Winter in the Blood

Winter in the Blood

Part One

1

In the tall weeds of the borrow pit I took a leak and watched the sorrel mare, her colt beside her, walk through burnt grass to the shady side of the log-and-mud cabin. It was called the Earthboy place, although no one by that name (or any other) had lived in it for twenty years. The roof had fallen in and the mud between the logs had fallen out in chunks, leaving a bare gray skeleton, home only to mice and insects. Tumbleweeds, stark as bone, rocked in a hot wind against the west wall. On the hill behind the cabin, a rectangle of barbed wire held the graves of all the Earthboys, except for a daughter who had married a man from Lodgepole. She could be anywhere, but the Earthboys were gone.

The fence hummed in the sun behind my back as I

climbed up to the highway. My right eye was swollen up, but I couldn't remember how or why, just the white man, loose with his wife and buying drinks, his raging tongue a flame above the music and my eyes. She was wild, from Rocky Boy. He was white. He swore at his money, at her breasts, at my hair.

Coming home was not easy anymore. It was never a cinch, but it had become a torture. My throat ached, my bad knee ached and my head ached in the even heat.

The mare and her colt were out of sight behind the cabin. Beyond the graveyard and the prairie hills, the Little Rockies looked black and furry in the heat haze.

Coming home to a mother and an old lady who was my grandmother. And the girl who was thought to be my wife. But she didn't really count. For that matter none of them counted; not one meant anything to me. And for no reason. I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years.

It could have been the country, the burnt prairie beneath a blazing sun, the pale green of the Milk River valley, the milky waters of the river, the sagebrush and cottonwoods, the dry, cracked gumbo flats. The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty, and the people accepted and treated each other with distance.

But the distance I felt came not from country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon. And that was why I had no particular feelings toward my mother and grandmother. Or the girl who had come to live with me.

I dropped down on the other side of the highway, slid through the barbed-wire fence and began the last two miles home. My throat ached with a terrible thirst.

2

"She left three days ago, just after you went to town."

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"She took your gun and electric razor."

The room was bright. Although it was early afternoon, the kitchen light was burning.

"What did you expect me to do? I have your grandmother to look after, I have no strength, and she is young—Cree!"

"Don't worry," I said.

"At least get your gun back." My mother swept potato peels off the counter into a paper sack at her feet. "You know she'd sell it for a drink."

The gun, an old .30–30, had once been important to me. Like my father before me, I had killed plenty of deer with it, but I hadn't used it since the day I killed Buster Cutfinger's dog for no reason except that I was drunk and it was moving. That was four years ago.

I heard a clucking in the living room. The rocking chair squeaked twice and was silent.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Hot cereal and pudding—how would you expect her to be?"

"What, no radishes?"

My mother ignored me as she sliced the potatoes into thin wafers.

"Why don't we butcher one of those heifers? She could eat steak for the rest of her life and then some."

"She'll be gone soon enough without you rushing

things. Here, put this on that eye—it'll draw out the poison." She handed me a slice of potato.

"How's Lame Bull?"

She stopped slicing. "What do you mean by that?"

"How's Lame Bull?"

"He'll be here this evening; you can find out then. Now get me another bucket of water."

"How's the water?" I asked.

"It'll do. It never rains anymore." She dumped the slices into a pan. "It never rains around here when you need it."

I thought how warm and flat the water would taste. No rain since mid-June and the tarred barrels under the eaves of the house were empty. The cistern would be low and the water silty.

A fly buzzed into the house as I opened the door. The yard was patched with weeds and foxtail, sagebrush beyond the fence. The earth crumbled into powder under my feet; beneath the sun which settled into afternoon heat over the slough, two pintail ducks beat frantically above the cottonwoods and out of sight. As I lowered the bucket into the cistern, a meadowlark sang from the shade behind the house. The rope was crusty in my hands. Twice I lifted and dropped the bucket, watching the water flow in over the lip until the bucket grew heavy enough to sink.

The girl was no matter. She was a Cree from Havre, scorned by the reservation people. I had brought her home with me three weeks ago. My mother thought we were married and treated her with politeness. My mother was a Catholic and sprinkled holy water in the corners of her house before lightning storms. She drank with the priest from Harlem, a round man with distant

eyes, who refused to set foot on the reservation. He never buried Indians in their family graveyards; instead, he made them come to him, to his church, his saints and holy water, his feuding eyes. My mother drank with him in his shingle house beside the yellow plaster church. She thought I had married the girl and tried to welcome her, and the girl sat sullen in the living room across from the old lady, my grandmother, who filled her stone pipe with cuts of tobacco mixed with dried crushed chokecherries. She sat across from the girl, and the girl read movie magazines and imagined that she looked like Raquel Welch.

