

Spring 1992

from Perma Red

Debra Earling

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Debra Earling

from *Perma Red*

Myra—Dead Sight
September 1946

Mama came in from smoking a cigarette right when I was asking my dad if he knew where Jules Bart lived. She was heading for the kitchen but she stopped and stood right next to me. Listening. So I asked my dad where Lena Twitchell lived, where Helen Singmaster used to live, where the Clatterbucks would be moving to, where Tater Master grazed his best horses. I even asked him to tell me where the old Reether accident had happened, to throw Mama off track. Dad went back to reading his farm report. Mama went back to the kitchen.

I thought I'd take a walk up to Jules' place. I could turn around if I chickened out. I didn't see the harm in having a look. I know Louise used to spy on a man she liked over in Charlo. I didn't see the harm. The closest I'd come to spying on anybody was when I used to try and find Thomas Kicking Woman and Louise. But that doesn't count. With them, I just didn't want to be left behind. They were always doing something or going somewhere. Their whole lives seemed exciting. I decided I would look at my hike to Jules' as a new adventure.

I packed some sandwiches and a jar of water. I put on my overalls and tied my hair back with one of my dad's kerchiefs. Chances are Jules wouldn't see me. I liked the idea of finally seeing where he lived. I imagined he had a good setup for his rodeo roping. I imagined I would sit in some bushes, unnoticed, eat my sandwiches, watch him rope, watch him. There couldn't be anything wrong in that.

When I left the house, the clouds that had been in the distance

were moving in fast. The trees were creaking with wind. I grabbed my coat and my mother's straw gardening hat. The hat was the color of weeds, which made it all the better. And then I ran. I ran with my bag of sandwiches, with the cold wind lifting the hair off my neck. I ran so fast it seemed the wind was carrying me. I was lucky that neither my mama nor my dad had seen me leave. I wouldn't have had a chance if they would have seen me. Now I was free. I let out a hoot.

The rain pelted me like hail. I could feel the wetness through my pants. So I kept on running to stay warm. I crossed the highway and followed my old trail to Dixon. It cut a mile or so off the highway. When I reached Miner's Hill, I stopped running. I walked under the pine trees to get out of the storm but the wind drove thin needles of rain down through the trees so I ran again. I knew I was just past milepost 107. I was surprised at how fast I had come up on the land where Jules Bart lived. I sat down to catch my breath but I was out in the open where anyone could see me. I looked around. I saw his fenceline first and I followed it, a curve that dipped down to a wide corral with high fences. I saw a white barn. I wasn't sure if I was at the right place. The house was old and hadn't been painted in years. I stood on the hill and looked for mean dogs. There were only a few horses, five maybe, in the corrals and they were running the far fenceline. I sat down on the hill and watched them. The storm was purple over the hills and moving fast. Wind pushed at my back. Wind laid the grass down and the horses ran hard. I felt if I stood up I would have rolled down the hill. Rain dripped off my face and hands.

I looked around to see if I could spot something that belonged to Jules but I didn't know what to look for. The storm was closing in, growing darker. The house was quiet. There were no lights

on anywhere. I looked around to see if I was the only one stupid enough to stand out in the rain. I decided to get closer. I hunched over and made my way down the hill with my teeth chattering. I could smell the dry dirt and the rain and it made me hungry. I found a little juniper tree near the barn that I could crawl under. The tree was stickery but I didn't care. The branches curled over me like an umbrella. I was beginning not to care if I ever saw Jules Bart. I sat down and opened up my lunch bag. I was sorry I hadn't taken a few more sandwiches with me. I heard someone in the barn and I pulled my hat down over my face and kept eating.

