

### *Song of Jimmy Backwards*

Cell 21, on the second tier. Dimensions: 7 feet high, 9 feet long, 6 feet wide. Brick wall in running bond, painted light institutional color. Twelve bars across. Six of those bars welded into a steel frame, the door that slides on a track. Metal bunk bed frames 6 feet long. Feet always hang over the end of the mattress. Prison issue shoes, shined black, stored under the bunk. #9 sauce can on floor, label peeled off, for cigarette butts, alternately used to heat water with straightened coat hanger wire to electrical socket. Spill the water, and we electrocute ourselves. I share this cell with McFate. Grey Men framed him for domestic terrorism in 1929. It's 1942. There's a war in Europe. From McFate's perspective, he's been behind the wall for twelve years. The courts sent me up in 1973, thirty-two years in the future. I do time in reverse. *Jimmy Ossian.* *We can reduce the sentence if you plead guilty to lesser charges,* said the public defender.

What lesser charges? I killed in defense of my Nation and in defense of family. And in retaliation. I'd have scalped them but they had crew cuts. Tried by a jury of so-called peers. How the fuck do they find peers? Go back in time and find an old medicine man? Go to Rosebud South Dakota and return with twelve *Hioka* clowns? Good thing I had a life, before I died and birthed myself by the railroad tracks. In the Rites of Reversal, my teacher, best friend and Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, sent me backwards to deconstruct trauma until arriving at the beginning. Then, according to him, healing will occur not just for me, but for every living thing in the universe. I am the instrument of that healing.

When I arrived, McFate was here, a white haired old man pulling twenty consecutive life sentences, convicted of blowing up twenty police officers at a union rally in 1929. He's innocent and could have bought his freedom.

Two towels hang from the top rail of the bars. Shelf across from bunk for soap and

towel. A circular mirror, string attached to a wire stand, hangs from wall light, head high with metal shade. Outlet as part of the wall lamp. Beneath, a small metal shelf waist high. Cup, folded washcloth, and bar of soap neatly arranged. Picture of Christ crucified stuck to the wall with Wrigley's gum on backside. Between shelf and lamp is the combination intercom-radio-speaker-face, a dial switch to control volume. Intercom face a foot square, holes form a circle design, like a saltshaker cap. Through the hook-holes hangs a black and white photo of towboats at Lambert's Landing. McFate was a towboat pilot awhile, owned his paddle wheeler, the *BILLY FAUST*. McFate's sky blue eye patch and string dangles on another wire hook through the speaker-face. Sink: ceramic over iron. Ceramic toilet, no water tank, set at a diagonal. Depress button in the wall to flush. The wall light: on.

McFate reads a back issue of *Popular Mechanics* magazine on the mattress of the top bunk. Left foot dangles off the mattress, a gap between big toe and the second toe. He finishes a cigarette. The way I see, McFate retrieves a butt from the can. It glows as he puts it to his lips, exhaling smoke into the butt. The cigarette gets longer. The match he holds takes the ember from the cigarette and the whole cigarette goes cold as the match flare subsumes. He returns the paper match to matchbook, removes cigarette from lips, licks it dry, and unrolls it. Flecks of tobacco rise from the concrete floor and into his hand, which spills into the paper, and then pours from the paper onto the Bull Durham pouch. He hands the sack to me, but keeps the matches I brought from the outside, in the future. He reads the advertising on the matchbook cover. Close cover before striking. McFate studies the cover with the yellow and blue illustration of a smiling sub-genius wearing a graduation cap and gown and holding a rolled up diploma in hand. Printed above the illustration: EARN YOUR DIPLOMA.

The inside of the matchbook advertises *The International Tibetan Correspondence School has helped thousands earn degrees in Auto mechanics, Avian Surgery, Baking, Beekeeping,*

*Bookmaking, Carpentry, Computer Programming, Credit Counselor, Game Warden, Genetic Engineer, Interspecies Interpreter, Philologist, Sexologist, Shamanic Meditation, Typing, Towboat Pilot, and Xylophone Tuner. Check course of interest include money order of \$5.00 per each, and send to ITCS c/o Orkney, Scotland.*

“I’m signing up for these classes.”

