

They kidnapped kids, just like they did with Yellow Bird. Made them go there, then beat the hell out of you. They took us away from our families. They stole our lives from us.”

“They got my dad by tricking him,” Orv said.

“How’d they trick him?” I asked.

“Well, if they couldn’t convince a kid to go, or they couldn’t scare the parents into sending them, sometimes they’d come by and bribe you with candy. They’d tell you they were taking you to town for something. I think there was like a bounty on us, like for gophers or beavers. Some guy got paid to come out and get us. The more Indian kids he got, the more money he was paid.”

“And kids would get in their car?”

“Sure. Those were different days, especially when my dad was young. When a white man told you to do something, you did it. Besides,” he grinned, “Indians like candy.”

“That’s how they got my uncle,” Grover said. “Damn piece of licorice.”

Dan turned back to me. “Remember what I told you about how I begged my dad to let me go so I could protect little Yellow Bird? It wasn’t that I didn’t know what I was getting into. They’d been taking kids for years. But I wanted to protect her.”

“Lots of us actually wanted to go,” Grover said. “We didn’t want the damn white man’s education. We wanted to test ourselves. We figured we’d stand up against the white man, become new kinds of warriors. That’s what a lot of us thought.”

“It’s what I thought,” said Dan.

He opened up another can of Coke and started drinking it down in large gulps.

“Boy, was I wrong.”

Grover let out a short “hnn” of approval or support.

Though I was fascinated and honored to be present at these kinds of revelations, I felt uncomfortable with the direction the

conversation was taking. I had been raised in the Christian tradition and loved much of what it had to offer. But the Indian boarding schools, like the Inquisition and the Salem witch trials, had exposed a dark underbelly of the Christian faith. I couldn't defend them, nor did I want to. They were, to my mind, the worst of all crimes — crimes committed in the name of religion.

"I'm going to show you something now," Dan said. "Go over there and get that broom."

I looked at him quizzically. "That one," he said, pointing to a broom propped up next to the woodstove.

Without speaking, I walked over and picked it up. I did not want to anger him.

"Now, lay it down on the floor in front of me."

I was not sure what was going on, but I dared not question. I simply did what he requested.

"Now, get down and kneel on it."

I hesitated.

"Just do it."

Slowly I got down on the floor in front of him and slid the broomstick under my knees. It dug into the soft spot right below my kneecaps.

The other men were still looking down. None of them would raise their eyes to look at me.

"Now just stay there."

I knelt there, balanced unsteadily on the broomstick. It created an uncomfortable pressure in my shins and thighs.

"Having fun yet?" Dan asked.

The pressure was rapidly turning to pain. I reached for the arm of a chair to give myself support.

Dan whacked my fingers with his walking stick. "No support."

The pain was increasing, moving up my legs.

"Stay there," Dan commanded. "Jesus is mad at you."

“Come on, Dan,” I said, putting my hands on the floor. “I get the point.”

He whacked at my forearms viciously.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “You aren’t going to get the point for a half hour.”

I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t stay there for a half hour. But I didn’t want to defy him.

“Just stay there,” he said angrily.

I teetered on the broomstick, my knees throbbing with pain. Finally, in spite of my embarrassment, I just rolled off the broomstick and lay on the floor.

Dan spit — a gesture of undisguised contempt.

“Too hard for a grown white man,” he said. “But not for a little Indian boy.”

“That’s how it was for us,” he said. “Every day. Didn’t know your lesson? Kneel on the broomstick. Speak Lakota? Kneel on the broomstick. ‘Jesus is mad at you. Jesus will send you to hell.’”

“Christ, Nerburn. We were just little kids. Cut off our hair, drag us away from our parents. Don’t let us talk in our own language. Tell us our parents are savages and are going to burn up in a fire that lasts forever. No wonder I pissed my bed.”

He looked down at me seated on the floor and holding my knees. His eyes were filled with a cold and empty rage. He was looking at every white man who had ever abused him.

He tapped the floor next to my knees with his walking stick. “You think that broomstick was bad? You should try marbles. One day they caught me talking my own language. They brought out two Bibles. Big black books, heavy as hell. They put some marbles on the floor, made me kneel on them. I cried and cried, but they hit me and made me do it. Made me kneel there with my arms out, holding one of those Bibles on each hand, balanced. Told me to pray.

“I prayed all right. I prayed. You know what I prayed for?”

I shook my head.

“I prayed for the goddamn broomstick.”

Grover let out a soft chuckle. Orv stayed silent. I could see he was uncomfortable for me, uncomfortable for Dan. But it was clear he knew what Dan was talking about.

He reached out his hand to help me up.

“You’re too old for floors,” he said.

I accepted his assistance gratefully.

“So that’s the answer to your question, Nerburn,” Dan said.

“What question?” I asked. My knees were still throbbing.

“About Orv and prison. Why it didn’t change him.”

I looked at Orv. His eyes were still cast downward.

“Prison couldn’t change him. It was too late. Prison wasn’t nothing. He’d been in a boarding school.”

A small, sad smile crossed Orv’s lips.

“Want to finish the game?” he said.