

Redbone

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— for 08765-031

The first time I ever thought about stealing a train, I was eight years old.

The doors closed and Jake was alone again, listening to sound of his cellmate breathing heavily in the dark. The lights always went out at the same time, no matter what, in a prison.

“Shit Jake, don’t you never get high?”

“No.”

“Because you’re an Indian?” Rick asked.

“No way, you fuck, them Indians got high way before white people, right Jake?” Sean said, shifting from one foot to the other in the cold and then sitting down heavily in the wet grass. He was a skinny white boy with long, feathered hair. His body made the smallest of impressions on the field.

Jake said nothing. He looked to his right and slowly around to his left. He turned to Sean and began delicately hand rolling a cigarette with a can of Bud still in his left hand.

“Damn. I used to play ball here, before I dropped out,” Sean said and then started laughing and quickly began to cough. He stuck the cigarette into the edges of his lips and put his Bud on the ground and ran his hands again through his sandy brown hair. It was shoulder length and smelled of stale beer. His hands shook as he pulled them through his hair and coughed. He looked out at the great green expanse and sighed.

“I was the great white hope for Wichita High when I played ball as a kid here,” he said and then looked around again and lit his cigarette. “Classic, right?”

Jake sat down on his creaking cot and after looking around quickly for any guards, he began searching for the flask under the mattress, his eyes always on the light. Finally, one of his long fingers hit the edge of the plastic. He pulled it out and took a drink. It was hootch and burned on the way down. He sat back against the wall, his eyes open and his mind turning like a wheel. He took another drink and listened to the silence all around him. He had a pen light in his pocket and he switched it on and off, on and off, absentmindedly, as he stared into the darkened cell.

“Great white hope, hey? Shit—I ain’t never been anybody’s great anything.” George laughed quietly and took a drag off of Jake’s cigarette. It was strong; the way hand-rolled cigarettes were and made George’s brain go beautifully numb for just a second.

“What do you think George, you’re the rez boy? Us Indians like to get high before whitey?” George looked over at Jake and smiled only for him. He looked around at the football field, wondering what it was like to be a football star in a tiny town, just like in the movies he’d watched with his father late at night in their leaky metal shack on his rez, the memory nearly a decade old.

“I like to get high,” George said and the guys laughed. George sat down in the grass and took the last of the cigarette, his long thin lips

beginning to turn down in their journey towards old age, just as his father's had.

George began combing his weathered fingers through the grass, his eyes on Jake, on his long, delicate fingers and bronze black skin. *I know what my dad would say about guys like Jake, but he's really one handsome looking motherfucker.*

Jake just kept looking out into the football field, one hand on his short kinky ponytail.

George turned towards Sean, their white faces looking almost bluish in the moonlight.

"Don't you guys know? Jake's religious."

The flask lay in his lap, nearly empty and barely visible. He looked at the light again. Thought of his mother.

Jake. Eat it Jake. Just eat the cracker.

Jake shook his head and drank but it was empty.

Mommy, where are your braids?

She sighed. I...I... don't need them anymore.

Jake was confused.

Jake, just eat the cracker, Ok? But Jake shook his head. He didn't like this place with its tall ceilings and strange music and somber looking people.

She sighed and said, let mommy hold you.

He held out his arms.

Jake could remember her hands in his short black hair, her hands holding his, his face a little darker than hers but with the same wide cheekbones, unforgiving black eyes, Indian mouth.

“Religious? Fucking...well then your bible must be different than mine because in mine it says you’re not supposed to steal. Besides, Jake drinks, which ain’t much different from gettin’ high.” Sean looked at Jake and then at George, wondering if either of them had any cigarettes, as he had quickly run out of his supply.

“Like you read the bible,” Rick said and Sean looked at him with narrowed eyes. Rick thought about the time they had been driving around, drunk and Sean had convinced that car full of guys he thought was gay to pull over. Rick looked away quickly. “Yeah, I guess I know what you mean.”

“Anyway, what’re we gonna do?” Jake asked.

“Let’s hotwire a car and go for a ride.” Rick smiled and got up out of the grass. “Aw, shit, my ass is totally wet!”

“That’s what she said,” George said and laughed quietly and to himself.

“Whatever. I’m tired of hotwirin’ cars. And we’re outta beer.”

“Let’s just go,” Jake said and looked out into the night, facing away from the others.

They all got up and started walking, Sean leading the way and talking about the women he wanted to screw. Sean was always talking about the women he wanted to screw and even though Rick was tired of it, they’d been best friends since high school and Rick knew that he’d never tell him that.

“You got a call Jake. Get up.”

Jake looked quickly down at his hands, realizing that he must’ve put his flask back in its place before he passed out.

He walked down the narrow hallways, looking in at the others in their cells, most of them Black, Mexican, Indian. He'd never in his life lived without the presence of Whites.

He nodded to the Skins standing in their cells, their hair back in rubber bands, their faces made into the same material as the material around them, many of them some of the best musicians he'd ever known.

It was America in there.

"Mom?"

"Yeah, Jake. How's it going?" He could hear her sighing, something he vaguely remembered his grandmother doing before she killed herself, something his cousin did.