McFate earns a dime a day. Bull Durham costs a nickel a week. He can afford to take every class. A dime a day. Ironic because he salvaged a not so well-hidden hoard worth billions that the Gray Men stole through weapons running, human trafficking, selling drugs, plundering nations for rare earths, and raping the planet in general.

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In a month, the trustee with the cart comes by our cell with the first packages and mail. The first book on meditation is entitled *Introduction to Star-Roving* by Swami Yuktswar Rawalpindi. A photo portrait in the text’s front piece shows a longhaired man, a halo of light shining behind him, blue-skinned face and a bone through his nose. McFate is impressed.

“We begin now.”

McFate teaches me the fundamentals of meditation.

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I rest in my bunk and read SPRING 1962 POPULAR MECHANICS, carried from the future same as the matches, and check out the photo spread.

“Read about the amphibious automobile? The Amphicar with tailfins. Built in Germany. English slant-four Triumph motor. Goes on land, water, and through snow. Ten-inch wheelbase.”

McFate takes interest. “Ye like that, eh?”

“I need one. The perfect contrary mode of travel. Now to figure out how to make it fly underground, and tunnel through the air.”

“It’s yours already. It’ll be there we ye get released. Did ye get to This Month’s Project?”

I skip ahead, read the article. Nitrates and crankcase oil as an explosive for blowing stumps from cornfields. Projects beyond the means of an inmate in the penitentiary. But this one involves simple materials, items found in a kitchen.

“McFate, you planning to blow a hole in the wall?”

“Aye. Ye know the future. Will I make it?”

“Before I started doing time, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Tree of the Center of the World—the sacred tree of the Dakota’s and god knows how many other people of planet earth—was under threat of attack by the Gray Men. You’ll need the explosives after the President of the United States pardons you in seventy years.”

“If I last. Behind this penitentiary wall, out of the healthful benefits of Rivertime, I age as fast as anyone in this joint.”

McFate claims he met me on the gallows in Sligo, Ireland in 1660. I have no knowledge of that except what he tells me. From my perspective, McFate explained Rivertime fifty years from now, at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting on Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis. He has a foot in Rivertime, a parallel dimension of immortals that flows through common reality. And I’m in it too, moving backwards. It has to do with the Mississippi River and the connection to all the waterways of the world, which connect to other worlds.

“If I blow my way out now,” he says, “I get outside and save that sacred tree.”

“Don’t do it. We die in the end, but the Tree of the Center of the World is saved, and by extension, the Earth. But if you blow your way out, things will change. Gray Men might whack you, the Tree lost and the Earth. Titan responsibilities fit for the likes of you alone.”

“I ken ye,” says McFate. “Save the world. Anonymous, dirty work. Somebody has to do it.”

Later in the week, McFate quits the prison laundry and finagles a kitchen job. He keeps the

job for seventy years, boiling hotdogs in a fifty-five gallon pot. After the kitchen stewards dish out the hotdogs, McFate lets the water boil from the pot until nothing remains but preservatives, a white powder on the bottom and sides. He scrapes this powder and saves it for decades until acquiring a few pounds of potassium nitrate.

In the future, I work in the automotive shop, repairing tractors used on the penitentiary farm. The prison produces much of its own food. Between salvaged drain oil and nitrate salts, by the time I meet McFate, he has enough explosives to blow this penitentiary into a crater.

In the future, the one-eyed man quits smoking, becomes vegetarian, exercises, meditates, fasts. He taps into the iota of Rivertime flowing through the red granite walls, and slows his aging.

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More books arrive. I forget what happened yesterday as though I was never there, but in the tomorrows where I come from McFate is diplomat and ambassador for roaches, rats, and mice. His study of philology and interspecies communication provides a base for intelligent relationships with these beings. When I return from a stint of star-roving from the hole, McFate has trained a working herd of strong smart roaches, who when hooked up to a matchbox with a tiny set of wheels, pull it along the tier, delivering cigarettes, matches, and razor blades to various cells.

