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The Circle

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The Circle

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(*Great granddaughter of novel’s real life character, the Indian woman, Priest*)

WRITING on a cedar parchment propels a man into the past where he confronts the enemy of his Indian ancestor. Trapped in the future but beckoned by the past, Jack Rikert struggles to give life to a legend that sinister elements would prefer remained in history's abyss.

The Circle

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The Circle

One Man's Odyssey

George Rogerson

Acknowledgments

THIS NOVEL is a work of fiction that deals with issues, which have concerned me since my youth, when I first came to know the people of the Puyallup River Valley. Writing it has been a happy labor, and has introduced me to valuable studies by many learned persons, committed to reclaiming Native Americans' place in the civic household and restoring vitality to ancient traditions. Among the many, I am indebted to the Southern Puget Sound and Coastal Indian specialists, without whose works, my research could not even have started. Lastly, and most particularly, to my wife Debora, my warmest thanks for her unstinting help and sound advice. No one of these people must bear such error as has remained, because in certain instances I decided to stay with my own interpretations.

To

George Andrew Rogerson of Challis, Idaho,

who showed me the river;

Zella Everill Rogerson of Tacoma, Washington,

who taught me about the Indians;

So'qwa of the Puyallup,

who introduced me to my heritage.

Preface

Pacific Northwest the place

THE FOUR VILLAGES named Puyallup, Nisqually, Quinault and Haida in this story are real, although the exact sites are not preserved. The former pair existed in Southern Puget Sound, at present day Tacoma, Washington, the latter two—Quinault, on the Northwest Pacific coast near what is now Taholah, Washington—the Haida, among Canada's Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii). Each of these villages is an amalgam of features drawn from its respective region. In the area now Washington State, where the principal action is set, the rivers and forests, magnificent mountains and wind-swept coastal bluffs remain today, as then, mute evidence to the work of the last great ice flows.

The Circle: One Man's Odyssey the novel

THE CIRCLE is a historical novel. All Native American families, and the central character, So'qwa are fictitious. However, I have set them among people who lived and events that did happen.

Despite the ever-growing fascination with Native Americans, the history and geography of the Pacific Northwest and its early people are only slightly familiar to most readers. Insofar as possible, therefore, I have tried to provide a historical framework for the reader that I hope will be informative without being burdensome. Here and there, I have allowed myself some very small alterations in location of landmarks to simplify the narrative, but none, I believe, that does violence to history.

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Names and Pronunciation

THERE IS no one language for the several Native American peoples in the novel. Therefore, certain important words and names that appear in *The Circle* are pronounced phonetically as follows:

SALISH	SAY-lesh
KUSIUT	COO-suit
LUSHOOTSEED	LU-shuht-seed
PUYALLUP	pu-ALL-up
NISQUALLY	nis-QWAL-e
HAIDA	HY-duh
QUINAULT	quin-ALT
TACOMA	TE-ko-ma
TAHOMA	TE-ho-ma (Mt Rainier)
SO'QWA	SO-kwa
TAQUAM	TA-kwam
MAUTTE	MAH-te
KLOLWALLE	CLOAK-wall
KWEAG	QUEEG
LEKWILTOK	LECK-will-tock
KWAKIUTL	kwa-KEY-tle
TLAHIT	TLA-hit (as in "claw")
CHIEF LESCHI	LESH-eye
SCANNAH-GAN-NUNCUS	SKA-NAH-gan-noon-cus

SALISH the predominant language group of western Canada and the Pacific Northwest of the United States consists of twenty-three separate tongues. The Puyallup and Nisqually tribes of Southern Puget Sound spoke one of that family, Lushootseed. Another variation of Salish is native to the Quinault. The Haida spoke a language isolate, one exclusive to their people.

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“You have noticed that everything that an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.”

Black Elk, Oglala Sioux

PART ONE

THE KUSIUT

“...on the fourth day after the September full moon, a special canoe carrying a supernatural being left the land of the salmon people and traveled up the Bella Coola River. Other supernatural beings joined the trip and performed Kusiut dances while waiting for their leader. Young men were forcibly recruited and instructed on the methods of deception used by the other members. An initiate’s face was painted black, and he wore a blanket, anklets, cedar bark collar, headdress and wristlets of dyed cedar bark. The Kusiut so carefully guarded their secrets that persons who broke silence were often put to death.”

Kennedy and Bouchard, *Bella Coola Ceremonialism*

ONE

**February 1975
Balboa Naval Hospital
San Diego, California**

“MAY I GET you something to drink before your medication?”

The visitor was a lean man who spoke softly to the resting patient. A blue nameplate gleamed against his white smock.

“No, thank you,” the patient answered.

“Are you sure? Maybe some orange juice? Coffee? Ice water?”

The visitor peered down with the kind-eyed sincerity of someone who had much to do but precious little time to do it. “Just a tiny pin prick,” the visitor said, a considerate smile creasing his face.

Offered a drink, the patient wondered idly whether he could have a beer. He’d heard that military hospitals the world over prided themselves on no such coddling, but he had nearly died when his helicopter fell out of the sky and inevitably found it deeply irritating to remain abstinent for the duration of his stay.

“How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve had a few,” the patient managed to whisper.

A sharp light burned his eyes. He stopped blinking into the beam and tried to focus on the man. He was tall, young, with his hair pulled back in a ponytail—no, a braid. He looked vaguely familiar. Very familiar.

“I know you.”

The voice came through a fog. “Where’s the scroll?”

“Where’s what?” the patient mumbled around a thick tongue.

“The scroll. Did you think we wouldn’t come?”

Rather than becoming angry, the patient looked up, gave him a faint smile and muttered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The response was only partially true. The scroll existed, but he’d never seen it. It was secured in a stout leather wrap. It was his

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duty, and that of his father before him, to protect something not viewed in a hundred years. But, now it was on its way to a safe place to be protected by a warrior. With his mind roaming freely over these and other more distant thoughts, he appeared to resist the drug.

Caught off guard by the patient's composure and response, the visitor released more chemical. "We asked you nicely before you went to the white man's war, but you wouldn't cooperate. Now, I can keep the happy juice runnin' 'til your brain fries. It's up to you."

A sure-fire truth drug had been high on the wish list of U.S. intelligence operatives during World War II. Scientists working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA's wartime predecessor, had to develop a chemical substance that could break down the psychological defenses of enemy spies and POWs to more easily extract information. After testing several compounds, the OSS scientists selected a potent extract of marijuana as the best available truth serum. The trick was to elicit information without triggering the descent into narcosis.

"What's your name?" the voice demanded.

"Geiger. Captain Leonard Geiger." He had a monstrous headache.

LEONARD GEIGER was a history professor at the University of Washington activated by the Marine Corps Reserve to fly helicopters in Vietnam. He'd survived the war to hang in traction at Balboa Naval Hospital in the orthopedic ward that specialized in keeping patients trussed up like hams in a smokehouse—and face it, thought Leonard, that's me. Nearly immobile, he had quipped there was one arm free to scratch whatever itched. Earlier in the evening, there'd been a birthday party on the ward, but now everything was silent, save for gentle snoring and the low whispering of two men nearby.

Leonard was thirty-three, but today he'd felt somehow older. Jack Rikert was coming. He always felt older around Jack, the kid he had treated like a brother when they were young in Tacoma, the

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magnificent fool who'd run through a minefield to drag Leonard and his crew from their downed aircraft. Their war was 5,000 miles away in a part of the world that nobody seemed to care about but countries felt compelled to fight over. Leonard chuckled when he'd recalled that it had taken a direct order for Jack to leave his unit to get a medal in Washington, D.C. He hadn't seen Jack in half a year—Jack, his closest friend in all the world.

“DID YOU HEAR what I asked you, Captain Geiger?”

It took Leonard a few seconds to comprehend what he'd heard. He squinted past the light. A wristband of dyed cedar bark dangled from the doctor's arm. He had seen that somewhere before, but his ears were ringing so loudly he could not think clearly. Suddenly, as he stared at the bracelet, a study of the Bella Coola Indians surfaced in his memory. The Kusiut Secret Society.

What the hell is going on?! This is madness, complete madness!

