

The Deerhide · Stephen Rosen

*God gave each deer just enough
brains to tan his own hide.*

Indian saying

"CHRIST, HOW CAN THEY LIVE in them things?" the man driving the car said. He took his right hand from the steering wheel and tilted the bottle of blackberry brandy almost to the vertical. He held the liquor in his mouth until he felt it sting his nose, then he swallowed like a loon, his Adam's apple moving the entire length of his long neck.

The big man in the passenger side of the car made no reply. He stared out the car window at the Indian shacks along the road. Their red-shingled roofs looked gray in the rain. Smoke rose straight up from cement-block chimneys. The Indians' dogs ran up to the ends of the driveways and barked at the car.

It was October. Wet black tree trunks in the woods; yellow leaves falling. From the "ditchbanks" came the smells of wet leaves and rotting logs.

"I think I'm a little drunk," the driver said. He wore a cowboy hat with a long feather in it.

The big man kept staring out the window. He wore a leather visor over blond hair that fell over his shoulders. He had one toothpick in his mouth and one behind his ear.

"Hey, Moon, do you think the squaw will tan the deerhide for me?" the driver said.

The big man said nothing.

"Moon, they say that when a squaw does a hide it's so porous that you can blow out a candle through it."

Moon nodded, not looking at the driver.

The driver tipped the bottle again. Moon turned and watched him. The driver lowered the bottle, looking at Moon. They looked at each other in silence.

They passed a sawmill. They drove through the part of the reservation where the new housing project was going up.

The man in the cowboy hat turned to Moon. "You ain't said much." He offered him the bottle, grinning.

"You're runnin' your mouth too damn much, John."

"What are you saying, Moon?" The man with the cowboy hat was still trying to smile.

"You know what I'm saying, John."

"You're wrong, Moon." Now he was not smiling.

Moon did not answer.

"Sometimes you're really stupid, Moon."

"Sure, John. Whatever you say, John." Now Moon was smiling.

In a few minutes they turned onto a long driveway. An Indian shack was set far back from the road; back there you could see the fog in the spruce trees.

In the yard a little Indian boy was playing with a big Husky. The Husky was white, but more than white because everything else was dark and muddy. The boy and the dog were having a tug-of-war over a leather glove.

The shack was one of those in which three generations of family sleep in one room. At the side of the shack was an old black Cadillac with the hood missing. In the yard lay a rusty box spring and the frame of a snowmobile.

The big man got out of the car first, carrying the deerhide in a big paper sack. The man with the cowboy hat got out and staggered a little. He called coaxingly to the dog and slapped his pants to get it to come to him. The dog came up and barked at him. The man started to talk to the dog in that overly familiar tone that people often use when they are afraid of a dog.

Moon asked the boy where his father was. The boy pointed to the shack, and he and the dog rushed off toward it. The two men followed. They grew serious as they approached the door.

Inside the shack it was dark and smoky and smelled of fried fish. An old Indian man with a shaved head was trying to get a fire going in a barrel stove. He went on with his work, seeming not to notice the visitors.

A large Indian woman stood at the gas stove frying fish. She was dressed in a man's shirt and pants, and she was barefoot. She was middle-aged, but the early white in her hair, her bent figure, the worn-out look on her face, made her look like a very old woman. From time to time she held a steaming cup of coffee to her cheeks to warm them. She glanced at the two men and went on frying the fish.

The boy tugged at the old man's pants, and the Indian looked up and saw the visitors. Neither his face nor his movements showed surprise.

The young man with the cowboy hat took the sack from his friend and held out the deerhide.

The old Indian got up from the stove and studied the two strangers.

The man with the cowboy hat grinned foolishly. Moon took off his leather visor and kept turning it round and round in his hands.

The Indian put down the piece of firewood and started toward the visitors. He crossed the small room in a few quick strides, but to the two men this felt like a long time.

The Indian's expression was neither friendly nor unfriendly. Without a word of greeting he took the deerhide. He felt it, rubbed it, smelled it, all the time watching the two men. The old Indian looked at them, up and down. He looked at their clean hands, at their leather coats, at their boyish faces.

Moon looked at the floor. The other man rubbed his boot against the mud and yellow leaves that were stuck on his other boot.

The huge dog had fallen asleep on the floor with his head on the boy's lap. The boy never took his eyes off the dog. He smoothed the dog's closed blond eyelashes. He whispered something in the dog's ear and then kissed his pink nose.

The Indian took the hide to the woman. Though the stove had started to give off heat, she still huddled within herself. She took in the condition of the hide in one glance. She did not touch it. She looked up at the old man with a grunt.

The Indian, admiring the hide in his hands, returned to the two visitors, who stood very close together near the door.

"Did you keep the deer's brains?" he asked. His whispered voice startled the two men more than if he had shouted at them.

Both shook their heads, though he had addressed only the one with the cowboy hat.

The Indian's face became grave. He repeated, "Did you keep the deer's brains?"

