THE BINGO PALACE

LOUISE ERDRICH

HarperCollins*Publishers*

by Louise Erdrich

Love Medicine
The Beet Queen
Tracks
The Crown of Columbus
(with Michael Dorris)
Jacklight (poetry)
Baptism of Desire (poetry)

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To Michael,
U R lucky 4 me

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MESSAGE

ON MOST WINTER DAYS, LULU LAMARTINE DID NOT STIR UNTIL the sun cast a patch of warmth for her to bask in and purr. She then rose, brewed fresh coffee, heated a pan of cream, and drank the mix from a china cup at her apartment table. Sipping, brooding, she entered the snowy world. A pale sweet roll, a doughnut gem, occasionally a bowl of cereal, followed that coffee, then more coffee, and on and on, until finally Lulu pronounced herself awake and took on the day's business of running the tribe. We know her routine—many of us even shared it—so when she was sighted before her normal get-up time approaching her car door in the unsheltered cold of the parking lot, we called on others to look. Sure enough, she was dressed for action. She got into her brown Citation wearing hosiery, spike-heeled boots, and, beneath her puffy purple winter coat, a flowered dress cut evening low. She adjusted her rearview mirror, settled her eyeglasses on her nose. She started the engine, pulled away onto the downslope winding road. From the hill, we saw her pass into the heart of the reservation.

She rolled along in quiet purpose, stopping at the signs, even yielding, traveling toward one of two places open at that early hour. The gas pumps—she could be starting out on a longer trip—or the post office. These were the two choices that

we figured out among ourselves. When she passed the first, we knew it must be the second, and from there, we relied on Day Twin Horse to tell us how Lulu entered the post office beneath the flags of the United States, the Great Seal of North Dakota, and the emblem of our Chippewa Nation, and then lingered, looking all around, warming herself like a cat at the heat register and tapping at her lips with a painted fingernail.

Day Twin Horse watched her, that is, until she turned, saw him looking, and set confusion into motion. First she glared a witch gaze that caused him to tape a finger to the postal scale. The tape seemed to have a surprising life all of its own so that, as he leaned over, extracting the finger, balling up the tape, Day Twin Horse became more and more agitated. For while he struggled with the sticky underside, Mrs. Josette Bizhieu entered, impatient as always, carrying three packages. Tending to her needs, Postmaster Twin Horse was unable to keep an eye on Lulu as she wandered, flicking at the dials of the tiny boxes that held other people's bills. He did not see her pause to read the directions on the Xerox machine, or lean over the glass display case showing pen sets, stamp mugs, albums that could be purchased by collectors. He did not see her stop before the wanted posters, flick through quickly, silently, riffling the heavy roll until she came to the picture of her son.

It was Josette herself, sharp and wary as her namesake bobcat, who tipped her chin down, turned her face just a fraction to watch Lulu Lamartine as she reached into the fall of criminals and with one quick tug, evenly, as if she were removing a paper towel from a toothed dispenser, tear away government property. Holding the paper, Lulu walked over to the copier. She carefully slid the picture onto the machine's face, inserted two coins into the coin box. Satisfaction lit her face as the machine's drum flashed and whirred. She removed the original, then the copy of the picture as it emerged. She folded it into an envelope and carried it quickly to the Out of Town slot, where Josette now held her packages as if deciding which

to mail first. Seeing the drop of Josette's gaze, Lulu quickly posted the letter, but not before Josette caught the city part of the address, already written onto the outside of the stamped envelope.

Fargo, North Dakota. There it was—the well-known whereabouts of that stray grandson whom Lulu Lamartine and Marie Kashpaw shared uneasily between themselves. So Lulu Lamartine was sending the picture of the father to the son. Perhaps it was a summons home. A warning. Surely, it meant something. There was always a reason behind the things Lulu did, although it took a while to find them, to work her ciphers out for meaning. Now Lulu walked directly through the glass front doors, leaving Josette and Day Twin Horse in the post office.