Leonard pulled on the frame of his bed but couldn't raise himself. He tried to call out to the two men, not twenty feet away, but the words would not come.

He made the mistake of glancing at the visitor. The man's expression had changed. There was a fierceness in his eyes that terrified Leonard. This could not be happening; this was some crazy nightmare! He watched the man inject more drug.

He's trying to kill me. No, he's going to kill me!

Leonard was struck by the utter finality. He would sing his own death song and wait for his guardian spirit to embrace him. He turned his head for a last look around, and motioned the visitor closer.

“I'll tell you this much, Kusiut,” Leonard said. “Go to hell.”

“That's where you're going if you don't talk.” The visitor emptied the syringe.

An orderly propped the doors open and wheeled a cart to the other end of the ward.

“Next visit I'll make you a vegetable.” The visitor quickly slipped out of the ward and headed toward the elevator.

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THEN JACK RIKERT CAME...on that day, of all days.

On February 23, 1945, a Marine patrol, under the command of First Lieutenant Harold G. Schrier, raised a flag on a volcanic atoll in the South Pacific. Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, witnessing the invasion of Iwo Jima, said, "...with that flag, the United States Marine Corps has secured its position for the next five hundred years." Each year, on February 23rd, Iwo veterans celebrated. It was a Marine's day, and aging men gathered to recall with pride—the American flag on Mount Suribachi.

Jack Rikert had come to celebrate.

He'd given his name at the reception desk downstairs and announced he was going upstairs to see a friend. He was not supposed to visit at that hour, but nobody wanted to argue with the tall, sandy-haired Lieutenant. A scar ran from his cheek to the corner of his mouth, giving him a slightly villainous look.

Jack found Leonard's bed and clutched his shoulder. "The Marines have landed, and the situation is in hand." He opened a ditty bag full of cold beer, passing a couple to the two men who were awake. Leonard shook his head.

"No beer? Not like you. What's wrong?" Jack sat on the bed and studied his friend's face. Leonard looked like hell.

"Jack, there's a problem," Leonard gasped. "I sent something to your family."

"What'd you send?"

Leonard paused to catch his breath. "It could be dangerous to possess."

"My family? What the hell were you thinking?"

"The Kusiut won't know. They'll be watching my people."

"Who?" Jack asked. "Who are the Kusiut?"

"Forget them." Leonard struggled to breath. "Just do the right thing."

"What are you talking about, the right thing?"

Winded, his body starving for oxygen, he whispered, "In time, you'll know, Jack. Promise me, please."

"Whatever you want, you know that."

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A radiant peace broke out around the eyes of Leonard Geiger, a warm calming glow that returned color to his face. His lips spread into a tiny smile.

AN EMPTY BEER CAN hit the floor. "Let's hear it for the Corps." Another empty clattered against a wall. Everyone was awake and talking.

Both ward doors banged open. A middle-aged Navy Commander in a voluminous smock darkened the doorway. "Knock it off!" she ordered, then spotted Jack.

"Lieutenant, get away from that patient."

"Yes, Ma'am." The ma'am seemed judicious. The woman was a formidable figure and outranked a mere Second Lieutenant.

"Commander Niles, Mister." She tossed some charts on an empty bed, picked up a can, and swept across the ward to pluck another from under the window. "How'd these get here?" she demanded.

"Guess it was me."

"Guess it was me?" she mimicked.

Another judicious, "Yes, Ma'am."

"Dammit, Lieutenant! What in God's name are you doing here?"

"Visiting, Ma'am. I'm just spreading a little joy in the night." The moment he said it, Jack knew he'd gone too far. Years of discipline took over. He stood to attention, eyes focused on a far wall, face expressionless.

"Don't be a smart ass, Mister. You better get your shave-tail butt outta here before I call security."

"No Ma'am." Jack stood his ground. "Captain Geiger and I are best friends. We grew up together. Served in the same unit. Not leavin' when he's in trouble."

The Commander felt for a pulse, then shined a light in Leonard's eyes. She punched the call button three times and turned on Jack.

"You give him anything?"

"Nothing. I brought some beer. He didn't want any."

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The Commander eyed Jack and continued searching for a pulse. “You certain?” she asked, accusingly. There was a faint pulse.

“Look, Commander, when I got here, he was having a problem breathing.”

A physician came in and pointed at Jack. “What’s he doing here?” The nurse said something that Jack couldn’t hear.

“I don’t care,” the doctor said. “Get him the hell out of here.”

While the nurse thumbed through Leonard’s chart, Jack stayed in place, in the middle of the ward, looking angry and waiting for someone to challenge him to leave. The standoff was interrupted by running feet as they pounded down the hall outside the ward. Jack turned toward the sound. Two orderlies rushed in pushing a gurney. They loaded Leonard and banged through the double doors.

“Where are you taking him?” Jack’s tone had a flicker of danger.

“ICU. Intensive Care Unit.”

“Will he be all right?” Jack asked.

The grim-faced doctor shook his head. “It’s not good,” he said, and ran after the gurney.

“Can’t be,” Jack turned on the nurse. “He was going home.”

“Calm down, son,” she said. “You say you didn’t give him anything. What made him sick?”

“I don’t know. Ask those guys over there, they were awake when I got here.” Jack pointed at the two patients in nearby beds.

“Like the Lieutenant said,” a sailor piped up, “me and my buddy were up talking.”

“Well?”

“A doc stuck a needle in the man’s arm.”

“His chart didn’t call for any shots,” the Commander said, her voice slightly raised. “Medication only after breakfast, so you’re mistaken.”

“Somebody screwed the pooch then,” the sailor insisted, “because he got one tonight.”

“Careful, sailor. I just read his chart. Besides, doctors don’t give shots, nurses do.”

“Maybe so, Ma’am, but we saw him. Didn’t we?”

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"Yeah, uh, yes, Ma'am," the other sailor added, "and he was the ugliest one son of a bitch I ever saw."

"Watch your mouth, Sailor."

"Well, he was...uh...Ma'am."

"Either of you see the doctor on the ward before?" the Commander asked, barely containing her anger.

Both shook their heads.

"What'd he look like? White, colored, brown or green hair? Come on, boys, remember something about this mysterious doctor."

One sailor thought for a minute. "To tell you the truth, Ma'am, I didn't look all that close, but he was sorta dark skinned and had a braid."

"A braid?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I'm sure of that."

"You telling me you saw an Indian?"

"No, Ma'am. Just some guy with a braid, kinda stuck down in his collar."

"You see a braid, Mister?" Commander Niles asked Jack

"No, Ma'am."

She turned back to the sailor. "Okay, how was he dressed?"

"A white coat, just like a doctor."

COMMANDER NILES SHOOK HER HEAD and swore under her breath. She hit the light switch and said, "On me, Lieutenant, I want some answers. We're not getting anywhere here."

She led Jack to the nurse's station. "Sit. I'll be talking with my nursing staff."

She returned and said, "Lieutenant, nobody here administered so much as an aspirin to Captain Geiger this evening."

"I should have called for help right away," Jack said.

"Not your fault, Lieutenant, not your fault. Can't blame yourself if some idiot got the wrong patient." She glanced quickly at Jack, to make sure he was listening.

Somewhere in the hall, a nurse coughed, but there were no other sounds. Jack thought of the patients and wondered if they were spending their last night awake and listening to that same sound,

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thinking they were safe in a hospital. Jack puzzled how something like this could happen.

A chilling thought jolted him. "Commander," Jack jumped up. "If only nurses give shots, then this was no accident."

"That's worth considering, Lieutenant, worth considering."

"There was a guy in the hallway," Jack said. "Waiting for the elevator."

"Why didn't you say so back there?"

"I didn't connect him to Leonard." Jack grimaced. "He had a hospital badge, but like the sailor said, he was not handsome."

"You sure?" When he nodded, she rang security. "Sit, Lieutenant. MP's will want to talk to you. We'll lock the hospital down. If he's still here, we'll find him."

AT SEVEN the next morning, the eastern sky had a suspicion of color, a flat grey, tinged yellow, silhouetting the hospital, the first hint of dawn. Jack Rikert climbed into an airport shuttle filled with Navy personnel. The shuttle passed through the hospital gates and into the bowels of San Diego. The Pacific marine layer rolled in obscuring the tops of buildings from his view.

