *our* independence everybody was fighting for."

"You think about things too much," Victor said. "It's just supposed to be fun. Maybe Junior will be there."

"Which Junior? Everybody on this reservation is named Junior."

And they both laughed.

The fireworks were small, hardly more than a few bottle rockets and a fountain. But it was enough for two Indian boys. Years later, they would need much more.

Afterwards, sitting in the dark, fighting off mosquitoes, Victor turned to Thomas Builds-the-Fire.

"Hey," Victor said. "Tell me a story."

Thomas closed his eyes and told this story: "There were these two Indian boys who wanted to be warriors. But it was too late to be warriors in the old way. All the horses were gone. So the two Indian boys stole a car and drove to the city. They parked the stolen car in front of the police station and then hitchhiked back home to the reservation. When they got back, all their friends cheered and their parents' eyes shone with pride. *You were very brave*, everybody said to the two Indian boys. *Very brave*."

"Ya-hey," Victor said. "That's a good one. I wish I could be a warrior."

"Me, too," Thomas said.

They went home together in the dark, Thomas on the bike now, Victor on foot. They walked through shadows and light from streetlamps.

"We've come a long ways," Thomas said. "We have outdoor lighting."

"All I need is the stars," Victor said. "And besides, you still think about things too much."

They separated then, each headed for home, both laughing all the way.

Victor sat at his kitchen table. He counted his one hundred dollars again and again. He knew he needed more to make it to Phoenix and back. He knew he needed Thomas Builds-the-Fire. So he put his money in his wallet and opened the front door to find Thomas on the porch.

"Ya-hey, Victor," Thomas said. "I knew you'd call me."

Thomas walked into the living room and sat down on Victor's favorite chair.

"I've got some money saved up," Thomas said. "It's enough to get us down there, but you have to get us back."

"I've got this hundred dollars," Victor said. "And my dad had a savings account I'm going to claim."

"How much in your dad's account?"

"Enough. A few hundred."

"Sounds good. When we leaving?"

When they were fifteen and had long since stopped being friends, Victor and Thomas got into a fistfight. That is, Victor was really drunk and beat Thomas up for no reason at all. All the other Indian boys stood around and watched it happen. Junior was there and so were Lester, Seymour, and a lot of others. The beating might have gone on until Thomas was dead if Norma Many Horses hadn't come along and stopped it.

"Hey, you boys," Norma yelled and jumped out of her car. "Leave him alone."

If it had been someone else, even another man, the Indian boys would've just ignored the warnings. But Norma was a warrior. She was powerful. She could have picked up any two of the boys and smashed their skulls together. But worse than that, she would have dragged them all over to some tipi and made them listen to some elder tell a dusty old story.

The Indian boys scattered, and Norma walked over to Thomas and picked him up.

"Hey, little man, are you okay?" she asked.

Thomas gave her a thumbs up.

"Why they always picking on you?"

65 Thomas shook his head, closed his eyes, but no stories came to him, no words or music. He just wanted to go home, to lie in his bed and let his dreams tell his stories for him.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor sat next to each other in the airplane, coach section. A tiny white woman had the window seat. She was busy twisting her body into pretzels. She was flexible.

"I have to ask," Thomas said, and Victor closed his eyes in embarrassment.

"Don't," Victor said.

"Excuse me, miss," Thomas asked. "Are you a gymnast or something?"

70 "There's no something about it," she said. "I was first alternate on the 1980 Olympic team."

"Really?" Thomas asked.

"Really."

"I mean, you used to be a world-class athlete?" Thomas asked.

"My husband still thinks I am."

75 Thomas Builds-the-Fire smiled. She was a mental gymnast, too. She pulled her leg straight up against her body so that she could've kissed her kneecap.

"I wish I could do that," Thomas said.

Victor was ready to jump out of the plane. Thomas, that crazy Indian storyteller with ratty old braids and broken teeth, was flirting with a beautiful Olympic gymnast. Nobody back home on the reservation would ever believe it.

"Well," the gymnast said. "It's easy. Try it."

Thomas grabbed at his leg and tried to pull it up into the same position as the gymnast. He couldn't even come close, which made Victor and the gymnast laugh.

80 "Hey," she asked. "You two are Indian, right?"

"Full-blood," Victor said.

"Not me," Thomas said. "I'm half magician on my mother's side and half clown on my father's."

They all laughed.

"What are your names?" she asked.

85 "Victor and Thomas."

"Mine is Cathy. Pleased to meet you all."

The three of them talked for the duration of the flight. Cathy the gymnast complained about the government, how they screwed the 1980 Olympic team by boycotting.²

"Sounds like you all got a lot in common with Indians," Thomas said.

Nobody laughed.

90 After the plane landed in Phoenix and they had all found their way to the terminal, Cathy the gymnast smiled and waved good-bye.

"She was really nice," Thomas said.

"Yeah, but everybody talks to everybody on airplanes," Victor said. "It's too bad we can't always be that way."