The two gazed after her, frowning and pensive. Around them, suddenly, they felt the drift of chance and possibility, for the post office is a place of near misses, lit by numbers. Their gazes fixed upon the metal postal box doors—so strictly aligned and easily mistaken for one another. And then the racks constructed for the necessary array of identical-looking rubber stamps that nevertheless could send a letter halfway around the world. Of course, there were the stamps themselves, either booklets or sheets sold in waxed cellophane envelopes. Eagles. Flowers. Hot air balloons. Love dogs. Wild Bill Hickok. The ordinary world suddenly seemed tenuous, odd. Josette reared back in suspicion, narrowing her clever eyes. Day Twin Horse regarded his olive-colored tape. The roll again was docile and orderly in his hands. He ran his fingernail across the surface searching for the ridge to pull, the cut, but the plastic was seamless, frustrating, perfect, like the small incident with Lulu. He couldn't find where to pull and yet he knew that in her small act there was complicated motive and a larger story.

As it turned out, however, there was not much more to know about the things Lulu did on that particular day. It was

later on that we should have worried about, the long-term consequences. All the same, we tried to keep a close eye upon her doings, so we know that soon after she left the post office Lulu Lamartine purchased, from the fanciest gift shop in Hoopdance, a brass and crystal picture frame. She brought it back to her apartment, laid it down upon her kitchen table. Josette, who sat right there with a glass of water, winding down from all her errands, told how Lulu used her nail file to press aside the tiny clamps that held in the backing. She removed the fuzz-coated cardboard, then the inner corrugated square, and lastly, the flimsy reproduction of a happy wedding couple. She tossed the sentimental photograph aside, positioned the wanted poster against the glass. She smoothed down the cheap paper, replaced the backing, then turned the portrait around front to gaze upon the latest picture of her famous criminal boy.

Even in the mug-shot photographer's flash, the Nanapush eyes showed, Pillager bones, the gleam of one earring at his cheek. Gerry Nanapush had a shy rage, serious wonder, a lot of hair. She looked for traces of herself—the nose surely—and of his father—the grin, the smile held in and hidden, wolf-white, gleaming. Looking down the length of her rounded arms, her face was thoughtful, Josette said, too shrewd, bent on calculation. In fact, we never thought Lulu Lamartine wore the proper expression anyway—that of a mother resigned. Her undevout eyes were always dangerously bright, her grin was always trying to get loose and work a spell. Her face was supple, her arms strong, and even touched with arthritis, she had the hands of a safecracker. Still, we thought the business would end with the picture sitting on the shelf. After all, he was recently caught and locked up again for good. We never thought she'd go so far as she finally managed. We believed Lulu Lamartine would content herself with changing the picture's resting spot, carrying it back and forth until she finally centered it upon her knickknack shelf,

a place where you couldn't help noticing it upon first entering her apartment.

Lulu's totaling glance followed Josette that day, not the picture's rigid stare, but the two pairs of eyes were so alike that it always took a decision of avoidance to enter the place. Some of us tried to resist, yet were pulled in just the same. We were curious to know more, even though we'd never grasp the whole of it. The story comes around, pushing at our brains, and soon we are trying to ravel back to the beginning, trying to put families into order and make sense of things. But we start with one person, and soon another and another follows, and still another, until we are lost in the connections.

We could pull any string from Lulu, anyway, it wouldn't matter, it would all come out the same degree of tangle. Start with her wanted-poster boy, Gerry Nanapush, for example. Go down the line of her sons, the brothers and half brothers, until you get to the youngest, Lyman Lamartine. Here was a man everybody knew and yet did not know, a dark-minded schemer, a bitter and yet shaman-pleasant entrepreneur who skipped money from behind the ears of Uncle Sam, who joked to pull the wool down, who carved up this reservation the way his blood father Nector Kashpaw did, who had his own interest so mingled with his people's that he couldn't tell his personal ambition from the pride of the Kashpaws. Lyman went so far as to court a much younger woman. He loved and failed, but that has never kept down Kashpaws, or a Lamartine either, for very long.

Keep a hand on the frail rope. There's a storm coming up, a blizzard. June Morrissey still walks through that sudden Easter snow. She was a beautiful woman, much loved and very troubled. She left her son to die and left his father to the mercy of another woman and left her suitcase packed in her room to which the doorknob was missing. Her memory never was recovered except within the thoughts of her niece, Albertine—a Kashpaw, a Johnson, a little of everything, but free of nothing.

