

AMBUSH

Over and over I keep asking, why did those Indians have to come into my life? Because if they hadn't, who knows how things would have worked out? My mom, rest her soul, was always trying to look at the good side. She'd probably point out that after all my talking about it I'm here in California at last. True, but I'm here without Sally. I don't know. Sometimes it seems like the only kind of luck I ever had was bad luck.

I mean, why did it have to be me on the highway near Four Corners? I'm just driving home and all of a sudden it happens: this jeep's blocking the road, somebody's lying on the asphalt and another man's waving at me. Even after a couple of months I see it all in separate pieces: the man who'd been waving is opening my door, the other one gets up from the road--it's like some horror movie where the dead return. Then there's the rifle and pretty soon they're pushing and yelling and before I can think about it they have me blindfolded and my hands are tied, I'm in the jeep. I remember smelling liquor(that would have been Quick Fox) and wet wool. At first it was all crazy and confused, them calling me Ellis and saying I was a prisoner of war. I tried to tell them I wasn't any Ellis but the jeep kept going through the gears real fast and pretty soon I could tell from the dust we were on back roads.

Sure I was scared when we got to that cabin at last and they took the blindfold off. Still in

the back of my head I'm thinking it's all going to blow over as soon as they find out I'm not Ellis. And when Quick Fox comes back from checking with their boss I'm pretty hopeful. He's swearing and kicking at the floor. "This ain't the fucking guy from the Highway Department," he keeps yelling. I could see how upset that Indian was. I almost wished I was still blindfolded.

"Hey," the other one, Cloud Shadow, says, "take it easy." I was holding my breath. It was already night outside, that cabin smelled of creosote and kerosene. For a while Quick Fox looked as if he wasn't going to talk to the other Indian. Then he said, "Sky Eagle says we keep him anyway."

My stomach fell. It was funny, though. First thing I thought of was how Sally and I'd kept putting off having a kid--I was the one who'd kept putting off having a kid, really--until we could get a little more ahead. What if these Indians killed me and I left no one behind? Through the window I could see the outline of the bare hills--they were black and sharp, one of them stuck up like a witch's hat--and I felt just awful, I missed Sally so much. We'd been having a lot of difficulties lately, the two of us working all the time. Every evening she'd come home complaining that her feet hurt bad but I was so tired I'd just collapse into a chair watching a Magnum rerun, I'd fall asleep before the first commercial. Lord, though, with those two strange Indians in a drafty cabin in the hills, how lovely all that seemed now.

Actually, even in those first few moments when I saw they were going to keep me I felt better knowing that Lloyd would be coming over to make things a bit easier for Sally. I had this sudden thought that if they killed me she could always marry him, and I somehow felt that would make up for our not having a kid. It was the strangest feeling: here I was in that cabin with one Indian mad as hell and the other one looking off gloomily into the distance, not to mention that rifle lying against the wall; and all at once for no reason at all I felt strong. Later I thought about that: if they'd have killed me then I'd have been a hero, Sally would have remembered me with affection. She'd have married Lloyd, sure, but it would have been the three of us, in a way. Now that's all gone.

I'm here in California at last, I tell myself, I'm starting all over.

Well, they didn't kill me. Mostly they told me about their tribe and its problems. It was a sad story. I never heard of a tribe with more troubles than that one. All through their history it seems they had these terrible floods and storms and bitter winters that killed off their people, and the other tribes were always invading their lands. I didn't want to say anything but, truthfully, they didn't seem to be much as fighters. Cloud Shadow recited some of their poems about losing their warriors in battle. They were sad poems.

"You've had bad times, I'll admit," I told them. I'm a fair man and I give credit where it's due.

"The white man made things worse," Quick Fox says, like it's a line he's been waiting to use.

That was why they kidnapped me in the first place. The state was going to put a highway through one of their Sacred Lands. Sky Eagle, the brains of their outfit, thought they'd grab this Ellis guy from the Highway Department and hold him as a "bargaining chip," as he put it, hoping they could get the state to re-route the road. This Sky Eagle didn't sound like much of a leader to me: he was operating out of a pay phone so the calls couldn't be traced, and one of those two had to drive into town at a prearranged time to call from another pay phone. It seemed awfully amateurish to me but I could see right away that Sky Eagle was going to be the kind of guy who didn't like to admit he's made a mistake.