I heard someone moaning, a deep throat moan. Scared me. I looked up. Someone was in the barn. Someone hurt. I squinted in the distance and could make out two men. I was sure one of the men was Jules. I wrapped half a sandwich up and snuck down the hill a little closer. They were in the barn. I saw Jules. Jules and Antoine Pretty Chief. I stepped a little closer. Antoine was kneeling in the dust in front of Jules, crying. I saw him pull his shirt off over his head. I saw Antoine half-naked, his face bleeding, one side of his ribs slit. I saw Jules unstrap his belt and yank it out through the loops of his pants and for a second I thought he was going to beat Antoine. But when I saw Jules' smooth butt bared, his work pants at his knees, and his boots still on, I wanted to laugh. I pulled back a little so I wouldn't be seen but still I kept watching. I saw Antoine's dark hands on the stark, white halves of Jules' butt, mouth open and Jules...and then I ran. I ran. Praying they wouldn't see me. I ran so hard my side ached. My breath was tight in my chest so I lifted my head up to get more breath but I didn't stop running.

I couldn't have seen it right, I kept thinking. I couldn't be right. I half-wanted to go back because I was sure I was mistaken. I

remembered the time I was seven and peeked through the crack in my dad's workshed only to see my dad and Dolores Newhauer. She had her panties down around her knees and my dad was looking at her up close. My dad told me later he was helping her lance a boil. That was all, he said. And I wanted to believe him even when I didn't. I wanted to believe that Jules Bart had a story too.

I was running so fast it felt like I had caught my foot on a rock and before I knew it, I was falling. I couldn't catch myself. I saw the wet grass come up at my face. I heard the water jar shatter and I felt the bone in my hand. I lay still in the cold grass for a while, listening to the sound of my breath. My knees were hot. I looked at my hand and it had been cut clean through to the white bone. I started to cry. There was a big piece of glass in my palm. I could feel a hot spot on my forehead, a hot spot that was scorching. The back of my head stung. I wanted to close my eyes, go to sleep. But I had a ways to go to get home and nobody knew where I had gone. I rubbed my good hand on my overalls. I could feel the little stinging rocks buried in my palm. I pulled the kerchief off my head and wrapped it around my hand. I could feel a deep throbbing pulse. I stood up and headed for home. My knees were tight and it was hard to walk. But I decided I had to get myself home. It all felt like a bad dream. Jules. The hard fall. I decided I would never tell anybody, not even Louise. Maybe it would all go away.

I felt my sides heaving. I didn't feel sick to my stomach but my whole chest was quaking. I could smell something sweet. It stayed in my nose sweet, sweet, like my dad's shaving cream and my mama's marigolds. I saw a big rock I could sit on and headed for it. It took me a while to make my way to it. My back was stiff. I sat down on the rough rock and looked at my pants. They were

torn at the knees and bleeding too.

I felt crazy. I thought for a second I could go back to Jules' place. He was closer than home. I felt like my mother's sister Norma who was put in Warm Springs. I wanted to laugh. The storm was whipping the bramble and I was surprised that it was still raining. My hair was dribbling water. I could feel the rain water in my toes. I took off my boot to pour out the water and saw something in the grass. My heart shot to my throat. I looked again.

Something was laying still in the grass. "I hope it's not a dead deer," I said, aloud. Hoping it was a dead deer. Hoping it was a deer or a big beaver. Hoping it was anything than what it was. I saw a woman. I saw a woman with her eyes wide open to rain. I saw a woman, an Indian woman with her black hair caught in the weeds like cobwebs. Her arms stretched back above her head. I stood up. I could see the dirt under her fingernails. I felt the muscles in my back curl up to my neck. All the trees nearby, a long dark stretch, were good places to hide. There was a dead woman in the field and somebody probably put her there. I didn't want to but I yelped. And even though my legs were throbbing, even though my hand was bleeding bad, I ran. I ran again, so fast the hard ground flew past me.

When I got to the highway, I kept running. I heard a car coming up from behind me and I wanted to hide in the ditch. The blood itched in my tight fingers.

"Please, God," I kept saying, surprised I was saying it.

The car pulled off on the shoulder behind me. I could feel the scream in my throat. I made a tight fist with my good hand and looked for rocks. And I turned to see Antoine Pretty Chief looking at me from the open window of his truck.

"Hey," he said, "are you okay?"

I looked back at him. The left side of his face was swollen and there was a cut on his lip that was still bleeding. I wanted to kick at his tires. I wanted to slam my good open hand on his dirty windows. If it hadn't been for him, none of this would have happened. The whole thing seemed like a dream. "Bastard," I whispered, "damn bastard." I walked over to his truck and climbed inside.

