Little Johnny Running Cloud

1.

***J***ohnny remembers stars spinning in circles cutting bright slits in the black sky. *The class outing to the planetarium in Chicago. The lights down I was kissing Louisa and I got so hard I couldn’t stand. She laughed as I moved my coat to cover up, “Why don’t you hang it on your woody, Johnny?”*

Hearing sounds of drumming he closes his eyes, grabs his bedroll, and sees himself six years old...Aunt Marrie wraps a bath towel behind his back, pulls him closer as she dries behind his ears: “Can’t be wet behind your ears, you’ll catch a death of...and what will my sister say?” She turns him around and works the towel down to his private parts: “What a big boy you are; another ten years...my, my... you’ll be just like your ta!”

He overhears ta say of Marrie, “With her hot blood she’ll make a trunk of trouble. McCleuds had her late, named her Marrie.” Explaining in that holy tone of his, “Biblical word it is: *mar* –a bitter spice for the incense. No wonder she’s a hard girl.”

*Auntie Marr, her name sounds like the planet*.

Marrie tells him about the clouds: “There’d be in older Scot families one reading the clouds like Gypsies the tea leaves.” Sneaks off with him on a windy day when he’s 15, sky full of threat, to a secluded spot. She shows him. “Aye, Johnny, your ma won’t have none of this so best no telling.” Johnny pulls away, runs home ahead of the black clouds.

“Ma, Aunt Marrie’s teasing me.”

His mother explains, “We need whatever help we can get, your ta being gone.”

*Ta fled to the war to avoid her*.

Marrie reads the clouds. “Those clouds be following you, Johnny. You’ll see. It’s not for a farthing your name’s McCleud.”

His mother gives her own history with surety. “Our families came all of us from the Isle of Lewis. MacLeod, the name’s in my bible if we believe what’s writ.” Later professes her family comes from Skye, ignores the change of island and confuses the name. “Your father’s name is McCloud, no danger of inbreeding.”

Johnny feels threatened by his aunt, uncertain about matters of incest.

Echoes of Aunt Marrie’s whisper when he turns sixteen. “Some tried to shorten the name to ‘Cloud’ but the shortening did na to your johnny.” He runs outside; she calls from the window. “Look you up, Johnny, see what the clouds tell you!”

She mocks his timidity.

*I’ll to run for San Francisco first chance; let Marr help Ma.*

Clouds pursue his fears across the August night sky.

2.

***J***ohnny walks home from his summer job at the local Texaco station, the day’s work a smudge on his left cheek. He stops in front of the Army & Navy Store and watches a hand arrange a duffle bag and army fatigues in the window. He’s too full of dreams to see the reflection of a maroon Pontiac in the glass.

He enters the store and with the week’s pay under his belt confidently asks about the new display.

Mr. Smith says, “It will make you look older. If it’s tight across the chest, blame your football coach and his weights.” He teases, “Your aunt will see the man in you.”

The peddler had promised a quick sale: “You’ll see, Johnny wants to look older, lacks stubble on his chin.”

Johnny takes a crumpled envelope from his back pocket, pays, and walks home with the fatigues stuffed in the duffle. At night his finger retraces routes 54 and 140 and the turn onto 159 for East St. Louis. He waits for opportunity.

Two weeks later the war office calls his ma to Chicago. Aunt Marrie’s told to look after Johnny. He wants none of it nor his graduation a year off. Duffle packed, fatigues stretched tight and itching, he’s out the door walking proudly down Main Street to 54, determined to hitchhike to San Francisco.

Not waiting for his ma’s return, he ignores her hopes and prayer: “The war’s three years over; maybe they know of your ta.”

*It makes no difference. Ta was running from Marrie. I’m no better*.

Sweating, the summer sun not screened by clouds, he recalls whispers in his ta’s pub. “A man will run from beer made with rice and a woman made of ice!”

He unbuttons his shirt, regrets the heavy fatigues.

*Ta cared more about books than me. Always reeked of malt and hops; proclaimed of Kristallnacht: “Them that burn books must be stopped.” He tricked the recruiting office, offered a smudged driver’s license – him a young 32. “Easy-peasy, Johnny, change the last 0 to an 8.”*

Johnny worries. East St. Louis and Joe’s Bar a long way off. A lineman on the football team whispered, “They’ll like you, Johnny, sure as there’s a heavy keg to move. Give them regards from all the Burtons here in Bolder.” Further hints of another kind of special at Dollie’s Diner. “Hot waitress there likes football players.”