"You goin' back, Sir? Sir?"

A round-faced sailor was talking and studying Jack's ribbons, staring at the pale blue one with white stars. Jack was not used to Sirs and salutes and didn't want to be bothered, but he smiled at the boy.

"No, not yet. I was visiting a friend."

"He goin' back, Sir?"

"He's not goin' anywhere. He's dead." Dead of an overdose of some compound the chief surgeon said, but the hospital lab hadn't determined what it was. The provost cleared Jack of any involvement in Leonard's death, but it was just like the military to admonish him for the late night visitation.

The young sailor was saying how sorry he was, but Jack shut him out. He was going home to honor a promise.

What had he promised? Jack was asking himself.

DEATH SONG

"When it comes time to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so, when their time comes, they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song, and die like a hero going home."

Chief Aupumut, Mohican

TWO

March 14, 1975 Holy Name Church Puyallup, Washington

JACK HATED FUNERALS. His mother had insisted that he go to Grandmother Rikert's funeral when he was a child, and everybody was crying. Worse than that, nobody bothered to tell six-year-old Jack that Grandma's remains ended up in a little jar on Aunt Mabel's mantle.

"Say hello to Grandma, Jackie," Mabel would point at the small blue vase. It made Jack shudder whenever he visited. Thankfully, no family member had died since grandmother.

Military funerals were different. People didn't carry on like at civilian funerals, and the deceased was laid to rest with appropriate ceremony. Jack rose when the Marine honor guard marched forward and posted the colors.

At first, Jack had thought he might escape to the mountain, where he could tramp around the highlands with some beautiful young companion and maybe never come home. Leonard's family found him and asked for a favor—to speak at the funeral.

"I am the resurrection," the priest began. "And whosoever believeth in Me..."

Jack blocked out the rest as he looked at Leonard's flag-draped coffin and mentally rehearsed what he was going to say when he delivered the eulogy. He followed the Stations of the Cross around the sanctuary to the one just above the window of Christ carrying the cross. He looked out and watched latecomers file toward the church.

God, how he missed his friend.

Days before the funeral, Jack made the rounds of all the places that meant something to him and Leonard. He had a beer at Pat's Tavern near campus, another at the Tea Pot on South Tacoma Way,

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drank a couple on the beach at Point Defiance Park, and then headed for the place where Leonard had rescued him.

TO JACK RIKERT, life was a collection of firsts, like the first day of school, the first intimate moment with a girl and the first time he met Leonard Geiger. It was 1959, Jack was nine and in the process of getting his clock cleaned by two teenagers who'd jumped him in the woods on the shortcut from school.

"Dirty Indian, go to your own school."

Jack's mother had insisted that the Indian School, at the edge of town, would not give her children a proper education and succeeded in having them admitted to Tacoma Public Schools. Jack's two older sisters fit right in, but not Jack. He imagined slights about his heritage where there were none, and more than once got into schoolyard scuffles. In the latest scrap, he'd bloodied a boy's nose, and that afternoon, the loser's two older brothers were waiting.

Jack desperately dodged the flurry of punches, but a blow to his forehead put him down.

"You get the message, Tonto?" one of his assailants asked.

Through a haze, he heard another voice. "How many does it take to beat up one kid?"

Leonard Geiger, practicing for a cross-country meet, interrupted the uneven match.

"Git," the larger boy said. "Ain't none of your business."

Leonard's short punch cracked on his jaw. "Now, it's even. Get up and fight, kid."

Jack glanced up at this stocky newcomer, crawled to his feet and faced a boy who stared dumbly at his prostrate brother. Jack squeezed his eyes shut and wildly flailed his arms.

"Whoa, Jackie, open your eyes. You can't hit what you can't see." Leonard ran both boys off with the threat of future beatings if they bothered Jackie Rikert again.

"Don't call me Jackie," Jack said, doubling his fists.

"Hey, I just saved your butt, how 'bout a little gratitude?"

"Sorry," Jack said, "but my name is..."

"Jackie, Jackie Rikert, and you live on Deming Street."

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“That’s Jack. I just don’t like Jackie.”

“Okay, okay,” Leonard smiled. “But you gotta learn how to defend yourself.”

Jack closed his eyes, rubbed his temples, and let things sink in for a moment. “You teach me?”

“Sure, just so you don’t use it on the teacher.”

That’s how it had started, boxing lessons. Leonard was a few years older, but that had not kept them from becoming best friends.

“BEST FRIEND.” *Who’d said that?* People were looking at Jack. It was something the priest had said. Then it came to him.

“His best friend and Marine comrade, Lieutenant Jack Rikert,” the priest smiled and gestured with his head.

The eulogy. Jack gathered himself, straightened his uniform blouse and walked to the lectern.

“What is life?” he asked the congregation. That’s what Leonard’s father had requested. As the question echoed in the sanctuary, the old man clutched the pew with his good hand and pulled himself up to face Jack.

“It is the flash of a firefly in the night.” His answer rolled over the mourners as if he spoke to each one. A stroke that left him partially paralyzed, with a telltale twist of the lips, had not dulled the powerful voice. “It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.” The old man sat down and began to rock in the pew murmuring something Jack couldn’t understand.

Jack paused and looked at the faces of people who loved his friend. It would be easier now.

“When it came time to die,” he said, “Leonard was not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death. When his time came, he did not weep and pray for a little more time to live his life over again in a different way.”

My friend, there is no death. Only a change of worlds.

“Have you noticed,” Jack glanced at the priest and hesitated. This was not going to be Catholic script. “Have you noticed, that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the

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Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. The sky is round, and the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.”

A groan from Leonard’s father swelled to a wail. The priest paled and clutched the arms of his chair. Younger members of the Puyallup tribe watched silently as their parents and grandparents swayed, their voices a call to the old ways.

Jack waited for their passion to subside.

“The American Indian is of the soil, whether it be the region of forests, plains, rivers or mountains. He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings. He once grew as naturally as the wild sunflowers. He belongs just as the buffalo belonged. Leonard was such a man. Out of his approach to life came a great freedom, an intense and absorbing respect for life, enriching faith in a Supreme Power, and principles of truth, honesty, generosity, equity, and brotherhood as a guide to living.”

Jack told the mourners that Leonard often spoke of the wholesome proverbs and legends of his people. “I want you to tell the children about Leonard and how he fought for his country, for a flag he cherished, and for a people he loved.”

Jack folded his notes and swept his arms wide.

“Don’t despair for Leonard,” he said. “My brother sang his death song and died like a hero going home.”

But not a hero’s death.

AT THE PLACE the family selected for burial, Jack commanded the honor guard detail. Six pallbearers from the Tacoma Marine Corps Reserve silently folded and tucked the flag so only the blue field and stars were visible. Jack presented the flag to Leonard’s mother.

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Jack slowly saluted. He forced himself to speak with a clear, firm voice. "Mrs. Geiger, please accept this flag from the United States Marine Corps, and our nation, as a token of utmost respect and admiration for the service your son rendered his country." He faced about and marched the honor guard away.

"Don't wipe your eyes, Private," Jack whispered to a young Marine reservist.

What difference did it make? In a few years, the name of the Private, all their names, would be like flakes of snow blowing across the distant mountain. No one will remember any of this at all.

Only the moment was important.

"It's alright to grieve, Marine," Jack said. "But honor our fallen brother by retiring with dignity."

The limousines whisked family members away and Jack returned to watch the casket lowered and covered. Tomorrow, he would go to the river, to fulfill his promise.

THE PROMISE

“A pal’s last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail.”

Robert Service, *The Cremation of Sam Magee*

“If today I had a young mind to direct, to start on the journey of life...I would, for its welfare, unhesitatingly set that child’s feet in the path of my forefathers. I would raise him to be an Indian.”

Tom Brown, Jr., the Tracker

THREE

March 17, 1975 Puyallup River Tacoma, Washington

THE PUYALLUP RIVER wanders aimlessly northwest from a glacier on Mount Rainier and twists and loops for fifty miles through the center of Pierce County, Washington. Its glacial flow is thick and heavy, milky and slow, and deep in the main channel. The Puyallup is not beautiful. Snags line its banks and a dozen creeks and sloughs feed it with an inexhaustible supply of slow-moving water. Twenty miles below Tacoma, it's hemmed in by levies and runs in straight as a hand-dug trench.