"Going? Mom, it's prison."

"Well I'm sorry Jake, I'm just trying to have a conversation."

"Mom, when are you going to bring Sammy in to see me?" He could hear his mother draw breath.

"Sometime, Jake, I—"

"Dad said you'd bring him in to see me. I just want to see my little boy."

"I know. I'm sorry Jake." He sat quietly for a minute.

"Do you remember that time that we went to see grandpa for the first time?" He could hear her breathing lightly on the other end of the phone, could hear his father next to her.

"Yes, Jake. I do."

"Do you remember that story he told?"

"What story? Your grandpa told a lot of stories. Half the time he'd lapse into Chickasaw and I could barely understand him."

“It doesn’t matter.” Jake fell silent again and thought he heard his mother muffling tears.

He could remember driving to his grandfather’s house. He was eight. His parents holding hands. Listening to Willie Nelson on the radio. And the sound of the train in the distance. Lonely. But beautiful, so beautiful. It made him enjoy the speed like nothing else. It had seemed to erase everything.

The trainyard was silent and filled with moonlight as the boys realized that they had found the entertainment for the night. They filled the vacuum with noise, driving shadow out and pushing themselves in.

“Shit, if I could drive one of these things, I think I’d go straight.” Sean smiled and looked up at the train, into the promise of another man’s life. He touched the black metal of the train with the edges of his fingertips. “I think I’m gonna quit at the factory tomorrow and tell them that I’m gonna learn how to drive a train.” Sean’s eyes glittered in the moonlight and George wondered what was really going on inside of Sean’s head.

There’s no way that you’d ever go straight, no way any of us would. George looked away from Sean and into the deep of the night. The group went silent.

“I can do it.”

Sean opened his eyes. “What’ya mean, ‘you can do it’ Jake? You can’t drive no train.”

“Yeah he can Sean, I seen him pick up any instrument and play it, I seen him fix a whole bunch of stuff.” Rick nodded and looked

over in Sean's direction. Sean looked over at Jake. Jake stood completely still, his expression revealing nothing. Sean tipped his head to the right.

"Ok. Prove it."

"Hey brother," his cellmate called out.

His cellmate was a skinny but muscular Black man named David. He sat quietly in the darkness of the cell, smoking.

"I'm not your brother."

"Yeah you are."

They had had this argument a dozen times, starting with the day Jake had walked into the cell, the doors closing behind him with jarring finality.

David stared straight into Jake.

"You're so fuckin' stupid." David barely moved. He put his cigarette out, his eyes still on Jake. "You think those fuckin' Indians would give a shit about you if you weren't in here?"

Jake ignored him, sat on his cot and leaned back. He could feel David's presence below, even through his momentary silence. Jake could hear David relighting his cigarette.

"Hey Jake. My great granpa was a Iroquois Warrior. Can I be part of yo fuckin' tribe?" David laughed.

"I'm not Black man."

David laughed again.

"Then you got to have the biggest, kinkiest Indian fro I ever seen...hell man," David said, shifting on his cot, "You look Black to me...mostly."

Jake burned inside. He never knew what to do with this. Once a cop had stopped him just to ask him what he was. *I'm Indian. My family's Indian...* Though Jake had burned with humiliation when he had met his real parents. Mom was a fullblooded Cheyenne/Arapaho. Dad, half Nez Perce...half Black. After visiting with them for a few weeks, they'd become used to his presence. One day, after coming home from a construction job he'd just been fired from, he walked up the steps to the old shitty house set in the middle of Wichita and heard screaming. He didn't even hesitate. He burst into the front door, which wasn't locked and saw his mother, standing right outside of the kitchen, holding her children hostage with a knife. They were huddled in a corner, their eyes wide with fear, their hair tangled and out of control. The littlest one was wailing.

Mom! he yelled. She whipped around with her knife and stared into Jake's eyes. She looked like she didn't recognize him. Jake braced. She stood there for a minute and then dropped the knife, sobbing. She fell to the floor and the children had crawled towards her, their arms out, their mouths wide.

Later, after the children had gone to bed, she held Jake and murmured *shoulda never let you go...shoulda never let you go...love your mamma, hey, Jake? Hey?*

Jake began searching for his flask.

As Jake climbed into the cab of the train, he saw a crow dart quickly over the engine. He stepped all the way into the cab and looked at the controls. *Damn Sean. I know how to do this. I will know. Just like my damn father always thinking that I'm not doing right cause I don't know how. Well I know. Sometimes I just don't want to.*

After about fifteen minutes of looking around, his hands moving silently over the controls, he found that he did know. Jake hesitated. *My record's longer than anybody else's in the state, White, Indian or Black. All the cops know my name. What am I doing?*

"Give up yet Jake?" Sean yelled.

Jake placed his hands on the controls. "Get in."

Yips came from below.

"Heeeeeeey," Darrel said, walking into Jake's cell. "They said you and I could take thirty minutes to jam while the others are liftin' weights." Darrel sat down on the cot and swung his guitar to the front, pausing to run his hands over his slightly protruding belly.

"Hey, your legs get skinnier?" Jake said.

