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Off the Reservation

by Harvey Spurlock

"The names of the deceased are being withheld pending notification of next of kin," intones the radio announcer.

Eileen heaves herself from the mattress, pads across the small room's bare floor, and reaches toward the six-pack in an otherwise-empty refrigerator. The cool glass against her fingertips ignites a flicker of anticipation. She knows in the back of her mind that this first morning beer in a month will lead to another around-the-clock drinking bout. One that within a week or so will render her unable to ingest a bite of food and will continue until the only way out is another trip to the Indian detoxification center.

From the antiquated radio, the funereal voice of Hank Williams moans a song of sorrow out of the past. Mechanically, she raises the beer to her well-formed lips. Her finger traces a scar on her lower lip and loses it in the flesh of her rounded chin. Her thoughts remain on the news of the wreck. Last night she heard an owl. Her mother heard an owl the night a bunch of drinking buddies couldn't wake her father.

For the most part, her only contact with her wino real father had been once a month when his government check bought her a new blouse or skirt. Her stepfather, a big man of sober ways and lofty ambitions for her, raised her. He hadn't had much control over her mother, but he ruled Eileen with an iron hand. He left after her mother ran off on a month-long fling with a North Dakota Sioux. That was about the time Eileen's life started falling apart.



She is sure Johnny was the driver. She pictures him in his uncle's Cadillac, flying over the northern Arizona highway, left hand locked on the steering wheel and the neck of a beer bottle, his other hand

caressing the blonde he brought into The Hunter's Club earlier. The uncle is stretched out in the back seat, half-consciously groping at the blouse of a blowsy brunette they scrounged up for him in a joint they'd slithered into after leaving The Hunter's Club. The blonde is running her hands over Johnny's tight jeans, inside the loose-fitting shirt which camouflages a body that even in its twenties is becoming flabby, that has lost touch with the midday sun and an honest day's work.

Full of confidence, Johnny steadies his knee against the steering wheel and tilts his head for a long swig. The blonde is lost in visions: lounging beside a pool in a bikini and high heels, she'll let her closest friend in on the tale of the wild Navajo. "I must have been insane to go out with that dude," she will exclaim, her eyes widening. "All that talk about guns and knives had my heart in my throat the whole time! Needless to say, I did what I could to please him.

"And we *did* have some fun. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Indians around here look pretty tame. But, I swear, no one will civilize that one in a million years.

"You wouldn't believe how he treats that Shoshone wife of his, though. Worse than a dog. No white woman would tolerate such humiliation for a minute. It's hard not to feel sorry for the plump little thing."

The blonde brushes Johnny's mane-like hair back from his neck. Maybe she'll give him a sucker bite. Something to remember her by when he comes to tomorrow afternoon, something to remind the Shoshone what a fool she is. She strains upward with her made-up mouth, shoving his knee away from the steering wheel.

The Cadillac spins on the berm, dips toward the ditch. A flash of fear searing his gut, Johnny whips the car back onto the pavement. He stabs for the brake, frees up his right hand by slamming the



blonde into the passenger door. But he has jerked the wheel too far. They are plunging into the ditch on the other side of the highway. The Cadillac snaps off three young pine trees before a giant weather-worn rock sledgehammers the elk-antlered hood into the front seat.

Johnny's handsome features haven't been crushed. But the eyes are as lifeless as the two holes in the turquoise medallion that dangles from around his neck. The medallion may not be a face. But to Eileen, it's the visage of an aged medicine man willing himself into his own grave aware that his last drop of magic has dried up.



Johnny, his uncle, and the blonde had materialized in the bluish smoke of The Hunter's Club about midnight. From a table Johnny sang out, "Bring us a beer, barkeep."

Eileen moved toward the tap, bristling, despising being called *barkeep*. If her life had taken a bit of a different twist, she might be a concert pianist; or at least playing in a high-society supper club. She took lessons for eight years. She can still hear her stepfather: "You miss one day of practice and I'm cutting it off. You'll never get another piano lesson."