We see Albertine dancing at the powwow, long braid down her back and shawl a blue swirl. We see her hunched over the medical library books resisting a cigarette ever since anatomy class. We see her doing what the *zhaginash* call *her level best,* which is going at it, going at it until she thinks her head will fall off into her hands. It seems her task to rise and sink, to rush at things fast and from all directions like the wind, to bowl down every adversary with her drama. We see her hurt when the strong rush fails. We see her spring back, collecting power.

We shake our heads, try to go at it one way, then another. The red rope between the mother and her baby is the hope of our nation. It pulls, it sings, it snags, it feeds and holds. How it holds. The shock of throwing yourself to the end of that rope has brought many a wild young woman up short, slammed her down, left her dusting herself off, outraged and tender. Shawnee Ray, Shawnee Ray Toose and her little boy, for instance. The old men shut their eyes and try not to look directly at this young woman's beauty because a hot flame still leaps to life, focused and blue, and what can they do about it? Better to let the tongue clack. We've heard Shawnee Ray talks to spirits in the sweat lodge in such a sweet way, in such an old-time way, respectful, that they can't help but answer. We don't know how she's going to get by that boss *ikwe* Zelda Kashpaw, who put up a stockade around her own heart since the days when she herself was a girl. We don't know how it will work out, come to pass, which is why we watch so hard, all of us alike, one arguing voice.

We do know that no one gets wise enough to really understand the heart of another, though it is the task of our life to try. We chew the tough skins, we wonder. We think about the Pillager woman, Fleur, who was always half spirit anyway. A foot on the death road, a quick shuffle backwards, her dance wearies us. Yet some of us wish she'd come out of the woods. We don't

fear her anymore—like death, she is an old friend who has been waiting quietly, a patient companion. We know she's dawdling, hanging back as long as she can, waiting for another to take her place, but in a different way from when she put her death song into other people's mouths. This time she's waiting for a young one, a successor, someone to carry on her knowledge, and since we know who that person must be, our knowledge makes us pity her. We think she's wrong. We think Fleur Pillager should settle her bones in the sun with us and take a rest, instead of wasting her last words on that medicine boy.

Lipsha Morrissey.

We're all disgusted with the son of that wanted poster. We give up on that Morrissey boy Marie Kashpaw rescued from the slough. Spirits pulled his fingers when he was a baby, yet he doesn't appreciate his powers. His touch was strong, but he shorted it out. Going back and forth to the city weakened and confused him and now he flails in a circle with his own tail in his teeth. He shoots across the road like a coyote, dodging between the wheels, and then you see him on the playground, swinging in a swing, and again he has made himself stupid with his dope pipe. He tires us. We try to stand by him, to bring him back, give him advice. We tell him that he should ground himself, sit on the earth and bury his hands in the dirt and beg the Manitous. We have done so much for him and even so, the truth is, he has done nothing yet of wide importance.

We wish that we could report back different since he last told his story, but here's the fact: that boy crossed the line back to the reservation, proud in his mother's blue Firebird car, and then he let his chances slip. For a while it looked like he'd amount to something. He stuck with high school, scored high in the state of North Dakota in the college tests. He gave us all a shock, for we thought he was just a waste, a load, one of those sad reservation statistics. Offers came into his Grandma

Marie's mailbox—everything from diesel mechanics to piloting aircraft. But then he proved us right. For nothing captured his interest. Nothing held him. Nothing sparked.

He got onto a crew that was turning an old abandoned railroad depot into a first-class restaurant, which was the fad in renovation. It came out picture-perfect, except that when the trains came through plates fell, glasses shook, and water spilled. Next, he worked in a factory that made tomahawks. He helped to bring that enterprise down around his own ears, and didn't stay to clean up the mess, either, but skipped off down to Fargo. There, he found work in a sugar beet plant, shoveling sugar. He shoveled mountains of it, all day, moving it from here to there. He called back on the party line, always collect, to his Grandma Marie, and always he was complaining.

