From the River’s Edge
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From the
River’s Edge

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Preface

Seeing the Missouri River country of the Sioux is like seeing where the earth first recognized humanity and where it came to possess a kind of unique internal coherence about that condition.

As you look you think you see old women leaving marked trails in the tall burnt grass as they carry firewood on their backs from the river, and you think you hear the songs they sang to grandchildren, and you feel transformed into the past. But then, winter comes. The earth freezes solid. And you wish for July and the ripe plums and the sun on your eyelids.

One August day I stood on a hill with Big Pipe and watched the flooding waters of the Missouri River Power Project unleash the river’s power from banks which had held it and guided it since before any white man was seen in this country. As old Pipe grieved, the water covered the trees of a timber stand which had nourished a people for all generations, and it took twenty years for those trees to die, their skeletons still and white. It took much less time for the snakes and small animals to disappear. Today, old Pipe has a hard time finding the root which cures his toothache, and he tells everyone that it is the white man’s determination to change the river which accounts for the destruction of all life’s forms.

When you look east from Big Pipe’s place you see Fort George; you look south and see Iron Nation, and you sense a kind of hollowness in the endless distance of the river span, at odds, somehow, with the immediacy of the steel REA towers stalking up and down prairie hills. Yet, as your fingertips touch the slick leaves of the milkweed and roll the juicy leaves together, it is easy to believe that this vast region continues to share its destiny with a people who have survived hard winters, invasions, migrations, and transformations unthought of and unpredicted. And even easier to know that the mythology and history of all times remain remote and believable.
PART ONE

A Trial
Issues of Law as Well as Fact

SMUTTY BEAR

“I am an Indian, but the man then told me I would become an American. To do this, he said, my son, what you have to do is to take care of the white people, and try to raise two or three streaks of grass. I have tried to do this, and have worn all the nails off my fingers trying to do it. Ever since I have tried to raise that corn, and I am still at it, but can’t raise it.” (Translation)

SUMMER 1856
The lawyer came out to Tatekeya’s place along the river that day.

He said to Tatekeya: “This is not about your stolen cattle, John. It is about justice and the law, as are all cases brought before the United States bar.”

“But what’s the chances of gettin’ my cattle back?” asked John.

“Well, we don’t think in terms of getting your cows back or getting paid for them, necessarily. We think in terms of what is fair.”

Very quietly and with mixed emotions, John answered that he thought the two things, i.e., the return of his stolen cattle and fairness, were one and the same.

“Not necessarily,” he was told.
He stood in the cluttered, stuffy little kitchen, looking out of the narrow window, stirring the bean soup boiling in a pot on the gas stove, and absently watched the wild turkeys mince toward the brittle weeds along the dirt road, their small heads jerking up and down as they pecked at fallen seeds, their beady eyes alert for any quick movement. A suspicious kind of bird. They stepped prettily into the trees, disappearing quietly as John's thoughts rambled.

He was glad his wife, Rose, had moved to town with their married daughter, giving him the opportunity to live by himself for the first time since their marriage thirty years ago. His was now a solitary, thoughtful life, as he had, perhaps, always wanted it to be.

A tall man in his early sixties, a man who had been nurtured on the prairielands of the Dakotas but one who showed little evidence of that hard life, John Tatekeya had black hair imperceptibly streaked with gray, his face was unwrinkled, the delicate, fine bones of his profile were strangely sharp, unburdened by the passage of time.

On this day, the kind which began with a morning so cool and bright as to seem extraordinarily bountiful, he lost himself in private thought, absorbed in the precious moments like this that he shared with no one, secretly and selfishly savoring his own feeling of insularity.

It was an important morning, but soon the heat from the stove in the small three-room house would become unbearable, he knew, and the sun would climb into the sky, and his clothes would get so damp they would hang limply about him, and he would be sucked empty of energy and vitality by the muggy, shimmering air. And he would cease to move about with such spirit. Only
those born into the hot, dry Dakota winds of August ever got to know how to really thrive in it. The others simply tolerated it.

