

Two Eagles

You'll want to hear why they shouldn't. Good reasons, I mean. I don't know if I can convince you but I'm going to try. My name is Leonardo Two Eagles, full blood Lakota, from Porcupine but spent most of my time north in Bismarck. Served in the 3rd Infantry in Iraq, and worked as a barber, and I paint, nature scenes like Bob Ross if you've heard of him. Most of all, I'm friends with David George Pratt. I feel I know him very well. They're going to execute him pretty soon, and I want to say why they shouldn't and how you can help, please. Forgive me if this rambles, I'm a painter not a writer.

There's not a day I don't cry for those two kids. I'm serving a life sentence for my part, and I only hope the little I do each and every day trying to make people's lives better here with my painting and helping people find God is some small way to say sorry. I don't know. Maybe it's not enough for those young lives. There's not a day I don't cry.

Like I said I was friends with Lieutenant Pratt. He was a hero in my eyes and in many others. You knew him well too, of course. He was something, I think you'd agree. Combat veteran, pilot of distinction and even wrote a great novel *Seasons in Kuwait* about his war

experience. I'd kid him about details, some stuff was wrong but it was right in most parts. I would never pretend to be a writer like him.

Even though *Seasons in Kuwait* was a success, sold really well, Pratt told me he didn't like not having the book to work on. We were at the Moose Elbow, this place we'd go to after I cut his hair, and we'd talk about everything under the sun over a beer or two. To me he seemed to have everything, a bestselling book, great wife and two kids, taught at the college, what could be wrong? He said he just didn't feel good, like he had nothing after the novel was done, the book had left him empty. I didn't really understand but I told him it would be okay. He was just having a bad spell, as we all did. I was going through one myself, going through a divorce from my wife, Marilyn my high school sweetheart, we still loved each other in a way but the war had changed us, no surprise, and she had to get away from what she called my darkness. We have a beautiful girl, Sylvia who in better days I'd take fishing on tribal lands around Wachter Lake and painted many landscapes there. Now Sylvia is a grown lady, amazing to say, about to have a kid of her own. She visits sometimes though it's been a while since she's seen her old poppa. I really want to show her my latest painting, I think she'll like it.

Anyway around this time was when people were coming in from all over to protest the Pipeline. They came in my shop wanting to know my opinion, expected me to be with them but in truth I didn't care two goddamns. If the white man wanted his oil let him have it. Least it was better than going halfway around the world to spill blood to get it. Pratt said it was just a thing for people to get worked up about. Had they been in Iraq they'd know what to get worked up about.

He'd come in regularly for a trim. He always had on a clean crisp shirt, pleated pants, expensive polished shoes. Dressed like an officer, like you had to salute when he showed up. And which I sometimes did, and he'd salute back. Then he'd hang his jacket, sit down and I'd snap the sheet over him, his fingers fiddled at the collar, and I'd comb and snip around his big red ears, thin blond hairs fluttered down. Next I'd rub eucalyptus tonic in his scalp, a sweet fragrance I smell even now in my mind's nose.

We were going on about the protest when Pratt brought up a student of his who had written a story about the Pipeline and he'd given her a bad grade for it, not because it was badly written but because her arguments were just an op-ed piece and not very original at that so to teach her a lesson he gave her a C minus minus.

Two minuses huh I said, brushing at the lieutenant's neck and shoulders.

Yep he said. Two.

It turned out this student of his had talent, her name was Rachel he said, a nice girl but he went on about how young people like her were too coddled and needed a dose of real life to get them ready for a cruel world and for a while I wondered if he was talking about her or about his own kids or even about himself. Over beers he told me he was still trying to get started on a new writing project but in the meantime he said he was happy to take students like Rachel under his wing, any who showed promise like her.

Amazing to think how long ago this was, almost twenty years. Time it seems washes away the past like a river washing out a bridge and it's impossible to get back. The best we can do is paint the bridge back in, and dream our way back. But I ramble.

I only remember our conversation that day because of what happened later. Rachel dropped his class after she got the bad grade, she took it pretty hard which surprised Pratt but also confirmed his ideas about how soft kids were.

Snowflake he told me.

Yeah I said, kids.

Snip snip went my scissors and came the smell of eucalyptus as my fingers touched his scalp and not until he was back a week later did Pratt ask if I remembered that student of his, that girl Rachel, and he said she had showed up again. It seemed she wanted to keep taking his class but on condition that Pratt apologize to her, in front of the whole class. Then she promised not to go to the authorities.

Not such a snowflake after all he said with a chuckle.

