

the grandfathers come
gently for james



jon horton



James Red Pipe wakes when the thunder rolls. He looks out the window next to his bed. The sky is grey, the air is yellow, the smell of rain is on a cool breeze that jerks at the curtains.

Dropping his feet to the floor, he looks at the digital clock and sees 5:05 PM arrive in big red numerals.

He walks to the bathroom, splashes water on his face, looks at the toilet and decides taking a leak is just too much trouble. Besides, the rotten baloney smell of his urine lately freaks him out. “Damn. I slept all night and now I’ve slept all day. What the hell is the matter with me lately?” He turns for the kitchen.

“I need to quit swearin’. It’s another thing they’ve told me I’ve gotta change.”

“They” are whispers that have been prompting him for weeks now. He calls them his “Jiminy Crickets”, but they frighten him.

James started getting little flashes of things he’d done in the past—things that weren’t good. It surprised him at first because he’d come to think of himself as a good man, a real good man. But one night he was waiting to go to sleep and he’d had a clear recollection of, in high school, forcing a girl to have sex. The memory was vivid. He also remembered the girl crying at his callous treatment of her in the school hallway when she tried to get some of his attention.

James is now the janitor of the high school and now thinks of that shameful moment every time he sweeps his broad dust mop over the spot where he wounded the girl, Janice Walking Soldier. The memory made him ashamed enough that he started having problems going to sleep. Then other visions started coming, even when he was at work—maybe two or three a week, almost like his life was passing before his eyes. It was startling.

Finally, he went to a purification sweat at Joseph Goggles’ place and asked the elder what he thought was happening. They were cooling off after a round of the sweat and it seemed like a good time to ask him.

The old man said, “Hard to tell what it means when The Grand-fathers begin to speak to a man. They don’t come right out with things.”

“It’s really bothering me. I need to know. Why is all this happening now?”



“More. Tell me more.”

“I did a lot of things that were pretty normal back then, when I was young. Well, not exactly normal, but normal for the rez. I wrecked my pickup with a couple of guys in the back. One of them is paralyzed. Also, I hurt a girl I’d been going with for a year, jerked my class ring from a chain around her neck and told her to screw off when she told me she was pregnant.”

“Hmmp. Those are some bad things. What else?”

“Those are the main ones, the first ones, that came up. But now it’s little things like stealing gas from bulk tanks at white guys’ ranches.” James wiped his face and took a deep breath.

“Go ahead,” the elder said.

“I cursed my mother, many times, when she tried to lecture me about drinking, missing school. Running wild.”

The elder made a rumbling in his throat. “Good thing the next round is the Healing Round, I will sing and pray for you.” He got up, with James’ help.

“This is a mysterious thing,” the old man said after the sweat was over and they were eating. “There were visitors during the last round. I will pray to the Grandfathers about it, maybe they will give me an answer.”

James goes to the kitchen and opens a cupboard. There are many cans of commodity soups there and he takes down a can of Tomato, opens it and puts it in a battered aluminum pan. When he opens the fridge there is no fresh milk so he mixes up a quart with powdered government stuff and adds a can of that to the pan, stirs.

Toasted commodity cheese sandwiches are excellent when dabbed with a teaspoon of salsa. His meal is ready in just a few minutes. The smells of the cooking makes him feel good. It reminds him of when he was a kid and his mom plopped toasted cheese sandwiches on the kids’ plates while his older sister ladled tomato soup into mismatched bowls set around the table.

His kitchen table is set near the east window. He puts down the plate of sandwiches and the pan of soup next to a can of Coke and sits at the end of the table. The cheese is still hot, runny. The soup burns his



lips so he takes his time with the first sandwich and waits for the soup to cool a bit.

And then he gets one of the visions, one of the prompts. His throat seizes.

“Oh God, no. Not that one. Please.” He puts the sandwich down and turns his eyes to the big rag rug in the center of the battered wooden floor.