As you can imagine, that first night when he gave those Indians the order to keep me I couldn't get any sleep. I kept my eyes closed and I smelled the musty sleeping bag, the dust, the creosote and kerosene--and I'd think of Sally, of the fights we'd been having. I'd want to tell her it was my fault(because it usually was, I could see from here)and that it wasn't too late to make things work. Really, there couldn't have been a worse time to have been kidnapped.

Well, I opened my eyes at last and I saw the moon had risen over the hills and everything was light. I lifted my head slowly, trying to see it out the window--real slowly, because I didn't

want to surprise those sleeping Indians. I shouldn't have worried--they were both snoring. There was the moon, big and silver, hanging over the black hills that shut in that valley. It was pouring light all over the outdoors and over the shapes of the Indians. I caught a glimpse of something shiny and I realized it was Quick Fox's rifle, which he was keeping close by.

All at once I realized I was crying. I put my hand to my face, trying to quiet the noise but truly, I didn't know what I was crying about. Maybe I wished I actually was this Ellis guy from the Highway Department, or anyone more important than a two-bit clerk from a convenience store that nobody was going to miss.

I knew I'd been hard on Sally. She'd changed since we got married from a fun-loving person who used to smile even when she answered the phone to a woman who seemed to be frowning now whenever you saw her by herself. I'd wanted to marry her right after high school but she made me wait a whole year. All we did was go bowling and have pizzas--nothing all that fancy, not enough to hold up the marriage, I thought--but she seemed to want that year of dating, not doing much of anything, as if she knew once we were married it was going to be hard. And I was impatient, I kept asking her to cut it short. I was always getting ready to start my life. Which is what got me into trouble in the first place, thinking I could take over my uncle's candy store and turn it into a moneymaker when all it did was break my heart for three years and put me so far in the hole the two of us had to keep working just to meet all the debts.

All the bad luck I had, all the obstacles that came my way, it just meant I had to keep asking Sally to wait a little longer for what she wanted. "When can we stop all this and just start living?" she'd ask. "Just a little longer," I'd say. Maybe I was remembering that year of pizza and bowling, maybe that made me feel a little more justified in asking her--just one more time--to wait.

But I wanted to get out of that town so bad. I used to talk to Sally all the time about the two of us living near the Pacific. It got funny. "Imagine us..." I'd say, and before I could go any further she'd jump in, imitating my voice, "Imagine us with the ocean out there, close enough to

touch." I'd kind of laugh at her making fun of me that way.

Really, she never seemed that interested in leaving, she wanted to be around her folks and friends and all. I figured she'd come around eventually, though. But we always needed just a little more money before we could think about moving. I look at it now and it seems as though it was never meant to be. Still, I remember driving to work each morning thinking that one day she was going to change her mind.

When I was looking at that moon and crying I was thinking about all that. I'd wipe my eyes with a corner of that musty sleeping bag and I'd see certain scenes again and again.

Lloyd probably came over the first day. It was natural enough: we used to call him our boarder sometimes. As soon as she knew what was up Sally must have called him and he'd have brought his truck full of tools and broken TV sets and plunked them right in the middle of the living room floor and more or less kept her company. She'd have stopped going to work right away, I know. Lloyd would have taken care of her, done some shopping, brought over a pizza. I imagine every now and then Sally would ask him in a kind of sing-song voice, "Oh, Lloyd, what am I going to do?"

I can see them watching a Magnum rerun. Lloyd would be on the other side of the room, fiddling with the dials on some old set. "It's O.K.," he'd tell her after a little while. Then he'd squint and pull his head back, move the dials a little and sit up straight. "It's going to be O.K." He'd give a little sigh. "It's going to be O.K."

Sally's got these gray eyes. When she's tense they can almost seem metallic, like the paint on a new car; but when she gets relaxed they soften so they remind me of the cashmere sweater I gave her when we first got married. These last couple of years she was always tense. I imagine, though, what with me gone and Lloyd talking to her so slow and methodical, telling her everything was going to be all right, the color of her eyes probably softened up.

But I had my troubles, those Indians had theirs. They had a map on the table showing their Sacred Lands--God knows it was in a desolate enough territory. Every now and then one of

those two would draw a finger slowly across the map to show where the road was going to go. Then one of them would be sure to say, "The white man promised never to violate those Sacred Lands." I swear, once I thought I saw tears starting in Quick Fox's eyes--it was that important to them.