The tall man at the stove seemed untouchable and remote at this moment, as he meticulously spooned the thick soup into a bowl, turned off the gas heat, and seated himself at the bare table. He ate silently, methodically, taking great care in breaking the salty crackers and dipping them slowly in the mild liquid. When he was nearly finished, he sugared his coffee generously and sat stirring with quick, short strokes, holding the spoon palm-up. He looked through the gauze curtains at the hayshed, a recently moved and converted trailerhouse, corrupted by the dispassionate sun and relentless prairie wind long before it was moved to John’s place.

Tacky.

Makeshift.

Cluttered and distracting.

He lifted his eyes toward the hills which spread out and away from the river, like earthen monuments of the past, forever, ophidian, resolute. John did not give much thought to himself as a man of the north prairies. But he was as much that as are the men of the other prairielands known to the world—the men of the pampas of Argentina, the llanos of the South, the steppes of Eurasia, the highlands of Africa, and the tundra of the Arctic. Like them, John Tatekeya of the Dakota prairielands and his people had forever possessed great confidence in their collective presence in their homelands. More than he thought about it, John felt it and simply held it in his heart.

As his eyes scanned the windswept hills he knew this: It is here that the spirit himself can wokeya. Wo-ki-ca-hni-ga-to? Didn’t Benno say these things when he talked to them in the sweatlodge? His crying sometimes helps human beings, Benno said. But not always. What can I do now? men have eternally asked, and John Tatekeya was no different. What can I do now, he asked also.

The wind bent the tall grass to its will, brushed weeds haphazardly across the roads. Even the birds seemed frail in its grip as they lifted their wings and dropped across the sky.
Minutes passed, and John sat at the little round table in the bright stillness, mixing, cooling, stirring his coffee with quick, short strokes. Finally, he lifted the bowl to his lips and quietly drained it. He stood up and reached for his hat just as he heard heavy footsteps on the front porch.

He stepped outside, slamming the door shut quickly.

“Hau,” he said, smoothing his hair down with one hand and fitting his Stetson on with the other. He shook hands with the young man from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and pretended a graciousness he did not feel.

“You ready, John?” asked the young man, whose red hair almost matched his flaming cheeks so recently burnt by the August wind which never ceased to blow across these prairies and hills at this time of the year.

“Yeah.”

U.S. government agents, or “FBI men,” or “wasichus,” as Tatekeya now thought of them, were nothing new to this Indian reservation in recent years. Nor were they absent from the other Sioux Indian homelands in South and North Dakota. The joke used to be that in every Indian home, there is the mother, father, children, grandparents, and the anthropologist. In the sixties, that joke changed to include the “G-man.” Figures of almost unrestricted federal law enforcement activities had a long history on Indian reservations, beginning even before the passage of such legislation as the Major Crimes Act and other “congressional violations of Indian Nationhood,” as John described the white man’s law of the nineteenth century.

The theft of John Tatekeya’s cattle occurred just about the time when groups of young American Indian men began to patrol the streets of urban America. Streets like Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis–St. Paul, where men in red berets would resist police violence toward “relocated” Indians and participate in a variety of activities which were soon to become the substance of a full-fledged political movement called “Red Power” and “AIM,” claiming national and international attention.

Before John’s case would go to trial, the American Indian Movement would be full-blown, and people all over the world would
know the meaning of “justice” in Indian country. And because of the controversial nature of the activities in urban America during this period, the rural, reservation, so-called trust lands were also under FBI surveillance in ways that they had not been since the late 1800s. It was then, John’s older relatives had told him, that the Department of War/Interior police force was placed on most of the reserved lands in the country, a colonial law-and-order force which changed Sioux justice for all time. Though he thought of himself as essentially a law-abiding man, these facts of history indicated to John the presence of some kind of alien force on Indian land that was at one and the same time coercive, obligatory, discordant.