Its journey through Tacoma is brief. The Puyallup bends twice at the northeast corner of town, then submits to the deep green waters of Commencement Bay, leaving its pale signature on the surface. The merging waters mark the inner bounds of the river's delta and the place where Jack Rikert went to honor his promise.

JACK DROVE to the place where his dad once kept a boat, Red Nielsen's Canal Street Boathouse. It tucked neatly under the Eleventh Street Bridge, which spanned the Port of Tacoma Ship Canal. Red often said the difference between this job and many others was that it gave him the opportunity to engage in his two favorite pastimes: fishing, which he did a couple of days a week, and studying his fellow man, an activity he engaged in the very moment Jack Rikert entered the crowded boathouse.

The clatter of the old cowbell over the door resonated in the clapboard structure. Red eyed the newcomer in line with the doorframe and judged him about six feet, two or three. He was clean-shaven and didn't have a weird haircut, but penetrating eyes and a nasty scar told the onlooker this was not a man to provoke. With increasing interest, Red watched the man's eyes scan the room, as if with a view to prepare for his next experience. He

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pegged him right away as military, but for sure not a fisherman, wearing pressed khaki pants and shiny loafers.

Red offered his trademark question, “What can I do you out of, Mister?”

“How ‘bout the price of a skiff?” was the quick answer. “I want to row out to the river.”

“Sure,” Red replied, “\$2.00 for three hours, \$6.50 all day, and I’ll need to see an ID.” Red once rented a skiff to a man who committed suicide on the bay. It had made a mess of the boat and the law raised a stink because Red couldn’t tell them the guy’s name. Looking out at the rain, he added, “You’ll probably need a raincoat and boots. We’ve got some for loan.”

Jack took a boat number, picked up the rain gear, and started for the door.

“Look, fella, why don’t you wait ‘til the blow settles down?” Red called out. “Rowing to the river in weather can be tricky.”

Jack nodded, stared out at the water, and then was outside striding toward the boats, leaning oarlock to keel as though on parade.

A SQUALL that had roared down Puget Sound was still churning the waters of Tacoma’s Commencement Bay and bearing on its gusting wind horizontal rain that rattled the borrowed poncho he wore. Jack stowed a battered briefcase under the seat and launched the skiff into the Port of Tacoma Canal. Pulling to starboard, he set a course to hug the shoreline. The wind subsided somewhat, but the ride was lively.

He hadn’t cleared the canal when a huge pleasure craft set the little boat dancing on choppy water. There was no response to his spread fingers and shout about the five-knot rule.

Partially out of a mixture of relief to be getting the thing over with and pleasure to be out on the bay, he relaxed. Skimming over rapidly calming water, he was lost in the rhythmic creak of the oarlocks and splash of the blades, the hiss of the bow as the tiny boat quartered the waves, rising and falling on the dark green water streaked with occasional ribbons of oil.

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He could almost see his father sniffing the air with his crooked nose, searching for the stench of the pulp mill and peering into the water for that perfect meeting of river and bay. “That’s where the Jacks, Steelhead and Kings pause to feed one more time before making the long run upriver to spawn in its tributaries. Check the water, sniff for the stink.”

He said that every time. He was right every time.

Jack wasn’t yet in sight of that magic marriage of river and bay but could already discern the fragrant pulp mill from the myriad waterfront odors—creosote-slathered pilings, number two crude fuel, the *parfum* of salt water, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, but familiar. By the time he reached the Puyallup River, the wind was lessening and the sun started working its way through the retreating cloud cover. He shed the poncho, folding it carefully, silently thanking the man who had pressed it on him.

Jack let the oars hang loose in the water. The river nudged the skiff into the bay, its glacial flow tracing the shape of a light-colored glove in the dark green water. Overhead, gulls were circling and searching, diving occasionally to squabble over some morsel.

Typical of Tacoma, fog appeared, obscured all the land, leaving in sight only the bay, a circle of water with indefinite bounds like views he had seen in the Pacific. In time, the shroud began to lift, revealing a passage to the north and nearer, Vashon Island, its trees slipping through pearly gray fringes to capture rays of sunshine. The entire island burst into view, then vanished back in the gloom. At length, the marine layer gave way freeing the island and water to dazzling sunlight.

Trailing his fingers in the water, Jack scanned the bay. On his right, in the near distance, the hills showed shades of green and brown, a winding road marking its base. Here and there were sprinkled shacks and small marine businesses separating the two-lane road from the gray stretches of rocky shoreline. The city was off to the left, its waterfront cluttered with docks and boats. Above the water, the historic Tacoma courthouse stood at the base of the city’s four sharp hills, on the exact site where the Puyallup Indians had constructed a large ceremonial house. Jack learned that one dark

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morning when he and his father were among the first anglers on the bay.

IN THE YEARS before the whites came, Jack's father had told him that tribal members, friends, and relatives from other groups met nightly in the structure, called the potlatch house. They shared the dances and songs given to them by their guardian spirits as visible proof of a relationship with the supernatural world.

"How big was the house?" young Jack had asked.

"Big as the largest Foss tug on the bay," his father had told him. Jack knew how big a Foss tug was. They worked the bay daily, pulling and pushing ships and log booms. It was a childhood dream to drive a Foss tug, except the one named Mary Foss. Neither he nor any of his pals had wanted to drive a boat with a girl's name.

"The Puyallup would hold big feasts, sort of like Christmas, or a birthday party," his dad had said, "but, instead of taking presents to the party, guests were lavishly fed and given gifts according to their wealth and status."

The Puyallup, his father explained, had a system of building social status. A man wishing to make people respect his community standing might give away the best of everything he owned, canoes, blankets, furs, skins, even food. His dad was not a loud man so Jack had leaned close to hear him. He could still smell Bull Durham and some shaving stuff his dad got every Christmas.

"How many people came?"

The elder Rikert's attention had turned to baiting hooks. The boy wondered at the sight of hundreds, maybe thousands, of Indians having a party, a potlatch party, which lasted for weeks. Jack pondered having a weeklong birthday party but rejected the idea when he realized he'd have to give away all his favorite things. He remembered being the only kid in the neighborhood who knew that treasured bit of history. Even his Indian friends didn't know. He learned something else that chilly morning. His dad's ring finger turned white when it was cold. He recalled sitting in the stern watching his father working his finger so it would not catch.

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WITHOUT realizing it, Jack was flexing his fingers. He quit squeezing his hands and propelled the little boat into Commencement Bay that bordered northern Tacoma and joined returning boats that had fled the squall. As he rowed farther, the Olympic Mountains became visible in the distance, beyond Point Defiance. He threw his left leg over the seat and turned to better see Mount Rainier. He knew that all true Tacomans preferred *Mount Tahoma*, Captain Vancouver's honor to a British admiral notwithstanding. From a distance of sixty miles, the colossal cone of Mount Rainier dominated the landscape, seemingly perched on the shoulders of the city of Tacoma.

Noisy sea gulls broke the spell. Herring, pursued by feeding salmon, churned the water nearby. One wheeling gull suddenly flapped its wings until it hovered stationary and screamed its raucous call in Jack's face. It flapped and screamed, aimlessly floating on slender wings inches from the churning mass of fish, then equally aimlessly wheeled away from the banquet. Jack followed it with his eyes, and when he resumed rowing, the thread of his thoughts was broken. He remembered why he had come to the mouth of the river. It was Leonard's note in the footlocker.

Jack stopped rowing.

Bobbing in the little craft, occasionally rocked by the wake of a passing boat, he was stalling, for no reason other than unwillingness to draw his attention from the gulls, the hill, the city, and the mountain. It would be easy—into the water, and let the current do the rest.

Jack's head ached from too many beers the night before. He could not figure out Leonard's strange message about finding a grave. Stranger still were Leonard's cryptic instructions.

"You have two choices," it had read. "Find your ancestor or bury the briefcase at the mouth of the Puyallup River. It will end where it started."

No mention of the mysterious Kusiut.