He describes a linguistic breakthrough while practicing Tai Chi out in the yard. Somebody split his lip. Pity the fool who ever hits McFate. This happened yesterday, so I have no knowledge of the mitigating event.

He exhales smoke into his cigarette that grows longer. The flaring match subsumes. "A crow spoke to me."

"What did *kangi* say?"

“That black son-of-a-bitch said *Hey Kimosabe!*”

“What did you tell it?”

McFate unrolls a Bull Durham and hands me the pouch. “I told him, in his own language, call me that again and I’ll bite off yer fookin’ head.”

Never call McFate *Kimosabe*. He thinks it means *Fat-White-Man-Who-Steals-Shit-From-The-Crack-Of-My-Ass*.

“Hey pal, I need more time in the hole to meditate.”

“It’s taken care of. Ye split my lip. The screws will be here inna minute.”

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The metal bench against the concrete wall feels cool and hard against my back, head, buttocks, calves, heels. I slow my breath to hear the pulse within my ears, slow my pulse and tune the static air until the note is lower than the range of human hearing, deeper than songs of humpback whales. I go into the depths, the cave of spirits, walk across the inward ocean to the passage, and through the portal. Shape-shift to a peregrine and fly backwards, through Rivertime that flows between the waterways of infinity to the beginning of Creation. Now I wing above the Mississippi River.

Here is a red rock, a granite boulder my ancestors painted to mark earth’s position among the Milky Way in recognition of the mathematical deity, Taku Skanskan. Here are houses where my grandfather’s villages stood for twenty-thousand years, and marshes where ancestors hunted mammoths. Here, white stone bluffs above the Saint Paul Harbor, shanty boats below the bluffs, and across the river a neighborhood of refugees having fled starvation and war and pogroms.

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Awaken in the grass and wasteland by the railroad tracks in Minneapolis. Old McFate standing by, furrows of grief riven across forehead and face, he hands a parfleche bag to me who

has just died after guzzling a fifth of White Wolf, and reborn from rubble beneath the stars, beginning life up railroad tracks where I pray, where Ogallala sleep in bushes along the river after dirty hot freight rides from the Paha Sapa and across plains of South Dakota, over railroad bridge where constellations of the Great Hare and his dog Loki sleep in a Chevy camper, drink ruby port and weep for the mangled bodies and crushed brains of the star people, where tramps roll Prince Albert tobacco from a can, wait to ride that freight.

McFate asks me, "How ye doin'?"

It's Samhein. "I've been dead a long time," I answer, "My body goes back to the earth over and over and mice nest in my yellowed skull and jaw, flesh feeding the elements I feed from. Now can you tell me how many drunken druids danced? With holes bored in their craniums, dismantling factories that create toxic waste and weapons with laser brains on our way to the world's oldest continuous soup line where Jesus passes out the loaves and fishes?"

One-eyed McFate a Dervish bag lady hurtling under the sun yet to make our daily prayers, now make them walking these streets, these prayers for courage and wisdom, for the hungry and pissed off. Pray this polluted sunlight and air nourish spirit through the glare of pavement day in, day out, on our way to the world's oldest continuous soup line, established by one Jesus H. Christ for the dispersal of loaves and fishes.

Twelve tables of twelve at Loaves and Fishes House of Charity Soilent Green and Bread. We are counted as we walk in the door, numbers not yet tattooed on our heads as I've heard will be done once again with the poor. Meet me at the Loaves and Fishes! We pray to the Saint of Basket Cases. Everyone we know is there. Women with four children, man wearing three suits, transvestite with tattoos on arms and silicone tits, Shinob cut and scarred from 'The Avenue' where he try to destroy his gifted mind.

I know what street poets say, don't know what I read in the paper, just dig what's in McFate's

bag and see someone claiming to be a poet and that person aint in the breadline, labor pool, or jail, it's a pimp maybe, or a politician, or the antichrist. Aint no poet and I know what poets say.