"There's a dead girl up on the hill," I said, "right up there."

He looked at me. "Up there," I said again, pointing. He looked at me again as he was getting out of the truck and I was locking the doors. When he came back from the hill, I decided to let him in. He started the truck up and turned to me.

"Looks like things aren't going so well," he said.

Indian Officer Charlie Kicking Woman—Reservation Death

Perma, Montana

September 1946

I could not believe the way we found Hemaucus Three Dresses dead. It had rained hard for a couple days and the nights were winter cold. We woke that morning to a bitter frost steaming off the fields. Summer coming back like a sickness. The mud ground felt dead in the sudden heat. You could stick a thumb in the thaw to the first finger joint and hit hard ground. The season was something like a mock spring because in a mock spring, people will shed their winter coats and step outdoors, flapping the chill away, the last welcome to winter sickness ripe in their lungs. But this was September.

It wasn't an Indian summer. And it wasn't a mock spring. It

was the first day of the trickster, the way death weeds out the weak. It was the mock return of hottest summer and people stepped outside barefoot and smiling, believing since the cold had already come, the rattlers were set in the ground for winter. Like a mock spring, there would be death from this trick change of season. I had learned this lesson from Thomas. He recognized the seasons and he was never fooled. He knew when the chinooks were coming, the clean warm wind. When he was little, he would get up in the middle of the night while we were all sleeping and open the windows and doors with the snow still on the ground. And every time he did that we'd wake to sweet birds and fresh air.

It was in a mock spring that Annie White Elk, the mother of Louise, had hiked up Magpie Creek to find her father. She was gone for two days with only a shotgun and a sack of jerky. There was a warm feeling in the air. It was a dry spring but she came home chilled and fevered and dreaming of a white root cellar filled with yellow apples. The day they buried Annie the winter came again. A long winter we still remember. Nothing good ever comes of a mock season. Nothing good ever comes of trickery.

Myra Vullet, a white girl from Perma, stumbled on Three Dresses. She actually caught one foot under Hemaucus and fell headlong over the body. She ran home to her folks and we went out there with the mother tagging along to where Myra said she'd found her. When Del Thrasher pressed his foot to her side to turn her over, I grabbed his leg.

"Matter with you?" he said. "She's dead."

I swallowed hard. Thrasher used his shiny black boot to rock her over. Hemaucus Three Dresses, the first girl I ever had a crush on. Hemaucus was not yet dead to me. I looked down at her face,

her long, loose hair shiny and thick as horse tail strands threading weeds. A hole in her back straight through her shattered chest bone, a single blood stain, round and dry as a quarter, her mouth open, her lips split by cracks of blood. I could see one breast exposed. And I saw too that she was already returning to the mud cradle that held her. The weave of grass stamped on her soft skin held a warm, sweet smell that made me uncomfortable. It was early morning. A mist was rising off the river, rising off the fields. The sun was so bright the back of my eyeballs ached. The top ground was thawing and we packed the grass like straw as we lifted her out.

And I knew then who had killed her. We all knew, had known for years it could happen. By the time I got home two hours later, all the Indians knew. Emma chewed on fried chicken with a slick, almost pretty stain of grease on her cheek and told me about Hemaucus, how Hemaucus had been cooking and left the table set. The dough for the fry bread was rising on the counter, a pot of eggs boiling on the stove. The small, daily particulars of her life were story now.

The man she had kept house for over at Dirty Corners had a "thing" for Hemaucus. He used to wait around the schoolyard to see what boys she talked to and where she went. Hemaucus was never pretty. She had a plain, almost handsome way about her that seemed to come from her quietness. Whatever it was, Sam Plowman wanted it in a bad way and I remember when we were kids we thought it was funny. It had something to do with shame, with wanting so bad it didn't matter to be forty-three years old with a facial tic, with bad breath and body odor. In fact, that seemed to be a big part of it all, an undesirability that was beyond appearance. He'd been born with unmistakable grief. It was

something you couldn't love out of him, something no white or Indian medicine could cut from him. He was flawed. Loneliness quivered in him and we could see it.