The federal agent with the flaming cheeks who appeared at Tatekeya’s door this day seemed innocent and somehow frail. John walked beside him to the government rig, which had the Department of the Interior, U.S. Government stamped on both its doors. John peered into the slats of the shiny blue and silver trailer, checking on the saddle horses, which were nervous and stamping and blowing dust from their nostrils.

John, who had been, “just for the hell of it,” a rodeo saddle-bronc rider in his earlier days and even now considered himself an expert horseman in the tradition of the great Sioux centaurs of the past, looked with quiet suspicion at the mares which had been brought to his place from the Agency pastures.

“You think these old gov’ment nags are gonna make it?”

“Just a minute, John,” said the young man, laughing. “They’re pretty fair examples of fi-i-ine horseflesh!” But he, too, peered into the trailer, as though to either confirm or deny John’s assessment.

John shrugged and got into the rig.

Together the men and the horses would conduct a futile search of the long-grassed hills of South Dakota and Nebraska for forty-two head of John Tatekeya’s cattle, stolen months before, all of them carrying the ID (Indian Department) brand.
As they pulled away from John’s place, they looked sideways at the large tipi at the rear and the small house in front, both set apart from a recently planted grove of elms and oaks to the west, the large corral standing in the tall grass, and a couple of outbuildings blazing in the morning light. Red Hair, unaccustomed to the rough, rutted reservation road, drove carefully and slowly. The house, looking like someone’s bad joke, was set up on blocks, the front screen door was hanging ajar, and the front steps were detached from the stilted porch. There was no foundation under the house, but electrical lines had recently been connected and John had begun to have hope.

The pickup pulling the horse trailer moved laboriously from the scene.

Along the road, wind had blown clumps of weeds into the barbed-wire fences, which held them there. And more were piling up. By late fall the fences would be so clogged with thistles a jackrabbit couldn’t get through. It became a metaphor in John’s imagination for his own struggle, and he silently watched a small whirlwind sweep dried leaves and weeds in its path.

The wind knows how to do things to interfere in the lives of men, thought John, and Dakotahs have explained to themselves the significance of its power through various means. His mother had resisted it all, having been persuaded finally by the simplicity of Christian beliefs to give up the complicated and difficult worship of the Four Winds, and he himself, because he had been her favorite son, was also dissuaded to some extent from practicing the old ways.

“Si-i-i-lent ni-i-i-ght, ho-o-o-ly ni-i-i-ght” rose incongruously in John’s memory as he watched the thistles being swept before
the wind. He remembered himself as a child of seven standing first on one foot in the bitter, sweeping snow, and then on the other, then entering the church singing Christmas carols and holding candles, which acolytes set ablaze as each communicant entered. He had looked over at his mother for approval and she had smiled at him, and her smile would forever haunt him. This Christian way was less time-consuming and easier on the physical self than any of the Indian religious practices John had come to know, and it had been a comfort for both of them and an assurance that everything was all right. He had believed that until his mother’s death when he turned nine years old. It was only at her graveside that he was faced with the fact that he knew none of the important songs which would assist her journey into the next world.

He thought of the ease with which they had been persuaded to believe in the white man’s religion, and as the pickup truck driven by Red Hair made its way down the graveled road and out of the bend in the river, John put the memory of his mother out of his mind, pulled his hat down over his eyes, and pretended to sleep. Now at sixty years of age, he knew that the white man’s law was no more powerful than his religion but just as pervasive, and he decided that he would try to pretend that this trip with Red Hair was something more than a futile gesture. It was, after all, the best they could do at this time, and it might lead, eventually, to the truth about who the men were who had committed this crime against him. He had to find the truth and get his cattle back.

The horses in the trailer grimly held their positions as the government rig pressed southward, Red Hair talking and chewing gum with equal vigor and John silently musing about his own culpability concerning the theft, which had cut his herd nearly in half.