Well, we could imagine. What kind of job was that anyway, for a Chippewa? We weren't very pleased with the picture. When he got back to his room, he held a dustpan underneath his shoes and socks and emptied the sugar in a little pile. He shook his pants in the bathtub and brushed his hair and washed the sugar down the drain. Still, the grains crackled underfoot and the carpet thickened. The shag strands stuck together, the sweetness drew roaches and silverfish, which he sprayed dead. Nothing was ever clean, he told Marie, us listening. The sugar settled into syrup and the spray acted like a seal, so that layers of sticky glaze collected and hardened.

Just like him. He was building up a seal of corrosion, hardening himself, packing himself under. We heard from sources we don't like to talk about that he was seen down in the bars, the tougher spots, the dealer hangouts and areas beneath the bridges where so much beyond the law gets passed hand to mouth. Like father, we thought, only moving our eyes to say it, like father, there he goes. And then one day Lulu's mailed picture of Gerry Nanapush arrived in Fargo, a wanted-poster message regarding his father that evidently made the boy stop and

look around himself. This was his life—a fact we could have told him from the first phone call. There he was, sitting at the fake wood-grain table, listening to cars go by in the street below. He was covered with a sugary chip-proof mist of chemicals, preserved, suspended, trapped like a bug in a plastic weight. He was caught in a foreign skin, drowned in drugs and sugar and money, baked hard in a concrete pie.

We didn't know him, we didn't want to, and to tell the truth we didn't care. *Who he is is just the habit of who he always was,* we warned Marie. *If he's not careful, who he'll be is the result.*

Perhaps a drumming teased in the bones of his fingers, or maybe his whole face smarted as if he'd slapped himself out of a long daze. Anyway, he stood up and found himself out the door taking what he could carry—jackets, money, boom box, clothes, books, and tapes. He walked down the hall and stairs, out into the street. He stuffed his car full and then, once he got behind the wheel, all that mattered was the drive.

We saw him immediately as he entered the gym during the winter powwow. He slid through the crowd during the middle of an Intertribal song. We saw him edge against the wall to watch the whirling bright dancers, and immediately we had to notice that there was no place the boy could fit. He was not a tribal council honcho, not a powwow organizer, not a medic in the cop's car in the parking lot, no one we would trust with our life. He was not a member of a drum group, not a singer, not a candy-bar seller. Not a little old Cree lady with a scarf tied under her chin, a thin pocketbook in her lap, and a wax cup of Coke, not one of us. He was not a fancy dancer with a mirror on his head and bobbing porcupine-hair roach, not a traditional, not a shawl girl whose parents beaded her from head to foot. He was not our grandfather, either, with the face like clean old-time chewed leather, who prayed over the microphone, head bowed. He was not even one of those gathered at the soda machines outside the doors, the ones who

wouldn't go into the warm and grassy air because of being drunk or too much in love or just bashful. He was not the Chippewa with rings pierced in her nose or the old aunt with water dripping through her fingers or the announcer with a ragged face and a drift of plumes on his indoor hat.

He was none of these, only Lipsha, come home.

CHAPTER TWO

LIPSHA

LIPSHA MORRISSEY

WALKING INTO THE LIGHTS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL GYM THAT evening, I stop as if to ask directions to a place I've always known. The drums pound, lighting my blood. My heart jumps. I am all at once confused and shy-faced and back where I belong without a place to fit, a person to turn to, a friend to greet. Of course, it doesn't take long before I glimpse satin, the trademark of my cousin Albertine Johnson. Her patience with that slippery fabric is well known, and sure enough, as if I'd even imagined the sky blue color, the darker shadows she would pick, my eyes latch right onto her the first time she circles past and catches me with the corner of her gaze.

I watch her. A dusky blue eagle spreads its beaded wings across her back, and she carries a blue shawl with all shades from navy to turquoise fringe swinging from the borders. Her leggings are beaded blue and her moccasins are that same color. She's put her red-brown hair in one simple braid right down her back, a tapering rope held on each side with a matching rosette and a white plume that lifts softly with each of her steps. Right about here, I ordinarily would begin to tell you all about Albertine: how she went away to school, how her life got so complicated and advanced. However, because she's dancing along with a friend, my story doesn't turn out to be a

record of Albertine at all. She comes later. No, the hero of my tale, the mad light, the hope, is the second woman I see dancing at the winter powwow.

Our own Miss Little Shell.