Under that rug are bloodstains. They are faint now but, to his eyes, they might as well be painted in fluorescent orange.

Seventeen years ago he had wakened, naked, on that spot. His hands were swollen and had cuts on them. His long hair was matted with blood and his whole body was covered with it. His feet were crust-ed, testament to the fact that he had been walking in dirt with bloody feet.

He had absolutely no recollection of what happened, or where he had been. The last he remembered he was in Rock Springs, running with some other ‘skins from the fort.

After cleaning up, James hitched directly to the VA hospital in Sheridan and checked into the Thunderchild program there. Since then he hadn’t had a drink. He thought he’d paid his dues, but it didn’t look like it now.

The rug comes up and he looks down on the silhouette of his body. It’s a lithograph of the greatest horror of his life.

“What do you want from me, for Chissakes?!” James shouts at the ceiling.

He sits down and pushes the food away, lays his face on his crossed arms and sobs for several minutes then raises his head to beg, “God, please forgive me! Give me some peace.”

The phone rings. James wipes his face and answers.

“This is Goggles. Come to my place.” The phone rattles down in its cradle on the other end.

As he drives, the smells of the freshly mowed hay fields and the water of the Wind River and wood smoke from the chimneys of the scattered little government houses adds some peace. Cooking and warming fires were fundamental to the lives of the native nations before



reservation life. The odor of wood smoke is an essence of the clear dawn of man. Surely, it will be part of the natural life on the other side.

At the end of Goggle's lane he parks behind two other cars. One belongs to Andrew Wallowing Bull, a traditional medicine man. He doesn't recognize the other one, a beat up Volkswagen.

The door to the house is open and when Goggles sees him through the screen he says, "Come in".

James enters and gives Wallowing Bull a bag of rolling tobacco. It is a tradition among all native nations to give a token gift of sacred tobacco when visiting an elder. For the others he shakes two cigarettes from his pack and hands them out.

On the couch are Wallowing Bull and Father Paul Benoit. It doesn't surprise James, seeing a traditional healer and a Catholic priest sitting side-by-side. He remembers that Father Paul danced the Sun Dance for many years. He looked comical when he first started, with his small frame and wispy beard. However, over the years he became one of the best, one of the most reverent. He danced more than almost anyone else during the three-day ceremony.

Wallowing Bull removes his long pipe from its ancient deerskin case and fills the bowl with sacred tobacco. When the medicine man is finished, Goggles helps him to his feet and Thomas does the same for the old priest, who is wearing his cassock.

This is very strange because he retired years ago, Thomas thinks. He is dressed to function as an official of the Church.

"Outside," says Goggles and they walk through back door, down steps lit by a bare 40 watt bulb. A small fire is burning at the back, near the fence. When James' eyes adjust he sees there are worn blankets and a quilt spread around the fire. A boy tending the fire is dismissed and he runs away into the dark.

Once the circle is made, Wallowing Bull raises the pipe above his head and prays to Father Sky, Mother Earth and the grandfathers, the ancients who guard the other four directions. He lights the tobacco, blows out some smoke and pulls it over his head then blows the holy smoke in all the directions as an offering to Mother Earth, Father Sky and the four grandfathers. He hands the pipe to Father Benoit who does



the same, then Goggles and James repeat the ritual.

They sit and Wallowing Bull begins to sing as Goggles taps on a water drum.

Mars and Jupiter blaze in the milky scrim overhead. In the sacred East the Buffalo Shedding Hair Moon is working its way toward zenith and Venus tags along. The sky is alive.

As the men's wailing canticle rises and falls on the night, Wallowing Bull says, "Now tell me about these voices."

"They aren't voices, I don't really hear voices."

"What, then?"

"They just send me, like... snapshots, that make me cringe. Some are about things I thought were no big deal, and some of them terrify me."

"Tell me about one they sent you. The worst."

"I used to pick on this big white kid. Just about everybody did, but I was the worst. One day in junior high, to impress the older boys, I walked up and punched him in the jaw. That was the little picture that I got in the middle of the night—me sucker punching him as he came out of the school door."