“I betcha some one of your neighbors done it, John,” said Red Hair. “Who do you know who doesn’t like you? Who needs money?”

That’s just about everybody, thought John, though he didn’t raise his head nor did he answer. He really didn’t want to enter
into this discussion; he considered it small talk, that chatter designed just to fill up the empty spaces which he had begun to realize were intolerable to the white men that he knew. Though they taught in their Sunday school classes that silence is golden, none of them that he had become acquainted with could stand silence. This young man, he decided, was a real talker. Liked to hear his own voice.

Sorrowfully he turned his thoughts to his own recent behavior. He had been drunk and absent from his place for nearly two weeks and was told later that he had been seen in Presho, Chamberlain, Pierre, even as far as Sturgis and Rapid City.

“They’ve been sold piecemeal, John,” Red Hair went on, totally oblivious to John’s unresponsiveness and now warming up to his subject enthusiastically. “And we’re gonna have to get on these horses and ride some of those ranches down there and see if we can identify any of your stuff.

“You know, selling them piecemeal is what a cattle thief will do because it makes them harder to trace that way,” continued the younger man with his one-way conversation.

Yeah, thought John, and if the government and me don’t find my cows we’re probably gonna come to the end of our bargain, ennit, Red Hair?

As the Department of Interior rig pressed on through the grasslands of western South Dakota and emerged into the endless Nebraska fields of cornstalks, dry and brittle from the August winds, John began to wonder about the issues at hand and thought that they might not be as simple as they seemed to be at first glance.

John had been one of the few men in the district to qualify for the government “payback” cattle scheme. The U.S. government provided you with fifty head of cattle, for example, and you paid them back with your calf crop for the next thirty years. He still had his own allotment, he had over the years purchased the allotments of his brothers and sisters, and so he was considered an Indian landholder who could be assisted to financial security through a federally funded cattle ranch project. John had always run a few cattle. It was the way he and his father and his brothers
had always lived in the contemporary world. But in the middle of a booming postwar economy it was thought that Indians ought to become big cattle ranchers. Run cattle for profit. Enter into the free-market economy of the greatest democracy in the world. John was one of the first to be contacted by the agent to apply for the funds.

He’d been at it now for three years along the Missouri River, in the midst of a time of great confusion and upheaval during the harnessing of the river for hydropower, the building of several huge dams (one of them near Pierre the largest rolled-earth dam in the world), and the subsequent flooding of thousands of acres of Indian land.

Some of John’s own land was now under water, as were the lands of his neighbors. In the middle of this confusion, John had to ask himself, What kind of man is out to ruin me? Who among my neighbors would do this thing and why? I know them all and have known them all of my life; I’ve worked and boozed around with them, prayed and grieved with them in times of sorrow; shared their joys and triumphs. And now I am getting to be an old man. And this, now. Just at this time. Who?

No, he thought, it must have been outsiders, men who are unknown to me, strangers who have crept in to steal a man’s livelihood without compassion, men I don’t know, men to whom I am not related, and, therefore, men without conscience.

This was John’s hope, but the depth of sadness in his heart acknowledged that his hopes might not be upheld. He might never know the answers to the troubling questions he now posed, and even if he did find the answers, they might not be the ones he would want to hear. He might never see his cattle returned, which not only would be a loss of great magnitude, financially speaking, but would also serve as a reinforcement of his secretly held notion that the world in which he now lived, the modern life which he tried to be a part of, unconnected as it was to his past, was cruel and without honor.

We Dakotahs used to know how to live, he thought. But they told us to settle down, and become like them. This is not the
world in which we can steal the horses of the Pawnee, and they ours.

Ah, well. . . . The four wires of his fence had been stretched and held to the ground, he knew now, and a couple of large trucks had driven into his pasture, up to the corral and loading chute, and more than forty head of John’s one hundred and seven horned Herefords had been loaded out. John had one of the best and largest herds on the reservation, the envy and pride of everyone around. His relatives could come to him now and expect that he would feed them. He gave meat for the feast at every summer dance, and he was known throughout the country for his generosity.

