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# The Word Made of Antler

*by Nels Hanson*

**W**e left Grassdale and crossed the southeast corner of Washington into Idaho and an hour after sundown drove the wooded gorge of the Cinnamon River past Finegold and the other small towns set between the ravine and the mountains.

It's a good road, but windy, without a divider, and logging trucks and cars go too fast. At night their headlights get trapped and magnified in the gorge, like train spotlights in a tunnel.

Each time I went around a turn I hugged the shoulder, thinking a car would drift over the double line. On one side was the cliff wall and on the other the river.

Tug was talking about an idea for a movie, about a couple approaching middle age, Jay and Roberta Dale, a handsome man and a beautiful woman who are expert Hollywood make-up artists, the best in the business. They're embittered because their true love is acting—they've failed to break into movies and now time is running out.

Roberta is the make-up person for Gloria Jordan, and Jay does the face and hair for Tony Blanchard, Gloria's leading-man husband. The two play opposite each other, like Katherine Hepburn and Spenser Tracy, in a string of hits.

One night in a bar the unhappy couple see their reflections start to change in the mirror—they decide to murder the stars and take their places.

The would-be killers tail the actors and learn all their secret weaknesses, then make themselves up as the stars and perfectly imitate their voices and gestures, their walk and the way they hold their cigarettes. Roberta confronts Tony coming out of an exclusive Beverly Hills massage parlor, Jay surprises Gloria as she leaves an appointment with a Swiss plastic surgeon.

The Dales have real talent and inspiration, they're better actors than their legendary doubles who take them for granted, and together they've worked out perfect scripts, scenarios that will play on guilt and fear, then trust and forgiveness, to trap their unsuspecting prey.

They easily seduce and begin torrid affairs with their victims, who live in adjoining mansions, then all four meet at a secluded luxury spa in Big Sur. Roberta and Jay plan to shoot the stars, put the bodies in the modest cabin they've rented and set it on fire, so the police will think it's the Dales who have died—they've made special dentures to fool the coroner.

But the killers have underestimated their own great acting abilities.

The matinee idol has fallen deeply in love with Roberta, his glamorous wife is wild about Jay. Gloria and Tony believe their marriage has been miraculously rejuvenated, that their spoiled mates are suddenly sincere and passionate and fascinating instead of selfish and vain. When they realize they've fallen in love with their masquerading employees, they aren't angry but excited.

The actress wants to kill Tony and let Jay take his place, the actor decides to murder Gloria and have Roberta play her roles.

Everyone is beautiful and looks alike, and the Dales—who suddenly lose faith and betray one another out of greed and ambition and fear that they'll lose their one chance at fame—get mixed up and shoot each

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other.

The movie ends with the stars sitting alone on facing leather sofas, holding their dying lovers in their arms.

“It’s a good idea,” I told Tug when he’d finished.

It was vivid, I had seen the complex scenes unfolding and all the sets, even the river boulders in the spa’s floor-to-ceiling fireplace and waterfall.

“You ought to write it up.”

Between oncoming cars, when the canyon was dark, I’d looked over at the river running just beyond the road’s shoulder. When we passed Finegold, the water lit up with blue and red and green neons. Somehow Tug’s story was the river and the river was the story and the pickup moved along both toward the end.

I’d remembered Holly, Jenny’s—my ex-wife’s—sister, and how her double, Paul’s neighbor, Julie, lived on in Mussel Bay.

Each time I’d seen Julie my heart would pick up and I’d start to say hello, before I remembered she wasn’t Holly. Still, I’d think Jenny or Holly were trying to send me a message.

Then this morning Jenny came to get the lost dishes and said Holly had died of cancer, two years ago.

Two nights ago I’d had the dream of the white statues in the green river.

“I thought it up last week,” Tug said. “I was stoned.”

He had just finished a story in a book Paul had loaned him—Twice-Told Tales, by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

“The Great Stone Face is a big granite rock, a natural Mt. Rushmore in New Hampshire. Whoever’s face matches the rock is a hero or savior or something. Famous politicians and rich people, generals—one guy is named ‘Gathergold,’ one is ‘General Blood-and-Thunder’—they show up and everyone gets excited that finally it’s the Great Stone Face.