*Yeah, like the pleasures promised by Aunt Marrie...her pleasures.*

Johnny’s thumb points southwest while the maroon Pontiac, hooded Indian Chief leading the way, pulls up behind his back. He hears a whistle and turns. A black gabardined arm waves him over. “You’ve fifty miles to Joe’s in East St. Louis.” Johnny’s startled, his destination sign forgotten with sandwiches on the kitchen table. The passenger door opens, “Ice tea’s in the thermos.” Johnny slides onto the front seat.

A smile appears under a faded fedora more grey than black as the old man says, “I’m Chaim and you must be Johnny.” The old sedan rumbles back onto the road. “Fatigues look good on you and the duffle will see you into Tahle...” The rest lost beneath the holey muffler.

He waves his hand, enchants, “Abracadabra gets you to Alhambra and I take159 and 50 into East St. Louis when I travel that way on business.”

Johnny, thoughts blurred by heat, says, “I’m going to San Fran. Aunt Marrie...” The holed muffler takes another bite.

Chaim confirms, “City Lights.”

The sunlight bounces off the hood ornament causing Johnny to wince. “What’s with that Indian?”

“Ah, Chief Pontiac, a sweet red; we work together.” Chaim produces a small catsup bottle on a chain. “Here, take this, the rest go to Collinsville. Brooks and their ketchup are building a big water tower. These are souvenirs for the event.” Another bottle dangling on the rearview mirror swings slowly back and forth.

A fly buzzing on his nose wakes Johnny. He sees a sign pointing to Rt. 159 and East St. Louis. There’s a jar of coins on the driver’s seat, a note, but no Chaim:

**I’ve business with Brooks. Please help yourself to 30 pieces of silver: total $6.60. Fit and proper for travel on Route 66. Tonto will spot the catsup bottle.**

3.

***M****a likes riddles; I hope she finds my note under her pillow*.

Johnny shakes his head. It was the first time he ever wrote, “Love, Johnny.”

Puzzling the coins is easy. There’s a sandwich on the dashboard wrapped in brown paper. A note and catsup bottle are underneath.

**The sandwich will tide you over until supper at Dollie’s. Tonto waits for you at Joe’s. This chain & bottle are for Juna down in Cape.**

A farmer pulls up. There are empty apple crates in the back of his flatbed. “Climb in, soldier. Old Jew asked me to drop you near Dollie’s on my way to the river. I’m Paul.

“Take an apple or two from behind the seat. Dollie’s and Joe’s not paradise. Dollie’s daughter a good show when she waits but mostly Dollie does the waiting. Daughter could use a strong hand. Joe’s close by, doesn’t open until 5.”

Johnny’s light-headed, eats Chaim’s sandwich, and asks if the Cards will move up from second, win the pennant, the series, and how about Stan the Man!

He has flashes of old Uncle Graeme McCleud down from Chicago with doubtful words of comfort. “Your ta’s hiding on Lewis.”

The truck bumps down 10th Street two blocks shy of State. Johnny hears the wake-up call, “Dollie’s is a block up, corner of 9th and Elm – home cooking and cheap. Best to have food in your stomach before drinking at that well. Cathy’s the daughter and you’re a good-looking guy. Always find work on the docks. Try Mississippi Shipping, mention my name.”

Paul waves goodbye. “Be careful of wild Indians west of the Mississippi.”

The door to Dollie’s is a half-turn from either street. The transom’s open and the window ledges have wilted plants that catch the sun but not the rain. The walls are grey and there’s a mirror behind the counter.

Johnny’s hunger’s whetted by the apple and sandwich. He puffs his chest and walks to the counter jingling his silver as proof of future payment. Dollie sets his place.

“Coffee and the special, please.”

“Needs another hour, start with the pie. Leave room for the meatloaf and potatoes.”

Dollie brings a slice of apple pie. “My Cathy made it, doesn’t come with the special but I won’t charge extra seeing you’re a soldier.”

The door opens with the last wipe of gravy and Johnny watches as Cathy sits down two stools over, her name card riding above her right breast. “Mom in back?” She leans closer, draws Johnny’s gaze to the cross below the open “V” of her blouse. Johnny swallows, asks, “Do you live around here?”