I follow the soft light of Albertine's expression to where it catches the harder radiance of Shawnee Ray Toose, who takes that glow of my cousin's and somehow beams it at me, in a complex ricochet that leaves me, as they sway by, with the dazzling impression of lights glinting off Shawnee's teeth. I step forward, to catch a better glimpse of them both, but my eyes somehow stay hooked to Shawnee Ray. The back view of her jingle dress, which is made of something snaky and gleaming dark red, grabs me hard and won't let go. The material fits so close, and her belt, labeled Miss Little Shell in blazing beads, so tight around her waist.

I blink and shake my head. My eyes want to see more, more, closer, but my hands save me, as I fold my arms and press myself back into the crowd. Still, every time those two women sweep by me I am fixed. I can't ignore the display of Shawnee Ray's sewn-in breasts, carried in a circle, around and around, like prizes in a basket, and those jingles sewn all over her in Vs, so that each wet-looking red curve goes by ringing with her body music. I catch her profile, tough and bold. Her hair is twisted into some kind of braid that looks stitched onto her head, and a crown is pinned there, made of winking stones. Once, when I look too long at her, I think she feels the touch of my attention, because all of a sudden she tips onto her toes, high, higher. She rises into the popcorn air, and she begins to step free and unearthly as a spirit panther, so weightless that I think of clouds, of sun, of air above the snow light.

Then she lands, bounds lower, and puts a hand to her hip. She raises her other arm, proud, and poises her fan high.

Shawnee carries the entire wing and shoulder of a big mother eagle. I picture her lifting off, snagging that bird midflight, and then neatly lopping it in half. You can see Shawnee

Ray deep in the past, running down a buffalo on a little paint war-horse, or maybe on her own limber legs. You can see her felling the animal with one punch to the brain. Or standing bent-elbowed with a lance. You can see her throwing that spear without hesitation right through a cavalry man or a mastodon. Shawnee Ray, she is the best of our past, our present, our hope of a future.

There are her parents, I see now. Elward Strong Ribs, second husband to big Irene Toose. They are back to the reservation for a visit. Shawnee's real dad died a while ago in a bad accident, and after Irene married again the new couple went to work in Minot. Shawnee Ray was left here on the reservation to finish high school and, oh yes, to have her baby, which everyone now takes for granted.

Tonight, Elward and Irene are sitting as far apart as they can place themselves on side-by-side folding chairs, trying not to look at their girl too often, or to seem too pleased with her or not pleased enough with one another. They try not to notice that Irene's other daughters, the Toose girls, are not in the gym but most likely out in the parking lot or farther off, drinking in the dark hills beyond. They try not to notice their own position, the best one, right in front but not too near the Rising Wind drum, and try not to talk too long to any one person or show their favor although they nod in agreement with the medium-stout woman in the heavy black-velvet beaded dress who stands next to them with a child in her arms.

Zelda Kashpaw.

When women age into their power, no wind can upset them, no hand turn aside their knowledge; no fact can deflect their point of view. It is like that with the woman I was raised to think of as a sister and call aunt in respect, the velvet beaded lady holding Shawnee Ray's little boy. Upon seeing Zelda Kashpaw, I remember to dread her goodness. I remember to fear her pity, her helping ways. She is, in fact the main reason coming home is never simple: with Zelda, I am always

in for something I cannot see but that is already built, in its final stages, erected all around. It is invisible, a house of pulled strings, a net of unforced will, a perfect cat's cradle that will spring to life as soon as Zelda is aware of me. I step back. Her head whips around. What am I thinking? My aunt knows all there is to know. She has a deep instinct for running things. She should have more children or at least a small nation to control. Instead, forced narrow, her talents run to getting people to do things they don't want to do for other people they don't like. Zelda is the author of grit-jawed charity on the reservation, the instigator of good works that always get chalked up to her credit.

Zelda stands firm, a woman to whom much is obliged. She moves within an aura of repayment schedules, and, as always, it is clear I owe her big even though I don't yet know what for. This happens in many different and mysterious ways. How amazed I am so often in my life to find myself acting, as I believe, from true and deep motivations, only to discover later that Zelda has planned what I am doing.

