

BEAR

I pulled into a narrow dark slice of shadow that lay between the truck stop and Gentleman Jim's, rolled to a stop and parked. If anyone asked I was just a farmer getting his bearings.

I put the cafe and convenience store over my left shoulder and the strip club dead ahead and just far enough. Four heaps sat glistening in front of the club after hours, two foreign sedans a monster pickup and a coupe de ville. Coming from behind a car now and then rolling in for gas or coffee, somebody piling out to stretch or take a leak. It was straight up 4 a.m. but nobody stopped the presses.

Outside of holding my lids open and yawning them shut, I stared at the boy's club and the boy's club stared back. In between all that excitement I counted the sparkles of glass lit by headlamps sweeping the parking lot. Added them up and put them in my little bank of memories. All the little sparkles from all the broken bottles scattered over all the stinking lots I spent my life in. I smoked too and had

a nip to hold me and let that warm feeling flood over, the feeling that a stakeout four hundred miles from home was almost home or close enough. Near as I was going to get anyway with familiarity doing its thing, the old rhythm of watching and waiting as soothing as a lullaby and making me almost dreamy. Another night in the doghouse but at least it was my dog.

I clicked on the radio and stared into the glow, like the center of everything, the absolute center of nothing. Twisting the knob the way a sleepwalker twists in his dreams. To rest my eyes I looked east now and again, out into the dark black prairie. Once or twice a reflection, a pair of glassy eyes stared back my way. Hungry eyes, the critters all roaming about looking for snacks.

Through the windshield I could see a smattering of stars twinkling in the distance, scattered like a spray of diamonds on deep blue velvet folds. I ran the window down and could just make out the low rumble of diesel engines over on the truck side of the plaza. And gypsy wind, rattling whatever wasn't tied down and blowing my way.

Twice I got out and went to the self-serve for coffee and a sweet roll. Beneath a moon that was up there now, close to the top and sailing over. Clouds too like horses racing and near enough to touch. Beauty in everything.

I had another belt and reached for my smokes.

“Easy now,” a voice said. “Keep the hands where I can see them, Matlock.” From over my left shoulder, coming out of nowhere.

I did as he ordered, didn't twitch, the voice somehow remembered, not threatening but hard.

“We met the other night,” he said. “After they mopped the parking lot with your ass. Sara's my sister. I'm going to slide into the back seat. Be a good man and unlock the door.”

I moved the hand slow and hit the button to spring the lock. I heard the door

open and waited while he got settled. I heard the door click and the part of my head that normally got whacked - behind the right ear and a little higher...that part started fidgeting, mousing up, expecting the rap. When nobody dropped in I figured it was okay to talk. So I talked.

“The name’s Maddock, Bear. You mind if I raise my arm? It’s Bear isn’t it? Sara said her brother was called Bear.” I raised my arm and felt the phantom knot on my head. The wonder of it all.

“I ain’t got no gun, white man. Clumsy as you are I wouldn’t need one. Sara says you’re supposed to help. She sees far but I got my doubts. Gimme some history.”

I rested my arm on the car seat and turned far enough back to look at my companion away there in the dark. He was big for sure but indistinct until one of the cars from the gas pumps wheeled out and around. I caught a flash of him then.

He was big all right with black ponytail hair the blue-sheen color of oil on captive water. He was wearing mirrored shades at midnight, resting on a large broken nose. Hard shoulders fell straight away to his waist. Barrel chest and an ass as flat as a mesa. Holding the white straw hat he took off to do his creepin’. Boots, buckle and a wristwatch on one of those wide leather straps. With a buckskin lace for a necktie snaking through a single turquoise bead that lay against the deep brown burn of his skin. In a sleeveless denim work shirt buttoned half way up and a tattoo on his left shoulder that read something like ‘Rangers.’ Shit, he didn’t need a gun.

“Gimme my juice,” I said. “It’s under the passenger seat.”

“You don’t need no more. I could smell you before I could see you.”

“Let me tell you somethin,’ Bear. It don’t have no effect on me. Just makes me friendly.”

“That right? You was certainly friendly last night.”

“They slipped gamma hydrox in my drink. I fell hard.”

“You’re a piece of shit,” Bear said and handed over the juice. He laughed. Some people, they just go with the flow.

“Bear White Crow,” I intoned and drained a slug. I wiped my lips with the back of the bottle hand and had another.

“Standing Bear, Maddock. You don’t know Native, do you?”

“Big Daddy knew your people. It’s why Sara trusts me. My Daddy’s from there too.”

“Sara trusts you cause you been sent. By Wakantanka. Mystery to me but I’m just a humble servant. What’s the plan, white eyes?”

“No plan as yet. I got a friend on the way for back up is all. You two ought to get on real fine. Lavon’s a freckle-assed redheaded redneck. Used to be a little twisted but he’s beginning to straighten out. That’s my big army, Chief.”

“You call me Chief again I’ll snap your neck, Matlock. What say we try and get along.”

“Works for me, Bear. Call me Maddock, okay? And I ain’t exactly signed on...just studying the situation at this point. Deciding, you might say.”

“You sent for your friend.”

“I was mostly decided, only...”

“Only you’re a yella piece of shit and don’t like Native.”

“I like Sara. I’m still deciding on you. Rangers is it? What do you need me for?”

“My plan was to go in there and gut the four of ‘em. Sara says that won’t work so good. It’s gotta come down different with this bunch - to make things stick. She says you’re savvy, that you’ll know how to handle these whites.”

“Sara’s got a lot of faith in me, man.”

“It’s not you, stupid. It’s Wakantanka. You’re just the tool.”

“Maybe I’ll walk, Bear.”

“Ain’t gonna happen, Matlock. Sara’s seen it. She told me your fate is sealed. It’s what gives you great power.”

“Well, if everything is sealed, I guess I’ll be heading back to the motel. Lavon arrives around noon and I don’t want to keep the boy waiting. Besides, it’s been a long day and I’ll be needing some sleep.”

I flicked the key to the ignition and as the engine growled I turned round to the back seat again. I was grinning like a coyote this time.

“Can I drop you somewhere, Bear?”

“I’m already home, Maddock. See you around twelve,” he said and climbed from the car.

I watched as he headed off south, wearing his hat now and hugging the dark that circled the men’s club. The ex-Ranger wheeling his way through the Panhandle, parachute boots for moccasin. One more critter on the prowl and looking to dine.

Knocking down stars as he went.