What do poets say man?

Ask him, "Hey Bag Lady, what do poets say?" McFate answers, "Poets say the ugly lover good in bed, Pretty lover just give head, In the soup line you got to stand, Stay out bed with Sam the Man, Leave the woman with twot-spray, Take the woman with strawberry jam."

On my way on my way I find a place to live in, a cardboard box with a scenic view of a loading dock.

For I so loved you that I died for you and yet you disregard and disavow what I have done, your own minions falling upon me, your raving and lying and building of destruction. From you the trees fled and no one knows where they have gone except nameless among the maddened gods in their infinite gawking.

I am the hawk who flies to confront god with my backwards song.

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I have power to change the past, meddle with the fall of everything, the end of the polar icecaps and the melting of the glaciers and the genocides of hundreds upon hundreds of millions, not least among them Turtle Islanders, and the extinction of woolly mammoths. I was Mammoth herder. How to ? Reason and logic are irrelevant. I have instinct, a salmon going upriver in this torrent before me.

So I hike upstream along the riverbank, pass below Hennepin Avenue Bridge. When I reach the Great Northern Railroad Bridge, climb the trestle and walk across to Nicollet Island. Silver painted graffiti upon the rust girders; *SUICIDE COMMANDOS. Quark. GROK.*

I stay on the tracks until reaching a patch of wild cucumber and Jerusalem artichokes at the front edge of a stand of brush, box elder, elm scrub. In the brush, kick through rusty sterno cans.



Cloth pouch of Bull Durham tobacco hangs from branch. Abandoned hobo jungle caught in time. Dogs know I'm here, and the jackass known as Dean, caught in Rivertime and old as I will become. Off his rope and grazing towards me. I sneak through weeds and offer a food-shelf apple. Hello my friend I will meet you again and again and every time you will be younger than the last time I met you. Train coming, dirtyfaced engine and boxcars slow over the bridge. Time to ride now, ride and ride with gallon plastic jugs of water and white bread and peanut butter with hydrogenated palm oil from the food shelf.

Train stops on the island. Climb in gondola and wait, wait, wait, then the train starts again and stops and starts then is moving. Wheels squeal against steel track, voices of ancestors and old delta blues guitar players and we ride through the night southwest to Mankato where 38 relatives were hanged by order of Abraham Lincoln, he had to give the lynch mob something and managed to reprieve 300. A pinch of tobacco and water to the wind.

Before sunrise I get off and wait, know which track along the Minnesota river. Train comes and I ride a to Fort Lincoln and Yankton on the Missouri river where Custer and the Seventh Cavalry got off the boat and began his military campaign, the Yankton under military and colonial occupation ever since, subjected to chemical warfare of alcohol and white flour fry-bread. I put out a pinch of tobacco and pour water. I ride and ride for another day and night and stand in the open boxcar door and watch pronghorn antelope and deer running and leading a pack of coyotes, burrowing owl eating rattlesnakes from prairie dog holes.

And I ride and ride, listening to Dakota and Lakota songs in the steel tracks till I am deep within moonscape of Badlands as sun rises up the ribboned layers of sediment of ancient ocean bottom and train slows for a crossing maybe pick up an empty car and I hang by one arm and then jump off and run in the direction of train, make my way to blacktop and a sign reads **INTERIOR** so I know where I am, in the seventh direction, beyond where the sun sets and

beyond the pines and beyond where the sun rises and beyond where the ancestors reside, and beyond the nation of sky and beyond this earth.

Now I hike backwards, thumb out. Get picked up by Turtle Islanders in an F-150. Driver wears Native Pride baseball cap. Family members jammed in beside him in the cab. Rosebud I say, and ride in the back and they let me off miles up the road. Keep walking backwards and get a ride from an old man in rusty dusty Ford Ltd. *Anpe washte*, good day, I say. *Nijia*, he say. We ride and he offers a smoke and I smoke with elbow out the window. *Pidamiye.Tahanshi*, I need to find an old man to chop wood for and to help with the Inipi.