For instance, she knows all about my return. My summons by Grandma Lulu. No words needed. Zelda has now left the Strong Ribs and Toose family and moved over next to me. She carries Shawnee Ray's little boy, Redford, carefully in her arms, but he is only bait for calculations. I know that much by this time. It is no matter that I have driven the back roads. No matter that I haven't talked to or in any way informed my aunt of my traveling decisions. It turns out that all along, without knowing it, I am just following her mental directions.

"I told them you'd make it," she says, putting down the boy, who runs directly into the circle and manages somehow to evade the trampling moccasins of the big-bellied war dancers who lurch past, too proud and heavy with bone plate and paint to lift their knees. Redford zips straight to his mother's side and she scoops him immediately close. His round-cheeked face sweetens, his eyes go big and tender, light with

dark fascination. Nobody talks too much about Redford's father, for it often seems that his presence is everywhere—he has a foot through every basket, a nose for scams and schemes. If I say it out, it is only to introduce what is known and whispered. The boy is the son of my half uncle and former boss, Lyman Lamartine.

I often brag on Lyman, for even though I think of him as a big, bland Velveeta, I am proud I am related to this reservation's biggest cheese. The fact is, a tribal go-getter has to pasteurize himself. He has to please every tribal faction. He has to be slick, offend nobody, keep his opinions hid. By way of doing this, Lyman has run so many businesses that nobody can keep track—cafés, gas pumps, a factory that made tomahawks, a flower shop, an Indian Taco concession, a bar which he has added to and parlayed from a penny-card bingo hall and kitchen-table blackjack parlor into something bigger, something we don't know the name of yet, something with dollar signs that crowd the meaning from our brain. My uncle took an interest in me after my A.C.T. scores turned out so high, though I don't think he ever personally liked me. It is well known that he and Shawnee Ray are long-term engaged, that dates for a wedding keep getting set, wrangled over, broken. What isn't clear to anyone is just who does the breaking or the setting, whose feet are hot, whose cold.

"Redford's big," I remark to Zelda. She is fanning herself with a paper plate she has stored in her beaded bag, and waits for me to say more. Zelda was once called raven-haired and never forgot, so on special occasions her hair, which truly is an amazing natural feature, still sweeps its fierce wing down the middle of her back. She wears her grandmother Rushes Bear's skinning knife at her strong hip, and she touches the beaded sheath now, as if to invoke her ancestor.

My aunt recently launched herself into the local public eye when Shawnee let it be known she would keep her baby. With her parents moving off, and her sisters' drinking habits a bad

legend, Shawnee needed a place to stay. Zelda took her in for the price of free-rein interference. She stepped to the front and erected a structure for the whole situation. She swept, tidied, and maneuvered an explanation and a future that would fit expectations and satisfy all hearts.

Through furious gossip, Zelda has got Shawnee and her man semi-engaged, and is doing her best to make arrangements for them both to marry. A pang shoots through me, now, when I think of marriage between Shawnee Ray and Lyman. I am surprised to find that I experience the disappointment of a hope I never knew I harbored.

Most people are jealous of Lyman, and maybe I am no better. He is an island of *have* in a sea of *have-nots*. And even more than that, he's always been a little special, picked out. Though short, he is a guy with naturally football-padded shoulders, a dentist grin, a shrewd and power-cleaned presence in a room. Lyman owns a beautiful Italian-cut three-piece suit. His shirts are sparkling white, his collars ringless, his bolo-tie stones not glass but semiprecious rocks. Some think that he is following in the footsteps of his old man, Nector Kashpaw, and will eventually go off to Washington to rise into the Indian stratosphere. Some green envy talk has him quitting the local bingo, running for an elected office, making politician's hay. As if business and popularity are athletic events, he keeps himself in tip-top shape, especially for a guy his age. His vested middle is made for a woman to throw herself at, clawing the buttons, which are sewn on double-tight. A girl could do an entire load of laundry on his washboard stomach. I know, because I've seen him bench press, that his biceps are smooth, rounded, and hard as the stones in lakes.

I could go on and on about Lyman. The truth is, our relationship is complicated by some factors over which we have no control. His real father was my stepfather. His mother is my grandmother. His half brother is my father. I have an instant crush upon his girl.