It was no challenge. She loved playing the beat-up piano he had worked overtime to buy. And he would have overlooked a slip-up or two anyway. "You want to hear my daughter play?" he would chime when they had company. "Get out some of that religious stuff, Eileen," he would say, slapping his knee with a large leathery hand.

"She's going to be the next organist for the church. That is unless that old lady hangs on too long—until Eileen's off this reservation, making it in the big world."

He swore she would go to college. And she almost had; music could have been her major. Her stepfather was smart enough, but he hadn't finished high school. He always had jobs that involved more

hard work than pay.



She set their beers on the table and the uncle waved money at her. He routinely picked up the tab. Johnny reciprocated in various ways: doing the driving so he would be the one to do the DWI time, for instance.

Johnny hugged the blonde, his eyes gleaming. "Hey, I want to introduce you two. That's my better half, Eileen. And this here's Gloria, a very, very close friend. Man alive, we got to be close in a hurry, didn't we, honey?"

"You didn't mention no wife, Slick."

Eileen figured the blonde's rings were in her purse. She probably had a truck driver husband on an out-of-town haul.

"That's because ours is purely a marriage of convenience, baby."

"Convenient for you maybe!" shot back Eileen.

"She pays the bills. And I provide certain other services." Johnny rubbed the blonde's back.

The services he was referring to no longer were part of their relationship.

"All the same, I think I'll excuse myself."

The uncle's head was lowered, cowboy hat shading his eyes. Eileen sensed he was indifferent to the pressurized atmosphere. If the lid blew off, he easily enough could wheel out of the way. The inheritor of a large farm and herd of cattle, he every so often sold off a slice to support his lifestyle. Eileen wondered if he ever thought about the day the last piece got lopped off.

She wondered how the blonde would look with a slashed face. "Maybe you'd better leave, cutiepie!" she hissed. "Before I put glass in your face. Then no man will ever look at you again." She grabbed an empty bottle from the next table.

The blonde appeared paralyzed. Johnny leapt up, the death's skull on his chest dancing manically. He clawed into her blouse and drew back his hand.



“Hit me, buster, and I’ll have the cops on you!”

The uncle shoved his hat back and lifted his eyelids.

They stood motionless, eyes fixed on each other. Tears welled in Eileen’s. Her words came out punctuated with sobs. “Don’t...forget, buddy, I put one guy...in San Quentin. And...I put a knife in my first husband’s back...when...I caught him with another woman. I...I...can do the same to you...any day.”

“Wow! I’m shaking in my boots.”

She yanked herself loose and eyed the blonde. “You can have him...you hussy. I...never...want to lay eyes on the bastard...again.”

She trudged toward the bar, sniffing, wiping away tears with the hands that hadn’t touched piano keys in years.

The way Eileen told it a young man was serving time for hurling her out of a window. In truth she didn’t know how she fell out of the window during a party in an apartment over a San Francisco skid-row bar. And the only person she had ever stabbed was Johnny’s uncle, with a fingernail file. During a drinking spree, she awoke with him crawling on top of her — Johnny’s idea of repaying his uncle’s generosity.



Still in her housecoat and sitting in the broken-down armchair by the window, she thinks about another beer. Hopefully the owner of The Hunter’s Club will take her back one more time after the binge is over, after she gets out of the detox center. But then maybe it’s time to leave Arizona anyway. There’s nothing at the Wyoming reservation; she left there for San Francisco after her first marriage broke up. Maybe she’ll try San Francisco again. She could find a place in a better section of the city, away from the few others from the reservation who were there.

The trooper is probably on his way by now,

traveling the same highway that the Cadillac had last night. She supposes he’d rather be going to a ranch house, where portraits of ancestors hang in the hallway, than to a one-bar town out in the sticks to encounter an Indian woman. This is the part of his job he dreads the most under any circumstances.