"No," they said together.

The old Indian was looking at his feet, thinking about something. He walked over to the stove and tried to fit two logs into it. He stood close to the stove absorbed in thought. For a moment you could smell singed hair.

The Indian walked up and down in front of the stove with a worried look. Presently he returned to the two visitors.

"Do you have the brains of another animal?" he asked.

The two men looked puzzled by his question.

"Do you have the brains of another animal?" he asked again.

The two men looked at each other as though one of them had asked the other the question. They turned to the Indian and said "no" with their faces.

The Indian looked at the beautiful deerhide in his hands and grew thoughtful. After meditating over something for a few moments he went over to the woman. He held out the hide to her, nodded toward the boy and the dog, and spoke to her very rapidly in Ojibwa.

She went on frying the fish and did not look at him.

He took the fork from her hand and spoke to her in a pleading tone, in Ojibwa.

She shook her head in refusal.

He grabbed her arm and yelled one, short Ojibwa word at her.

She tore herself loose and went to the window. She stood motionless in front of the window, her back to the others in the room.

It grew very quiet in the shack. No one moved. Now and then the pitch from the pine logs in the fire popped. An old clock ticked. Outside the window the rain fell on the leaves like fine sand.

After a few minutes the woman went back to frying the fish.

The visitor in the cowboy hat was drawing a figure 8 with his boot on the floor. His big friend pretended not to have seen what had happened and stood looking out the window.

The old Indian, who had gone over to the stove, got up and started walking up and down in front of it. Again he approached the woman, this time very cautiously. He touched her arm and whispered to her.

She did not answer him.

The old Indian turned from the woman and went to the visitors. He stood before them in silence a few moments and then said, "You do not have the animal's brains. It cannot be done." He made no move to give the hide back to them.

The man with the cowboy hat spoke up. "I will pay." He took out his wallet and pointed to it. "You will get money. Very much. Understand," he said in that loud voice and in that childlike speech often used with foreigners.

The Indian listened without replying.

The man with the cowboy hat grew more desperate. Very slowly and very loudly he said, "Do you understand? I will pay. Understand?" He held out his wallet and pointed to it.

Without answering, the Indian walked over to the stove. He ran his thumbs under his suspenders, thinking. He looked over at the boy. The

boy looked up at him, and when the boy saw the old man's face he stopped petting the dog.

The Indian cracked his knuckles. He looked at the boy and he looked at the woman, and he looked at the boy again.

"Come here!" the Indian said to the boy. He motioned to the boy to go with him to a doorway leading to a small room. The boy gave his dog a big hug and got up and followed the man.

The woman for the first time looked right at the two strangers. She narrowed her eyes on them, like a cat. She never spoke a word.

From another room came the sound of doors opening and closing, a man's voice, silence; then a boy crying, then screaming. There were rapid footsteps, furniture was knocked over, a door slammed. Then all was quiet.

A minute or so passed. The old Indian came back into the room, but not the same man who had gone out a few minutes earlier. He stopped at the stove. His right hand, searching for the back of a chair, found nothing. It was as though he were a blind man in unfamiliar surroundings. Then he saw the two strangers by the door. His features became severe, his face pinched. He looked at them. It was the sort of look that judged not the two men standing before him but their whole people.

The Husky, missing his master, jumped up on the couch and looked out the window. His nose was pressed against the window and the window started to fog up. His ears stood up. His tail, curled back in the shape of a comma, never ceased moving. He began to whimper, jumped over to the front door and pawed at it, then looked back at the Indian for an explanation.

The Indian went up to the visitors and said "ten dollars!" as if he had said "get out!"

The man with the cowboy hat took out his wallet and gave him the bills. The Indian took them without looking at the man. Then he took a rifle from the top of the refrigerator, grabbed the dog by the collar, and went out the door without a word or look to anyone.

With the man and dog out of the room a different silence settled in. The two men felt the Indian woman closer to them, yet she hadn't taken a step. She stared at them. They forgot to leave.

Outside there was a rifle shot. The two men exchanged glances. The woman turned her back to the visitors. They saw how the sides of her face made strange, jerky movements. They knew enough to leave.

Outside the rain had stopped. It was cold. The two men walked

quickly toward the car. Near the pumphouse the Indian was bending over the dog. Moon looked away so he wouldn't see what the Indian was doing to the dog.

The boy was nowhere in sight.

Back in the car the man with the cowboy hat began to chatter, as if suddenly a spell had been lifted from him. "Damn, Moon, if they ain't a different sort of people."

The big fellow said nothing.

The car turned out of the driveway. "Hey, Moon, what a bow-and-arrow won't do for a few bucks."

Moon just looked at him.

The man with the cowboy hat took the bottle of brandy from the glove compartment. "That squaw bitch . . ."

Moon grabbed the bottle from him. "Shut your goddamned face before I bust this over it!"

They drove back to town without another word.