The old lady imagined that the girl was Cree and enemy and plotted ways to slit her throat. One day the flint striker would do; another day she favored the paring knife she kept hidden in her legging. Day after day, these two sat across from each other until the pile of movie magazines spread halfway across the room and the paring knife grew heavy in the old lady's eyes.

3

I slid down the riverbank behind the house. After a half-hour search in the heat of the granary, I had found a red and white spoon in my father's toolbox. The treble hook was rusty and the paint on the spoon flecked with rust. I cast across the water just short of the opposite bank. There was almost no current. As I retrieved the lure, three mallards whirred across my line of vision and were gone upriver.

The sugar beet factory up by Chinook had died

seven years before. Everybody had thought the factory caused the river to be milky but the water never cleared. The white men from the fish department came in their green trucks and stocked the river with pike. They were enthusiastic and dumped thousands of pike of all sizes into the river. But the river ignored the fish and the fish ignored the river; they refused even to die there. They simply vanished. The white men made tests; they stuck electric rods into the water; they scraped muck from the bottom; they even collected bugs from the fields next to the river; they dumped other kinds of fish in the river. Nothing worked. The fish disappeared. Then the men from the fish department disappeared, and the Indians put away their new fishing poles. But every now and then, a report would trickle down the valley that someone, an irrigator perhaps, had seen an ash-colored swirl suck in a muskrat, and out would come the fishing gear. Nobody ever caught one of these swirls, but it was always worth a try.

I cast the spoon again, this time retrieving faster.

The toolbox had held my father's tools and it was said in those days that he could fix anything made of iron. He overhauled machinery in the fall. It was said that when the leaves turned, First Raise's yard was full of iron; when they fell, the yard was full of leaves. He drank with the white men of Dodson. Not a quiet man, he told them stories and made them laugh. He charged them plenty for fixing their machines. Twenty dollars to kick a baler awake—one dollar for the kick and nineteen for knowing where to kick. He made them laugh until the thirty-below morning ten years ago we found him sleeping in the borrow pit across from Earthboy's place.

He had had dreams. Every fall, before the first cold wind, he dreamed of taking elk in Glacier Park. He planned. He figured out the mileage and the time it would take him to reach the park, and the time it would take to kill an elk and drag it back across the boundary to his waiting pickup. He made a list of food and supplies. He inquired around, trying to find out what the penalty would be if they caught him. He wasn't crafty like Lame Bull or the white men of Dodson, so he had to know the penalty, almost as though the penalty would be the inevitable result of his hunt.

He never got caught because he never made the trip. The dream, the planning and preparation were all part of a ritual—something to be done when the haying was over and the cattle brought down from the hills. In the evening, as he oiled his .30–30, he explained that it was better to shoot a cow elk because the bulls were tough and stringy. He had everything figured out, but he never made the trip.

My lure caught a windfall trunk and the brittle nylon line snapped. A magpie squawked from deep in the woods on the other side of the river.

4

"Ho, you are fishing, I see. Any good bites?" Lame Bull skittered down the bank amid swirls of dust. He stopped just short of the water.

"I lost my lure," I said.

"You should try bacon," he said, watching my line float limp on the surface. "I know these fish."

It was getting on toward evening. A mosquito lit on Lame Bull's face. I brought in the line and tied it to the reel handle. The calf bawled in the corral. Its mother, an old roan with one wild eye, answered from somewhere in the bend of the horseshoe slough.

"You should try bacon. First you cook it, then dump the grease into the river. First cast, you'll catch a good one."

"Are the fish any good?" I asked.

"Muddy. The flesh is not firm. It's been a poor season." He swatted a cloud of dust from his rump. "I haven't seen such a poor year since the flood. Ask your mother. She'll tell you."

We climbed the bank and started for the house. I remembered the flood. Almost twelve years ago, the whole valley from Chinook on down was under water. We moved up to the agency and stayed in an empty garage. They gave us typhoid shots.

"You, of course, are too young."

"I was almost twenty," I said.

"Your old man tried to ride in from the highway but his horse was shy of water. You were not much more than a baby in Teresa's arms. His horse threw him about halfway in."