“But the spoiled people’s faces never match the rock and this kid, he keeps getting bummed-out, but he doesn’t lose faith.

“At the end, you find out the boy who’s waited all his life—he’s an old man now—he’s the one. He’s humble, a good person.

“Over the years his face changed to the face of the rock.”

Tug paused and watched his own reflection in the darkened side window.

“Joyce liked it. I told Dixie but she didn’t like the end.”

“The Hawthorne story?”

“No, my movie. She wanted Gloria and Tony to kill each other, then Roberta and Jay to take over their identities. The Dales haven’t committed a crime and now their dream comes true. The studio needs the stars, the fans won’t know the difference, except their acting is better, now they’ll probably win Oscars.

“She said that would be a happy ending.”

I didn’t see a clear connection between “The Great Stone Face” and “The Hungry Mirror.”

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Although they were both about obscurity and fame, lowliness and wealth, one was the legend of the hidden king no one knows or recognizes, the other about finding or losing your true face in the look of another. Maybe it was like the book I'd read again, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

"I guess it depends on whether you want your movie to be a comedy or tragedy," I said.

Tug said Dixie wanted to play Roberta.

Dixie's idea for changing the ending reminded me of Roper lying on his stomach in the back of the squad car outside the Gill Net, Tug tending to the topless dancer's bloody nose and then taking Dixie home as her abusive boyfriend headed for the station and a cell.

Was that comedy or tragedy?

On the Blue Fin, Roper had wanted to kill the yellow fish, then threatened me with the gaff when I grabbed his wrist.

I steered a little to the right as we went into a turn.

A car came straight on with its blinding headlights, passing a semi on the curve.

"Shit!"

"Hold on!"

I went off onto the shoulder toward the rock wall as the black car floated three or four inches along our side. Along the front fender I saw two long gouges, the top one green and the lower white and reaching halfway across the door. Everything turned into that fake slow motion where the seconds divide into years.

Very clearly I could see the eager bony face of the black-haired teenage driver, the thin mustache on his short curled lip.

I could have reached out and touched his sideburned cheek or the pale blue sleeve of his t-shirt. I could have grabbed his ear.

With a long scream of tires he crawled by, whipping back in line in front of the semi. The diesel hit its air brakes and started to zigzag, and I held the jumping pickup against the wall of rock.

The lumber truck howled by like a train, nearly grazing our fender and the door and fishtailing so white two-by-fours began rolling off, sailing past the window as I ducked and leaned toward Tug.

In the mirror I saw the car's taillights flash once and disappear around a turn as the big truck's brakes blinked and lumber scattered from either side, tumbling end over end down the road and into the river as oncoming cars began to swerve.

The mirror went dark as we rounded the curve.

"Holy shit!" Tug said.

My hands began to shake, my knees felt weak, and my breathing came fast.

My side mirror lit up and I saw a car was behind us. I drove on.

"That fucker had his foot to the fucking metal," Tug said. "You believe it?"

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“He must’ve been drunk.”

But his slow fleeting image hadn’t looked drunk. His face appeared energized, aggressive and alert.

I tried to breathe deep, slowing down, driving deliberately through the next turn.

I heard a siren and saw flashing red lights coming toward us and I signaled and pulled to the rock wall as crimson light swept the cab and the highway patrol car rushed by.

“He’s after him,” Tug said.

“I hope he gets him before he kills somebody.”

“It’s going to be spooky. I’m glad I’m not there.”

I imagined a pile-up in the narrow canyon, cars leaving the road and leaping toward the river as their headlights shot across the pines.

Around another turn we saw more flashing lights at a crossroads up ahead.

On the left was a town smaller than Finegold—I forget its name, though later I heard it on the radio at the Elgin Hotel—and on the right sheriffs’ cars and an ambulance parked in front of an A & W hamburger stand.

The front window of the stand was gone and some attendants leaned over somebody on the ground.

“He robbed it,” Tug said. “He shot somebody.”

“I saw him,” I said. “For a second.”

“They’ll get him. I don’t want to go back.”

“No. Let’s go on.”

“I’m going to have a joint. I got one rolled.”

“Go ahead. I want to get away from the river.”