He might have come from somewhere else like she had — maybe somewhere far away: New York or North Carolina. She can imagine him reflecting that there is still something that mystifies him about the Indians, as much as he has been around them the last few years.

Rounding a curve, he gazes down into a pine-tree-lined canyon. The northern Arizona landscape can be beautiful, even poetic. Not knowing anything about meter or metaphor, he’d written a few poems in high school. In fact, his dreams of college had seemed easily within reach — yet in the end, they remained unreachable. Fast-talked by a recruiter, he had joined the Army instead and found himself in the military police division. After his discharge, staying in law enforcement seemed to be a natural progression. He hasn’t written a poem since high school.

He winces as he sees the small town up ahead. Now that he’s almost there, he simply wants it to be over with. It’s a shame about the Indian alcoholism: the endless array of public intoxication arrests on the reservations. Most of them had drunk themselves out from behind the steering wheel long before they ended up the way this woman’s husband had. That could be a subject for poetry too. Writing from an Indian angle, he could entitle a poem “The White Man’s Gift” — if he could still write a poem.

The rundown apartment building across from the bar is all too easy to find. Eyes from all around — especially the woman’s, no doubt — are on him as he steps out of the air-conditioned, out-of-place cruiser into the brilliant sunlight. Without his sunglasses, he’d feel completely naked. In the dark doorway, expecting the stairway to be rot-