Jack was aware of a disquieting sensation. He was going to be sick.

Damn, he thought. Sick in a rowboat.

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Jack hung over the side of the boat and heaved until his eyes hurt. He felt terrible.

As he reached for the briefcase, a line from the Service poem, *The Cremation of Sam Magee*, rang in his brain, "A pal's last need is a thing to heed, so I swore I would not fail."

THE PLEASANT MOOD was gone, and he imagined the green water swallowing things, like the great maw of Moby Dick. Whales did not swallow people, did they? *What about Jonah?* Something made him crane about. Two large black birds, perched on the bow, stared at him with vacant eyes. Startled because the birds had approached undetected and irritated by his inability to get the business over with, he flushed the birds.

The shiny visitors flew around the boat once, landed on the stern seat, strutted across the width of the skiff, and resumed their intense scrutiny, joined now by an even larger pair.

A nearby fisherman heckled him. "Hey, buddy, you chumming for birds?" Laughter rolled across the water.

Jack sucked a deep breath to keep from telling the guy to do something unnatural to himself. The four pairs of blank eyes gave him the creeps. It was as if they were trying to say something to him. He dismissed it as nerves.

His father would probably say, "Mother Nature talks to anybody who listens." Jack was not sure.

ONE EVENING after their favorite radio program, the elder Rikert rolled a smoke, lit up, let the smoke fill his lungs until he coughed, and got around to his favorite subject. "What most people call the supernatural," a long drag, "is the spirit world of the Indian. To him, trees, plants, the animals we hunt, and humans all had guardian spirits."

The "guardian spirit" lecture made the son look away and stifle a grin. That irked his father, who had a way of slightly tilting his head when he was annoyed, so that his cigarette smoke trailed up into his right eye. "If it weren't for your mother, I'd have raised you to be an Indian." He sat there squinting, going on about how all

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things in “the great unwashed” got their life and power from guardian spirits, “just like we do.” It was the “just like we do” that put Dad at odds with Zella, Mrs. Rikert, who called his spirit belief pure hooey and, on this occasion, branded it pagan.

“My dear Zella,” he’d said, “I’ve spent a lifetime toddling in a wonder world. My excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers, is preferable to the dogma of the church. If this is paganism, then at present, at least, I am a pagan.”

“Really, husband,” she’d scolded, then fled the room.

“A guardian spirit isn’t like a fairy godmother,” his father had said. He insisted it gave power, power to do things, like fish, hunt, and make children, all the things that people did in life. “Now I your know Mama doesn’t see it that way. She thinks all the spirits are in heaven, far away from a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Well, she can have her church ways, but no one has ever proven to me that the Puyallup and Nisqually Indians are wrong.”

His father’s faith was equal parts Catholic ritual and the old ways, although a faith compartmentalized into Protestants or Catholic did not make sense to him. “After all,” he’d say, “there’s just one Spirit.” He often complained that the clergy discouraged ancient beliefs because they just didn’t have a way to explain it.

EVENTUALLY, he’d tell his dad about the annoying crows and they’d have a good laugh. Waving the poncho briefly unsettled the birds. They lifted off a few feet but returned immediately to stare at him. He decided to wait them out.

He removed his shoes. They were saturated, probably ruined. Probably should have accepted the offer of rubber boots. His socks were wet, too, and he draped them over the seat beside him.

Jack threw the life preserver cushion between the front and middle seats and slid back so that his head rested on the bow seat, his back on the cushion, and his feet where he’d been sitting. He

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started to drift off when the largest visitor crapped. Suddenly, one of dad's favorite fishing ditties whirled into his consciousness.

"When I was sitting in the sand," Jack crooned, "something dropped into my hand, damn those seagulls, I'm glad that cows can't fly." Jack fixed drowsy eyes on his black companion.

Glad you're not a cow...

THE SKIFF lurched, lifted by the hand of a whirlwind that whistled across the bay. Sensing rain, he reached for the poncho. It was gone. The birds were gone. The anglers were gone. Jack Rikert was alone in the bay.

For a moment, he had the idiotic notion that next he would be riding the zephyr to Never, Never Land, leaving behind his present dilemma. Almost as suddenly as it had come, the howling gale subsided. The only sound now was chanting. Riding the tail of the turbulence, two long, black canoes materialized from the rocky shoreline of Vashon Island. It couldn't be, but there they were, filled with men, paddling in unison.

He squinted at the rapidly approaching canoes, their high prows decorated with an eagle—red and black. They didn't have the semi-transparency of an apparition. In fact, with each coordinated dip of the paddles, he could see water dripping from them. The men were clothed in what looked like armor and a helmet, of sorts, their painted faces set in determined masks. They were more real than the birds, like a carefully reproduced work of the masters, only this painting moved. They headed toward the city. It had to be some kind of Native American reenactment.

Jack blinked a couple of times and made sure he was looking in the right direction because he couldn't see the city. Tacoma was not there. He knew that was not possible, so he shook the sleep from his head. He had to be sleeping because where the city should be there was a solid belt of green, unbroken save where some long gray houses jutted out from the trees. Jack swept his gaze along the very edge of the horizon and then back again. The forest pressed forward to the water where there should have been docks, ships, and buildings.

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In all directions, he saw the shining waters stretched away into the leafy wilderness, its farther edges fading gradually and blending with the pale blue of the sky. Jack felt a moment of comfort when he saw the jutting promontory of his mountain, a white spirit looking down from the sky to keep watch—a sentinel, faithful and changeless. That was all he recognized. He saw no docks, no ships, no buildings, no landmark courthouse, nothing but trees from shoreline to sky, and he thought he saw a tiny flash of movement, which appeared and disappeared as he watched. There were people on the beach, scattering toward the thick woods bordering the water.

Jack had been so absorbed with the disappearance of the city and the people on shore that he'd forgotten about the canoes. He turned and half wished he had not. A warrior, with a grotesquely twisted nose, stood in the lead canoe with a raised lance. Shiny, dark hair stuck out from under what looked like a helmet, and bold streaks of red and black divided piercing eyes from a mouth contorted into a tooth-bared sneer. Jabbing the air with his weapon, the frightful specter looked intent on skewering him.

Jack's hands clutched the oars. He looked at his white knuckles. He couldn't get his head around what was happening. Everything slowed in motion. The chanting was deafening, filling his head, making clear thought impossible. The bow of the lead canoe was nearer. It sliced the water with awful precision, like a great black blade cleaving a path straight toward him. The chanting, the sound of water submitting to the black menace, the calls from the warrior with death in his hands, sent a spear of panic through his body.

He wanted to wake up.

The warrior shouted again and threw the lance.

"Puyallup dog, son of a Puyallup dog, you go to your place of death and wander because I will own your spirit!"

Shocked, Jack realized he understood the warrior, although he had never before heard the language.

He cringed as the prow of the swiftly moving canoe crushed the skiff and strangely felt no pain as the lance entered his chest. Pinioned to the crumbling boat, he could not escape. As the canoe swept by, the ugly warrior jerked the weapon free, leaving a gaping

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hole. There was no blood, only the hole, and the bay swirling into it like a sink drain.

The departing warrior turned and raised his weapon in victory. Then, as if in the killing zone of a mortar round, with a great whoosh, the apparition disintegrated, not into bits of human debris or wooden fragments, but tiny star-shaped flower petals quickly devoured by hungry fish.

A BOAT was alongside.

“Hey, mister, are you alright?” Somebody was poking Jack. There’d been no lance. It was a fishing pole.

Jack instinctively brushed aside the offending fishing pole and glared at the man, feeling anger mixed with relief. He was certain he’d been dreaming, but less certain about the hurt in his chest. In Vietnam, he had taken an AK-47 round that bruised him through a flak jacket. It was that kind of hurt. Sweating, the fearful kind of sweat that made you stink, he wanted to get out of here. He knew all about fear. He and fear had become daily companions in Nam.

“Looks like you got more company,” the angler motioned to an approaching flock of birds.

Following the man’s gaze, words tumbling out over a dry tongue, Jack mumbled, “What in blazes?”

Squawking and fluttering wings punctuated the arrival of a dozen more birds crowding the stern of the little boat.

“You alright?” the man asked again. “I came right over when you curled up in the stern.”