"Hey," I told them, "you know that if it was up to me I'd just leave it that way forever. You know that, don't you?"

It was a kind of awkward relationship between me and those Indians. After the first day or so their security wasn't all that tight but then, they knew I had no inclination to get myself lost in those Godforsaken hills where I might freeze to death or get eaten by wolves. There was nothing to read in that shack but a couple of old outdoor magazines and we didn't talk much, except at meals, and then it was mostly them telling me those sad stories about their tribe.

You could see they were waiting for instructions from Sky Eagle, who was making demands of the Highway Department, and those two boys knew the news wasn't very good. It could make Quick Fox testy sometimes.

"We got ourselves a live alligator by the neck," he said after one of his talks with his boss. Cloud Shadow told him with his eyes to watch what he was saying but he just went on. Quick Fox was wearing his black hat pulled way down. When he smiled you could see how bad his teeth were. "You don't know what's worse," he cackled. "to let him go or just keep hanging on." He looked mean and dangerous, the way he could all of a sudden.

I wanted to tell him I didn't feel like any alligator but I figured if I just kept quiet things might get better eventually.

Cloud Shadow didn't say anything. He wasn't fat but somehow when he was sitting he looked pudgy and there was something almost feminine about him, so he'd seem like a mother brooding over her kids who'd gone bad. More likely, he was thinking about double-bottomed semis barreling through his tribe's Sacred Lands. I think he realized from the time they found out I was the wrong guy there was no way they were going to stop those trucks.

One night we played poker for nickels and dimes but I can tell you that was anything but fun. Cloud Shadow was good but he got distracted, like he had other things on his mind; Quick Fox, who'd had a little firewater, played for keeps. The strangest thing was, I got great cards and what good did it do me? As soon as I won a couple of hands I started getting a stare from Quick Fox across the table: it kind of made everything go still and even his string tie looked menacing, like a snake that might be getting ready to strike. Pretty soon he's got this maniac-killer's smile on his face and all I'm seeing is the shine on the barrel of his rifle propped against the wall behind him. I got to thinking of stories from the Old West and I start discarding aces, throwing away pairs--it kills me to do this. I keep wondering, with all the bad luck I've had, why is God playing around with me like this? Well, as Quick Fox wins all those games I'm throwing his way he gradually gentles down and his scary smile relaxes into a dead pan that's easier to deal with. But do you know what I actually hear myself saying in my head? *O.K,redskin, you win with your measly pair of tens but they're going to pour concrete all over your Sacred Lands.* I guess that shows just how frustrated I was.

I mean, sometimes when I think of the injustice of it all. I never in my life did anything to hurt any Indian.

I was with them five days--four days, twenty hours more or less, if you want to be accurate--and how often has that much time gone by at the Anytime Store and I can't remember a thing about it afterward? But this five days with those two changed everything. Hour after hour passed and nothing happened--they didn't let me go, there was no ransom, no marines buzzing over those hills in helicopters. As I watched the moon climb over the black, pointed hills, I realized I could disappear completely and nobody would know the difference.

Oh, I fell in love with Sally all over again--maybe I fell in love with her for the first time, really. Sometimes it seemed to me she was the only person in the world who knew me. I remembered how wonderful it used to be on Sunday mornings lying beside her in bed in the early days of our marriage. I'd be up before she was and I'd pull close so that in the warm

darkness under the covers I'd feel the tickle of her breath against my skin. Lying there, she'd be warm and soft and smooth. In that shack with the Indians I knew that I'd pushed her away from me and all at once I felt a panic chill: I couldn't be sure I hadn't lost her already and I vowed I was going to change when I got out of this, I was going to appreciate what I had, I was going to tell her I learned something out there and for sure I was going to start listening more closely.

Of course by then Lloyd was already listening closely, letting his coffee go cold as he sat cross-legged on our living room floor, trying to bring the wavy lines under control. Sally's eyes would be soft and calm now, she'd be talking about the days when the three of us would drive out to the man-made lake and skinny-dip at midnight.

"Do you remember, Lloyd?" she'd say.

"Yeah." He'd bend over, twist his screwdriver and give a grunt. "Oh, yeah."

"Those were good times," she'd say.

And Lloyd would stop working, sit up straight for a moment. "Yeah," he'd say, almost singing it, slow so that it seemed like more than one word.