“Keep up the good work, Billy boy. My life’s in your hands.”

“They feel a little shaky.”

“How about some music?” Tug flipped on a Dead tape.

It was “Broke-Down Palace,” about how on hands and knees you had to row, row, row. I liked it but not now.

“How about something else?”

He went through the cassettes, then slipped one in.

A young Otis Redding sang “Dock of the Bay,” telling how he was so far from home. All day from San Francisco he sat watching the tide come in and go out, as we drove on along the Cinnamon River.

About four miles from where the gorge opens out and the road leaves the river, we came to a country crossroads and a white clapboard grocery store.

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"Why don't you pull in." Tug lifted his hand. "I'll get some stuff to eat."

I parked in front, next to a white Chevy pickup with Idaho plates. On a bench on the store's porch an Indian kid about sixteen sat next to an old woman with gray hair in braids. She wore a faded sweatshirt, a long black skirt, and a dark bead necklace with a white pendant.

Tug opened his door. "Come on, help me pick the kind of sandwiches you want."

"You going to buy 'em?"

"Naw, I'm going to make 'em." He grinned. "Tug's the cook now."

At the ranch, we'd had to eat my dad's venison chili.

I watched Tug go up the steps and into the store, then got out. I felt stiff and tired and worn out from the near wreck.

I climbed the wood steps and the Indian boy got up off the bench and stepped toward me.

"Hey, Captain."

"Hey," I said.

"You from Oregon, Captain?" When the boy talked I saw he had teeth missing in front.

"Yeah."

"Oregon's a good place."

"It is."

"Idaho's no good."

"It's not?"

"Naw." The boy shook his head. His shiny black hair fell across half his face. He cocked his head, flinging the hair clear of his eyes.

"They don't like Indians here. No jobs, no money. I'm broke."

"How much you need?"

"Three bucks. My aunt likes Thunderbird."

I looked over at the silent woman who stared straight ahead, her dark eyes unblinking in her impassive face. I took out my wallet. I felt generous. Tug and I could easily be dead.

"Here. Buy her something decent. Get something to eat."

The boy looked at the ten-dollar bill, then reached for it.

"Thanks." He slipped a hand into his pants pocket. "Here, Cap. It'll bring you good luck."

In the porch light he handed me a small figure made out of antler.

I looked at it. It was a sleeping papoose in a boat-shaped basket. There was a hole to run a string through for a necklace. It was carefully carved.

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"No, that's okay." I tried to hand it back.

The boy lifted a hand.

"Go ahead, it's good." His large black eyes looked into mine.

"All right. Thanks."

"It's the Sleeping Child."

"Like the lake?"

The boy stared at me. "You know it?"

I studied the carving, turning it over in my hand.

"I've heard of it."

"Big medicine," the boy said. "It'll bring you good luck."

He turned back to his aunt, who still hadn't moved, and I entered the grocery.

It was an old general store with a creaky, slatted-wood floor and a high ceiling of molded tin squares.

I nodded at a woman in a red muu muu behind the counter. She had dyed black hair. At her back were shelves of cheap wine and a single row of different whiskeys in half-pints. She was watching Tug in the fish-eye mirror on the back wall.

I went along an aisle of canned goods, fishhooks, and salmon eggs and lures, to where Tug stood at a cold case of cheeses and sandwich meats. He had a little wire basket hooked over his arm.

"Where you been?"

"I was talking to the kid out front."

"You see the jackalope?" Tug nodded above the refrigerator doors at a stuffed jackrabbit wearing antlers. "We oughta nail a few fins on it and send it to Paul. There's his monster."

He reached down. "So, you want ham or baloney?"

"Ham."

Tug picked up a square plastic-covered package.

"Get some bread and I'll get us a tomato and some condiments. You know, sage leaves with quail shit."

I walked back toward the front, took a loaf of Roman Meal off a wood shelf and potato chips from a rack, and waited for Tug by the counter.

The old Indian woman stood across from the clerk in the muu muu. She pointed at a bottle of Sunnybrook, then down at a candy bar.

The clerk stood with her hands on her hips. "You got money?"

The Indian woman nodded.

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"Let's see it then."

The old woman opened her hand, showing the ten-dollar bill.