Reading is my number-one hobby, and I have browsed a few of the plays of the old-time Greeks. If you read about a thing like Lyman and me happening in those days, one or both of us would surely have to die. But us Indians, we're so used to inner plot twists that we just laugh. We're born heavier, but scales don't weigh us. From day one, we're loaded down. History, personal politics, tangled bloodlines. We're too preoccupied with setting things right around us to get rich.

Except for Lyman, who does a whole lot of both.

As an under-the-table half sister, Zelda Kashpaw is in his corner, and she tries to help him out in the community. She blesses his and Redford's future in a hundred conversations via phone and tribal mall, asks positive input from the priests, from her friends the Sisters. She leads novenas for unwed mothers. She helps Shawnee in every way—would have had the baby for her if she could, and nursed it too, with the rich, self-satisfying milk of her own famous kindness. It's gotten so, by this time, no one can mention the current situation of Redford and Shawnee Ray without acknowledging Zelda's goodness in the same breath.

"Isn't that a fine thing Zelda's doing?" people repeat to each other. "Shawnee Ray is lucky to have her take such an interest."

Yes, Zelda racks points up sky high with her tireless energy. She fixes it for Redford to get a naming ceremony and she arranges files and blood quantums in the tribal office where she works, so that he is enrolled as a full-blood. She gathers WIC food to feed him, and is always at the Sisters' door when they open it to sell or give away donated clothing. People let her snatch what she wants, knowing it is for the child, who is always, at every moment, dressed like an ad in a magazine. Even if Shawnee Ray sews his outfit, as she has the one he wears right now—old-time leggings, a ribbon shirt of dotted calico—the word soon leaks that Zelda bought the "special" fabric.

Just to check, I point at Redford.

"Nice fabric," I observe.

Zelda draws herself up with a penetrating air.

"*You* might think so," she answers. "But it was not what I wanted. They never have exactly what you're looking for! I had to go to three shops, then finally I gave up and drove all the way to Hoopdance." She frowns, shakes her head remembering the gasoline expended and the many unworthy bolts that passed between her critical thumb and first finger.

"And Shawnee Ray, she looks like she's doing pretty good." I am casual, unable to help myself from mentioning her name.

"Pretty good." Zelda's hand goes into that beaded bag. She draws out a foil-wrapped brick and presses it toward me. The thing is heavy as a doorstop. I don't need to ask—it is Zelda's old-time holiday fruitcake, made with traditional hand-gathered ingredients, chokecherries pounded with the pits still in them, dried buffalo meat, molasses, raisins, prunes, and anything else that carries weight. Winter traction, I think as I heft it. I thank her, and then, when that is not enough, thank her again for saving it for me through the new year and its aftermath.

Accepting my gratitude, Zelda turns her attention full onto me. I can feel her scan my brain with the sudden zero-gaze of medical machines. A map of my feelings springs up in blue light, a map that Zelda focuses to read.

Miss Little Shell.

Suddenly I am watching so hard for the flash and wave of red that I miss Zelda's reaction, which is too bad, because if I could only have seen what she was rerouting and recasting to fit her intentions and visions, I could perhaps have headed off all that came to pass. But too late. I have this impression that my regard of Shawnee Ray, my watching of her, is natural. So I stand there and continue looking, as in me there begins to form some vague swell of feeling. I believe at the time it is fate at work, but of course, it turns out to be Zelda.

* * *

You may undergo your own incarceration. You may witness your demise piece by piece. You may be one kind of fool who never gets enough or another who gets too much. Lipsha, I tell myself, you didn't have to come back. You got your father's poster in the mail, courtesy of Grandma Lulu. Staring at this haunted face, you had the impulse to change your life. But to put that moment into operation is more complicated than you thought. You are looking for a quick solution, as usual, but once you get into Zelda's range that won't matter. Something else is at work. I have to ask myself if there is more—am I drawn back specifically to watch the circle where that pretty Toose now appears? And Shawnee Ray herself, our hope of a future, is she aware, too, and has she rolled me into each one of her snuff-can-top jingles? Sewed me into her dress with a fine needle? In/out. In/out. Lipsha Morrissey. My man. Can it be possible?

