

Andrew Comey

A Winter's Tree

I woke up staring into a deep translucent blue sky. A loud roaring filled my ears and I felt my body being gently vibrated. As I lifted my head off the truck bed, it felt like someone had peeled my scalp back and was blowtorching my brain. I pulled myself up and peered over the wall of the truck bed. I could see the San Francisco peaks far off in the distance, and for miles around, gentle sloping curves stretched towards infinity. The sight was empty and vast. Simple and beautiful. I felt safe. I saw a sign approaching and recognized it as one I had drilled with buckshot when I was younger and figured we were probably about halfway between Flagstaff and the reservation. Relieved there was no immediate crisis, I settled back against the cab and noticed the familiar figure of Sam Pena sprawled out by the tailgate.

I was glad to see him. Sam was what I call good people. His folks lived on the reservation down the road from mine, and we had been friends since childhood. I liked him because he didn't pretend to be anything other than what he was, and he didn't talk unless he had something to say. People who pretend talk too much. They use words the way a dog trainer in the circus uses a hoop. I once dated a girl who had me jumping through so many hoops that I probably could have qualified for the Olympic high hurdles. Unfortunately, instead of qualifying for the Olympics, I ended up marrying her. She seems really annoyed with me these days because I'm not as well trained as I used to be, but the fact of the matter is that after a

few years the pretty leaves fall off the tree and you're left staring at bare wood. Then either you still like the tree, or you don't.

Sam started thrashing around. Although I respected him for being honest about himself, looking at him sprawled out back there made me think that perhaps a little pretending isn't such a bad thing. The front of Sam's shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots were covered in dry mud. He looked like he had fallen flat on his face in a mud puddle. In the overall scheme of things, for a night on the town, this wasn't bad at all; a little embarrassing perhaps, but not bad. Falling flat on your face in the mud fell into the same general category as urinating in public, stuff like that. After all, if you're going to fall flat on your face, then the mud was a good place to do it, certainly better than asphalt or concrete. I had heard stories about guys getting drunk, passing out, and getting frostbite, or wandering out on the highway and getting hit by semis. Falling in the mud was no big deal.

Sam woke up abruptly and threw his eyes around wildly until they locked on mine. He then relaxed and threw me a big smile.

"Joe Feather, how are you today?" he asked lightly.

I shrugged my shoulders. He knew.

"Where's Mary?" he asked.

I shrugged again, shot Sam a hard glance, and looked away. I didn't want to go into it. We had left the reservation together last night but had lost each other in a sea of booze.

When I looked back at Sam, his big smile had come back like one of those inflatable dolls the kids have that keep popping back up after you punch them.

"You know, Joe," he said, "you put on one hell of a good show last night."

I didn't like the sound of this one little bit. Whatever it was, I knew I probably didn't want to hear it. I had pretty much decided to leave it lying just where it was but Sam must have sensed something and his face turned serious for a moment. "Oh Joe man, it was nothing to be ashamed about. In fact, if I were in your shoes right now, I would think it was maybe even something to be proud of."

The smile was back. Whatever he had on me must be really

good. I was too weak to take anything really seriously, and despite my best intentions, I could feel a smile growing across my face. I waited for him to continue, but he just sat there grinning.

“Well, are you going to sit there grinning at me until I throw you out on the highway or are you going to tell me?” I yelled.

When he realized I didn’t remember he laughed so fucking hard he had tears in his eyes. When he finally came up for air, his face was pure glee.

“Well, I got to the Crazyhorse late, and when I walked in you and Mary were sitting one of the top booths with Gail.”

Mary and Gail together were trouble. They had been best friends since they were cheerleaders in high school and had been maids of honor at each other’s weddings. They got together about every week or so, and it seemed to me from what I’d overheard, that their favorite activity was talking about me or Gail’s husband Mark. Basically, they would huddle up over a cup of coffee and just rip us to shreds. Usually their conversations started out with a “Whose husband did the stupidest thing this week”-type debate, before singling each one of us out for a thorough raking over the coals. Then they would pour another cup of coffee for intermission and rest a minute before going back over everything to make sure they hadn’t missed anything juicy. One day I was home sick. They thought I was asleep, and I was amazed to hear some of the stuff those two talk about when they’re alone. Guys are pretty bad about this kind of stuff before marriage, but afterwards we cool off and avoid being specific about certain things. For one thing, you don’t want another man thinking about your wife in that way, and for another, you don’t want other guys to think you’re anything less than some awesome sex god your wife can’t get enough of. Well, I found out Mary and Gail get real specific. I guess from their point of view, men are not the most graceful creatures on the face of the earth, but I always sort of thought we had our moments.