"Set it down," said the clerk.

I thought she sounded disappointed. She turned, reaching for the half-pint of whiskey, then took the candy bar from the rack. She bagged them and took the ten dollars off the counter. The Indian woman waited for change.

The clerk closed the cash drawer, then looked up, irritated.

"No change. Sandwich, yesterday. And a Coke. You still owe me—"

The boy's grandmother held out her hand.

The clerk shook her head. "No money. No more."

"What's her change?" I said.

The clerk looked at me, scowling. "What's it matter?"

"What is it?"

"Two-fifty," the clerk said.

I took out my wallet.

"Here," I said. I touched the Indian woman's wrist with three one-dollar bills.

She acknowledged me with sharp black eyes in her deeply wrinkled brown face but didn't speak.

A white antler carving like her nephew had given me hung from the end of her black necklace.

She took the money from my hand, then picked up her bag and went out. Her hair was almost white. She wasn't five feet tall.

"Don't drink it here," the clerk called after her. "You hear me?"

Tug came up with a six-pack of Miller's and the groceries and set them on the counter.

I put the loaf of bread and the chips on the pile, next to a blue plastic sack of ice.

"Is that all?"

The clerk looked at the words on Tug's t-shirt, then his hair and the earring.

"You want anything else?" Tug asked me.

"No," I said. "Let's go."

The clerk rang up the beer and bread and meat.

I handed Tug half the money and he paid and she bagged the groceries. She slipped the bread in on top of the cold drinks and blue ice and nodded toward the door.

"I ask people not to do that."

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“What’s that?” Tug said.

“Give money to Indians. They don’t need any encouragement.”

“I can imagine,” Tug said. He looked at the shelves of liquor. “You have many fine wines.”

They drink it, I just sell it.”

She shoved the bag across the counter.

“Right,” Tug said. “I’ll tell that to Custer.”

She glared at Tug.

As I got into the truck, I saw the boy wave from under a locust tree where he sat on the ground with his aunt. He reached toward her and lifted the white pendant of her necklace and I waved back.

“We need to watch it.” I turned to Tug, nodding toward the storefront. “This is enemy territory.”

“I’m used to it. You got to snap right back. I learned that being the only long-hair in Sweet Home.”

“That sounds like fun.” I started the truck.

“It was. Between fights I got a lot of dates. Had to leave, though.”

“I guess so.”

“Those loggers take a drink and start to get amorous. What do they say? ‘This is the Wild Wild West, where men are men and the sheep are terrified.’”

“That makes a pretty picture.”

I backed out, then turned to pull onto the road. I saw the clerk watching us at the window.

“Where’re we going?” I asked after we’d gone half a mile.

“The Wicked Witch said there’s a campground just up the road.”

I was tired and eager to eat something and get some sleep. After the fugitive kid and the lumber truck I didn’t want to drive anymore tonight.

The air felt cool at the window. Sugar pines edged the road and above them the stars shone bright against the black sky that grew lighter to the west. Beyond the pines somewhere the moon was heading down. I could smell the bread in the sack.

A quick cottontail crossed the road through the headlights and disappeared in a snapshot of red eye, bent ears and arched back, white puff tail.

—It’s only now, a year later, that I’m beginning to understand how everything fit together—each animal and tree, moon and star there for me to read if I’d been awake and alert.

Tug leaned forward, peering through the windshield.

“It’s in here, somewhere. There.”

He pointed and a brown forestry sign stood up in the lights.

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Turtle Lake State Park  
Camping and Picnicking

I slowed and turned down the dirt road through scattered pines.

"I'm worn out," Tug said.

"Me too."

I pulled around a sloping shelf of granite and saw the small round lake with white moonlight on it.

The campground lay below us in a stand of trees. It looked deserted, only a single fire at either end of the line of darkened campsites.

"There's no one here. You think it's too late in the year?"

"I don't know," Tug said. "It's just the way I like it."

Tug lit a kerosene lantern and made thick good sandwiches with lots of ham and tomato. It was quiet, except for a loon on the lake that called crazily again when you thought it was gone.