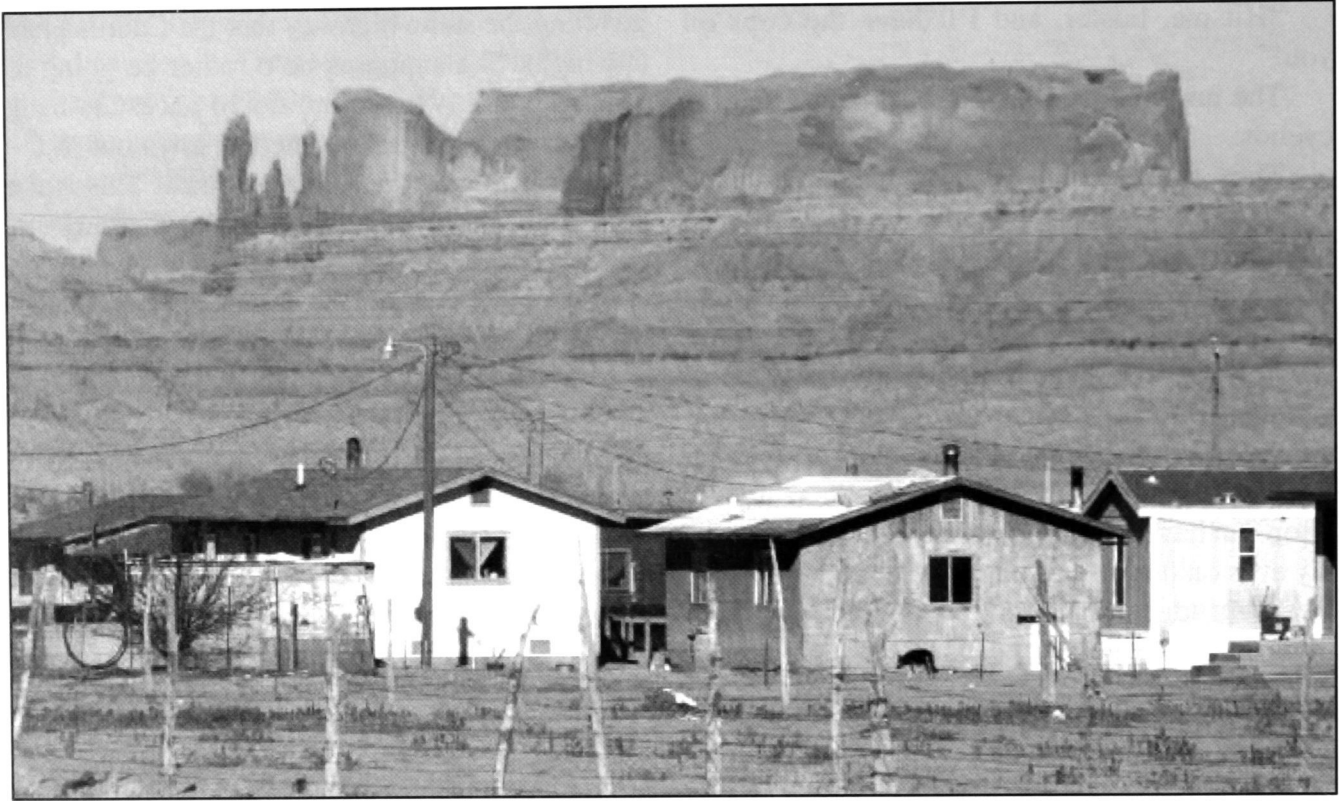


Photo courtesy Getty Images

ting and treacherous, he uncovers his eyes for the climb. At the top of the stairs, he slides the dark glasses back on.

When she opens the door there is an aura about her he hadn't anticipated—like maybe life had taken a wrong turn for her long before last night. She *is* still fairly young; as he had been once. At the moment, though, the indefinable ambiance only makes the news of her husband doubly tragic, doubly difficult to deliver.

Emerging from the dingy doorway, he again conceals his eyes, wishing he could have done the job in a less matter-of-fact manner. But he's never been good at conveying his true sentiments. The midday sun could blister a person's brain cells, but he'll soon be back in the air-conditioning. He'd caught a faint whiff of alcohol when she fearlessly thanked him. Somehow, despite hair growing white, he doesn't feel like Santa Claus. Maybe he'll write the poem someday.



Her feet are already aching when she gets up to get another beer. They still are misshapen from the fall. The doctors at first thought she might never walk again, but she proved them wrong despite not even a card from her mother the entire time she was in the hospital. She took a bus to Arizona instead of going back for the last operation.

Between her feet and the need to sneak a beer now and then, it would be a long night at work. She had a few nights left before the booze totally took control. It was Johnny who brought her beer after she was too weak to get it herself. And it was Johnny who always called the detox center for an ambulance after her arms drew up around her chest and she began seeing skulls and dead people.

Back in the armchair, a song she knew as a child runs through her head. She hums a few bars then experiments with fresh words to the music.

The knock on the door gives her a jolt. She



hadn't noticed anyone in the hallway. Drawing back the faded curtain, she peers down on the garbage-strewn sidewalk in front of The Hunter's Club across the street. The scene is more nauseating in daylight than the neon nighttime. An overstuffed cat slinks into the alley beside the bar. But no silver-gray state trooper's car mirrors the sun.

She slips the beer into the refrigerator on her way to the door.

It's Johnny's mother, the tattered quilt turned into a dress hanging from her withered shoulders. "Johnny home?"

"Does it look like it?"

"Can't rightly see. Where is he?"

"How should I know?"

"I take it he didn't come by last night?"

"Why should he? There's nothing for him here."

"I'll be talking to you later then, Eileen."

Eileen sighs. "You want a cup of coffee?"

A bony finger tremblingly settles on the mother's pointed chin. She looks up from under crinkled eyelids, a hint of a smile licking her wizened lips. "Don't mind if I do."

The mother eases to the edge of the unmade bed. Eileen snaps off the radio and starts down the hallway to run water into the pot. Thinking back to the day Johnny brought his mother a box of fried chicken, she speculates that the old woman really wouldn't be sorry to see him dead. The chicken was to make up for having kicked her out to sleep in the alley the night before so a lady friend and he could use her room. Not accustomed to much food, the mother toothlessly gnawed through half a drumstick and shoved the box aside.

Johnny malevolently eyed the box and drank more beer. "I go to all that trouble and you don't even goddamned eat it," he periodically mut-

tered.