“Yeah, right above this place.” She looks him up and down. “Say, why don’t you stop by tomorrow afternoon, early.” She winks and adds, “Where’re you from and where’re you going?” She doesn’t wait for an answer, “Well, I got to get to work.”

Dollie moves the Brooks tangy catsup bottle down the counter, trays the dishes and thanks Johnny for the three quarters. “Come back soon, son.”

“Maybe tomorrow, told there’s work on the docks. Got to meet someone at Joe’s.”

He asks Cathy for directions to Joe’s. She hints, “Two o’clock tomorrow; door’s on 9th.”

4.

***J***ohnny stands at 11th Street and Oak. The hanging sign for Joe’s is partially obscured by summer haze. *Frank better be there. Tony’s such a bull-shitter.*

He enters a long, dark room filled with smells of smoke and yesterday’s beer. A man sits at the end of the counter talking softly with the bartender. Johnny crosses to counter-center, tracks the floating smoke rings.

The bartender comes over and Johnny, his throat dry, rasps, “A cold beer.” He hides behind his glass, asks about Frank, a friend of a friend. A shake of the head and a call down the counter.

“Hey, Tonto, you ever hear of a Frank drinking here? Why don’t you come here, see if you can help. Kid says he’s looking for a friend, guy named Frank.”

He whispers, “Our resident Indian, says his name’s Tonto, *Honest In-d-yun*!” Happily adds, “He’s a *good* Indian.”

Tonto sits one stool over. “Nope.”

The beer meets Dollie’s coffee. “I got-ta piss.” When he returns he nervously offers to buy both a beer. Declined.

He leans over, asks, “Is your name really ‘Tonto?’”

“As good a name as any.” A pause. “The actor playing Lone Ranger is part Indian.”

Johnny struggles with his second beer and words pour out. “I’m going to San Francisco. Got a couple bucks saved, stop and work if I have to, leave St. Louis on Route 66 for LA, then up the coast.” He brags he’d worked in a garage that summer.

Tonto points with the toe of his boot to the catsup bottle chained to the duffle bag between them, says, “Chaim sent you. Spot of meatloaf on your shirt – you ate at Dollie’s. See her daughter? That one’s a real work. We’ve a couple days; tug’s not ready.”

Johnny’s puzzled, sips his beer, thinks about Cathy, Aunt Marrie, and finds himself getting aroused. *Did that Indian put something in my beer when I went to pee?* “You from around here?”

“Yes and no, need to be where I need to be. Depends.”

Outside the light’s fading. Johnny wonders where he’s going to sleep. He yawns and asks if there’s a Y nearby. Tonto grins, says, “It’s summertime...camp at the Mounds. Indians in Collinsville 1000 years ago. Brooks takes our tomatoes and makes a water tower of ‘em. Horseshoe Lake with trees, small cook fire. You’ve a bedroll. We can rig a tarp cover and drape a shirt to keep the ‘skitas off.”

Words come too fast. Johnny grabs the counter, fights for balance, does his best to keep beer and meatloaf in place. “Yes, thanks, indoor plumbing first.”

Outside it’s cooler, not so muggy. Tonto walks to an old busted-up Ford pickup, tosses Johnny’s duffle in back and moves him carefully into the cab. “The window doesn’t roll easy, best leave it be.”

5.

***T***onto’s quiet until Cahokia. “Locals call this Monk’s Mound as if they’d hauled up the earth themselves.” Johnny sees the open space: high, terraced mounds pressing down. “Seven hundred years back my ancestors built a city here bigger than London was then. Twenty-thousand souls.”

He tells Johnny, “We’ll make you a good Indian,” and backs the pickup into a clump of trees. Johnny helps spread branches over the hood. They follow a deer cut 20 yards to a small clearing and cross to a stand of evergreens. Tonto explains, “Needles make a soft bed and pine keeps some critters away, overhangs keep off any light rain, better drainage. Put your duffle down here. Align the bedroll with the head east.”

They return to the clearing and pull dead-fall branches to a fire ring. “A small fire and Indian smoke; our ancestors will join us tonight.”

Tonto carefully prepares kindling and small branches inside the fire ring. After the fire is established he removes a pipe from his jacket pocket and pouch from under his belt. He takes a small branch from the fire to his pipe. He passes the pipe. “Inhale deeply. Peace will come and through the smoke we will become brothers.”