Jack was not about to answer truthfully. The vision would just have to join the other demons that accompanied him home from war.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, “just don’t know what to do about these damned crows.”

“Round here we, call those ravens, Mister.”

“I guess I’ve been away too long.” Ravens, crows, it did not matter. What Jack Rikert wanted to know was why they landed on his boat, and the other bigger question, the canoes.

“You see anything strange out here, like canoes?”

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“No canoes,” the fisherman answered, convinced he’d encountered a nut case. “The only strange thing out here is you all curled up in your skiff, and those ravens.”

After the man motored back to where he’d been fishing, laughter echoed across the expanse of water.

JACK LOOKED toward the city, fearing he’d been hallucinating. Wide vees of the canoes’ passage still marked the water. Bewildered, with a dozen unanswerable questions racing through his brain, one thing was clear: Hallucinations do not leave a wake.

Jack felt like he’d peeked into the past, but whose past? He didn’t have any answers. He was not about to buy into Puyallup Indian tales of spirit power emanating from mysterious visitors. Just the same, he pulled hard on the port oar and headed back to the boathouse. At this very moment, he did not want to test it.

A soggy loafer, full of water, scattered the birds. They circled the boat and headed for Vashon Island, a couple of miles away, one leaving the others to return and crap in his lap as it wheeled overhead.

“Damn!” he said. “Damned promises, damned ravens, damned Sam Magee! Damn!”

SPIRIT QUEST

“...it was supposed that lost spirits were roving about everywhere in the invisible air, waiting for children to find them, if they searched long and patiently enough...[The spirit] sang its...song for the child to memorize and use when calling upon the spirit guardian as an adult.”

Mourning Dove (Christine Quintasket), Salish

“Some men are born to action. Others are born to think. The secret of it, the magic of it, is to know which way is your way. So’qwa’s way was to leadership. In real life, his name would come to mean wisdom.”

Tlahit the Teacher, Puyallup

FOUR

Spring 1782 Puyallup Village

THE RIVER, old people said, was a gift from the spirit who ruled the great mountain. When the spirit saw the people misbehave, he had wept tears that froze on the high slopes. During the day, the sun melted his frozen tears causing torrents of water to create the river. Because it was born of sorrow, the river wandered for many miles to ease the spirit's pain. Its water was muddy, the color of the people who lived on its banks. Silt, sand and gravel bars continually disguised its path. Near where the river entered a great bay, it snaked across a valley, carving a dozen streams that went nowhere.

Where the river flowed into a broad bay, peaceful people had found a good life for themselves. They were slender, of medium height, with traditions so old that the words traveled on the wind. Called Puyallup, "people of the forest shadow," they placed their faith in personal spirits, which could bring luck in acquiring status or wealth. They lived in so mild climate that they wore little more than cedar shawls or shifts in winter and sometimes nothing in summer. The people often adorned themselves with earrings of flat shells. When identifying themselves in council or at trade with other tribes they were likely to say, "Puyallup," and lay an open hand on their breasts.

When the rains came, the languid river moved with more purpose. The salmon returned, and the people who gave the river its name—Puyallup, awaited them.

THE GIRL had begged her brother to let her see the salmon come to the river. Fawn was eight, So'qwa two years older. So'qwa meant "little brother," in the language of the Puyallup, but he was tall by all standards, nearing six feet. His loose black hair, bound by elk thong decorated with tiny shells, came to the tip of his shoulders.

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Behind the hair, which hung in his eyes, was an intelligent face, confident to the point of arrogance. He was muscular, his skin the color of tanned deer hide.

Taking into account his height, So'qwa was just like any other Puyallup not yet an adult. It was his eyes, an unsettling green, which set him apart from his brown-eyed companions. He would playfully turn those piercing eyes on misbehaving children, who would run wailing to their mothers that So'qwa had set spirits upon them.

“When are we going?” Fawn asked.

“As soon as it gets dark, real dark,” he whispered.

They sat in silence for a time. So'qwa contemplated his little sister. He had named her. Her first wobbly steps reminded him of a fawn struggling to stand by its mother. She wore her first deerskin clothes. Two village women had helped his mother cut a loose tunic and skirt from the softened leather. For shoes, they had had her stand on a piece of the soft deer hide and cut patterns around her feet. She was proud of the new moccasins, with small shells stitched on them and a little fringe that whispered when she walked.

“What if some boys see us going and follow?”

“We'll wait until everyone is asleep, and then we'll go. You'd better share my sleeping shelf,” So'qwa said. “That way we will be sure to wake up.”

It was the barking of one of the hunting dogs tied outside that woke them. Tiptoeing past the house fire, banked for the night, they awoke their grandmother.

“What are you two doing?”

“Going out to see why the dog is barking,” So'qwa told her and quietly pushed his little sister out the small side door. Smothering their giggles, they hurried down the familiar path. At the big fir, Fawn made a joke out of leaning against the tree, one hand behind her ear, listening.

“Nope,” she said, solemnly, straightening up, “no words of wisdom from this tree.”

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They had gone no farther than a couple of steps when the harsh cry of a screech owl cut through the night. Fawn stopped in the middle of the trail and called her brother, her voice quavering.

"Come on," he said, pulling at his sister's arm. "It's nothing but an owl."

"Grandmother says," Fawn whispered, "when a screech owl cries, it is the sign of a death—the owl never lies."

"You and grandmother." So'qwa shook his head as he walked down the path.

Stooping to drink, So'qwa looked down the length of the stream where it flowed into the river. It gleamed bright, reflecting a lighted night sky.

"Like the silver salmon, the water shines," he said. "This is the best time at the river when no one is around to make it dirty."

"Did the Changer give us the salmon?" she asked.

"Of course," So'qwa said. "At first, he changed the dog salmon into food for the people. And those fish belong to each tribe on their own river."

"Do all rivers have the same fish?" Fawn asked

"No, silly girl." So'qwa put his arm around her. "Salmon do not go where the water falls over high rocks."

"Why not?"

"A stupid boy accidentally spilled cooked salmon into the river. Everyone knows that such a thing will chase the live fish away. Because he broke the rule, salmon are not allowed above where the water falls from a high place."

"Oh."

The river was in full flow and Fawn drew back fearful of the swift water. So'qwa held her hand. Together they walked along its bank toward the bay, shimmering in bright moonlight. Trees lined their side of the river and So'qwa told his little sister that a warrior always avoided walking in open light. She felt safe with So'qwa, squeezing his hand in response. One day, she would marry someone from another tribe, a chief's son her father had found wandering in the forest. The chief had pledged the boy to Taquam's first daughter. For now, So'qwa and her family were all she needed.

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EARLY LIFE of a Puyallup child was one of affection, largely in the care of grandparents. Teachings of family history, moral behavior, and direction on growing up with dignity were the responsibility of the older generation to pass on to the young ones. Girls and boys played together those first years, making toys out of stones and shells they gathered on the beach. As part of a child's spiritual training, they took cold baths at dawn while parents were away providing for the family. At five or six, children left the care of grandparents to trot around after the father or mother, learning their societal roles. Boys used the grandfather's gift of a bow and arrow for shooting at small birds, girls took grandmother's proudly woven basket and joined their mothers to collect berries.

The passage to adolescence was formally marked with a puberty ceremony. For boys, it occurred when the voice started to change, girls, at their first menstrual period. Now they could eat with the adults, but they learned the old people got the choice parts of the salmon, because eating what remained would make the children strong.

Children learned to move quietly in the house and did not interrupt older people. When they disobeyed, parents used switches or tales of giants and ogres hunting the woods, like the Cannibal Woman, who carried a basket on her back to pack off bad children for her next meal. Puyallup mothers often chose someone to represent the Cannibal Woman, who came stomping into the village to collect naughty children. "Please do not take So'qwa, Cannibal Woman," his mother pleaded. "He will learn to behave," although switches, ogres, and the terrifying Cannibal Woman seldom deterred the playful boy.

FAWN ASKED what made the sky so bright at night.

"The Raven," So'qwa said, with big brother importance. "It is he who brought light to the world by releasing the sun, moon, and stars from the boxes in which a great chief had been storing them. Many call the Raven a bad trickster, but if he had not released the light, it would be like walking with your eyes closed."

