

THE ELKWILDWILD RUNS FREE

Elkwild's train rolled through the night into a moment out of time, a black hole in infinity the gods had forgotten. Elkwild stared out the window realizing this, absorbing the peace. No one who knew who he was knew where he was, and no one who knew where he was knew who he was. He was no one, at no place, in no time, content to be alone.

The steel wheels turned the track, shucking out a hypnotic rhythm as the train threaded its way deeper into the black hole. Romero would be going for his twentieth in less than twenty hours, but that thought could not pierce the veil to torture Elkwild now. He peered into the prairie remembering school days when teachers said white men rode trains to shoot buffalo ... and Indians would die.

He had no Indian in him anymore, not really. Just the name. Three generations of white women had bread out the crazy blood his great-grandfather was said to have had. Bill was a white name, and he was white, no more Indian than Joe Allegro from *The Times*.

A woman with a child in the seat across the aisle was trying to sleep sitting up, her son asleep and leaning against her. She looked to Elkwild like he imagined his mother would have looked with him leaning against her the same way.

He frowned and shifted his eye, wondering if the kid had an Aunt Allison, full of theories and discipline. He stared at the boy ... no lines on his face ... and turned back to watch the darkness outside.

The glass of the window seemed to keep the darkness outside. His reading light was on. People were sleeping, dozing, but Elkwild knew the night was awake. He narrowed his eyes and looked out as if he knew it well.

Clouds ambled through the moon, painting the sky black. Horses pawed the ground, shaking their manes and looking nervously into the trees. A shirtless man in blue jeans and suspenders stepped onto the porch with a rifle, a bottle, and a cigarette, studying the horses. He scanned across the yard, looking into the trees, trying to see what was spooking the horses. Elkwild's great-grandfather stared from behind a bush, still, his eyes burning. Somewhere from a void a coyote howled, young and alone.

The man on the porch looked directly at Elkwild's great-grandfather, squinting, then turned and walked to the end of the porch to look around the corner. Nothing was there, and the horses seemed to be breathing easier. Elkwild's great-grandfather let his breath slip out like a long, fat snake as the white man returned to his place.

The phone rang for the fifth time. Elkwild's wife heard it, and she juggled her shopping bags to jam her key into the lock.

"Jesus Christ," she muttered when the key refused.

The phone rang again and finally the door consented. Elkwild's wife clicked in her heels across the living room, threw her bags onto the white leather couch and pulled her phone from her pocketbook.

“Bill,” she said. “I didn’t think you’d get to LA til tonight.” She paused. “How are you? How you doing?”

She kicked her shoes off and switched the phone to the other ear.

“I was just getting in and my hands were full ... and the door wouldn’t open,” she said. “Shopping,” she said.

There was a pause, silence.

“Did Rivera get his big win yet?” she asked.

“Romero,” she said quickly, “that’s right.” Then she listened as Elkwild talked.

Elkwild’s wife frowned. “Tonight? LA? ... I really can’t Bill,” she said, her voice sounding lost. “I’ve got a class tonight. Shirley’s going to pick me up at eight.”

There was a pause, silence, and Elkwild’s wife used her big toe to pull one of her shoes across the floor, biting her lip. Elkwild and the missus made some conversation, and said goodbye to each other.

Elkwild pushed the button on his phone, ending the call, then stared out the window picturing his wife drawing her high heel across the kitchen floor with her toe back in St. Louis. She hadn’t asked how he had made it to Los Angeles so early. He had wanted to tell her about the overnight train.

Elkwild flopped onto his pillow and stared at the ceiling, his hands behind his head, his tie loose and disheveled. Isolation was almost like a friend by now. I should call Rawlings, he thought. I should see if anything is happening. He knew Conley had probably called Rawlings

from Montreal already. Conley ... the rookie ... relentless in his quest. Elkwild thought about the four-game series with the Astros, next after three with the Dodgers.

Houston, he thought. Melinda.

He looked at his phone ... at the white Bible next to it. Calling her now would be the final straw, and he knew it. He wondered if Cheryl had told Mrs. Elkwild about Melinda. Too bad there weren't more women in the world like Cheryl, he thought. Was it wrong to think that way about a daughter? A sin?

"Bill," Melinda said. "You have to change."

She stroked his hair and looked at him ... sympathy.

"Aaron is having a great year," she said, "and he's just a rookie. Focus on that. And Tino Romero. He's got to get his twentieth win sometime, doesn't he? There's excitement in that, and all the sports fans in St. Louis count on you to let them know what happens. Do you realize how big a deal that is?"

Elkwild looked away and sighed.

"Listen, Billy," Melinda said, "see yourself like someone in a wheelchair. How many people have their mother die when they're six, then are forced to live with an evil aunt? You had no father really, and in place of a mother you got cold slaps. You were programmed wrong. You're a ... cripple ... in a way, and yet, look at all you've accomplished, all you've risen above. Some wheelchair people sit in a corner and die slowly, drooling on themselves. Not you. You've made something of yourself, wheelchair and all."

“You met her in an art museum?” Cheryl asked, and Elkwild nodded.

What’s she like? Where does she live? What does she do?