The smoke smells of burning straw and spice, not store tobacco. Johnny coughs and Tonto laughs, reaches for the pipe. Johnny watches and the second time inhales slowly filling his lungs with the smoke.

“Tonto, am I an Indian now?”

“Dream and tomorrow we’ll talk. Relieve yourself on the other side of those trees.”

Johnny finds walking an entirely new experience. He crawls into his bedroll, mutters a soft, “Good night.”

Half-way through the night he wakes and sees the sky locked between pine branches. Grey clusters of clouds blow by. Across the sky a war bonnet races with a horse. A cardinal sings on a branch in his mind.

Tonto’s up at first light, pushes ember-red coals around a coffeepot, and moves blackened lumps to the edge of the fire ring. He hands Johnny a rope. “Stretch it between those trees and hang your bedroll in the sun. Rope can be used to hang a rain flap. Never enough rope camping.”

They sit together for an Indian breakfast: potatoes baked in dying coals and coffee brewed overnight. “Knock off the burnt. Crisp skin’s good, potatoes and tomatoes all native to America.” He passes Johnny a twig to chew. “Better than a store-bought plastic stick with last night’s gunk!”

Johnny drinks the coffee, decides he could do this all the way to California.

Tonto patiently sits on his haunches.

Thirty minutes later he stands and suggests it’s time to walk to the top of the Cahokia Mounds before tourists make dust. He waves his hand as they climb. “From the top you can see the Mississippi flood plain. The spirits are here even if it’s not a burial mound.”

Johnny recalls tenth grade studies, wants to say, “Collinsville’s the horseradish capitol of the world, put that in your pipe!"

He remembers playing cowboys and Indians ten years before, shouting in victory, “Gotchya, only good Indian’s a dead Indian.” *No one wanted to be an Indian. They always were shot with a pop from our orange-crate rifles.*

Tonto leads Johnny to the north side, a full panorama from the top. Back at the campsite he boasts, “The base here is bigger than that of the Great Pyramid of Giza.”

He takes out his pipe. “We’ll return to St. Louis at noon.” He fills the bowl and uses a silver lighter. “A gift from Chaim.”

Johnny nods after the second bowl. “I need to lie down.”

Two hours later there’s a hand on his shoulder. “Johnny, time to go. I’ve errands to run. We’ll meet at Joe’s at seven.” In town he puts Johnny’s duffle in the cab of the truck. Johnny stands silently in front of the diner remembering Cathy’s red hair and freckles.

*She said before two. I want to suck her breasts.*

6.

***D***ollie notices pine needles in Johnny’s hair as soon as he steps in the door. “Tonto’s had you up on his Mounds. I bet he bitched about those Trappists taking the name. There’s grunt work for your supper if you want it but you gotta go upstairs and shower. Can’t have you working here like that. And wake my lazy daughter. If you want, I’ll get you coffee and pie first. You look like you need it.”

Johnny stares nervously at the pie, pushes the crust aside and watches the cherries bumping bellies.

*Didn’t think it would be like this. What’s with Dollie and her daughter?*

His mind’s full of Indians on cloud horses. Nervously tells Dollie, “Pie’s good; I’ll go shower now.”

Dollie gives him her key. “Knock loudly and yell. Be here by four so don’t go falling asleep.”

Johnny blushes thinking about Cathy and offers to pay for the coffee and pie. *Cathy’s breasts, her breasts.*

“Part of supper.”

His heart’s beating faster as he goes round to the outside door and up the stairs. “Anybody home?”

Cathy whistles the cardinal’s song from his dream. “Come on up.”

She looks at Johnny. “Whew, you look like someone camped on you. Tonto, I bet. Shower’s down the hall on your left. Throw your clothes out and I’ll hang ‘em off the back porch.”

Johnny strips and drops his clothes outside the bathroom door. Later, wet towel around his waist, he calls through the cracked door, “Cathy, my clothes.”

“First door on your left.”

He steps inside and Cathy pulls him to the bed with one hand and strips the towel with the other.

Cathy puts a finger on his lips, teases, “Let’s see how big Little Johnny can be.”

Church bells wake Johnny. Cathy suggests, “Why don’t you rinse off while I bring in your clothes. Tell Mom you found a note saying I had errands to run and will be at work by four.”

Cathy is gone by the time he gets back to the bedroom. There’s a note alongside his clothes.

***Running errands – Cathy***

Johnny gives the note to Dollie. “I must have fallen asleep after I showered.”