I'll drop you off, says old man. You're *Makato*, stinky like a skunk and walking backwards up the road. Tell him Vernon Black Horse sent you.

We cross into Rosebud. He orders for us. Bacon and eggs and toast and hash browns and coffee at The Antelope in Mission. I use restroom, look in the mirror, I'm so black with dirt and soot from boxcars I might be African.

He drops me off in Parmalee. *Pidamiye* I say. *Washtelo* he says, and is gone up the blacktop and over the hill. I walk the dirt road towards house and trailer. Kept nice, with flowers. A woman here. An outbuilding for ceremony. By the barbed wire cattle fence a sweat lodge covered with green surplus army canvass. Fire pit and altar mound. A garden hose runs to a galvanized tub, I go and bathe. The woman comes out the front door and stands on the porch and watches me. She goes back inside and an old man comes out, thick muscled and gnarled, a tree in the gulch, and walks to me. The pouch of Prince Albert in my left hand.

"*Ahtay*, Father, I'm sorry for being so dirty, I just got off the boxcar. Vernon Black Horse dropped me off." I offer him tobacco, and he shakes my right hand, holds the tobacco to the six directions. He knows why I'm here.

Chopping wood, running chainsaws, driving pickup through range and into the gulches with a pinch bar and harvesting *inyan*, stones, for the sweats. Sleep in a trailer among the *Sicangu*, People of the Burnt Thigh.

He takes me to visit the graves of my wife and children and mother-in-law, murdered by the FBI. I haven't met them yet, no memory of them. A sense of loss tears my guts out, the sense of loss I awoke with when resurrected from the dead by the railroad tracks.

You will meet them he says.

Live in Crazy Horse Valley, hidden by trees, among herd of buffalo and wild mustang from the years 2019 to 1973. Learn the ways of the sacred clown, practice gluttony and seldom wash. Smell skunky and dress in black and white, except when naked on *Hambleyca*, or on a mission involving meddling with the future. In Sundance, tempt fasters with food and water.

They are in the grave, wife, daughters and mother-in-law. I dig them up. Earth flies into my hands and onto the ground beside the hole. We load caskets into the bed of the pickup then drive backwards to the community center. From there I go look at their bodies at the morgue, the charred bodies that becomes my family.

Gray men in cowboy hats and sunglasses, tinted windows of goon squad SUV, stare at me from the morgue parking lot. They will firebomb my mother in laws trailer. I'll track those who give the order.

I look good with my two long corvine braids and get it on with a beautiful and brilliant Jewish activist. The knock comes on my door. Younger Vernon Black Horse says the FBI firebombed my mother-in-law's trailer where my wife and daughters are staying and killed them while they slept. I fail to protect them because I'm screwing another woman.

I cannot stop going back, now I'm with my wife and daughter, I'm arguing with her and she drives away and takes the girls, ten and eleven. Loves of my life. I know what will happen and

am powerless to do anything.

And I go back to 1974, camp at Wounded Knee, the site of the massacre of three hundred Miniconjou Lakota of Bigfoot's camp, women and children and elders, shot by Hotchkiss machine gun cannon in 1890, and we are here now, taking Wounded Knee back, defending it, getting out from under the tribal council bought and paid for by Uranium.

Federal Marshals drive armored cars and tanks. Death squads cruise the rez. Our people, our friends, elders and women and warriors, murdered and thrown in ditches. Feds cut off their hands for identification. We are paranoid of our friends. We execute each other as informants.

One afternoon, Marshalls make their way through the woods towards our camp. They have M-16s. We have AR-15s. I spot them, know from the future which way they move, and wait for them. We shoot. They withdraw except for two we pinned down. I circle through the trees, signal to other warriors, and come up behind them. Two feds peek over a fallen log, M-16s aimed at our camp. They talk among themselves. *The leaders*, the one with the blond crew cut says, *we can break their spirits by killing their wives and children*. The dark one nods his head. *I put the word out*.

