

BLOOD *to* RUBIES

PRELUDE

*There are secrets
that can never be uttered,
secrets that must go to the grave,
given to the earth
like a gift unopened,
for millennia to slowly crush into
its own timeless striations of truth.*

*From this silent quarry,
from this bedrock of forgotten souls,
blood turns to rubies,
youth to diamonds.*

*Shed like sparks of immortality,
they cascade
in crystalline clarity,
unwitting,
unwitnessed,
unwritten.*



prelude

The end was near but he did not fear it. He had been granted a life of epic proportion, lived to its fullest measure. Now death waited for him in the wings like a patient usher. The symphony of his years had dwindled to an ellipsis of quiet strains. Old bones, old breath. Impediment his only consciousness. Finally, the end. 103 years old. A man who had seen much.

His last day was simple in the small town of Spotted Horse, Idaho, 1954. As he did every night at 6:00 p.m., he shuffled into the Maple Leaf Café, bent as a gnarled walking stick, and sat at the chrome-rimmed counter. A cheese sandwich on white bread and a glass of milk

waited for him on the red faux-marble Formica. Spidery hands grasped the sandwich and toothless gums stamped out half-moons in the bread. He put the rind of crust on the plate and gulped cold milk that left a white rim around his sinkhole lips.

Hunched on the stool in an arthritic stupor, he peered up. A large black-and-white photograph in an ornate gold frame hung on the grease-stained wall. The picture was of an Indian marriage on a mountain cliff. The old man stared at the photograph as he chewed. Through fogged cataracts and cigarette smoke, the thinnest of memories sliced through time, tickling his brain like an ancient feather.

Beside the picture, hung the head of a rare white buffalo, musty gray like dirty carpet and moth-eaten in truncated majesty. Its marble eyes, dulled by grease, cast a ghostly gaze. As if its spirit had traversed beyond its tortured post nailed on the wall, back to the open prairie, leaving only a vacant hull.

With a paper napkin, the old man wiped his crystallized stubble, then shuffled out. His old John Deere tractor, parked on Main Street in front of the café, was in a space unspokenly reserved for him. The engine block rumbled, exhaust belched soot, and the tired engine shuttered into motion.

Under the axle between the large tractor tires, a three-legged terrier, rheumatic and nearly blind, rose for the trip home. A long time ago, he'd named the dog Willie after a long-dead friend, but he no longer addressed him. Theirs was a bond expressed in silent daily rituals. Old man, old dog, old tractor. Traveling together, affixed to each other in exacting proximity. A fixture on the streets of the small town. Passing, then gone, but always there.

His cabin was several miles outside of town, nestled in the mountains on a gravel road. Overgrown weeds studded with metal carcasses of broken machinery surrounded the sinking log hut. He climbed off the tractor and shuffled past a small cemetery, oddly well-kept, at the edge of the tangled yard. In the center were a pair of small boulders, squatting like stalwart toads between two formal gravestones. Their granite faces marked time, dragging it forward beyond living memory, beyond forgetting. The old man touched one of the gravestones in

passing. He opened the tattered screen door of the cabin, the little dog scurrying before the door slammed hollow behind them.

Inside a gloaming of unruly newspapers and books stacked precipitously, sustained themselves only by the virtue of their chaos. A narrow path snaked through the catacomb, violated by a stray book or crumpled paper.

Beyond the eccentric squalor, black-and-white vintage photographs spanning a half-century and a life rich in adventure blanketed the walls. Some framed, some thumb-tacked to the broken plaster, their corners brittle and curling with time, remnants of vanished dreams. There were portraits of famous people—Wild Bill Hickok, Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, George Armstrong Custer sitting on his first dead grizzly. There were photographs of great events—the Pony Express, the San Francisco fire, the first transcontinental railroad. And there were pictures of majestic scenery. One frame enshrined a 1938 *Life* magazine cover with a mountain scene. The cover blurb: “A Frontier Photographer Remembers America’s West.”

A magnificent photograph, larger than all the others, hung above the stone fireplace: a beautiful blonde woman with hair like a lion’s mane tousled by the wind, her face cast toward the sun, sweeping her hair to the side with a tanned arm. Her other hand grasped a Winchester rifle. She wore men’s dungarees and a white cotton blouse rolled to the forearms. A leather belt cinched her waist, the end hanging aloof like a hound dog’s ear. It was not her beauty that was striking, however, but the look in her eyes, independent and piercing in its intensity. For all her youth, she was clearly a woman who had not suffered fools.

Somewhere under the pallets of debris lay a negative plate—only the negative, for the photograph itself had been thrown frantically in the fireplace long ago. In it, the Bitterroot Mountains towered beyond a meadow blanketed with flowers. The image had been blurred, however, for the photographer had knocked the camera in haste. The smears of tall buffalo grass seemed like undulating hair or waves of fire.

Two smeared images emerged from the whorls of grass, double-exposed in phantom mime. One was the ominous darkness of a grizzly bear running, its massive form besmudged by

speed. But its long, extended claws were eerily in focus, leaving trails of lethal force like scratches across the page. At the corner of the frame in the grizzly's path, was the head of a little girl, barely higher than the grass. The photographic plate remained buried but forever present beneath the crushing sediment of a life's work.

In a small clearing before the fireplace was a rocking chair, a black lacquer Chinese box perched on its arm. Its lid bore a scene of an Oriental slave girl surrounded by admiring men, its edges, burnished by wear.

The mésalliance of such images in the rumped cottage was of achievement amid decay. The photographs were his life work. Sometimes, unexpected thoughts from another time bumped around in his knotted brain. He did not know why they came. He fell into them like trap doors to paradise. And they surrounded him in the vivid exuberance of his youth. And he remembered.