“Never mind. The sink’s full of dirty dishes. Take care of that first and then move the supplies in the corner to the basement.”

She catches Cathy coming in the door at 4:15 and points to the tables. “They’ll need a wipe first before you set them.”

The supper crowd begins to lighten after 6:30. Johnny’s been washing dishes and pots for 2 hours. He stops Dollie, mentions Tonto, Joe’s and 7 o’clock in one breath.

Dollie laughs. “Seven, Indian time? You shouldn’t worry. If he says he’ll be there, he’ll be there. But once the sun sets, how’s he to tell time? I’ll get you a full plate at seven, you eat slow and you’ll still be there before him even if you walk backwards, trust me.”

Johnny’s plate is clean by 7:15. Cathy’s clearing tables near the door and whispers as he leaves, “You be sure to come back soon; there’s work for you!”

He finds Tonto waiting at the end of the bar.

“Already keeping Indian time.” Asks about Cathy.

“I had to work for my supper.” His blush tells the rest of the story.

Tonto holds his gaze. “One beer and back to our camp before all the clouds disappear.”

7.

***J***ohnny stares blankly out the window on the drive back to the Mounds. *Did I really make love with Cathy this afternoon?* They hide the pickup as before. Tonto carries two large saddlebags and the camping gear to their site.

They share a thermos of tea while the fire burns down to cooking embers. Tonto shows Johnny how to position the potatoes. He waits for the tea to take effect.

Tonto removes a gourd rattle and two ceremonial staffs from one saddle bag and a heavy water-drum from the other. “Johnny, spread your bedroll and lie down.”

He goes back to the truck for a jerry can. Tells Johnny, “Mississippi water,” as he half-fills the drum.

Slowly he strikes the drum, shakes the rattle, watching Johnny’s eyes drift to the clouds.

“Take in what the clouds are telling you and see if you can find your lucky star.”

Johnny watches for stars and sees clouds taking the shape of Indians. The cavalry come and chase a warrior across the sky. He sees one warrior with a beaded band securing a red feather behind his left ear.

Heat lightning flashes from the red feather to the peyote stick on the far side of the fire ring. *That’s me being conceived. I know it. Ma told me about the church picnic but none of this.* The cloud warrior sees his parents lying on a blanket. No other parishioners left on the Mound. The mother stares skyward as the father enters and the lightning strikes. Only a featherlike blood stain of virginity bears witness in the morning.

Drumming and rattling, rattling and drumming. Tonto calling and calling. “Johnny, Johnny, have you seen Red Feather?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Dance, Johnny, dance. The fire circle’s the belly-button of the world, dance around it and your feet will trace the path you will follow.” Johnny floats to his feet, dances to Tonto’s drumming, rooted, swaying – a sapling in the wind, his hands the many branches, a pair of cardinals nestling on his shoulder.

The red male chirps in his ear. “Johnny, get ready to ride the Mississippi on the Mississippi.” He laughs so hard he falls down. He floats to his feet and runs to the trees, yelling to Tonto, “I’ve got to pee-pee I, yes, pee-pee I.”

*Marrie held it, said to aim carefully. I wasn’t four: m – i – s – s ...– I – P – P – I!*

He returns to the fire circle and Tonto suggests, “Be a good thing to sleep now. We’ll talk in the morning. Here’s a pillow of daisy feathers and marigold petals.”

Tonto moves Johnny’s bedroll under the pines. After Johnny’s asleep he suspends a beaded rattle above his belly-button.

In the morning smells of coffee and potatoes wake Johnny. Tonto’s at the fire, gives him a mug.

Johnny’s bleary eyes look over the rim to Tonto. “About last night...”

“Yup.”

“Drumming and dancing; clouds and lightning, yes?”

“Yup, you talking less, sounding like an Indian. Red Feather says we should call you *Little Johnny Running Cloud*. He’s the father of the thought.”

Tonto’s all business. “Tonight the tug, USS Missi-Ippi, barges already tied, departs for New Orleans. You get off at Cape Girardeau. Dancing is easy, un-dancing history not so easy. You or yours un-dancing on the Cherokee Trail. That’s what the Chief saw.”

Johnny has no memory of any Chief.

Tonto suggests, “Sit or lie – I’ll do the tidying.”

8.