Missed my chance. Cannot save the lives of my wife and beloved children and mother-in-law. There is no redemption for me so I raise my carbine, take aim. Hey, *washitshu*. They turn and I squeeze off a few rounds in the faces of both of them. That's for my wife and children and mother-in-law. And three hundred women and children and elders of Bigfoot's camp.

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The Man takes my clothes and gives me an orange jumpsuit. I'm sitting in this holding cell.

"Time to go," says the bailiff.

"We can reduce the sentence if you plead guilty to lesser charges," says the public defender.

What lesser charges? I killed in defense of my Nation and my family. And in retaliation. I'd

have scalped them but they had crew cuts. Now I get a trial with a jury of my peers. How the fuck do they find peers? Go back in time and find an old medicine man? Go to Rosebud South Dakota and return with twelve *Hioka* clowns? They'll call me Jimmy Backward when I go to Stillwater Prison. Good thing I had a life before I died and birthed myself by the railroad tracks.

Swear to tell the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God. *Tashunka Witco*, Crazy Horse, is my messiah. Bring me a chinupa, a sacred pipe, and I'll swear, but the chinupa lays cradled in the arms of Neeshomiwg the shaman in the sacred cavern of the inward ocean. Bring me that chinupa, offer me tobacco, and I'll tell you the truth. But you will never find the chinupa and I will never tell you where.

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I'd started serving my sentence in 1974. They release me on a summer day in 1933 when McFate is a few years into his sentence, with seventy more years to go. I come out with acne scarred face, more tattoos, muscle from lifting weights, hair long enough to braid.

Once outside the prison gates, I head for highway 12 and begin walking backwards to Saint Paul, sticking out my thumb for a ride. A pickup pulls to a stop. I climb in the flatbed, and ride to the Indian mounds at Dayton's bluff. I sleep upon the graves of my ancestors until the stars come out, awaken at dawn and look over the Mississippi.

Take the shortcut down the bluff. Go to the cliffs edge over the railroad yard, and descend, handholding ledges and foot upon gnarly roots of box elder that grows between crevices. When near enough to the bottom, I drop to the ground in a panther's crouch in the middle of a group of teenagers. One looks like a darker me. Half Dakota and half Irish, he will become my biological father. I speak Dakota to him. He tells me *Ahtay Kangi Hegan*, Father Little Crow, plays dominoes at the River Rat tavern. The girl next to him is Jewish. She comes from the slums across the river. She will become my mother. I turn my back to these children and leave them

before I meddle with my own existence.

The river now a short jaunt over the tracks, the bluff at my back, I consider different ways to access the sacred cavern.

I hike the railroad yard till I reach the Farmers market, then up Jackson Street. The River-Rat never closes. Once inside the River-Rat, I check around to see anybody I know. A small crowd sits and stands at the bar. Rivermen. Lanyards hang from the belts of several, looping into their pockets deckhand style. These men carry knives.

Ahtay Little Crow plays dominoes with Pig's Eye Parrant. Parrant slides the domino to himself with his meat hook hand, flips it over with his fingered hand, and slaps it on the table.

I pull up a chair and sit. The two older men gaze at me awhile.

Ahtay's smile comforts me. "Well, Jimmy Ossian. Coming from the future again?"

"Yeah," I say. "I just finished forty years in Stillwater."

Pig's Eye reaches up with his good paw and shakes my hand. "I guess the real work begins, and it won't be you digging the belt line sewer, or sitting in the state pen."

"Old McFate schooled me. You've got something for me?"

Ahtay looked real happy. "Let's head over to the West Side and rest. Tomorrow evening we'll sweat. Then we'll go to the cave and get you started."

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Two nights later, Pig's Eye and grandson keep watch at the manhole cover in the alley behind the River Rat. Grandson stands between two five-gallon cans of gas. Ahtay and I, canvass rucksacks on our backs, descend the iron rungs that lead to the tunnels beneath the street.