"I remember that. I was almost twenty."

"Ho." Lame Bull laughed. "You were not much more than a gleam in your old man's eye."

"His stirrup broke—that's how come the horse threw him. I saw his saddle. It was a weakness in the leather."

"Ho."

"He could outride you any day."

"Ho."

Lame Bull filled the width of the doorframe as he

entered the kitchen. He wasn't tall, but broad as a bull from shoulders to butt.

"Ah, Teresa! Your son tells me you are ready to marry me."

"My son tells lies that would make a weasel think twice. He was cut from the same mold as you." Her voice was clear and bitter.

"But why not? We could make music in the sack. We could make those old sheets sing."

"Fool . . . you talk as though my mother had no ears," Teresa said.

Two squeaks came from the living room.

"Old woman! How goes the rocking?" Lame Bull moved past my mother to the living room. "Do you make hay yet?"

The rocking chair squeaked again.

"She has gone to seed," I said. "There is no fertilizer in her bones."

"I seem to find myself surrounded by fools today." Teresa turned on the burner beneath the pan filled with potatoes. "Maybe one of you fools could bring yourself to feed that calf. He'll be bawling all night."

Evening now and the sky had changed to pink reflected off the high western clouds. A pheasant gabbled from a field to the south. A lone cock, he would be stepping from the wild rose along an irrigation ditch to the sweet alfalfa field, perhaps to graze with other cocks and hens, perhaps alone. It is difficult to tell what cocks will do when they grow old. They are like men, full of twists.

The calf was snugged against the fence, its head between the poles, sucking its mother.

"Hi! Get out of here, you bitch!"

She jumped straight back from the fence, skittered sideways a few feet, then stood, tensed. Her tongue hung a thread of saliva almost to the ground and the one wild eye, rimmed white, looked nowhere in particular.

"Don't you know we're trying to wean this fool?"

I moved slowly toward the calf, backing it into a corner where the horse shed met the corral fence, talking to it, holding out my hand. Before it could move I grabbed it by the ear and whirled around so that I could pin its shoulder against the fence. I slapped a mosquito from my face and the calf bawled; then it was silent.

Feeling the firmness of its thigh, I remembered how my brother, Mose, and I used to ride calves, holding them for each other, buckling on the old chaps we found hanging in the horse shed, then the tense "Turn him out!" and all hell busted loose. Hour after hour we rode calves until First Raise caught us.

The calf erupted under my arm, first backing up into the corner, then lunging forward, throwing me up against the horse shed. A hind hoof grazed the front of my shirt.

I pitched some hay into the corral, then filled the washtub with slough water. Tiny bugs darted through the muck. They looked like ladybugs with long hind legs. A tadpole lay motionless at the bottom of the tub. I scooped it out and laid it on a flat chunk of manure. It didn't move. I prodded it with a piece of straw. Against the rough texture of the manure it glistened like a dark teardrop. I returned it to the tub, where it drifted to the bottom with a slight wriggle of its tail.

The evening was warm and pleasant, the high pink clouds taking on a purple tint. I chased the cow back up into the bend of the slough. But she would be back. Her bag was full of milk.

5

After supper, my mother cleared the table. Lame Bull finished his coffee and stood up.

"I must remember to get some more mosquito dope." Teresa emptied the last drops into the palm of her hand. She smeared it on her face and neck. "If your grandmother wants anything, you see that she gets it." She rested her hand on Lame Bull's forearm and they walked out the door.

I poured myself another cup of coffee. The sound of the pickup motor surprised me. But maybe they were going after groceries. I went into the living room.

"Old woman, do you want some music?" I leaned on the arms of her rocker, my face not more than six inches from hers.

She looked at my mouth. Her eyes were flat and filmy. From beneath the black scarf, a rim of coarse hair, parted in the middle, framed her gray face.

"Music," I commanded, louder this time.

"Ai, ai," she cackled, nodding her head, rocking just a bit under the weight of my arms.

I switched on the big wooden radio and waited for it to warm up. The glass on the face of the dial was cracked, and the dial itself was missing. A low hum

filled the room. Then the music of a thousand violins. The rocking chair squeaked.

"Tobacco," I said.

The old woman looked at me.

I filled her pipe and stuck it between her lips. The kitchen match flared up, revealing the black mole on her upper lip. Three black hairs moved up and down as she sucked the smoke into her mouth.