"Who could walk with eyes closed?"

One Man's Odyssey

"Tell me what you see, little sister," he asked, placing his hands over her eyes.

"Nothing." She started to ask about the mean man who kept the light hidden, but she felt So'qwa stiffen.

"Fawn," he whispered, pointing toward the bay. "Canoes." Talking to Fawn and watching the reflection of distant islands dancing on the water, he had nearly missed the dark shapes near the shore.

"What does that mean?" She was suddenly frightened and sought her brother's hand.

"Sometimes there is night fishing, but..." he stopped. "Our canoes would be lit."

Puyallup men, he knew, spread dirt on a board placed across the front of the canoe. On the dirt, they built a small fire. One man paddled in the stern, while a second in the bow speared the fish attracted by the light.

"Let's go and see," So'qwa motioned to Fawn and crept along the riverbank. When they reached the mouth of the river, Fawn rose to return the way they had come.

"Maybe those were not canoes we saw."

"Stay down," he ordered. Stretching full length, So'qwa made his way to the rocks at the water's edge and peered over. To his left, in a shallow cove, floated three big canoes.

"Raiders!" he hissed. "They are waiting for the tide so they can attack up the river."

Fawn was backing away from the shoreline. She wanted to run to her father.

"Don't run, Fawn, be silent."

TO FAWN, the careful journey back along the riverbank seemed endless. When they reached the creek trail, they ran hard. Bursting through the front door, So'qwa awakened his father and gasped, "Raiders! Raiders!"

Unruffled, patient Taquam heard the boy's story.

"They are waiting for the tide and it's almost high!"

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“You are brave children,” Taquam smiled down at the boy and his sister, placing a hand on their shoulders. “So’qwa, go and arouse the village. Then take your mother, sisters, and grandmother to the forest. You must watch out for them.”

“But, Father,” So’qwa protested. “I can fight them too...”

Taquam raised his hand and the boy’s mouth shut.

“Get the Warrior,” he said, motioning to So’qwa’s older brother, Mautte.

With her children about her, So’qwa’s mother touched her husband.

“Stay,” she implored.

Taquam shook his head and left to address the Warrior and the village men.

FAWN worked her way to the rear of the communal house. She saw the Warrior had armed all the men. Some were working at barricading the front door. Women covered house fires, dimming the inside, filling the air with smoke. Fawn heard the Warrior.

“We will fight the raiders at the water so our women and children can escape to the forest and other villages.”

Then she was outside with the others, running across the open space surrounding the house to the edge of the forest. Ahead, she saw a thicket of salal growing high and dense around an old tree stump. The wide spreading boughs of a spruce looped gracefully down to the salal. Fawn joined her mother and burrowed into the brush.

Despite the alarm, the raiders captured several children. The Puyallup men responded quickly and showered the canoe with arrows before the Warrior boarded and killed the helmsman. In the melee, the war canoe was overturned, dumping captives, raiders, and rescuers into the water.

SAFE IN THE FOREST, So’qwa watched as the bay became dotted with struggling figures, both Puyallup and Haida, the former attempting to rescue their children, the latter just as determined to right their craft and escape with their captives. So’qwa made a

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decision, and bolted from hiding into the water, swimming to a point between the raiders and the heads of four small boys struggling toward shore. He grappled with two men pursuing the children giving the escaping boys a head start. Then, quickly outdistancing the warriors, he herded the frightened children to shore and safely into the woods.

“So’qwa is the bravest,” Fawn whispered when he returned to the hiding place. Her mother pressed a finger against her mouth, a signal for silence. Rain began to patter down on the leaves and trees, a few drops splattering through to the hidden people. Fawn shifted into a more comfortable position and slept against her brave brother.

“A White Man?”

ON HIS TENTH BIRTHDAY, So’qwa had been taken aside by his father and prepared for doleful news. A Puyallup man was of little importance unless a spirit visited him. He sat the boy on a fallen tree and told him that acquiring a personal spirit was a matter of great importance. It was, however, not a matter of happenstance because it required effort.

His father said, “You must prepare yourself so that a spirit will have a good place to stay. It could come in any form, perhaps an animal, a bird, or a fish. And,” he added, “it will be your guiding spirit, your power throughout your life.”

So’qwa listened, but he knew as much about acquiring a spirit as his father. Young boys talked about it all the time. They would sit transfixed when older brothers told them that, to obtain a spirit, it was necessary to dive into deep water carrying a heavy stone covered with saliva. This they said made the boy sink to a great depth. Slyly winking at one another, they assured the boys that each would awaken lying on the beach in possession of a personal spirit.

So’qwa boasted he would make a raft to float out to the deepest water and fasten himself to it with a long cedar rope. He would dive

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into the water with his stone, and leaving it on the bottom, would pull himself to the surface with the rope.

Not one of his companions believed his plan to build a raft, because they all knew the dark waters of the bay teemed with sharks. To their knowledge, no one had ever caught a shark, but parents' assurances that they existed kept the youth in shallower water. Nevertheless, to protect themselves should they encounter a shark, each fashioned a sharp stick of ironwood that he stuck in his hair. When a shark attacked, they would endeavor to force the creature's mouth open with the stick.

His father heard So'qwa bragging.

"Never boast. Let the action of your hands speak for you." His father spoke so gravely that So'qwa stopped thinking about building a raft and made a vow never again to inflate his importance. His father's sorrowful eyes carried the message with as much power as his words. So'qwa felt his face redden with shame, for honor was in deeds, not words.

TOWARD DUSK on a spring evening of his tenth year, So'qwa walked to a little stream near the village to find his guardian spirit. Drawing a deep breath, he lifted his arms wide and spoke as the moon rode out brightly from behind the clouds.

"Come, my spirit, come," he cried, and bounded into the stream, welcoming the sting of its icy coldness.

He waded ashore and rubbed sand on his body. Purified, he sat and waited for what seemed to a boy a very long time. There were no feelings of power, though. The trees were silent, as were the water and the animals of the forest. After numerous attempts, he slumped exhausted beside the stream.

Doubts and fears of the quest slipped him into an unsettling dream. His father was there, telling him to take a firebrand of dry cedar bark into the forest to summon a spirit. It burned three days. He fasted but met no spirit. In his dream, So'qwa lit another firebrand that burned four days. Again, he fasted and bathed, but no spirit came to him. He selected another firebrand that burned six days and finally the spirit came.

One Man's Odyssey

So'qwa saw himself going up a bluff from the beach and the spirit coming down. The man was white and carried an arrow in one hand, a salal branch in the other.

"Who are you?" challenged So'qwa.

The spirit said his name, which meant White Man Coming. He told So'qwa that white men would be his friends. So'qwa was disgusted! He had once encountered a white man and had no desire to again. Still, this was a spirit and the name was worth remembering.

When he returned from his vigil, So'qwa did not reveal what his vision had been, fearing he would lose some of his spirit power, if indeed, he had any. The thought of befriending white men was unsettling and difficult for So'qwa to accept. Later, perhaps years later, during the winter spirit dances, So'qwa thought he might meet an acceptable guardian spirit. Perhaps the bear spirit would visit him...he could carry a bear's claw. If an eagle spirit came to him, he would wear a feather or some of the down from beneath an eagle's wing. He desperately wanted such tokens to use as his symbol or as a design when he painted his house. *But a white man?*

So'qwa doubted this spirit would ever affect his life, but he feared it because he knew all spirits were dangerous and could cause death. In small boy fashion, he decided this was not his true guardian spirit, and he returned home disconsolate.

"Sometimes it takes many moons before a spirit settles down on the body," his father said, trying to console the boy.

There was no consoling the unhappy child, and like a child, he rejected the "white man" spirit. Months came and went, So'qwa certain he would never be important. For a man without a spirit to provide him power was not to be a man of substance. Believing a "true" spirit had not visited him, So'qwa suggested to his father that perhaps his action in the battle with the raiders qualified him to sit in council with the men. Taquam simply shook his head. So, each morning, So'qwa rejoined the other village boys neck-deep in a nearby stream, training for manhood, preparing the body for a guardian spirit.