"Shut up you fucker. You piss me off and you'll feel the wrath. I'm a motherfuckin' Apache, you remember that."

"Sure, man, as long as you can play, I don't give a shit what kind of Indian you are. Less you're a homo."

Darrel followed with a friendly 'fuck off,' and they began with an old Stevie Ray tune. Quickly, they worked their way into something else, playing for nearly fifteen minutes before Darrel had to stop. He had arthritis from a car wreck.

Jake began running his fingers along the strings of his guitar, playing the first few chords of a Metallica song and then beginning to tune the guitar, even though it really didn't need tuning.

Jake, let's go for a ride on your motorcycle.

Margaritte, your mom doesn't want you to.

So what. My dad's drunk and my mom is off in town. Let's go.

Jake used to spend weeks hanging out with his cousin in Denver. She was the only one who ever really got him, the only one he told about his visits to his biological parents. They would ride around on his motorcycle, up in the mountains and he'd tell her about when he'd put cherry bombs in the toilets at the high school in Wichita.

Jesus Jake, did they ever find out who was doin it?

Yeah. But the best was when I'd forget that I'd put them in there and they'd go off and surprise me. And then Margaritte had laughed.

He remembered her light brown arms around him. He remembered her leaning into him and the speed, and the wanting more.

Three drunken boys squeezed into the cab of the train next to Jake. The train began to slowly slide forward and Sean leaned out of the cab.

"Freeeeeeeeeeeeedom! Freedom boys!"

Jake smiled. The train began to speed up. This is the way it should be. This is the way everything should be.

George leaned back into the darkness. Jake couldn't see his face but he knew that George was smoking and watching him.

"Damn Jake."

"I know."

The two white boys began laughing wildly as the landscape blurred past them in beautiful ambiguity. George was smoking in earnest and staring out the window, thinking about his family back home in Montana. *So many kids, so much time, so little to do...but still, I should go home to Fort Peck. At least for a while.*

He looked at Jake, pulled his cigarette to his lips and blew the smoke out into the frosty air, unable to tell what was breath and what was smoke.

Jake sat holding his guitar in the light, the sun beginning to set. Darrel had gone to visit with his cousin in cellblock 12.

Jake—do you love your parents?

Of course. Don't you love yours Margaritte?

Yeah. But maybe we could run away. On your bike, you know, go powwow to powwow. My mother never lets me go to powwow. Says it'll piss my dad off.

My parents used to go all the time. Before they became born again.

My mom says there's nothing more annoying on this earth than a born again Indian.

Whatever. Let's just listen to this.

Whut is it?

It's heavy metal. But Christian.

Ok but then we gotta take that ride on your bike.

Jake could hear the words to CCR's "I Put A Spell On You," clocking away in his brain and he began whisper the tune, though the sound of the engine had just begun to make it impossible to hear each other unless they screamed.

I put a spell on you...

The train was now clipping along at an incredible pace.

Because You're Mine...

Jake could feel the train underneath him. *This feels so good. It's like I don't have to think about nothing but what's in front of me. It's like nothing matters at all.*

He smiled and thought of Margaritte.

You Better Stop the Thing That You Do...

He wondered what she was doing, right now.

I Said Watch Out...

Probably going powwow to powwow. He smiled again. He looked out the window and felt an incredible pull from the outside. He looked back at the controls and frowned.

I Ain't Lyin...

Where's the brakes on this thing?

He began to look around frantically. He turned towards George but he was gone, his eyes locked on the horizon. Rick and Sean were still drunkenly leaning out of the cab, yelling and whistling at the town, the miles of wheat rapidly approaching. He could feel his mother out there, both of them, and Margaritte, and the wheat, and his future and everything else, everything.

Margaritte, did grandpa ever tell you that story about him and his friend Gary?

You mean the one where he and his friends got drunk and painted 'Indian America' on the Capitol?

No. This was about a Black guy he knew. After he'd stopped doing liquor runs for the priests.

No.

When I was eight, my parents took me to see him. It was right after they converted and they cut their hair. Then my mother told this joke about all Indians bein' part biker and granpa laughed and dad left the room. I think grandpa was mad because they weren't gonna be Catholic anymore.

Anyway, he told this story about this Black guy named Gary who he'd been friends with during the time he'd worked at the warf in Houston. They was real close. Always had each other's backs. So, anyway, Gary's wife was Indian.

Yeah? What tribe?

Kickapoo. So this lady, she left Gary and so he and grandpa started drinking right there on the warf and Gary got so drunk, he decided his wife had left him for grandpa. Grandpa said he did everything to convince Gary that it wasn't true but Gary was just too messed up and heartbroken to care. Then he pulled a knife on grandpa. Then they started fighting.

Grandpa fighting?

Yeah... but anyway, grandpa...he said... he said he killed that guy.

Grandpa killed somebody? Jesus.

Yeah.

The doors closed again and Jake stared out as the doors shut, David already laying on his cot behind him, silent. Jake stood for a long time looking out into the prison, at the thousands of brown faces staring back from the gray, each one still inside their cells, the last few sounds of the night echoing strangely and working their way up to him, to all of them, and beyond. □