Elkwild had driven to Fordham University to tell his daughter he was cheating on her mother.

“I can tell you love her,” Cheryl said after watching her father talk about the lifestyle editor for the Houston Chronicle.

Cheryl stared at Elkwild, her slow gaze smelling the confusion of the man slumping on her bed. She took a deep breath and let his tear roll down her cheek.

“Mom is not happy,” she whispered. “You’re not happy.”

Cheryl shook her head, no, when Elkwild asked if his wife was seeing another man.

“It’s just that no one is winning,” she said. “There’s no point. You two are like a couple of last place teams battling out a tie game into the 15th inning at the end of a season. There is no point. Let her go. Let yourself go. You’ll be great friends ... I can tell ... but you aren’t made for her and she isn’t made for you. She can’t live with you on the road all the time. She doesn’t handle alone very well.”

Elkwild nodded and scratched the graying stubble on his chin.

“Go with Melinda,” Cheryl whispered.

The palomino stallion snorted aggressively and pawed the ground. Elkwild’s great-grandfather slowed his step, lowered himself, and breathed a hush the stallion’s way.

“Shhhh “

The horse shook his mane and turned away. Crickets filled the night air with their leg-rubbing noise, sounding like an invasion of extraterrestrials. The mountains on all sides hid the valley from the rest of the world ... a place with no place, a hidden stage for anonymous actors. Elkwild's great-grandfather crept through the night, hiding in the spaces between the cricket's noise. The palomino reared and clawed the air, scattering a trio of startled mares. Elkwild's great-grandfather held out a hand, his eyes clutching the stallion's heart.

“Shhhhh “

A man came onto the porch with a rifle, wobbly with booze. He stood at the top step, searching the yard, waiting for a cloud to free the moon. He squinted, aimed his weapon at a bush, then lowered the gun. The horses jostled against each other, tails flying. Elkwild's great-grandfather imagined himself into a snake, moving low to the ground, staring at the drunken white man. The man's eyes moved over the Indian on the ground. He fired a shot into the stars and hollered.

“What's wrong with y'all?” he screamed. “Settle down!”

Tino Romero shook his head and spit on the ground.

“Just throw the ball,” Joe Allegro from *The Times* moaned.

“Bases loaded, two outs,” croaked the legendary Ed Morgan. “One more out and Romero will finally notch his twentieth win, after three straight heart-breaking losses. But if Tommy Furrelli can connect for a base hit, the Dodgers will have won their third straight ninth inning comeback. This is why America loves baseball folks.” Morgan smiled to himself; nice touch, he thought.

Elkwild stared at the ash on the end of Morgan's cigarette, which had been growing longer for the last two minutes. With Morgan, cigarettes were an appendage, a sixth finger, always lit and always there. Smoking had been banned in the press boxes for a long time, but rules like that did not reach the stratosphere of a legend. His habit was older than the law, and in his words, no one had the balls to tell him to stop.

"Throw the ball," someone whined. "God ... this guy."

It has to drop, Elkwild thought, watching Morgan's ash bend under its weight. Romero moved like an artist. He threw a fastball down the middle, and Furrelli stroked it into center field, base hit, game over. Elkwild shook his head.

"Son of a bitch," someone hollered.

Elkwild saw a sparkle in Bennett's eyes and a flash of light made him frown. Bennett, the all-state cornerback, stared back in slow motion. Elkwild rubbed his stomach as the defensive backs around Bennett trotted to their positions in slow motion. The crowd and the field grew fuzzy, and the sounds of the stadium came to him warped, as if in a dream.

A state title ... or a gray ride back to Chatterton. Elkwild frowned, feeling funny. A path etched itself in slow motion through the haze, directly toward Bennett, then right and upfield. Elkwild frowned ... wrong route, he thought, wrong route. A strange soft light shined. A growl pulled his head left, where Collins was barking out signals in slow motion. Collins turned his head toward Elkwild and their eyes locked. He knows, a voice in his head said ... run it.

Elkwild felt dizzy. That voice; where have I heard it?

His head pounded, a tribal drum, and his heart burned, a ceremonial fire. The eagle was with him. He had been waiting for this moment all his life. Another warped growl and all he heard was steady buzzing. Aunt Allison broke through the static. Your mother's dead. Be your best. Elkwild's don't whine.

Elkwild's great-grandfather slipped the latch off the gate of the corral. The palomino trotted a circle on stiff legs, knowing the Indian was there for him. Elkwild's great-grandfather moved surely, feeling the spirit within him ... invincible and he knew it. He stood outside himself, watching and learning. The door to the house flew open.

Something snapped. Elkwild sprang into the stream of light. Your mother's dead. All-state. He passed a tree, another. He made a cut and the moccasins fell off his feet. An arrow whirred past his ear, sticking fast in the wintering maple. His heart pounded, lungs breathing ice. A woman screamed in the distance, the sound fading as Elkwild sprinted through the trees, cutting, zagging, spinning. A dog howled, then another, dozens, the sounds growing louder as he ran with tears streaming down his face. Elkwild ran to the edge of a cliff and the chasm opened like a womb, muffling his scream as he jumped.