We sat at the picnic table eating supper and drinking cold beer, the lantern throwing a circle of fuzzy yellow light. We couldn't hear the other campers. Except for their low fires through the trees, you wouldn't have known anyone else lived on the planet.

"I like this," Tug said.

"It's a good spot."

"You want another sandwich?"

"No thanks."

"The beer's cold. You want another one?"

"Naw, I'm fine," I said.

"You want to make love to the naked girl in the lake?"

"Not tonight."

Tug lit a joint and I took a hit, then passed it back. It seemed like Tug had been smoking all day from the same joint that never ran out, like a soup stone.

"We've traveled many miles," Tug said.

"Three different states."

"States of consciousness," Tug said. "We crossed the line."

Tug was right. This morning I'd seen Jenny again, for the last time and the first time in six years, and realized how much I still loved her. I'd learned that kind smart Holly had been dead for two years, that her fiancé had sat by her bed.

I'd seen Jenny's two boys, Clint and Chad. Jenny and I might have named our kids something else. And her husband, from a distance. I knew what make and color of car she owned. Today her boys had seen

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the lions at the Portland Zoo.

After more than a year I'd seen my parents, my fading father and in the bar in Grassdale my alcoholic but youthful mother who called me Tuesday's Child. And her current lover. Brad Wallace.

And the dogs, trusting Willy and wary Chance. And Crucifixion Rock—

We'd nearly got killed an hour ago.

A soft breeze rustled the highest pine boughs and I wondered if anybody had been hurt in the canyon, if the police had caught the thin-mustached boy I'd seen briefly at the window of the black car that missed us by half a foot. I wondered if he were still alive. I thought of the fresh lumber tumbling like matchsticks into the dark river.

Then I remembered the A & W and the ambulance attendants leaning over somebody. It was sad big news and by moving on we'd never know what happened though we'd nearly been in the middle of it.

The lantern shone on the plank tabletop. The moon made a circle of ivory light on the black water.

Tug opened another beer that hissed and went quiet. In the yellow light I examined the carving the Indian boy had given me. I looked closely at the Sleeping Child's small peaceful sleeping face.

"What you looking at?"

"The kid at the store gave it to me. Said it was good luck."

I handed the figure to Tug. "It's cut out of some kind of antler."

Tug examined it. "It's a baby."

"He said it was the Sleeping Child."

"What's that?"

I looked out at the water.

"Like the lake Paul was talking about. The basket's like a boat."

"Maybe we oughta use it for a lure."

Tug handed the carving back, then pretended to cast and reel it in.

"I saw this show about Loch Ness. There's a tunnel and the monster goes back and forth, between these two lakes."

"I thought they proved that was a fake."

The loon called again with its eerie mad cackle stranger than a peacock's scream.

"Nessie? No way." Tug grinned. "The verdict's in, man. Spock said so."

"I thought that picture was a fake. Some doctor did it."

"So? Who cares about the quack? There's plenty of people, straight-ass people who've seen it. Those Scottish types that wear kilts and say 'Bonnie morn' and drink primo Scotch for lunch."

"Maybe that's why they see it."

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"They got a radar signal but there's 20 miles of murky water 900 feet deep."

Somewhere close an owl hooted twice.

"They think it's some kind of finned dinosaur. A something-saurus. You never know." Tug drank his beer.

I put the carving in my pants pocket, then got up and stretched.

"I think I'll turn in."

"You want some more weed? It'll give you good dreams."

"Naw, I need some regular sleep."

"I'll tell you my other movie. Superman and Batman switch uniforms for a day and the Man of Steel falls for Cat Woman, Batman likes Lois Lane. They don't know Lois and the Cat have changed places. They all meet at Big Sur. It's called 'Trading Capes.'"

"One a day, like a vitamin. You'll give me nightmares."

"Naw, Tug's the cook."

"Tug's the cook."

I got a plastic ground cloth from the back of the truck and spread it out a little way from the table.

We didn't have a tent but I wasn't worried about bears. I couldn't remember if there were grizzlies in Idaho. I unrolled my bag and stripped down to my underwear, folded my shirt and pants to use as a pillow, then got in.

I lay there, looking out across the fading moonlit water until the lantern went out and I heard Tug roll out his bag.

"You still awake?" Tug asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"It's a clear sky. You can see the stars."