The only thing that saved him was money. His mother's endless supply. And he had connections too. Harvey Stoner once paid a visit to him in jail on a barn arson charge and the man walked free. If it would've been me, I would've been strung up by my nuts. But something is going on here. You can't tell me these deals aren't funny. One day I'm going to find out what's going on and put an end to this nonsense. I'm going to nail Harvey Stoner. He'll get what's coming to him.

I had a hard time in school. The kids would make fun of me. Call me pansy and pussy. But when Sam Plowman came along, I could laugh at him too. When I was eleven, Sam Plowman was a joke. For a short time I could feel like I belonged. I wasn't the brunt. I was part of the group. Then the feeling changed. The more I called him names, the more rocks I threw at him, the more I felt connected to him. It felt like I was making fun of myself. So I threw even more rocks at him. I stood beside all the other boys. I threw rocks fast and hard, a sling to his stooped shoulders, a quick tight nip to the ear. We'd sting him bad. I'd run away, laughing, with the sound of his grief roaring in my ears. I turned once to see him rubbing his knees, sitting on the Mission steps and no Hemaucus in sight.

It wasn't until I got older that I began to see he wasn't funny or one to be made fun of. Like the time he beat Hemaucus up outside of school when we were fourteen. We stood in a circle, maybe fifteen of us boys, our hands in our pockets, all of us vaguely embarrassed because we did nothing but watch. His fists were grinding. When he finished with her, her eyes were small,

red-rimmed as a sow's and bleeding. Nothing was ever done that I know of. We didn't know who to tell. Hemaucus walked home alone, snuffling through a fist-sized nose. And that was the last time Hemaucus came to school.

Lately, I'd seen her around Mission with a Hidatsa cowboy from Wolf Point. He'd gone to rodeo days over in Ritzville. He'd been gone awhile, I'd heard. I knew it was Plowman. I could feel it. I figured he must have shot her first and then moved her body to the field a few hours later. I was thinking I'd go out to search around his house, check out the barn and the cleaning stalls about the time the Feds showed up. It was a dead end, they said. They weren't going to be able to do much. They estimated she'd been shot in the field about ten o'clock the night before. They'd been asking questions and all the leads were cold as Post Creek. They'd keep working on it, they said. The matter was in their hands now. I looked at my supervisor, knowing this was shit. When they left, he grabbed my shoulder hard and said it was best to drop it.

They picked up Samuel Plowman three days later, apprehended him at the Dixon bar. They held him less than thirty-six hours. His mother had found a stern alibi for him. That's my theory, anyway. He was let go. He's walking free today in South Dakota or Wyoming. I think about the other Indian girls, listen to the moccasin telegraph and hope nothing else happens. I don't know, maybe a person like Sam has only one obsession in a lifetime. But I hate to speculate on bullshit. The asshole will probably rape twenty Indian girls in one way or another. I'm not doing my job. I'm letting things slide if a man like Samuel Plowman can be set free.

I lied to myself about Hemaucus, like I lie to myself about Louise. I had a deep desire to be with both of them at sometime

or another. I wanted Hemaucus in small ways, probably in some ways as bad as Sam Plowman had wanted her. I wanted to touch her skin. I remember wanting to press behind her at the water fountain, feel the muggy heat of her. When I found her dead, I wanted to touch her forehead, cool as clay, bend down to hold her. But I let a white man press a mud-boot to her side and talk about bullet trajectories and possible motives.

Louise is different than most all the other women on the reservation. For the color of her skin she can pass for white but chooses not to. She's run away from school, broke loose from police custody on the way back from Missoula to the reservation. She's fooled me more times than I can remember. She doesn't take crap from anybody but Lester Black Road and she even keeps him guessing. I've chased every sighting of her. When she was a kid, just fifteen years old, she pissed the BIA Superintendent off so much he had us pick her up on sight whether she'd done anything or not. And that got old fast. She got good at running away. Once she ran away from the school in Thompson Falls. I caught up with her at her grandma's. Louise was thin and her clothes were old. Mr. Bradlock, the social worker, came along for spite, I think.