It had probably taken three or four men to do the job on a moonlit night, and silent and unnoticed, they had probably driven down this same isolated road, John mused.

Regretfully, John recalled the agony of his own recalcitrant behavior, and he could think of no excuses. He had driven into the barren yard nearly two weeks after the theft, looked around for reassurance though he knew that Rose would not be home, and petted his big hound dog as it emerged from under the front porch. John had felt nauseous.

He was red-eyed and aching from too much liquor and too many nights laid out in the bed of his pickup or slumped behind the wheel.

He’d gone into the house and sunk tiredly into the overstuffed chair for a few minutes before he headed for the bedroom. He slept for a couple of days, thinking that if he stayed in bed the dizziness in his head would stop, but it only seemed to get worse and it caused skips in his heartbeat every time he stood up. He couldn’t eat. Before he could get better, he shuffled outside and went around to the back of the house. Shaking and weak, he had started the fire to heat the stones for the sweat he knew he needed.

Later, he had gone from pasture to pasture, at first driving his rig because he felt so weak; the next day, he’d saddled the old buckskin gelding and ridden slowly through the bottomlands near
the river looking for any telltale tracks. He did this for days, not knowing what else to do.

One late afternoon, after such a search, he sat in the saddle smoking a cigarette, and when he looked up into the sky he noticed perched in a nearby cottonwood a silent, handsome owl keeping watch over his activities. As he moved along the subirrigated eighty acres, he felt on his neck the old carnivore’s gaze.

“That old man,” he said under his breath. “A i sta wa hna ke sni” (why does he not take his eyes off me?). He turned in the saddle and hollered irritably, “Get the hell outta here!”

John found himself wondering about this owl, sitting there in a kind of ineffable quietness that was disturbing, turning its head toward him since its eyes, set immovably in their sockets, could not change their positions, purposefully keeping track of his movements. He felt it to be less innocent than many of the species known to him, and he wondered what it knew.

Some owls hunt night quarry only, John thought. Those were the kind with eyes on each side of the head so that they seem not to be looking in the same direction at the same time. And since it was getting late in the afternoon, John at the first thought this owl keeping watch on him might be one of those.

But it was not. On the contrary, this owl, which had become John’s attendant, however briefly, in this matter, seemed to be one of those splendid companions of prairie dogs known in this country to exist for the purpose of maintaining the balance of nature in other than obvious ways. Yet it was too large to be one of those burrowing owls, those tiny creatures who run about prairie dog towns on long, spindly legs. It was huge. Magnificent. And John rode on, thinking, and listening, and holding the reins taut, the old gelding’s prancing gait forcing him to stand crouching in the stirrups.

Uninterested in violence, disconnected from the natural urge to strike out, this owl seemed ageless, and John began to imagine that it might even be one of those said to have accompanied the people on their migration into this world. Was it not, though, a hunter? What was it hunting? It seemed not to be trying to
frighten those who inadvertently came upon it. John was, if not frightened, at least startled by its persistence.

Even as his horse swung gracefully into the tall grass along the river’s edge, and as he bent over the saddle to look for signs of the movement of his cattle, John had the feeling that there was nothing here worth searching out, nothing that would answer the question of the whereabouts of his cattle. And the presence of the handsome bird seemed to affirm that feeling.

Looking over his shoulder, John watched the great bird’s silent flight to another tree, where it perched higher, with its toes placed so that there were two in front and two in back. It detached itself a second time, and then another, its hush wings lifting it toward the highest tip of a huge cottonwood. From that vantage point this bird of prey stared into the fading light, and John kicked his horse in the flank and they plunged on and went away.

When he reached the road which wound its way into the bend of the river, John again put the spurs to the buckskin and rode hard and fast back to his own corral. He would have to seek answers elsewhere.