The Pleiades burned straight overhead. The night Tug had gone home with Dixie I'd told Paul my mother's story about Merope, the missing sister, who'd fallen in love with a mortal. It was Sisyphus, who pushed the rock. I'd read her father was "Atlas," which means "he who dares or suffers." He was Titan of the Moon, before he was beaten by Zeus and had to hold up the Earth. What would Merope's doctor say?

"Where's Jupiter?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "It's one of those that doesn't flicker."

"How come?"

"It reflects light from the sun. Like the moon. It's not on fire, like a star."

"That's right," Tug said. "You know, there'd be no life on Earth, you and me wouldn't be here this second, if it weren't for Jupiter."

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"What're you talking about?"

"I saw a show about it the other night. Jupiter's the biggest planet in the solar system. It's like a big vacuum cleaner. It catches all the stray rocks and asteroids that enter the system and get pulled toward the sun. Otherwise they'd all crash into the Earth."

"I didn't know that." It was like the moon making the Earth tilt on its axis, back and forth in rhythm, so the seasons were regular and plants would grow.

I thought how it was a moral truth that our existence depended on something preceding us, something cold and foreign and millions of miles away, a bright speck in the sky among a trillion stars. Jupiter was like a proof for God, or at least a brake on how much you could gripe about your immediate predicament.

"You see those stars, straight up?" I said. "Like a tiny dipper?"

"The Seven Sisters."

"That's right. That light left thousands of years ago. They may not be there anymore."

"I know," Tug said. "They're not there now. They've already moved."

The sky was a memory of the sky. We thought about that without talking.

"We'll be in Kootenay tomorrow," Tug said. "You'll get to meet my sister Joyce. And Ray. You'll like Joyce and her boy. They're cool. Plus I laid it on, how you're a prince and all."

"We start working day after tomorrow."

"Just think, those saws and all the junk are there right now, stuff we'll be using, sitting there in the dark, cooled down. Think of it. The cold oil in the oil reservoirs."

"The bark on the logs in the yard."

"All the axes sleeping in the back of loggers' pickups."

"Some girl you're going to meet."

"Or almost meet."

"She'll turn a corner," I said, "just before you see her."

"Paul's sitting in his chair, looking at the fish."

"Roper's in jail. Dixie's dancing at the Gill Net."

"Slow down. I'm getting dizzy."

"I guess it's time to sign off. See you in the morning."

"Bill?"

"Yeah?"

"Where do you think Roberta and Jay Dale are right now?"

I laughed. "I hope they're far away from here."

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"Me too," Tug said. "Good night."

I lay looking up at the sky a little longer, thinking about Tug's strange movie about the doubles, then again about Holly and Julie who looked the same, one alive and one gone, about the worlds of things we didn't know and probably never would, maybe no one would ever understand at all, until the sky was deep dark water and the stars were reflected in it and I was asleep.

Again I was in Sleeping Child Lake.

Paul's yellow tropical fish swam at my elbow as I pulled down away from the Blue Fin toward the circle of light. Again, Roper had knocked me off the boat with the gaff.

Again, just in time, just before I was out of air, the yellow fish veered away and I slipped through the clear porthole into the beautiful valley and could breathe as I waded the green river.

Then I saw the white statues in the water by the bank, Swanson, the paymaster from Thomas Fisheries in Mussel Bay who'd given me the pink slip and Roper and the boy with the thin mustache who'd driven the black car by the Cinnamon River.

The woman in the muu muu.

I looked down but my arm was still flesh.

I saw the white Sleeping Child carving shine at the center of my palm and my right foot touched the grassy bank, then my left and I didn't turn to stone.

I moved quickly, running now through the sweet grass toward the brown teepees painted with red suns and blue moons at the bend of the river.

A black-haired boy stood in clean deerskin before a pole rack of drying pemmican.

I couldn't see his turned face but blue and green beads gleamed on his tunic. Then the slender figure moved.

It was a young woman. She was smiling and wore a leather band at her forehead and a tall white-tipped feather in her hair.

I thought, There's a word that means "the peace that passeth understanding"—

As I ran faster I was disappointed I couldn't remember the word no matter how hard I tried, it was like being underwater and unable to take a breath, then suddenly as I gripped the antler Sleeping Child I realized I knew the word after all and could say it if I wanted.