"That seems like a pretty small thing. Most boys are naturally mean."

"But, a few days later I remembered how others picked up on that day and began to treat Mike like shit too."

"And you blame yourself?"

"Well, the problem is that he joined Marines but he became a machine gunner and pulled three tours in Iraq. He was a famous killer, earned more medals than a Mexican General."

"According to military tradition that's a good thing."

"He stuck an M-16 in his mouth. Left a note saying he couldn't live with himself any more. Cursed all the bullies in his childhood; said if he had any real guts he would have hunted down us injuns instead of Iraqi women and kids... and himself."

Thomas' throat clogs. He puts his head down and he grunts with choked sobs. Gaunt Father Benoit moves beside him, puts his arm across James' shoulders.



When the episode passes Father Benoit says, “Is it like this every time—a little flash leads to a much bigger memory?”

“Sometimes. Mostly it’s just pretty small stuff, like hurting people with words; or promising to help, then not doing it.”

“Things that small, then?”

“Yes.”

There is a pause and Thomas notices looks passing between the three elders.

Wallowing Bull says “We have talked about this, the three of us. We believe these are the voices of the Grandfathers themselves.”

“Why would they be communicating with me?”

Father Benoit says, “Because you have been a good man, an honorable man most of your life and they want your atonement before you die.”

Wallowing Bull says, “Stand, James.”

The Medicine Man walks up and puts his big hands on each side of James’ head. After a moment he grips the arms, then places them on the chest and stomach. He walks behind and works his way down to James’ buttocks where he grunts, stops. Then he moves to James’ side and places one hand on the abdomen and the other above the buttocks. He stares at the sky and murmurs under his breath.

After a minute or so he drops his hands and says, “Lets go back inside.”

They return to the little front room of the house and Wallowing Bull says, “It is as we thought.” The other men nod.

“What?” James asks.

“Is your water pink?”

“Uh, yeah. And it smells bad.”

“For how long?”

“Since Christmas time, maybe.”

“And how long have you had trouble making water?”

“Quite a while.”

“Before Christmas time?”

“Yeah.”

The medicine man looks at the other men and says, “Yes, it’s as



we thought,” and they nod.

Father Benoit pulls at his wispy white beard for a minute after telling James to sit down on the chair facing the elders.

“The grandfathers are preparing you for your crossing to the other side. But, first, they have something for you to do. Something very important.”

Goggles and Wallowing Bull grunt in agreement, gravely nodding their heads.

“What’s the matter with me?”

Wallowing Bull answers, “You have a cancer. It is in the man gland and you have let it go too long for the white man’s knife to cure you. I have traditional medicine that will work for some time. It will work with the wishes of the grandfathers—I hope mebbe until the Sun Dance. We will dedicate a day of the dance to you. The prayers of the whole Arapaho nation will be directed on you. Then. . .who knows?”

Goggles said, “Obviously the Grandfathers are honoring you by showing you how to cleanse your soul. We have prayed together, the three of us, and been directed on what we are to do.”

Father Benoit says, “You were baptized and catechized into the Catholic faith. Come to the chapel next Sunday afternoon and I will hear your confession.”

“But I haven’t been to church for years.”

“Precisely. You need to do your penance and put your Christian obligations behind you. Then you can go where you are lead by the Old Men.”

“What time?”

“Four o’ clock.”

“I will be there.” He looks at the other elders.

“What else do I have to do?”

Wallowing Bull stands and picks up a bulging buckskin bag from the sofa. “Come in the kitchen.”

A teakettle has been warming and he turns up the heat. There is a large mug waiting on the counter. The medicine man loosens the strings on the bag, puts a heaping spoonful of ground herbs in the mug. “No more, no less. Make three mugs every single day, morning and



noon and just before you go to bed. Drink it while it's hot, don't let it cool down."