Once I allow myself to consider anything, it is almost sure those thoughts don't quit, so I sink down holding Zelda's gift. I find myself in a bland steel chair and I wait, watching the floor, dazzled with new prospects. I am out of shape for being told what to do by everything around me. I've been out in a world where nobody cares to manipulate me, and maybe I take this unseen plotting as a sign of concern, even comfort, and fall back under its spell. That might be it, because even when another part of the design comes clear, soon after, I don't register its meaning.

Lyman Lamartine attacks the polished wood floor with his pounding feet. He whips by me and I hardly glance up except to register that he is now good at yet another thing. Lyman has inherited, and wears now, the outfit of his champion grass-dancing brother Henry. It is old-timey looking compared to the other yarn-draped and ribboned ones, but there is something classical about it, too. His antique roach has white fluffies bob-

bing on the wrapped springs of two car chokes, long silky fringes from an upholstery outlet, a beautifully beaded necktie and a pointed collar, matching armbands, and over his forehead, shading his shifty eyes, a heart-shaped mirror.

Lyman gets bigger when people stare at him, his chest goes out, his nostrils flare. He grows visibly as he swings into motion. Which is maybe why he is so good at dancing. The more people who watch him the faster and huger he spins, as if he feeds off their stares. He takes the title of his dance literally and plays out a drama in his head. He believes in himself like nobody else. Now I watch close, closer, and get lost in things I see: a guy on the lookout, quick footed, nervous, sneaking up on someone unsuspecting. Crouching. Snaking down in long grass. The grass, it closes over him. You only see its movement as he creeps along, as he knits himself into the scene. Wind riffles through, bending, charming the stems and stalks and plumes. The sneaking what . . . warrior? No, *lover,* pokes his head up. Puts it down. Now he's getting close. More grass blows, waves. His victim sleeps on. Suddenly Lyman springs. Four times, right on the drumbeat, he jumps in a circle, his feet landing in a powerful stance, his heart mirror shining like a headlight, glancing sharp, piercing, pointing, straight into the deep brown eyes of Shawnee Ray, who winces, blinks, then opens her eyes wide and skeptical to take in his crazed and sudden dancing.

Aunt Zelda, of course, stands right next to Shawnee, focusing that love light to a narrow laser. She leans over, accomplishing through small remarks great articles of destiny. As she talks, she jiggles Redford, whose dark brown hair and beaming eyes are fixed upon his father. Shawnee Ray turns away from Lyman. Zelda pops a piece of candy into Redford's mouth so as not to distract the two. Shameless, playing on resistless baby greed, Zelda keeps the boy occupied and totally set on the hand that contains the rest of the packaged sweets.

Hold on now, the tangle, the plot, the music of homecom-

ing thickens. Lyman has one great advantage. Zelda shoots her webs right at him from a distance, and he allows them to stick. They are in on this together, although he doesn't know it yet. Sensing that invisible-string guide ropes have been erected to assist his approach, Lyman simply walks over, smiling at his own son. He is friendly, unconcerned over looks and whispers. He says hello to Shawnee Ray, reaches into Zelda's embrace and takes Redford, who strains toward him with thrilled arms and an open face. Zelda's lips press together, sealed on her own directions like an envelope. Having insisted everything should be up front and normal, these are the fruits, her reward.

I have to admire Lyman right then, for he clearly has kept a firm connection with his little boy. Perhaps I should take lessons from him, but I don't. I don't have the broad vision, or I am otherwise unprepared. Maybe the net that whirls clean around him falls by accident, with firm links, over me. I hardly know what happens next, although I hear it coming, the sounds of her approach. Then those steak-rare, ringing hips are suddenly before me, eye level, and I look up, over what the basket carries, into Shawnee's downcast and commanding eyes.

"You're back," she states. "For good?"

"For bad," I joke.

She doesn't laugh.

I glance away from her, anywhere but at her, and try to compose myself. I have the sense of weight descending, and then of some powerful movement from below. I have this sudden knowledge that no matter what I do with my life, no matter how far away I go, or change, or grow and gain, I will never get away from here. I will always be the subject of a plan greater than myself, an order that works mechanically, so that no matter what I do it will come down to this. Me and Shawnee Ray, impossible, unlikely. I don't know if I give in then, or if I respond to the sight of her slender, silver-ringed, strong, and pointed fingers resting for a moment on my own bare hands. I only know that I close my ears to the drum