She dreamed all her life of being a writer and Pratt's grade was the worst grade she ever got, even in math, and it was just about how he didn't like her politics and his comments had been demeaning and cruel and she wanted him to make an apology and give her at least a B without all those minuses.

Pratt actually chuckled under my scissors. The whole thing was funny to him, no matter how serious it all sounded. He said he was happy to see her show some spirit unlike so many of his students. He underestimated her and had to respect her for what she did.

Really I said.

I snipped and combed and snipped. Pratt had a nice smooth skull with a green vein that ran up his temple between some tiny brown spots. Also a slight depression over his left ear, a

freckle on the rim. In fact I knew the guy's head better than the back of my hand, just not what was inside so much.

Well I'll show her he said still chuckling.

By then the colors were turning and I was out painting and the next time I saw Pratt he was in a good mood. I asked him if he was writing again and he admitted he wasn't getting much writing done and I suggested maybe a story about a painter who goes out into the woods and has an adventure like Jack London one of my favorite writers, back when I read books as a kid. Pratt only grunted as I snipped and combed. It turned out he wasn't in a good mood but a strange one, one I'd never seen before. Afterwards I closed up shop and we went off to the Moose Elbow with leaves of red and yellow swirling about in the street and giant clouds hanging over the mountains which made me want to paint. But I was glad to be with Pratt also. He bought me a beer and that's when he dropped his bomb: he was getting a divorce.

I couldn't believe it. Compared to Marilyn and I he had the perfect marriage. Pratt shook his head. It wasn't perfect he said. Nothing was. But he had to leave Doreen. He loved someone else. And that's when he gave me a look. I saw that vein on his temple.

Who I said, afraid to hear the answer.

I can't say he said.

Okay I said, trying to think who it could be and feeling this heavy weight in me. I really liked Doreen and what about his kids? Pratt didn't want to talk about that. Instead he was happy and wanted just to be happy, didn't I understand? He said a lot of other things, so much I couldn't follow it all and I was reminded how little I knew what was inside his head.

Come on he said, slapping my back. Don't spoil the party.

I told him I knew a counselor he could use if he was interested? He stopped talking at that point, getting mad at me for maybe the first time ever and the next time he came in for a trim he was a little cold toward me and it hurt me. I asked him how the writing was going. He said he had started a new book and I said that was great.

He put his twenty on the counter as usual, put some gum in his mouth, and rang the bell on the door on his way out. No Moose Elbow for us it seemed.

Soon after that the streets were clogged with protestors, people carrying banners and signs REZPECT OUR WATER stuff like that, and things got crazy with people shouting at cops and getting into fights and busting windows and I was afraid for my shop, putting boards over the windows. As I watched some of it I was surprised to see Pratt among the crowd. He stood ramrod straight like a general reviewing the troops, a slight smile on his face. I went over to him. He didn't seem to recognize me at first, like his mind was flying somewhere. Then he nodded at me and made a gesture at the protestors, crazy right? I said some things he didn't seem to hear and I realized his eyes were across the street at a young woman, a pretty girl with long black hair and glasses and that's when I knew it was that girl Rachel, that's who he was there for.

I tried to talk to Pratt about the protest or his writing or even the weather. People were banging on drums and honking. I got louder. But Pratt ignored me. When I brought up Doreen he only gave me an angry grunt and his face got dark. Then I realized it wasn't to my bringing up Doreen but that he noticed two people with Rachel, a young woman and young man. She was laughing and seemed friendly with both of them and it was obvious Pratt didn't like it, his face getting a hard putty look in the light, only his eyes shining.

Right about then my hat flew off in the wind. Pratt surprised me by not only noticing but actually swooped to capture the hat. As he handed it over he noticed I had sketched two eagles with outstretched wings inside the band. He seemed amused and confused all at once, as if this was the first time he'd thought about me his entire life and asked what it meant. When I reminded him of my name he said oh yeah.

I didn't see him for a few weeks after that. He no longer seemed like the same person, that putty I had seen in the protest even harder on his face, a covering of something like he was thinking of a joke and he was about to burst out laughing, a terrible joke maybe, and he had to keep it to himself.

My next memory is running into Pratt at the Moose Elbow, and we had a few beers as if everything was still the same but wasn't of course. He told me he was sleeping with Rachel and I said something about how wrong that was, to throw away everything, his wife and kids and all he had in life just for some girl, that just because the world was going crazy it didn't mean he had to also and he got mad of course, saying it wasn't my business and I said it was, that I loved him, and he only laughed.