The tea is loaded with Hyssop mint and mountain licorice, but is still bitter enough to force James to make a face. "Whew!"

"Take this mug with you, it is just the right size. Don't use any other one."

The four men smoke a pipe and purify themselves as Wallowing Bull sings a powerful song. After thanking the elders, James leaves first because he is parked behind Father Benoit and Wallowing Bull.

On the way back to his place, James turns down a lane to a Game & Fish easement on the Wind River and parks.

The distinctive scent of the river in the low water of autumn reminds him that Wallowing Bull told him he will soon be passing to the other side. He too is at low water. Strangely, the thought does not depress him. He is like the river—moving in a natural cycle that will lead to winter's long sleep.

The moon rides the waters, reflected perfectly where the river is deep then as dapples and scallops where it slides over rocks and shoals. A feeding trout plops on the water, the scent of a hunting skunk wafts by on the night's cool breeze. Then an owl hoots four times from one of the large cottonwoods across the river and James knows he will not see the summer solstice and the Sun Dance. When the owl calls a man's name the natural world knows his time on this side is short.

The Grandfathers are the guardians of the four directions: the red east, the yellow west, the white north and the black south. With Father Sky and Mother Earth they care for the universe and everything in it. They know everything.

James drinks his "tea" exactly as the medicine man told him to and soon his water isn't pink. After a week he can pass his water with no difficulty and his strength comes back; he doesn't need the long naps he's been taking for the last few months. But the guidance, the gentle promptings, continue and it seems like there are a thousand things that need to be scoured from his conscience. Some make him cringe, though he tossed them aside like a gum wrapper when he was strutting through life.



“Keep it simple,” the Father Benoit said just before they entered the confessional and he did. “Father I have sinned against the laws of God and the Holy Catholic church. I have sinned against myself and many, many others. I beg God, the Holy Father, the Savior, the Holy Spirit and the Church for forgiveness.”

He was given four Hail Marys, a blessing, and the priest added an “All My Relations” as he left. His spiritual obligations to his Christian life were satisfied. Ended.

The nightmare comes during the Beaver Moon, November. It is after a confrontation with a Shoshone at the casino run by the Arapahos on their side of the reservation. The guy was drunk and belligerent, calling the Arapahos “niggers”. Some guys shoved him out the door into the parking lot and beat the crap out of him. As he left, James saw him standing with his hands on the fender of a car, his head down, legs and arms shaking as strings of blood and mucus ran from his mouth, spitting teeth. He didn’t feel one bit sorry for the guy, Shoshones got everything they had coming to them. The Shoshone are enemy.

The Northern Arapahos’ hunting grounds, which they shared with their cousins the Northern Cheyenne, included all of eastern Colorado and western Nebraska and Kansas. After a war of extinction by the U.S. Army when gold was discovered in Colorado, the Arapaho were sent to Oklahoma in 1868. The Northern Cheyenne were finally given their own reservation but the Northern Arapaho were forced onto the large rez of the Shoshones, a traditional enemy.

Crow and Shoshone scouts had even led Custer to the Rosebud and the battle that would be known to the world as Custer’s Last Stand. If it hadn’t been for them General Crook’s much larger group would have been wiped out too.

The Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne would get all the credit but the fact was that the Arapaho had many men in the fight, including James’ great-great grandfather. They should have been known as heroes of the Battle of the Little Big Horn too.

When the wars in the north were done there was a lot of resentment on the rez and many small but bloody fights were fought between Shoshones and Arapahos. And then there was the subject of the slander



of being “niggers”. After the wars the Buffalo Soldiers were stationed on the reservation and some Arapaho women had children by them, something the Shoshones were prejudiced against. Over a hundred and fifty years later they still used it to slander James’ people.

In turn the Arapaho considered the Shoshones and Crows cowards for fighting on the side of the U.S. Army who slaughtered hundreds of defenseless Arapaho and other peoples in order to steal their lands for the gold diggers. The resentments still ran deep, and wide. The Shoshones felt that half of their land had been stolen and the Arapaho felt like the land under their feet was not their own. Their hearts were still on the boundless tall grass prairies to the south.