***A*** thunderclap wakes Johnny. He struggles down to the pickup. Tonto’s leaning against a fender. Johnny feels lightheaded, wonders if he really has a lucky star and a new name. Tonto helps him into the cab. “I’ll go back for your bedroll and duffle.”

When they’re underway he explains. “I’m Cherokee, Johnny. We lived in Georgia and the Carolines before the gold on our land ended hopes for peace with the white man. First, the Spanish and De Soto, next the English and the French. Fort on the Coosa River protecting their spoils down to Mobile Bay. French losing to the English who ‘gifted’ smallpox blankets in gratitude. We were caught in the middle between the colonies and England.

“Creek War comes and the Cherokees save Andrew Jackson’s white ass at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. Our capital’s in New Echota, headwaters of the Coosa River. Years passing quickly and the treaties of the 1820s, 1830s even faster. Andy slipping his knife between our ribs. ‘It’s relocation time!’ Made sure we’d end up on the far side of the Mississippi. Cherokee’s *Trail of Tears*. You’ll be on it from the beginning. You promised the Chief.”

Johnny’s eyes stare ahead. *I just want to get to San Francisco.*

“I’ll start at the beginning, Johnny, tell you the Cherokee story of Creation. First – a big water tower hanging in the sky gets split in half: top filled with water; bottom half with critters and the first people. They wondering what’s on the outside, struggling up to the rim, slipping back down again. Up and down. Frustrated, they start dancing, beating on the half-barrel with their sticks. Over and over ‘thump, THUMP,’ holing it beneath their feet, tumbling through a sieve of their own making.

“The Galunlati, living above, angered, swished the halves about, spilling water onto the earth. People lucky enough to land on the dry land crying at their loss, salting the oceans. Animals pulled onto dry land become bears, rabbits, deer and other critters. Those not rescued become fish. The people sighing at their loss. Sighs making a wind, suspending falling creatures in the air, birds.

“Close your eyes, we’ll soon be back in East St. Louis.”

A tired Johnny recalls last night’s echoes of rattle and drum, suspended time and sees through closed eyes Tonto circling him, sprinkling pollen and tobacco.

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind, Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind, Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of mind,

9.

***T***onto drives into East St. Louis: down State, left onto 10th Street, lining up Broadway with the Eads Bridge. He drives past Joe’s and Dollie’s, imprints a flight path for Johnny’s return years later.

On the Missouri side he goes north on Commercial, bounces down Sullivan and north again to a wharf providing tie-downs for commercial barges. A made-up string of barges and the tug, USS Missi-Ippi, alongside the dock. A small caravan squats close to the embankment apparently painted by a ten year old.

An African-American man descends two steps to the cobblestones. They hug.

“It’s been too long, Blink, too long. This here’s Little Johnny Running Cloud. He needs passage down to Cape Girardeau. And Johnny, this is Mr. Blink.”

Johnny stumbles over the stones and shakes hands. “Hi, Mr. Blink. Glad to meet you.”

*Didn’t think I’d get passed from a Jewish peddler to an Indian and now this dark African.*

Blink looks at Tonto. “Johnny, nothing to worry about. You’ll see the river can cure what ails you. Wash away those youthful sins. River keeps on flowing.”

*Sins, is he talking about Marrie or Cathy?*

Tonto agrees. “Blink never blinks, sees what we miss. What he sees gives him grey hair. Come, Johnny, your duffle’s still in the truck.”

Johnny retrieves his bag and finds a card stuffed in its mouth, “PONY” spelled in capitals.

“Pony’s the name of my truck.”

Tonto takes it, folds it away in his back pocket. He points at Johnny’s duffle. “My pony wouldn’t mind one of those apples in there. He’s been good.” Johnny’s eyes open wide when he finds three apples. There was only one there this morning.

Blink grins, “I’ll take one of those too and you best eat what’s yours, Johnny.”

Tonto waves goodbye.

Blink says, “You shouldn’t worry. I’ve seen Tonto doing one trick after another. He’s one magic-making Indian. Better get you on board and stow your stuff. We push off in an hour.”

He leads Johnny on deck and down the cabin stairs, apologizes. “It doesn’t smell all that good but once we’re underway you get a breeze below and the hum of the engines is soothing. You’ll have an easy sleep tonight. Cape’s about 150 miles on the river. When we get there depends on river traffic and if everything runs smoothly. Capt’n Dan will get a reading on the traffic and try to get us into Cape late morning. You’ll be no problem. Even spare you the extra grub. Tonto’s a good Indian and sometimes helps us here in St. Louis.”