The chair surrounded by movie magazines was uncomfortable, so I sat on the floor with my back resting against the radio. The violins vibrated through my body. The cover of the *Sports Afield* was missing and the pages were dog-eared, but I thumbed through it, looking for a story I hadn't read. I stopped at an advertisement for a fishing lure that called to fish in their own language. I tore the coupon out. Maybe that was the secret.

I had read all the stories, so I reread the one about three men in Africa who tracked a man-eating lion for four days from the scene of his latest kill—a pregnant black woman. They managed to save the baby, who, they were surprised to learn, would one day be king of the tribe. They tracked the lion's spoor until the fourth day, when they found out that he'd been tracking them all along. They were going in a giant four-day circle. It was very dangerous, said McLeod, a Pepsi dealer from Atlanta, Georgia. They killed the lion that night as he tried to rip a hole in their tent.

I looked at the pictures again. One showed McLeod and Henderson kneeling behind the dead lion; they were surrounded by a group of grinning black men. The third man, Enright, wasn't in the picture.

I looked up. The old lady was watching me.

6

Lame Bull and my mother were gone for three days. When they came back, he was wearing a new pair of boots, the fancy kind with walking heels, and she had on a shimmery turquoise dress. They were both sweaty and hung over. Teresa told me that they had gotten married in Malta.

That night we got drunk around the kitchen table.

7

Lame Bull had married 360 acres of hay land, all irrigated, leveled, some of the best land in the valley, as well as a 2000-acre grazing lease. And he had married a T-Y brand stamped high on the left ribs of every beef on the place. And, of course, he had married Teresa, my mother. At forty-seven, he was eight years younger than she, and a success. A prosperous cattleman.

The next day, Lame Bull and I were up early. He cursed as he swung the flywheel on the little John Deere. He opened up the petcock on the gas line, swung the flywheel again, and the motor chugged twice, caught its rhythm and smoothed out. We hitched the hay wagon behind the tractor and drove slowly past the corral and slough. We followed the footpath upriver, through patches of wild rose, across a field of sagebrush and

down into a grove of dead white cottonwoods. A deer jumped up from its willow bed and bounded away, its white tail waving goodbye.

The cabin, log and mud, was tucked away in a bend of the river. A rusty wire ran from the only window up to the top of the roof. It was connected to a car aerial, always a mystery to me, as Lame Bull had no electricity. He gathered up his possessions—a chain saw, a portable radio, two boxes of clothes, a sheepherder's coat and the high rubber boots he wore when he irrigated.

"I must remember to get some more tire patches," he said, sticking a finger through a hole in one of the boots.

We padlocked the cabin, covered the pump with an old piece of tarp and started back, Lame Bull sniffing the sweet beautiful land that had been so good to him.

Later, as we drove past the corral, I saw the wild-eyed cow and a small calf head between the poles. The cow was licking the head. A meadowlark sang from a post above them. The morning remained cool, the sun shining from an angle above the horse shed. Behind the sliding door of the shed, bats would be hanging from the cracks.

Old Bird shuddered, standing with his hindquarters in the dark of the shed. He lifted his great white head and parted his lips. Even from such a distance I could see his yellow teeth clenched together as though he were straining to grin at us. Although he no longer worked, he still preferred the cool dark of the horse shed to the pasture up behind the slough. Perhaps he still felt important and wished to be consulted when we saddled up the red horse and Nig on those occasions when it was necessary to ride through the herd. No matter what season, what weather, he was always there.

Perhaps he felt he had as much right to this place as we had, for even now he was whinnying out a welcome. He was old and had seen most of everything.

8

Teresa sat on the edge of the concrete cistern.

"Your father won Amos pitching pennies at the fair. He was so drunk he couldn't even see the plates."

"Amos used to follow us out to the highway every morning," I said. "We used to have to throw rocks at him."

"The others drowned because you didn't keep the tub full of water. You boys were like that."

Her fingers, resting on her thighs, were long, the skin stretched over the bone as taut as a drumhead. We could see Lame Bull down by the granary, which doubled as a toolshed. He was sharpening a mower sickle.

"We went to town that day for groceries. I remember we went to the show."

"Yes, and when we came back, all the ducks were drowned. Except Amos. He was perched on the edge of the tub."

"But he never went in. He must have been smarter than the others," I said.

Lame Bull's legs pumped faster. He poured some water on the spinning grindstone.

"He was lucky. One duck can't be smarter than another. They're like Indians."

"Then why didn't he go in with the other ducks?"