After the incident at the casino James is full of anger when he goes to bed but he can’t sleep for a long time. He begins to think about the fight on the Rosebud and soon it all comes back to him in a troubled dream: He is helping the young men move the enormous horse herd to feed on the hills southwest of the camp of about forty thousand Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho. It is a beautiful morning.

Suddenly there is gunfire, James rides toward it and is soon fighting with the cavalry in the dust. There is a tumble of blue and red, horses and men slamming into each other, the smell of blood, he is upended and fighting for his life with a big knife. Wounded horses scream in agony, a soldier has him by the throat but James is slippery with blood and he breaks the blue man’s grip, pushes him away and onto his back. The floor is slick and his knees slip in the blood, he sees more splashed on a wall. He raises his fighting knife and plunges it into the back of the soldier who is crawling away. The man collapses. James stands, raises his face to the ceiling and looses a warrior’s warbling cry of victory. Two men, not enemy, flee from the house.

Now he is following the Wind River, stumbling barefoot along the bank, slipping through barbed wire fences, stripping his blood-soaked clothes and throwing them in the water. His long hair is heavy and slaps on his shoulders and face. He sees headlights and runs naked onto the road. The car slows then accelerates around him, the Indian face in the door window horrified.





James vaults awake. He is soaked in sweat and his throat is filled with sour vomit. He runs to the bathroom, falls to his knees, empties his stomach in the bowl and gets the dry heaves until he is too weak to remain upright. He falls on his side and curls his body, gripping his knees with his arms and wails until his voice is gone, “Forgive me, forgive me. Please God, forgive me!”

All reservations have ten thousand times ten thousand profound secrets and it is the way of the people to hold them closely if it concerns one of their own. There are some sins that will not be tolerated, but there are others that fit the code of silence that protects their own from the FBI, which investigates serious offenses on reservations. Killing an enemy is something that will go forever unmentioned—like speaking the names of the dead after they have passed to the other side.

Later, it is the day before Thanksgiving and James is driving to the Northern Cheyenne reservation in Montana to spend the holidays with his first cousin John Knows His Gun. It is snowing and his tires aren’t the best so he is driving carefully. That’s why he notices the man lying in the snow at the side of the road.

He pulls over and backs up. The Indian guy wakes up when James shakes him but he is groggy and staggers when he is helped to the car. Once inside, he opens his hip-length denim coat and bends forward to put his bare hands on the hot air vents. The heater motor squeals loudly when turned on high but the guy needs all the heat he can get so James lets it run because the man is shaking so badly.

After a while he says, “Thanks man, I was out there all afternoon but no one would give a ride to an injun. He looks at James. “You know how it is.”

“Yup. Red niggers. Where you headed?” He hopes the man is going to Lame Deer, the main town of the Northern Cheyenne rez.

“Crow Agency.”

James goes cold inside. His passenger is an enemy. Like the Shoshone, the Crows were scouts who led the Blue Coats to genocidal victory against the Arapaho, Cheyenne and the Sioux.

“I’m going to Lame Deer, I’ll drop you off.” The Crow and Cheyenne reservations butt up against each other.



“Where you from?”

“Fort Washakie.”

The guys nod. He knows immediately that James is Arapaho, not Shoshone.

“My name is Paul Bad Horse, I just got out of prison in Rawlins.”

“Yeah. I could tell from your clothes and the haircut. Didn’t they give you a bus ticket?”

“Yes, but I want to cash it in for the money.”

“Bad choice.”

“I made a lot of bad choices. That’s how I ended up in Rawlins.”

“What was the beef?”

“Second degree murder. But I got out after only three-and-a-half years, by a miracle.”

“Hunhhh.”

“I was sentenced to twenty-five to sixty and hadn’t had a visitor the whole time I was in prison. Then one day they told me there was someone to see me. It was my grandmother. She told me that Jesus had told her I was going to be getting out soon so I should prepare myself.