Her reply was: "I'll eat some more for supper. Lordy, that'll last me three days. I sure do thank ya, Johnny."

In the end, he jumped up and jammed pieces of chicken, bones and all, into her mouth.

She almost choked to death.



Eileen plugs in the hotplate. Thinking of the beer, she wishes she had let the mother leave. "Did you hear..." She remembers Johnny hocked his mother's radio. "Did you hear that owl last night?"

"I did. That hootin' sure enough put a chill in my bones."

Eileen spoons instant coffee into cups. "There was a car wreck last night. Four people dead according to the radio."

"Some of them fool teenagers?"

"Radio hasn't said yet."

They lapse into silence. After Eileen serves the coffee, she sinks into the armchair and recalls the last time she riled Johnny up the way she had last night.

Just past noon the next day he came across the street from the bar, perspiration glistening on his face, the medallion flopping against his chest. She could have slipped out the back but he only would have caught up with her. There was something flat and dead about his eyes when the door burst open.

Afterward she couldn't get out of bed. Johnny had to carry her to the bathroom.



Eileen inches the curtain away from the window.



Gazing outside, she sings in a low doleful voice:

Last night I heard
An owl in a tree.
Twere these lonesome words
That he spoke to me:

The elk once played
The night away,
But he's been slain
This very day.

And those dancing eyes
No longer shine.
The barroom warrior's
Beneath the pines.

She hums a bit more.

When she turns from the window, the mother's coffee is on the nightstand. Her back more bowed than before, she wrings her gnarled hands in her lap. "Johnny's the only family I got left," she murmurs.

Eileen nods.

"Lord knows, he don't treat me the way a mother's got a right to expect. I guess I should have left him alone after he left the last town."

There are two children from Eileen's first marriage, both living with her former husband's parents. She sends them presents for birthdays and Christmas but hears nothing in return.

"Johnny was all right once, but then the drinkin'..." Her voice trails off.

"Well, I'm gonna leave ya, Eileen. Thanks for the coffee."

Eileen walks over and helps her to her feet. They embrace briefly, embarrassedly break away. The old woman shuffles from the room.



The trooper is younger and heavier than she imagined him. He doesn't wear sunglasses. Aside from his uniform and white man's facial features, he reminds her of her stepfather.

Her stepfather whipped her only once. It was the

evening her freshman year when Farrell Whiteplume, a senior, talked her into riding home with him instead of taking the bus. "I'm sorry, child," he said, "but I'm doing it for your own good. I want to see you get off this reservation and make something out of yourself!"

"I guess you're here about the car wreck," she says to the trooper. "I heard about it on the radio." The radio is on again, an announcer pushing a deal at a health spa.

"Uh...yes, ma'am. Are you all right?"

"I'll be okay." Three years after the whipping, she could have easily gotten a scholarship. Her grades had been nearly straight A's. But she married Farrell Whiteplume, thinking she could still go to college later.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere? It would be in the line of duty."

She shrugs and shakes her head, the corners of her mouth downturned. "No thank you." She should be sobbing; maybe even fainting.

"Do you need someone to stay with you? I could get a friend or relative."

She shakes her head again, almost apologetically, and lowers her gaze to the floor. Claspings her housecoat more tightly around her, she doesn't understand why, when crying has come so easy all her life, that she now can't summon a single tear.

The trooper's eyes skirt the room. Maybe he's looking for a bottle of sleeping pills, something near the ceiling to wrap a lamp cord around, a gun.

She sees a small lonely room somewhere in Idaho. Some said her stepfather had blood relatives in Idaho. She never heard him mention them, though. It was during her senior year that her mother had had the fling with the North Dakota Sioux. But he didn't actually walk out the door until two months later, after he got the news that Eileen was to be married.

The trooper takes a card from his shirt pocket. "Here's a number you can call regarding your husband, ma'am. They're pros. You won't have a bit of trouble." She accepts the card and the trooper turns toward his cruiser.

She feels so alone that her eyes do mist.