I saw her run out the back of the house toward the hill. It was cold, the kind of cold that makes your ankles ache. I chased after her, feeling stupid with my gun rubbing my leg, my wool pants scratching, and slick leather soles. I could see her just ahead and Bradlock was yelling at me. And I quit. I just stopped and tromped down the hill with wet shins and cold feet. Let him chase her if he wanted her so bad.

Bradlock made us wait at the bottom of the hill until nightfall, waiting for a skinny Indian girl who was smarter than us. She

never came down. Least not while we were there. And I thought of her as the shadows swallowed the pond, thought of her with the car running heat to our bones. She was probably standing near the trees, blowing thin breath into the pocket of her cupped hands and I wanted to wring her scrawny neck. I got out of the car a couple times. I saw the grandma peeking through paper curtains at us and felt embarrassed for us both. Every now and then Bradlock would ask me to get outside of the car and call her. I jumped the barbed fence just to be doing something, lost my footing and slid a long length of thigh in steaming cow shit. And I was sore at her skinny ass, her smart, tough looks. Sore at myself to be believing this would amount to anything but more humiliation.

I'd been thinking lately I'd gotten pretty lucky to leave this life behind. But Louise is my biggest reminder. I'm always chasing her back to my own past. I'm not even chasing her in the official sense anymore. I chase her for myself, I guess, like a bad habit. I look for her. Tell myself she needs to be looked after. Maybe I never should have given myself into the whole situation with Louise. I should have backed off a long time ago. Because something has happened to me that feels like love with her. I don't know. There's a point in love where we all can choose to be in love or not to be in love. Maybe something deep in our lives beyond instinct and hope makes us weary and too damn wanting, the slow time when we look out our morning window and we don't see the new sun or the grass shine. We only see that something is missing in our lives, something we're not quite sure of, like the feeling of losing a good, deep breath to restlessness. I've jumped on the hope of an easy solution and it turns out to be love again which in my opinion is just more wanting, the worst kind of wanting after you've

Paul Zanyaki

already stood at the altar with a shit grin on your face that doesn't look like a happy glow after five years.

I've been thinking that maybe I'd try to move off this reservation for awhile. I've been wondering what it might be like to move to California. But deep down I know I'll just be staying here. Staying here with a wife who loves me a little too much and a woman who thinks I'm some kind of idiot. A woman I feel myself pulling in my breath for, my soft gut. A woman who sees only that my boots are polished and holeless, the leather on my holster has a nice sound, that I always have a good meat sandwich in my jockey box. I guess maybe that's all the Indians see in me. It's what I see in myself, a whole lot of nothing everybody else doesn't have.

I've come to hate this place. And it's hard to give up something you hate. Impossible. Hate stays with you. I'd walk a fast road any day to kick ass. But I wouldn't get out of my truck to peck my wife goodbye in the morning. It's too much work. Love is work. It's hard work to try and hold on, even when you want to. Hate is different. Hate drives like hornet venom. And I've learned to hate the side of the fence the Indians are on. I pull back from the smell of being poor, of wood-smoked clothes and old beans and Indian women who have been eating fry bread so long they look like buffalo. It's a shame in me like oil under my fingernails. It's everything I am. I can't pick it out.

I caught Louise drinking in the bar last night. She's too young to be drinking and Indians aren't supposed to drink by law. I've hauled her out of the bar a hundred times and a hundred times more I've let her stay. But I didn't have an official reason why I wanted to stop her. I didn't want her to know I just wanted to see her home. I went up behind her, thinking I might chase her out

the door if she saw me too soon but I was wrong. She turned to me with her wind-sweet smile and leaned so close to me I could smell the sweat in her hair. She put her head on my shoulder and said so low I almost couldn't hear her, "Where would you like to be?" And I didn't expect her to say that. It caught me by surprise. I'm not sure what it means even now. I suppose it could have meant a lot of things but what it meant to me last night was more than I wanted anyone to see. It was, I thought later, a question that drew me to her. And standing there in my uniform with the threat of getting tossed out on my butt, with the threat of losing my job and losing my standing in the community, I slipped a tight arm around her waist. We were quiet together for a long while. And I left the bar alone. About the time I got close to my home my belly was shaking and I was grinding my teeth, thinking there was a stupidity born in me I could never escape.