After that bad scene which I felt so terrible about I assumed I would never see Pratt ever again, I was surprised to see him come in the shop. He sat, I snapped the sheet, and he told me he was sorry and I said I was sorry too, I almost cried. I told him I hoped we could still be friends and he said yes, it was important to him.

But I have to do what I have to do, he said

Of course I said, but the way he said it gave me a chill, his voice so cold and dead. I promised not to interfere in his life, I just didn't want to see him do badly.

I'll be fine he said.

Sure I said.

But I didn't let it go. I loved the lieutenant too much for that. Or maybe I felt it was wrong for someone so smart as him to do something so stupid and how I was not just some dumb private and barber but that I could be smart too, or at least helpful, so I followed the girl around the campus and back to her house and took pictures of her with her roommate, the girl we saw at the protest, and then later with the young man, she was kissing both of them and definitely seemed very friendly with them, and I showed Pratt all this.

He laughed as he scrolled through the pics on my phone. Then he set down his beer, wiped his lips, and with his hard putty face told me to stand down.

Yes sir I said.

I promised not to bring it up ever again. And we went back to drinking.

Still, I think that gave him his idea, that I could be a part of whatever he was up to. I wish I could take it all back, it was very stupid of me to stalk those young people as I did, but all I was thinking back then was how worried I was for Pratt throwing his life away for young people who didn't even care about him. If he wasn't going to care about his life, then I would.

Sorry if this is getting long. Sometimes I think we're all in our cells writing to someone out there, hoping someone reads and understands. I only hope you get this in time.

It was a snowy day when Pratt came in and stole my hat, something I didn't realize until much later. He said he wanted me to help him with something, and my heart leapt it was just what I wanted to hear, like I was getting orders to move out at last. Then once the war was won maybe we could get back to the way things had been.

His eyes were tired not their normal bright selves. I asked if he was okay and he admitted he wasn't sleeping well, and I told him going through a divorce was just hell, and he nodded not really listening to me go on about my own past troubles. He said he was in contact with an editor at a literary journal trying to get Rachel's piece published because she was so talented and in the meantime he felt her friends were a distraction, too much stuff about politics and the protest and they needed to be away if Rachel was really going to blossom as the great writer he knew she could become.

That's where I came in. He wanted me to get those two young people and drive them out to a remote location in tribal territory where I knew the land, and have them get a scare that would make them leave town forever. That was all it was supposed to be: a scare.

I didn't like it, but it was like I was under his spell and couldn't say no, not wanting to upset him worse or make him angry. I just wanted him to snap back to his old self and this seemed a way to do that, however foolish that seems now and how very stupid I was.

Wearing a different hat than my usual one I couldn't find anywhere for some reason I went off to pick up Lizzy at the restaurant where she bartended where I told her some bullshit about a tribal council wanting to talk to some of the young protestors to coordinate the protest with the indigenous peoples. She was a little reluctant but she got in my car when I mentioned Rachel was going to be there too, and it was only later I learned she tried to kill herself over Rachel and there had been a lot of drama outside the frame of what I'm painting so to say and other things I didn't know about, but at the time I got her in the car and that's all that mattered.

Then we picked up Adam who was more eager to get in, very excited to meet the great chief and all that bullshit. It was late afternoon with a cerulean sky as I drove them past Wachter

Lake into the hills and mountains and forests I loved painting so much. We crossed a bridge and Lizzy asked several times if we were there yet and where was Rachel and where were we going exactly, and I told them just sit tight we'd be there soon and finally after bouncing over the snow and mud we got to the spot Pratt wanted us to go.

I should have just turned around. That's what I think of every day. I should have turned around, thrown the car into reverse and hightailed it. Instead we sat there for a while. Lizzy kept chattering and I could tell they were getting a little spooked, like they didn't know meeting native people would be so scary. A hum and groan went through the pines as wind swept down from the mountain, sprinkles of titanium snow glittering in the sunlight, and I recognized not far from us was where I found a nest with eggs in it with my little daughter so long ago when we got the nest back in a branch where it would be safe, how long ago that was.

Pratt came out from behind a tree. In his high boots and camo jacket he had that hard look on his face like he was staring into a strong wind, eyes a little narrow, lip up on his teeth. I should have turned back, got those kids, they were just kids, back to safety. Instead I sat there frozen like I was watching the movie of my life through the windshield.

Pratt gave us a wave.

Who is that, said the kid Adam.

With someone else's tongue it seemed I spoke up and said, That's who will take you to the council of elders.

Well let's go, Lizzie said I'm freezing, they have something to eat?

They both got out of the car.