I suppose she asked him to stay over the very first night, being so scared and lonely. I can't say I blame her: she must have been really upset. And he'd have slept on the couch, the first night.

In that shack I remembered a lot of things about Sally, like when the candy store went bust and I just kind of fell to pieces for a while, I couldn't even get out of bed for a whole day. How was I going to pay off all my debts? Was I going to go to jail? There were some people who were really mad at me; what were they going to do? I was younger then, and scared. She'd made me some tea and coaxed me to come into the kitchen. I wrapped a blanket around myself because I was so cold all the time. I sat at the table and looked into the back yard where I'd planned to have a lot of barbecues--I couldn't have felt worse. But Sally was calm, she said she knew we'd have to give up the house, that she'd have to start working full time now, but she was willing to do it.

"It'll only be for a year," I said. "Maybe two. I promise, I swear it." I remember her sitting there, her wrists looking so thin against the dark tablecloth.

When thoughts of Sally made me sad I'd try to distract myself by thinking about those Indians. How could they ever have thought such a crazy plan was going to work? I mean, they must have been pretty desperate.

Mostly, though, I'd wind up thinking about my own life. I'd think about how my father used to come home drunk almost every night and sit in the chair by the TV, laughing quietly to himself, even if it was the news he was watching, and the light would catch his bald head. His love for the bottle did him in, and he would have been fired from his job driving a delivery truck if he hadn't been killed in that accident. Long ago I'd made up my mind that I was going to be different from him, I wasn't going to wind up a drunk who bores anyone who'll listen with the story of the one adventure of his life, the time he hitchhiked to Alaska.

How many times did I have to hear him tell me about that trip? "I was the only human in a hundred miles. The river was running hard and you could almost hear the salmon swimming through all that cold fast water." Well, by and by my Indian guards offered me a slug of booze and I told them I didn't drink. Quick Fox shook his head, as if he was disgusted. Cloud Shadow didn't say anything but I thought he approved. He drank, but just for politeness' sake.

On the night before they got word from Sky Eagle, though, something kind of changed. It was raining and you could hear it pounding the roof of that shack. Quick Fox had more than a few too many and he stumbled off to his cot in the corner, where he hunched up under the covers and started moaning over and over something that sounded like "Lola." I didn't know if that was his wife or girl friend, or maybe a daughter. Then again it could have been an Indian word, I suppose, something about his tribe.

Cloud Shadow saw I was watching. He shook his head and turned away.

All at once, with Quick Fox out of commission and me feeling awful about Sally, I had this really strong desire to talk to Cloud Shadow. I would have liked to have known a little about

him and his troubles. Did he have kids? He looked like he'd be a real serious father. I suppose I thought that if we started talking I could have told him about Sally. I was thinking about how she and Lloyd and I had been friends all through high school. I would have told that Indian about how everyone was surprised when easygoing Lloyd married Jeanine not long after Sally and I got married because nobody figured it would work out, though six months was pretty fast for it to break up.

Cloud Shadow was sitting at the table. His back was to me. I thought I'd move around to the other side of the room to check out if he looked like he was inviting conversation. Quick Fox had quieted down on the cot and I worked my way around to the sink for a glass of water. I never got over the habit of being careful not to surprise them with any sudden movements. I poured myself a glass of that water that smelled like coins you've had in your pocket all day and as I drank I snuck a peek at Cloud Shadow.

He was staring out the window into the hard rain. I expected him to be looking sad but I saw instead that his face was like a rock, a rock you throw at a person when you want to hurt him. I doubt he even knew I was in the room with him. The kerosene lamp was coated with soot, I could smell the water in the glass before I set it down. And all at once it seemed to me that Cloud Shadow could be the more dangerous of the two Indians, that he was somebody with hurts that went down real deep that I was never going to know about. I tell you, I was scared. I went back to the other side of the room and I listened to the rain quieting and the flame fluttering in the wick of the kerosene lamp and I looked at Quick Fox peacefully asleep. I really wished he was awake.

I don't know, I got myself spooked, I suppose. It was just one glimpse and I felt like I'd lost a lifelong friend. Maybe I should have said something to Cloud Shadow anyway, maybe he'd have smiled at me sadly and we'd have started talking. But after I saw his face when he was looking out the window it was as if someone had put a DANGER sign on it.