"Remember the petrol," whispers Pig's Eye. Grandson hands me a five-gallon can. I carry it down and return for the next can. The grandson replaces the cast iron cover, using a pinch bar to jiggle it into place.

At the bottom we turn on headlamps. Ahtay pours tobacco into his palm and hands me the Bull Durham. I take a pinch, meditate a moment, let the tobacco fall to the sand, and continue along the barrel roofed tunnel with a five-gallon can of gas in each hand.

When we enter the cavern, Ahtay raises his hand. He places more tobacco on the beach at the edge of the sacred cavern's lake. Shine my lantern around, study paintings I haven't seen in a long time: mammoth, sturgeon, turtle, eagle, Tree of the Center of the World. At a rock ledge, spring water spills from the tentacled whiskered face of the giant catfish, stone carved.

Scan around the around the Cavern. Find McFate's *BILLY FAUST* moored on one side, well kept, paddlewheels looking fresh painted. Moored next to *BILLY* is the tail finned Amphicar.

I set down the cans. "McFate sure kept his word."

"True," says Ahtay. "Is this what my grandchildren will drive in the future?"

"They never became popular. They rust."

"I notice it comes with a paddle."

"That's in case the engine gets wet and stops running."

"So, future technology isn't what it's cracked up to be," says Ahtay.

"It gets worse. They have hydrogen bombs and nuclear reactors. People in the future know how to kill everything and everybody on earth planet without even trying."

"If you go backwards in time and tinker with the future, change that too. What's the advantage of this boat-car of yours?"

"Well, for one thing, that slant-four engine doesn't need gasoline. It can run on alcohol."

"So you'll distill your own supply?"

"Learned in Stillwater."

"Just don't start drinking again." *That's all we need. A drunken ignorant god.*

"McFate claims I'm sober when we run into each other in Ireland a long time ago, in the

1600's. Says I travel by tornado. He claims I help him get sober in 1859, just before the War between the States. But this time travel thing looks snaky. One of the first things I'm supposed to do is find McFate's old girlfriend and fall in love, and she with me."

"Which girl? He's had several over a few hundred years."

"Emma Goldman the anarchist."

"Oh yeah. Mouthy woman."

"I adore loud-mouthed women."

"You would. Okay, let's get to Neeshomiwg's cavern."

We walk through the stone catfish's, at the flow of spring water from its mouth. Ahtay pokes around until his arms pass through another wall.

"Here we are." He vanishes.

I follow him, entering the small dry cul-de-sac with stone shelves, two blackened mammoth tusks upon one shelf. The mummified body of Neeshomiwg lies between the tusks. I'd been here as a teenager growing up along the river in St. Paul. The chinupa and parfleche bag lay across his chest. Stacked in a corner are crates and chests I helped Casey McFate move from the *BILLY* in 2019, to keep them from the Gray Men.

I recognize Neeshomiwg's outfit.

"Those striped pants he wears are what the screws made me put on when they put me in solitary. I learned astral projection and time travel wearing black and white striped trousers."

"I know," says Ahtay. "You and Neeshomiwg are one and the same. Jimmy Ossian is Neeshomiwg backwards, or vice versa. Leave the chinupa. Take it at an earlier time from now. Let's get you currency for your travels. Grab that middle crate and set it up here."

I hoist a crate to the shelf next to my ancient sleeping self. Ahtay picks the lock with the small blades of his jackknife, and opens a drawer containing jewels of various sizes and shapes.



“Blood diamonds and rubies. Always big in Europe, China, and India. Be careful. People in ancient times have fleas and can give you the bubonic plague.”

“How can I protect myself from that?”

“Teach hygiene when you can, keep your hair cut short, sleep with horses, keep smoky fires, and bathe often. Make condoms from sheep gut. Here’s gold coins.”

He fills the rucksack to the brim, cinches the straps tight, and passes it to me

With two rucksacks filled with gold and precious stones, I follow Ahtay through the walls to the main cavern. The sun is up, as light upon the Mississippi refracts through an underwater tunnel, and upon on the wall and ceiling of the cave.