Elkwild's great-grandfather eased the rope around the palomino's neck. A bullet danced in the dust at his feet, and a mare at the edge of the corral jumped hysterically.

“Shhhhhh “

Let's run, he thought in stallion. Let's go, I'll let you free. The horse rubbed his bulk gently on Elkwild's great-grandfather's chest, and Elkwild's great-grandfather rubbed the horse's chest with his free hand as a bullet whined over their heads. Elkwild's great-grandfather felt the spirit within him glow warmly, stronger than before, as he and the horse broke. The plane opened as an endless vista. The two became one. Gunshots from the back came like starlight, memories of a world beyond, and it dawned on Elkwild's great-grandfather that he was flying.

The eagle was with him. He had been waiting for this moment all his life.

Elkwild's great-grandfather looked down to see if it was real. He saw his feet, and felt his hand pulling the rope, hurrying the horse. It occurred to him that he was outrunning the stallion. Something stirred in his heart and he realized this was the moment he had been waiting for. He closed his eyes and leaped across the void into nothingness ... silent and dark.

Elkwild heard cheering. People jumped on top of him, slapping his helmet. He realized he had the football, and was on his back in the end zone. Touchdown. State title. At the goal line, Bennett stood with his hands on his hips, his eyes staring cold and hard at Elkwild.

That light sparkles again.

Elkwild frowned. Had he seen that?

A painted warrior sat tall on a dappled horse, an eagle on his shoulder, looking down from the edge of a cliff.

Elkwild heard his wife sobbing in St. Louis. It was sunny in Houston. Cheryl would graduate from Fordham in May, all smiles and radiance.

“Are you sure,” Elkwild’s wife asked.

“You’re just afraid,” he said.

Elkwild’s wife nodded silently, coddling her phone with her neck and shoulder. She dabbed the corner of her eye with a Kleenex, remembering the time Elkwild was young and crazy and had stolen her a diamond ring.

“You know,” she said, “I think I’ve known all along that this was coming. It really isn’t a surprise. It’s almost relief ... like someone dying that you know they’ve been dying for two years.”

She burst into a laughter that was really more crying, and Elkwild held on the line, letting her free.

“I was thinking the other night,” he said softly at last. “we’re all going to die someday.”

Elkwild’s wife reigned in her tears to listen. Her eyebrows knotted. “What?” she sobbed.

“We’re all going to die someday.”

She puzzled up her face, knowing Elkwild was in one of his places again. There was nothing she could say. It would make sense a month from now, doing the dishes, or two years later, just about to go to bed. It would hit her why he’d said that at this time, and she would smile.

“What’s she like?” she asked, and then listened as Elkwild told her.

“I hope you’re happy,” she said with a warm little laugh. “Really. I mean it. Something tells me she’s going to help you. I’m not what you need Billy.”

Elkwild nodded sadly, and Mrs. Elkwild could see him nod sadly, a thousand miles away. She bit her lip and dabbed the corner of her eye with a Kleenex.

“Bill? ... Call me once in a while from your hotel rooms. Let me know what the weather’s like in Montreal ... or San Diego ... or Atlanta ... or – “

And Elkwild’s wife exploded with tears.

Elkwild nodded sadly, letting her free.

Melinda Hayes stood at the end of the coffee table, watching Elkwild unwrap the gift on the couch, confused. Elkwild looked up. A football? In this big box? Melinda Hayes smiled.

“There’s more,” she said, and Elkwild looked down, digging through the wrapping papers in the box.

A frame? A picture of what?

Elkwild saw himself hauling in a pass, Orlando Bennett a step behind; the front page of the Chatterton Item, December 3, 1982. It said, “State Title” in bold letters across the heading, and “Elkwild scores in final seconds” just below.

He studied the picture slowly, his eyes drawing back to prehistoric times. Melinda Hayes faded away .. the coffee table ... the room

Your mother’s dead.

Where are you going?!

Elkwild didn’t listen. He wheeled out of the house and into the night with the football on his lap. The night was alive and he could feel it, wheeling deeper into the black hole ... deeper.

Where are you going?! Allison asked, nervous. What do you think you're doing? Your mother's dead. Get over it. Allison grew frantic. Panic laced her voice. Get back here. Stop it. Where are you going? Billy, please.

Elkwild wheeled into Tom Landry Stadium, the lights off and the bleachers empty. Crickets filled the field with their leg-rubbing noise, sounding like an invasion of extraterrestrials. The stadium blocked the field from the rest of the world, a hidden stage for anonymous actors.

Elkwild strained to wheel himself through the thick grass to the goal line, and there he sat with his hands on the football, staring through the goalposts at the end of the field. He had known this moment was coming all his life. He absorbed the peace, knowing the world was three lifetimes away. He took a deep breath. You know what to do, a voice told him, and he knew the voice.

Elkwild stood and without looking kicked his wheelchair backward over the void. He shifted the football to his other arm, cradled it, smiled, and the warmth of the night took him in.

The first step he took slowly, and the second step only a little faster. And then he took a third step and broke. Ten, twenty, thirty, forty At midfield, Elkwild closed his eyes and took off, flying.

I love you Billy, his mother said, and finally he was free.