I suppose at that very moment back in town Lloyd was sitting on our floor with a

newspaper spread out so his tools wouldn't dirty the rug. He'd have a cup of coffee there on the newspaper too, going cold before he finished it. He'd be fiddling with the dials, he'd be telling Sally things were going to turn out all right, I'd be back safe in a while. "Don't worry," he'd say, "I know that boy. He'll come out O.K."

"Oh, Lloyd, Lloyd," she'd say. "What am I going to do? I'm so tired."

And he'd remind her of some crazy thing the three of us did in high school because he'd know she'd feel better remembering.

"Lloyd, Lloyd," she'd laugh softly after a while, "you should never have married Jeanine."

He'd twist his head a little, working on a screw, he'd snap a button and the set would go on: perfect. He'd pick up that coffee cup and take a sip, just enough to wet his lips before putting it down. "Yeah," he'd say, "I know. Do I ever."

And then the two of them would watch Magnum for a while without saying anything.

I've only been here in California for a month. I live in the Valley, which isn't on the ocean, but it's convenient to where I work--the store's pretty much like the one back home--and I can get to the ocean anytime I want to. Just last week I went to the Santa Monica pier. I had a really nice seafood dinner by myself in a clam shack and then I got a cup of coffee and walked to the end of the pier. The ocean got silver, the lights went on all around the curve of the coast and the mountains that stood between me and the Valley turned purple. They seemed like cardboard cutouts, the sky behind them was peach but a chilly blue came up from somewhere and all at once those mountains went black. The surf was hissing below and I felt a shiver. I'll admit it, there was some kind of fear and I didn't know what I was doing there on a pier jutting out into the Pacific. I had this strong feeling I wanted to be somewhere else but I had no idea where that place might be.

The strange thing was, out here in California I suddenly remembered those two Indians,

that cabin up in the hills, the smoking chimney of the kerosene lamp; and at the same time I was thinking of Sally and Lloyd, who were together now. I didn't know if I hated the two of them or wished I were with them. It took a little bit for me to catch my breath and remind myself that I'm starting over, that I'm not old, really, I have my whole life before me.

I can't sleep much these days--I suppose it's the excitement of the move. I'll raise myself up in bed to see the numbers on my digital clock. A few minutes later I look and the numbers are different. I know I'm going to be tired all day, I'll have to drag myself through the hours at work. I close my eyes and lie there trying to sleep and I'll start remembering things from that time. Sooner or later I'll be going over that last day, when Quick Fox came into the cabin after his call to Sky Eagle and told me they were going to let me go.

"I won't tell anyone anything," I promised.

Cloud Shadow looked at me and once more his face changed to a rock. "You're damned right," he said. He didn't have to tell me they knew where I lived, they knew about Sally. I sure didn't want to find out what they might do if they got really desperate.

"Sky Eagle made a deal," Quick Fox said. "We got to return you." He motioned to Cloud Shadow. "We're going to be out of town for a while. But we have plenty of friends here."

Those two were really disappointed, as you can imagine. I heard them grumbling outside the shack, probably cursing out Sky Eagle. Nothing was going to stop that highway from going through their Sacred Lands, evidently. I got myself ready but I really didn't know how to feel. I looked at the cabin where for a while at first I actually believed I was going to die. The hills outside already looked different. I knew I was going back to my old life at last but the feeling was a little like disappointment.

They blindfolded me again though this time they didn't tie my hands and we drove back across those dirt roads. It didn't seem to take anywhere near as long as it did in the first place and those two Indians weren't saying much. When we were down at the four-lane outside of town they let me take the blindfold off.

They left me in the shopping mall and gave me a quarter for a phone call even though I had my own money. Then they just drove off, without any farewells. There I was in the shopping mall. I stood there for a while and watched the people going by. It was the dinner hour and things were quiet. I suppose I looked pretty disreputable, my clothes all wrinkled and such, though I'd washed up earlier that day. I wondered how long I could just stroll around there before anyone would recognize me. For a few minutes I enjoyed being invisible.

When I phoned Sally at last she answered after one ring: she was expecting me. She called my name.

"I love you," I told her.

"I'll be right there," she said.

I remember thinking as I waited for her that there was always a period when you saw someone again after a while, no matter how close they were, when you were strangers to each other. I tried to prepare myself for that.