“It looked like you had been there a while,” Sam continued, “and Mary and Gail were whispering in each other’s ear laughing, and you were drinking from the neck and looking around with a pissed-off look on your face. I sat down at the bar to have some shots. About an hour later, I heard some shouting and turned

around to see you standing up in front of the whole bar swaying around with your cock in your hand yelling ‘sa proud cock, ‘sa noble cock, ‘sa cock a man can be proud of.’ Man Joe, it was better than Disneyland! I was laughing so hard I fell off my bar stool and took Mike Pensaro with me. The whole bar was laughing, even Mary and Gail. Well, not the whole bar. There were a couple of tourists right below you on the dance floor who were looking at you the way a coyote does when you have it in your headlights. Even the bartender was laughing, but the owner finally made him go get you. We were all clapping as he led you out, and when you got to the door, he even let you take a bow.”

This was bad, real bad. It was not something that was going to be politely swept under the rug. It would spread like wildfire. People would call up everyone they knew to tell them about it. I could leave for Alaska right now and the news would beat me there: Joe Feather and his noble cock.

“Sam?”

“Yeah, Joe.”

“We’ve been friends a long time right?”

“Sure.”

“Would you do me a favor?”

“Anything, Joe.”

“When we get back to the reservation would you take me out and shoot me?”

He just laughed. It was the kind of thing that was funny when it happened to someone else.

We passed the turnoff to Diablo Canyon and it brought back memories. It was in the walls of that torture chamber that I won the state cross country championship my senior year. It’s funny, but I almost never think about running any more. It seems so long ago. Half the tribe came out to watch the race, and I didn’t want to let them down. The race was very close and my main competition was a Hopi runner named Louis. I think being Indians and growing up at the high elevation of the Mongian rim gave us an edge over the city guys from the south. We were about even when we finally climbed out of the canyon and started the sprint for the finish line. I didn’t think either of us had anything left until I caught a glimpse

of my father standing on the sideline. I was shocked to see him because he was always too busy getting unbelievably fucked up, or beating the shit out of my mom, or both, to bother with a small thing like a race of mine.

Ever since I was a teenager, the man had never had a kind word for me. He knew I was a good runner though, and I think part of him resented me for it, and part of him was proud of me. Whatever it was, I wanted to prove to that motherfucker that I was the man he never was. After I won, he never congratulated me. He saw me win. I guess that was enough for him. When I got home, he had already gone out drinking with his friends. He had gotten a ride and left his truck. I grabbed his keys, even though he would probably try to kick my ass for it, and went to pick up Mary. I didn't give a fuck.

When I picked Mary up, her eyes were sparkling and her voice was breathy. We drove out to one of the smaller mesas. There was nothing but desert night for miles around. We lay in the back of my dad's pickup and stared up at the stars. On that night they were shining just for us.

As we pulled onto the reservation, I thought about how far away all that seems to me. We let Sam off and drove to my place. As we pulled up, I saw a tribal police car and a Bureau of Indian Affairs truck parked out front. "Shit," I thought, "the Crazyhorse's owner must be really pissed." I got out, thanked the driver, and started walking up the drive. They got out of their vehicles and met me half way. The tribal police guy was a schoolmate of mine. His name was John. The B.I.A. guy I didn't know. John did the talking.

"Joe, we'd like you to come with us."

"I didn't mean to do it, John, I was drunk, and if it makes any difference, I'm sorry."

"I know you are Joe, but she's beat up pretty bad and I really don't have any choice."

"What the fuck do you mean?" I demanded, "Who's beat up?" They shot each other a quick glance.

"Mary," John replied.

I felt like I had been blindsided in a bar fight. I was just stunned. My hands started to shake. After a minute I thought about going for John's gun so they'd have to shoot me. I had always promised

myself I would never end up like my dad, and here it was staring me in the face.

“Joe, do you have anything you want to tell us before we take you in?” John asked.