“So I did these paintings?”

“If Neeshomiwg and Jim Ossian are the same, then you painted these.”

“That’s a long time ago. I’m going back that far?”

“It’s everyone and everything’s destiny because this has to do with the future, every instant. I am honored to be one of those who help you get started.”

“It’s like being Christ, carrying the sins of the world.”

“You’re no sin eater. It’s bigger than that.”

“I’m fucking afraid.”

Ahtay, hands at his sides, looks me over. *Here stands a man, covered with jailhouse tattoos, who pulled forty years in Stillwater, and lifted weights every day he served time.*

“You choose self-discipline, truth, courage, flexibility and just plain downright goodness. That makes you very dangerous. So why are you afraid?”

“I’m afraid of freedom.”

Ahtay shrugs his shoulders. “That should be no problem for an Irish-Jew-Sioux. Existence and nature is your jail cell now.” Then Ahtay points to the dome of the cavern. “See that painting

you did? The Tree of the World. That's the story of the creation, of life, and of all knowledge. Stay focused on The Tree. It's your umbilical cord to yourself and everyone else."

Something else occurs to me. "Love backwards. Evolve. Eve love. If I'm going back to the Garden of Eden to duke it out with God, then I'll marry Eve."

"Just make sure she isn't a monkey if you mate with her."

I relax and laugh. Ahtay laughs with me. We laugh until we cry.

"Well, I guess I'll be off, and drive this Amphicar into a tornado and see where I land."

We shake hands. I climb into the auto. The movement causes a small wake to break across the beach. "Where the keys at?"

"I got 'em," says Ahtay. He hands over the keys.

I crank the engine, but it doesn't fire. "No gas. Forgot to fill it."

Ahtay removes the gas cap and fills the gas tank without spilling a drop, loads the cans on the backseat floor.

Crank the engine again. It starts. "McFate says I'll be back and forth. *Toksha*."

Ahtay's lifts his elbow sideways, his down-turned palm at the level of the tip of his sternum.

He extends his hand straight forward, turns palm up and gives me the finger. "*Washte*," he says. "*Toksha*."

I press the throttle and drive out of the water, up the beach, and through the catfish to the Ocean of the Underworld.

\*

The old man folds his arms, and talks to the water. "Guardian, who am I to be the one who listens to the confessions of God? We are all gods then, I suppose." He kneels, picks up a handful of sand, lets it spill between his fingers until he holds one tiny grain. "God," he says to the grain of sand. "Who am I to speak to you? Anyway, please help my friend Jim."

\*

“Wake up, Jim.”

“Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Give it a rest, Jim. If you act too crazy the warden is liable to send you to Saint Peter.”

I don't need that. Saint Peter is the asylum for the criminal insane. But I could use another six months in the hole.

The screws wear cowboy hats, khaki shirts with dark brown epaulets, and pleated patch pockets with scalloped flaps. Shield badge over left pocket. First they take me to the prison barber. An old lifer shaves my head and face. Then the screws let me shower. I toss the old black and white stripes in the canvass hamper. Another old lifer, a trustee, lays out a clean towel and set of black and whites on the wooden bench. I let the hot water pour over my body, the first time I touched water in four months. The screws watch as I dry myself with the course towel. Probably wonder how I keep my physical strength with the time I spend inactive.

“You queers getting hard-ons looking at me?”

“Jesus, Jim. Why do you always take everything so personal?”

I pull on the clean black and whites, sox too. Put penitentiary brogans on and lace them slow. When I'm done they cuff hands behind my back and march me before them. They figure I might hurt them to get thrown back in the hole. I've done it before, in the future.

The clicking of our leather soles upon the concrete floor: sounds like Gray Men shadowing me down side streets. Our footsteps echo through the cellblocks as we climb plate steel stairs to the second tier.

McFate stands at the bars, left eyelid closed over the sunken hollow of his missing eye.

The screw opens the cell and removes the cuffs. McFate nods to me. I go and lie on my bunk, stare at the ceiling, and remember dreams.