I should have grabbed them, pulled on their jackets, thrown the car in reverse, thrown time itself in reverse. At least shouted Wait don't. But my lips were dead. Nothing came off my lips as I watched them go with Pratt in the viridian dark even as I thought I should run after and say that was enough, those kids are scared enough.

On the drive home my heart went like a million drums at my own protest as I told myself he was going to scare them that was all, just scare them.

I'm so sorry.

Every day I cry.

I don't know when I heard the crack of thunder, time is mixed in my memory but I knew it was a gunshot, the single report of a gun but I told myself it was just a warning shot to scare them, only later did I learn he shot Adam and strangled Lizzy because his gun jammed, he choked her dead in the snow holding her down with Adam bleeding in the snow nearby.

I wish I could stop seeing that.

I was still shaking when I got back to the shop. The only way I could swallow away the awful taste in my mouth was to tell myself those kids were gone on a journey to somewhere else, maybe California, scared away but alive, and everything was going to be okay somehow.

Pratt himself came in a few days later for a trim. My hands shook as I snipped and combed and with my breath hard I wanted to ask what happened but didn't dare and finally Pratt put down his twenty and was about to go but with my heart hard in my throat I got out if everything went okay?

Pratt narrowed his eyes. What do you mean he said.

I started to babble, asking if everything was okay was it going to be okay?

He nodded. Then he seemed to lose that putty look and some softness came in his face and his eyes got bright and he said thank you, Leonardo, something he almost never called me, usually it was just Leo and then he reached for me as if to shake my hand then seemed to think better of it and his hand went for my shoulder to pat it and seemed to think better of that also, his hand just awkwardly fluttered around before going to his side again. We looked at each other. It seemed he had something else to say, his head was bent and his eyes looked tired and for a second it seemed he was going to say sorry. Then he saluted and was gone.

A week later I had the shock of my life when police came in my shop and arrested me for the murders of Adam and Lizzy. They found my hat at the scene not far from the bodies. Pratt had put it there. I think he expected me to confess the crime for him. For his commanding officer. But it turned out I was very bad at making up stories unlike him. My written confession was not convincing. A C minus minus effort.

I know now I probably sabotaged the whole deal as it was. I didn't want to go away for a crime I didn't commit but I also didn't want Pratt to go away either, and he had so much more to live for as well. But I botched the whole deal. I didn't save either of us.

Pratt was in Las Vegas with Rachel when they found him. Next thing I saw him on TV being led to the courthouse and people shouting Fascist and throwing things. In court I tried my best to save him. Never once did he look at me. He sat there hard and cold and deadly as they pronounced his sentence.

Others also tried to save him. Teachers and students and fellow pilots and Doreen and his kids, all about his bravery and good heart and how he deserved a lighter sentence. But they said

he was in the pocket of big oil and used his politics against him to get the death penalty. And he showed no remorse. He showed nothing. It was as if without Rachel he wanted to die anyway.

Never again will I give him a trim, snip around his ears or rub eucalyptus in his scalp and just talk about things like the old days. I miss him very much. What they said in court wasn't true either, I think. People don't kill or drop all those bombs for politics or country or even the earth. It's only love that makes us kill.

Pratt is not a bad man. I believe that. He was just making bad choices.

And it's why I'm asking you Rachel.

Please.

I've read so many good things about you, how you became a judge and blocked the Pipeline once and for all, a landmark they say. A hero to the people. And now they talk about you becoming a Supreme Court judge someday and how amazing that would be and I hope it's true. I admit I didn't like you much back in those days, which I'm sorry for and maybe I was a little jealous but I see now what Pratt loved so much about you and I'm proud of you even like you're a daughter to me.

It's sad things couldn't have been different.

I don't know how long I have myself, not feeling too well lately. Soon I will be with Great father, I don't know. Maybe he'll give me back my hat.

We should all have forgiveness as we are sinners in the eyes of God and need grace from God. I pray Pratt will be saved and wait each day to hear he is saved. The biggest sinners are those who need forgiveness most.

I hope you forgive him Rachel. We all must forgive, it's so important.

Again I'm rambling, I'm sorry. I only hope you can help in some way, please.

I also hope for my girl. She promised to come see me. The last time I wrote her I told her I hoped the child she was carrying won't have any of me in it, which upset her and she told me hush Poppa with the gloom and doom. I know she's right, I should be happy for god's grace and nature's beauty which I dream of every night being in meadows and mountain waterfalls under clouds and my latest painting of my dream places is a painting of a tall mountain with two eagles flying over the peak and pink and purple flowers in the foreground and a little cabin, it's where I'd like to be buried. A beautiful spot. I thought of painting smoke coming out of the cabin but why ruin a good painting?