“Somehow, I knew it was the truth. That night I began to. . . I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Hear voices. Kind of.” It is a statement.

Bad Horse looks at James. “How did you know that?”

“I just know.”

The Crow stares out the windshield for a couple of minutes. “I started studying the Bible with the chaplain. Then I started preaching in the yard—brought a bunch of guys to Jesus. Even started a Bible study class. A little over a year later, two days ago, I was getting out of a prison van in front of the bus station. Twenty-one years early, just like my grandmother said.”

James glances at his passenger. He hasn’t taken off his black stocking hat. There is a tattoo on his neck. Some things become real habits and this guy was a prison gangster, for sure.

When Bad Horse is finally warm James turns the protesting heater down and the guy leans back in the seat. Then, after a while, he



says, “I want to pray for you. Okay?”

James isn’t comfortable with the suggestion. He has put his Christian life behind him when Father Benoit took his confession months ago. Then he knows he should say yes.

“Go ahead, I need all the help I can get.”

Bad Horse starts praying, talking to Father God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He quotes from the Bible, Matthew this, Isaiah that, the Apostle John a couple of times, and others. Then he prays in the Crow language and James knows he is talking to the grandfathers. A peaceful feeling comes over James.

After the prayers and preaching the car is silent, the only sounds are the slap of snow against the wheel wells and the whirr of the heater.

“Thank you.

“You are welcome, Brother.”

“I have a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“You mentioned John:14 and it stuck in my mind. What was that one, again?”

“That’s a good one. Jesus says, ‘Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not true I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.’”

A chill ran over James’ shoulders.

Bad Horse got out at the convenience store at Crow Agency and phoned someone. Then he returned to the car and got out his small duffle bag and told James he would wait for his ride. Before he shut the door he leaned down and said, “You have no enemies. Your heart is good. You are walking the Red Road, I can tell.”

In the rearview mirror the man looks small and alone under the light above the phone booth. He raises a hand, a benediction of some sort.

James isn’t aware that his tires have broken loose on a corner covered with black ice until the car is sliding sideways. The end of a guardrail hurries toward him, its reflectors catching some of the glare from the headlights, then slams into his door. The car spins backwards,



plows into deep snow behind the rail and starts to slide. The car enters bushes that slap heavily against the metal, then comes to rest far inside them.

The car is buried in deep snow, resting at so steep an angle that James is lying on his back in the seat. The side window is broken and he pushes at the snow, testing it. It is packed hard, not fluffy enough to dig through. When he tries to crawl to the other side of the car he's transfixed by a stab of pain in his lower back. When he tries again he can't move his legs.

He leans his head back on the headrest, tears pour down his face and he moans. He is buried in a plum thicket with a broken back. It is past midnight, there will be no traffic on the icy winter highway and his heater isn't working. He begins to shiver violently from the cold coming through the metal of the door pressed against him. And from fear.

He turns on the windshield wipers and the glass clears. Directly above him is a patch of moonless night sky stuttering with stars. In the middle of the bed of light is the Great Bear whose tail ticks away the hours as if on a clock face. It shows about two o'clock in the morning. Paul Bad Horse appears in his mind and he remembers the man's words, "In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you."

"That's what this was all about—giving some guy a ride?" he says aloud, and smiles as a great peace comes over him. His conscience is clear, he has no regrets. The grandfathers have prepared him well. He watches the Great Bear's tail tick away. He closes his eyes.

Red Pipe is riding through the tall grass prairie of his ancestors' hunting grounds. Eagle feathers toss in the black mane of the buffalo runner he is riding. There is a small stand of cottonwoods in the distance and he eases his horse into a canter. A bunch of startled antelope burst into flight. Bluestem and Gramma grass slap at the toes of his moccasins and leggings as he hurries toward the trees and lodges. There is the smell of cool water and wood smoke on the air. It's the same sky on this side.



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