Tlahit the Teacher

A PALE BIRD seen at sunrise means the night is over. Puyallup boys can relax, for creatures that roam the dark are sleeping.

But not on this morning. The little bird that hopped busily from bush to bush might signal the start of day, but there would be no relaxing. So'qwa tried to put the bird and the cold out of his mind and squinted into a weeping sky. He did not blink so he might capture power from the first spears of the sun's light. The old people said such staring was an intrusion and might anger the spirits, but So'qwa willed back his fears and watched the glow lengthen and briefly color the distant mountain's white shawl.

Sunlight invaded the spaces between towering firs and cedars to sparkle in the jewels of moisture on the damp, green undergrowth, to flicker on naked brown boys squatting in an eddy of a swift creek and to illuminate a man's weathered features, switch in hand urging the boys deeper into the icy water.

A conical reed hat perched on the old man's lank gray hair and shed water onto a short cedar shawl, where it dribbled down his bare legs to soak well-worn deerskin moccasins.

"This is the way to grow strong," he said, his switch stinging the behind of a slower boy. "This is the way to grow brave."

He craned his neck to appear taller than mid-five feet, all the while herding them into the water...to their knees, to their waists, to squat, shivering, neck deep. Too frightened to meet his stern gaze, the boys tried to remain stoic. Despite the bone-chilling cold of the pool where they huddled, they patiently awaited the next command. After decades of patient instruction and loving sternness molding the Puyallup youth, Tlahit the Teacher feared for their future. Too many boys did not listen.

IN THE YEAR 1782, Tlahit was over fifty, but alert, dark eyes belied his years. An expressionless face disguised intelligence and acute awareness of his world. A lifetime of daily exercise and swimming kept his sinewy body fit. In his younger years, he was an

One Man's Odyssey

important village member, resourceful and intuitive. Sometime after a fever took his wife and children, he stopped doing anything but training the youth. He loved the boys. He spent hours with them. He filled their heads with tales of their ancestors' heroic deeds, embellishing the lives of even the humblest village citizens. Tlahit enjoyed respect, even though he talked to himself.

"This is the way to get power!" Tlahit brandished his maple switch toward the shivering boys. They had heard it before, but it was unwise not to give him one's full attention.

"Power!" A crack of the switch on his palm. "Power!" Another smack on a hoary hand. "It's the only way you will be able to hunt, fish, and make babies."

There were conditions. Power, Tlahit instructed, came only to those persons who had acquired a spirit and training was the only way to be acceptable to a spirit. He had heard of people acquiring spirits in other ways, but believed that the most powerful of spirits resided in a body purified by hard training.

Tlahit eyed a fat youth kneeling in the water. "Never-Lose, you bring shame on your house. Sit!" The boy gasped, eyes pleading, as the icy water covered his shoulders.

The teacher scowled at the whimpering boy. The boy had come from the east where flattening a child's head was practiced. The boy's forehead was disfigured before a white holy man convinced the mother to stop. At first, children ridiculed him, but he was large for his age and pummeled his tormentors. His prowess at wrestling was such that he had taken the ridiculous name Never-Lose and began a reign of terror over Puyallup youth. It was a smaller but agile So'qwa who ended the mischief. Tlahit considered it unfortunate for the child because the name Never-Lose stuck, but he figured it was as much in derision as any other reason.

Still, that a Shaman's nephew would show such weakness disgusted the teacher. The boy had had every opportunity to perform the required rites of passage, but was coddled by a doting aunt and made little effort.

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A MISTING RAIN had ended, and the sun carried with it the promise of a pleasant spring day in the Puyallup River Valley. Tlahit raised his arms, exposing his naked body, the sun warming his aching joints. He whacked at one leathery palm with the maple switch above the miserable Never-Lose, then his face creased in a gapped-tooth smile. "It is a good that our land flows with pure water, because the spirits demand a clean body and you will please the spirits."

Tlahit studied the one called So'qwa. Odd, the boy had retained his childhood nickname. He was old enough and had proven worthy of a more appropriate name, but that was the family's business. That he had shown courage in a desperate fight against Haida raiders spoke well of him, Tlahit decided. To the teacher, So'qwa was nothing but a nuisance. However, Tlahit reasoned too much independence caused disobedience in So'qwa, so the old man dealt with him more harshly than the other boys. It had been so for the three years So'qwa toiled under Tlahit's guidance. The teacher had to concede, though, that So'qwa had exceeded the others in the tests of manhood training.

One such test, that of courage, occurred at night, "Bring word of what the people are doing in that house," Tlahit would demand of a child. Houses stood on narrow strips of beach bordered by dark water and darker forest. Terrified boys sometimes clung to the corner of the building and would not venture farther. The old man would ask what the child had observed. If the boy could not report on the activity in the house, Tlahit made a mental note to help build the child's confidence and sent another. Unwilling to suffer such indignity, So'qwa never failed.

Harder challenges followed and So'qwa was equal to each. He sometimes fasted two or three days, searching for some obscure spot in the woods Tlahit had ordered him to find. On one occasion, it was to locate a certain tree where a bear had left its mark on the northern side. On another, he had to describe the British trading house on neighboring Nisqually land, ten miles away. Tlahit often required that So'qwa leave piles of stones or sticks, driven in the ground, to show he had really found the sites.

One Man's Odyssey

TLAHIT SCRATCHED where an insect had recently visited and returned to pondering the Puyallup habits of naming. Without realizing it, he was speaking aloud.

"Names," he said, "are the property of the family used by only one person at a time." Tlahit knew it would have been unwise for So'qwa to use another name until the family was certain the boy would not go back to Baby Land and certainly not until he grew up to honor it.

"No," he said to the tall cedars, "he should not carry the birth name because he is too old to return to Baby Land."

Tlahit stopped when he realized that one small child was listening closely, vigorously nodding his head in agreement. He focused his attention on the tiny head bobbing in the water. It amused him that the boy knew his secret. Probably all the children did...he talked to himself. Although annoyed by what they might think about his habit, Tlahit liked the frankness in the face staring from the water.

"What do you know of Baby Land?" he asked, glaring at the boy.

"Teacher, it is..." The child quailed before the feared teacher.

"Speak!"

"It is where baby souls live before they come here. There are no adult people. They play with other baby souls. Babies come to earth talking the language of their land."

"Yes, and?"

"If the baby likes life here, he will grow to be a man. When he dies, his soul goes to the regular land of the dead."

"What if he does not like life here?"

"Then his soul will go back to Baby Land," the boy said. "It plays there until it returns, like the souls of clams and salmon."

This Tlahit knew to be true. He nodded praise to the young student, for it was good to praise. The child, enormously pleased with his own performance, disappeared beneath the water to savor the moment in silence.

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THE GRATING SOUNDS of shrill voices interrupted Tlahit's private conversation. It annoyed him.

"The tongues of disobedient children will be frozen solid by the winter spirit! Wash yourselves!"

The dense forest swallowed the high-pitched squeals as the youngest ones scrubbed their chilled bodies with handfuls of twigs.

At a command, which he could not remember giving, the youth had splashed from the water to the mossy bank of the stream, led by grinning So'qwa and his cousin Kweag. Their looks raised old Tlahit's suspicion that one of them had issued the order that brought the children from the water.

The cousins elaborately committed themselves to drying and donning their clothes. When So'qwa saw that Tlahit's back was toward them, he nudged his cousin, and together they sprinted for the trail that led back to the village, breechclouts slapping against their wet skin, dark hair flying back from their headbands. So'qwa, taller by half a head than his cousin, led the way.

They did not get far. Tlahit ordered them to return. The cousins halted, So'qwa hanging his head in mock contrition.

"You, So'qwa, take the hunters' trail and announce our return to the village."

"Clever old man," So'qwa whispered to his cousin. "He makes me swim to the other bank. It is the longer way and I cannot reach the village first. I'll be mocked."

Under the stern eyes of the old man, he stripped and entered the water.

Tlahit also knew that the task was nearly impossible since the hunter's trail was on the opposite shore. So'qwa would have to swim the stream twice. It is just as well, he thought. The small ones needed to see that even So'qwa, a future leader of the village, must be obedient.

"You, Kweag, cleanse yourself!" The cousin returned to the water and sat down.

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