No words would come out of my mouth. They read me my rights while I stared at the ground. I couldn't even look at them.

When we got to the jail, they took my picture, fingerprinted me, and told me I could make one phone call. There was no one I wanted to call. I asked John if it looked like Mary was going to be O.K. He said he didn't know.

John took me into a room and sat me down. “Look, right now we're going to have to wait until Mary regains consciousness to see if she wants to press charges. The girl who was with her won't talk. If Mary presses charges, you should get a lawyer.” He paused for a minute and looked out the window. “You know, Joe, it's hard for me to believe you would do something like this.” I put my head down on the table and heard the door close behind him.

A little while later another cop came and put me in a cell. Staring at the bars, I knew there was nothing left for me. I think they must have suspected it because they kept looking in on me pretty often. I sat and prayed she would be O.K.

A few hours later John came back. “Joe, she regained consciousness and won't say anything until she sees you.”

I was so relieved she was going to be all right, that for a moment I just sat back and thanked the lord. I didn't know if I could face her, but I thought whatever she wanted to do or say to me, I owed it to her to face the music.

When we got to the hospital, John drove up to the front entrance and parked. Cops can park anywhere. We went in and got on the elevator. When we reached the fifth floor, the elevator doors opened and a guy in a suit came up to us and asked to speak with John alone.

“Joe, wait here and don't do anything to embarrass me.” They walked out of earshot and had a short conversation. Then they turned and came back to me.

“Joe,” John said, “put out your hands.”

I held them out palms down. They looked to me the way they

always did, just ordinary hands. The guy in the suit examined them real carefully before nodding to John and walking away.

“Joe, that guy is a detective with the Flagstaff police. He told me that the doctors just told him that whoever beat up Mary used his fists.”

I looked at my hands. A sliver of hope ran through me. I looked back at John.

“You’re not off the hook until the girls talk, but it looks pretty good.”

We started walking down the hall and heads without bodies floated past me. It felt like I was in a little control room in my head just watching everything. A door opened and I was looking at my wife’s face laying on a white pillow. Her right eye was black and blue and swollen up like a golfball.

“Joe, Joe,” she said in a small voice and held up her hand. I felt like crying. I took her hand and we sat for a while in silence until John touched my shoulder.

“Mary, who did it. Did I do this?” I asked softly.

She shook her head from side to side. I was relieved for about a second before a new feeling swelled up from deep inside of me and spread through every inch of my body. I noticed I was squeezing Mary’s hand so hard it was turning white. “Who did?” I asked in a real tight voice.

“I don’t remember.”

“If you don’t remember, how do you know it wasn’t Joe?” John asked.

“It wasn’t Joe.”

John looked like he was going to start badgering her.

“Mary, please tell us what happened.” I pleaded.

She looked up at me for a minute before answering. “Oh Joe, after you made such a fool of yourself at the Crazyhorse, me and Gail left and walked over to Pappy’s. We got pretty drunk and Gail started flirting with this truck driver. When closing time came around, this guy offered us a ride home. We thought since there was two of us, it would be O.K. The minute we got in the truck, he was all over Gail. It was kind of funny and Gail didn’t seem to be minding, so I just sat there. When he started to try to pull her pants

off, Gail started to fight, saying that she was married. Before I knew it, he hauled off and hit her across the mouth and told her to shut the fuck up. I jumped out of the truck and ran around to his side, opened the door and started pulling him off her. He let go of Gail, got out of the truck, and came after me. Gail got out her side and screamed for help. He started towards her, but I guess thought better of it and turned to get in his truck like he was going to leave, but for some reason he turned around real suddenly and it was lights out. That's all I know."

"Can you remember any details about this guy or the truck he was driving?" John asked. She told him everything she could, which wasn't much, and he left to go talk to Gail.

I sat there with her all afternoon. She fell asleep and I had a long time to think. I thought about killing truck drivers for a while, but knew the guy was probably halfway across the country by now. I thought about my dad. I thought about the difference between winning a race and waving your cock around in a bar. And I thought a lot about Mary.

About eight o'clock in the evening the doctors decided to release her. We had our arms around each other as we walked down the hall. A sharp winter wind whipped past us as we stepped through the front doors. A giant bare oak tree was lit up by spotlights on the lawn.