I was going to shout it so the woman would know I was a friend even though I was white, but stopped short as I heard a rifle shot behind me, for a moment sure Roper's statue had come to life and fired, aiming at my back with the gaff that was a rifle, the bullet on its way, spinning—

I sat up in my sleeping bag.

Tug was up on his elbow.

"What the—" Tug began.

The passenger window of the truck exploded and I ducked my head as the second report tore through the trees and echoed back across the lake.

"Get over here!" I cried out.

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Tug and I scrambled toward a big rock. It was three feet high and flat, the rangers had buried it on end as a barrier for cars.

"I knew I shoulda brought a piece—" Tug tried to catch his breath.

"Fucking Indian lover!"

The words of the male voice came from the trees up the hill.

Tug and I crouched behind the rock in the dark.

"Get the message, fuckers?"

It was another voice.

A shot cracked and roared and we ducked lower.

"You don't screw with Idaho!"

It was the first voice, closer.

A shot hit the unlit lantern on the table and it burst into flames. The tabletop was on fire.

"You want to make a run?"

"Wait—" I grabbed Tug's arm. I thought I heard a motor starting.

"Daylight comes, you be gone, assholes!"

"Watch it."

I looked up over the edge of the rock and a pair of headlights flashed on through the pines, the truck driving fast back up the dirt road. Tug saw it too.

"Shit, this is crazy—" Tug stood up slowly.

"Let's get out of here."

We threw dirt on the burning table and lantern, then pulled on our clothes and dropped the gear in the back of the pickup.

A crescent of spider-webbed glass was left in the window. Tug pulled at it but it was too short and wouldn't break off.

"You'll cut yourself."

Tug tried to roll the broken window down into the door, but it was stuck.

With a piece of cardboard Tug swept the glass off the seat.

"Look." Tug pointed to a hole in the seat cover. "They were up above. Otherwise it would've got the other window too."

We got in and the light went off. I started the truck, gunned the engine, and we started back up the dusty road.

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The other campers hadn't called out or approached.

"What if they're waiting for us?" I let up on the gas.

"Naw, they won't shoot out on the paved road."

"You don't think so?" I wasn't sure.

"They're long gone, the fucking cowards. Anyway, they said tomorrow."

"It's like the goddamned KKK," I said.

"Like 'Easy Rider.' I thought we were goners."

Something pinched my thigh. I hit the brake.

"What's wrong—"

I stuck my hand into my pocket, then felt the carving.

I pulled out the Sleeping Child and held it up. The sharp prow of the basket had bit into me.

"My good-luck piece."

"Shit. Throw that thing out the window."

"Naw." I looked at it in the green dashlight. "We didn't get shot, did we?"

"I guess not. That's your redneck repellent."

"Like a ghost shirt."

"Man, don't start talking about ghosts," Tug said. "That was close."

"I'll wear it around my neck."

"Aw man, you're safe with me."

"I can see that."

"You want to go back and smack the old lady?"

"I don't think so."

"You know, compadre," Tug said, looking straight ahead as we started again, "just this once I think you're right. The next place we stop, you tell off the clerk."

"Right," I said.

I held the Sleeping Child in my palm.

Running toward the Indian village and the girl who wore the feather, I'd learned a word I was almost able to speak. ✂

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of Montana and received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and a citation in its Joseph Henry Jackson competition. His stories have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Texas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Long Story*, *Short Story*, *South Dakota Review*, *Starry Night Review*, *The Offcourse Journal*, *Atomjack*, *Zahir*, *Word Riot*, *Ruminate Magazine*, *The Write Place at the Write Time*, *Caveat Lector*, *The Dead Mule*, *Genre Fixation*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Emprise Review*, *Connotation Press*, *The Iconoclast*, *Splash of Red*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Xenith*, *Danse Macabre*, *Sixers Review*, *The 3rd of November Club*, *Porchlight*, and other journals. Stories are currently in press at *Monongahela Review*, *Avatar Review*, *River Poets Journal*, and the *Overtime Chapbook Series* at Blue Cubicle Press.

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