"You always used to tell me I think too much," Thomas said. "Now it sounds like you do."

"Maybe I caught it from you."

"Yeah."

Thomas and Victor rode in a taxi to the trailer where Victor's father died.

"Listen," Victor said as they stopped in front of the trailer. "I never told you I was sorry for beating you up that time."

"Oh, it was nothing. We were just kids and you were drunk."

"Yeah, but I'm still sorry."

"That's all right."

Victor paid for the taxi and the two of them stood in the hot Phoenix summer. They could smell the trailer.

"This ain't going to be nice," Victor said. "You don't have to go in."

"You're going to need help."

Victor walked to the front door and opened it. The stink tolled out and made them both gag. Victor's father had lain in that trailer for a week in hundred-degree temperatures before anyone found him. And the only reason anyone found him was because of the smell. They needed dental records to identify him. That's exactly what the coroner said. They needed dental records.

"Oh, man," Victor said. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Well, then don't."

"But there might be something valuable in there."

"I thought his money was in the bank."

"It is. I was talking about pictures and letters and stuff like that."

"Oh," Thomas said as he held his breath and followed Victor into the trailer.

When Victor was twelve, he stepped into an underground wasp nest. His foot was caught in the hole, and no matter how hard he struggled, Victor couldn't pull free. He might have died there, stung a thousand times, if Thomas Builds-the-Fire had not come by.

"Run," Thomas yelled and pulled Victor's foot from the hole. They ran then, hard as they ever had, faster than Billy Mills, faster than Jim Thorpe, faster than the wasps could fly.

Victor and Thomas ran until they couldn't breathe, ran until it was cold and dark outside, ran until they were lost and it took hours to find their way home.

All the way back, Victor counted his stings.

"Seven," Victor said. "My lucky number."

Victor didn't find much to keep in the trailer. Only a photo album and a stereo. Everything else had that smell stuck in it or was useless anyway.

"I guess this is all," Victor said. "It ain't much."

"Better than nothing," Thomas said.

"Yeah, and I do have the pickup."

"Yeah," Thomas said. "It's in good shape."

"Dad was good about that stuff."

"Yeah, I remember your dad."

"Really?" Victor asked. "What do you remember?"

Thomas Builds-the-Fire closed his eyes and told this story: "I remember when I had this dream that told me to go to Spokane, to stand by the Falls in the

²The United States boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow to protest Russia's invasion of Afghanistan. (JHP)

middle of the city and wait for a sign. I knew I had to go there but I didn't have a car. Didn't have a license. I was only thirteen. So I walked all the way, took me all day, and I finally made it to the Falls. I stood there for an hour waiting. Then your dad came walking up. *What the hell are you doing here?* he asked me. I said, *Waiting for a vision.* Then your father said, *All you're going to get here is mugged.* So he drove me over to Denny's, bought me dinner, and then drove me home to the reservation. For a long time I was mad because I thought my dreams had lied to me. But they didn't. Your dad was my vision. *Take care of each other* is what my dreams were saying. *Take care of each other.*"

Victor was quiet for a long time. He searched his mind for memories of his father, found the good ones, found a few bad ones, added it all up, and smiled.

125 "My father never told me about finding you in Spokane," Victor said.

"He said he wouldn't tell anybody. Didn't want me to get in trouble. But he said I had to watch out for you as part of the deal."

"Really?"

"Really. Your father said you would need the help. He was right."

"That's why you came down here with me, isn't it?" Victor asked.

130 "I came because of your father."

Victor and Thomas climbed into the pickup, drove over to the bank, and claimed the three hundred dollars in the savings account.

Thomas Builds-the-Fire could fly.

Once, he jumped off the roof of the tribal school and flapped his arms like a crazy eagle. And he flew. For a second, he hovered, suspended above all the other Indian boys who were too smart or too scared to jump.

"He's flying," Junior yelled, and Seymour was busy looking for the trick wires or mirrors. But it was real. As real as the dirt when Thomas lost altitude and crashed to the ground.

135 He broke his arm in two places.

"He broke his wing," Victor chanted, and the other Indian boys joined in, made it a tribal song.

"He broke his wing, he broke his wing, he broke his wing," all the Indian boys chanted as they ran off, flapping their wings, wishing they could fly, too. They hated Thomas for his courage, his brief moment as a bird. Everybody has dreams about flying. Thomas flew.

One of his dreams came true for just a second, just enough to make it real.

Victor's father, his ashes, fit in one wooden box with enough left over to fill a cardboard box.

140 "He always was a big man," Thomas said.

Victor carried part of his father and Thomas carried the rest out to the pickup. They set him down carefully behind the seats, put a cowboy hat on the wooden box and a Dodgers cap on the cardboard box. That's the way it was supposed to be.

"Ready to head back home," Victor asked.

"It's going to be a long drive."

"Yeah, take a couple days, maybe."

145 "We can take turns," Thomas said.