Blink secures the duffle to the side of the hull and helps Johnny into the folds of the hammock. “May as well try it now. I’ll tell the captain when he comes on board. Wouldn’t do popping out, him not knowing.”

Johnny’s soon dozing, wondering about his new name and his bareback ride with Cathy.

Blink’s on deck, tidying when Captain Dan comes on board. “Little Johnny’s below resting.”

The Capt’n jokes, “Better Little Johnny getting 40 winks than us getting 40 Blinks.”

Johnny is still dreaming when they cast off. His lucky star whispers: “Cape Girardeau, the Cherokees crossed in the winter of 1839, large chunks of ice, boats overloaded. Andrew Jackson’s payback for helping him in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. He takes 20 million acres from the Creeks after sharpening his knife against the Seminoles in 1817. Took all of Florida. The Cherokees should have seen it coming. Gold on Cherokee land in Georgia leads to the Indian Removal Act. You’ll be learning this again but history takes getting used to.”

Johnny wakes, forgets he’s in a hammock and tumbles out. He feels the thrum-thrumping of the large diesels under his feet. He goes up on deck but without sea legs needs the rail to reach the wheelhouse. Blink’s standing beside the captain and makes the introductions.

A pale Johnny extends a hand. “I’m John McCloud, thank you for having me on your boat.”

“My pleasure. Tonto’s always helpful. Wouldn’t hurt to return a favor. We should be at the Cape tomorrow morning.”

Blink says, “I’ll be back with coffee.”

Johnny mentions his strange dream about Indians.

Capt’n Dan nods knowingly. “You shouldn’t be surprised if you have Indian dreams on the river. The Mississippi is their father. In Ojibwa it means ‘Father of Waters.’ Tonto told me its source, Elk Lake’s the Ojibwa name, is spring-fed by the tears of all the Indians that were forced to cross – pushed west by the palefaces. It was Schoolcraft who concocted the Latin name, Itasca, stealing both the lake and name from the Indians. The mighty Mississippi’s all from Indian tears!”

Blink returns with mugs of black coffee. “Thanks, Blink. Why don’t you take the wheel?”

Mug empty, the captain takes a note from his pocket for Johnny. “Tonto left this for you to give to Juna, Jr. in Cape. Why don’t we move to the port side and watch the lights on the shore?”

Several hours pass, time beats like the diesel. Johnny tires and goes below.

Johnny’s up with sunrise, smelling bacon and hearing the coffee perk. Blink advises, “Got to relieve yourself, find a sheltered spot on deck, make sure no boats about to pass, and aim your whizzer downwind over the side. ‘Weighty’ business do back there in that closet. But trust me; the smells ain’t to write home about.”

On deck, Capt’n Dan points aft, stern-side. When Johnny returns to the wheelhouse Blink has coffee, thick slabs of bread and a generous plate of crisp bacon waiting. Capt’n Dan cautions. “If you got your sea legs, help yourself. If not, stay with black coffee. No sense feeding good bacon to the fish.”

Later Johnny asks Blink if he knows Juna.

Blink grins, explains, “There’re several Junas along the river. They pop up wherever Tonto sends a person. You’re not the first. Been going on all the thirty years I’ve been working this tug. Juna and Tonto never seem to grow much older, though lately I think I’ve seen a couple grey hairs in Juna’s braids. I got curious, went to a library in New Orleans. Only Juna I found was a Cherokee named Junaluska that saved Andrew Jackson’s life at battle of Horseshoe Bend. Juna told me his father was also called Juna, said it goes back for generations. Sang me his great granddad’s song about going down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico, Indians riding the coffin of General Jackson like a canoe. Don’t worry, Juna’s a good man.”

Johnny feels queasy and is told to find a comfortable spot on the bow and look at the far horizon down river. Blink advises, “Fresh air should help.” The sun passes overhead and an hour later the rhythm of the engines changes.

Blink comes forward, announces, “Cape Girardeau in fifteen.”

Johnny is standing on deck with his duffle when they pull alongside a bulwark. A man with two braids hanging down his back is waiting at the tie-up. Johnny thanks Capt’n Dan for the ride and Blink for his help.

He walks down the plank and asks, “Are you Juna?”

“Yup,” Juna turns, beckons Johnny to follow.