"Okay," Victor said, but they didn't take turns. Victor drove for sixteen hours straight north, made it halfway up Nevada toward home before he finally pulled over.

"Hey, Thomas," Victor said. "You got to drive for a while."

"Okay."

Thomas Builds-the-Fire slid behind the wheel and started off down the road. All through Nevada, Thomas and Victor had been amazed at the lack of animal life, at the absence of water, of movement.

"Where is everything?" Victor had asked more than once.

Now when Thomas was finally driving they saw the first animal, maybe the only animal in Nevada. It was a long-eared jackrabbit.

"Look," Victor yelled. "It's alive."

Thomas and Victor were busy congratulating themselves on their discovery when the jackrabbit darted out into the road and under the wheels of the pickup.

"Stop the goddamn car," Victor yelled, and Thomas did stop, backed the pickup to the dead jackrabbit.

"Oh, man, he's dead," Victor said as he looked at the squashed animal.

"Really dead."

"The only thing alive in this whole state and we just killed it."

"I don't know," Thomas said. "I think it was suicide."

Victor looked around the desert, sniffed the air, felt the emptiness and loneliness, and nodded his head.

"Yeah," Victor said. "It had to be suicide."

"I can't believe this," Thomas said. "You drive for a thousand miles and there ain't even any bugs smashed on the windshield. I drive for ten seconds and kill the only living thing in Nevada."

"Yeah," Victor said. "Maybe I should drive."

"Maybe you should."

Thomas Builds-the-Fire walked through the corridors of the tribal school by himself. Nobody wanted to be anywhere near him because of all those stories. Story after story.

Thomas closed his eyes and this story came to him: "We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world. It doesn't matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories. My father, he died on Okinawa in World War II, died fighting for this country, which had tried to kill him for years. My mother, she died giving birth to me, died while I was still inside her. She pushed me out into the world with her last breath. I have no brothers or sisters. I have only my stories which came to me before I even had the words to speak. I learned a thousand stories before I took my first thousand steps. They are all I have. It's all I can do."

Thomas Builds-the-Fire told his stories to all those who would stop and listen. He kept yelling them long after people had stopped listening.

Victor and Thomas made it back to the reservation just as the sun was rising. It was the beginning of a new day on earth, but the same old shit on the reservation.

"Good morning," Thomas said.

"Good morning."

The tribe was waking up, ready for work, eating breakfast, reading the news paper, just like everybody else does. Willene LeBret was out in her garden wearing a bathrobe. She waved when Thomas and Victor drove by.

"Crazy Indians made it," she said to herself and went back to her roses.

Victor stopped the pickup in front of Thomas Builds-the-Fire's HUD house.³ They both yawned, stretched a little, shook dust from their bodies.

"I'm tired," Victor said.

"Of everything," Thomas added.

175 They both searched for words to end the journey. Victor needed to thank Thomas for his help, for the money, and make the promise to pay it all back.

"Don't worry about the money," Thomas said. "It don't make any difference anyhow."

"Probably not, enit?"

"Nope."

Victor knew that Thomas would remain the crazy storyteller who talked to dogs and cars, who listened to the wind and pine trees. Victor knew that he couldn't really be friends with Thomas, even after all that had happened. It was cruel but it was real. As real as the ashes, as Victor's father, sitting behind the seats.

180 "I know how it is," Thomas said. "I know you ain't going to treat me any better than you did before. I know your friends would give you too much shit about it."

Victor was ashamed of himself. Whatever happened to the tribal ties, the sense of community? The only real thing he shared with anybody was a bottle and broken dreams. He owed Thomas something, anything.

"Listen," Victor said and handed Thomas the cardboard box which contained half of his father. "I want you to have this."

Thomas took the ashes and smiled, closed his eyes, and told this story: "I'm going to travel to Spokane Falls one last time and toss these ashes into the water. And your father will rise like a salmon, leap over the bridge, over me, and find his way home. It will be beautiful. His teeth will shine like silver, like a rainbow. He will rise, Victor, he will rise."

Victor smiled.

185 "I was planning on doing the same thing with my half," Victor said. "But I didn't imagine my father looking anything like a salmon. I thought it'd be like cleaning the attic or something. Like letting things go after they've stopped having any use."

"Nothing stops, cousin," Thomas said. "Nothing stops."

Thomas Builds-the-Fire got out of the pickup and walked up his driveway. Victor started the pickup and began the drive home.

"Wait," Thomas yelled suddenly from his porch. "I just got to ask one favor."

Victor stopped the pickup, leaned out the window, and shouted back. "What do you want?"

190 "Just one time when I'm telling a story somewhere, why don't you stop and listen?" Thomas asked.

"Just once?"

"Just once."

Victor waved his arms to let Thomas know that the deal was good. It was a fair trade, and that was all Victor had ever wanted from his whole life. So Victor drove his father's pick up toward home while Thomas went into his house, closed the door behind him, and heard a new story come to him in the silence afterwards.

[1993]

³A house financed by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. (JHP)

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