

## SPIRIT-JUMP

I was waiting in the hallway to collect Lucy from nursery school when her teacher came up to me and said, "Mr Erskine? Do you think we could have a private word?"

Immediately, I felt guilty. It was ridiculous, but teachers still have that effect on me, even today. Especially this one, Ms Eisenheim, a thin domineering hawklike woman in a grey two-piece suit. She was young and she was actually quite attractive, if you're into thin domineering hawklike women. I could imagine her in black stockings and a black basque, whipping me soundly for forgetting to scour the bathtub.

All of the other parents gave me sympathetic smiles as I followed Ms Eisenheim to her office. All of the other parents were women. Their husbands were doctors or lawyers or Wall Street analysts, which meant that I was the only man who has the time to come to Lennox Nursery School every lunchtime to collect his child. At first the mothers treated me with deep suspicion, especially since I find it difficult to dress really smart. I mean my tan leather jacket coat is just about as soigné as it gets. But after a while they began to realize that I wasn't a down-and-out or a potential child-molester, and they began to include me into their gossip. After the first term I was almost an honorary mother

Ms Eisenheim led me along the echoing, wax-polished corridor until we reached a small stuffy office, its walls pinned with maps and graphs and a reproduction of George Washington crossing the Potomac. Through the window I could see the asphalt play-yard, its wire-mesh fencing snagged with curled up yellow and grey leaves.

"Please close the door," said Ms Eisenheim.

"Is there a problem?" I asked her.

"I'm afraid there is. I tried to call you earlier, but you weren't in. There was an incident during recess today and I'm afraid we were obliged to separate Lucy from the rest of her class."

“An incident? What kind of incident?” (Instantly shirty and defensive reaction of overprotective father toward his special little sugar plum fairy.) “She’s only four years old, for God’s sake.”

“There was a scuffle, of sorts, in the play-yard. Two little children were badly hurt.”

“How badly?”

“One of them suffered a sprained ankle and the other had a deeply-grazed knee.”

“So what are you trying to tell me? That *Lucy* did it?”

Ms Eisenheim pursed her lips. “I’m afraid that there were witnesses, Mr Erskine, and not just children. Ms Woolcott saw what happened too.”

“And what *did* happen? Come on, Ms Eisenheim, this is very hard for me to believe. Lucy has the sweetest nature of any child I ever knew. We’re talking about a little girl who walks around *ants*.”

“Well, I have to say, Mr Erskine, that up until now, that was our experience of Lucy, too. Today’s outburst was quite uncharacteristic, but you can understand that we had to take steps.”

“You had to lock her up? What is this, Attica?”

“Please don’t get upset, Mr Erskine. Lucy wasn’t locked up. She was simply made to stay in a room away from the other children. One of our young teaching assistants has been reading to her.”

“What’s she been reading? ‘You have the right to remain silent, but anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law?’ Listen, Ms Eisenheim, I want to see Lucy now, if you don’t mind. I can’t believe that you’re treating a four-year-old girl like a hardened criminal just because two kids couldn’t manage to keep their balance in the schoolyard.”

Ms Eisenheim slapped her hand on her desk. “Mr Erskine! This wasn’t a case of anybody losing their balance! This wasn’t even a scuffle! Lucy threw Janice Mulgrew clear across the yard and into the fencing, and she pushed Laurence Cullen face-first

into a brick wall. She knocked down seven other children and then it was all that Ms Woolcott could do to restrain her.”

I stared at her; and for the first time I couldn't think what to say.

“This was nothing to do with *balance*, Mr Erskine! This was a wild and deliberate attack of extraordinary ferocity. I'm going to have to ask you for a psychiatric evaluation before we can allow Lucy to spend another day here.”

“She *threw* Janice Mulgrew clear across the yard?” I repeated. “Am I right, and is Janice Mulgrew that big, fat kid with the ginger braids?”

“Janice does have russet hair, yes. And, yes, she is a little challenged by her weight.”

“A little challenged? Have you seen the size of her? I couldn't even lift her feet off the ground, let alone throw her anywhere. And you expect me to believe that *Lucy* threw her?”

“Five or six feet, yes. There were witnesses.”

“Witnesses saw a skinny little kid like Lucy throw a barrel of lard like Janice Mulgrew five or six feet? What are you putting in their milk, Ms Eisenheim?”

“You can say what you like, Mr Erskine. Lucy will still have to undergo psychiatric tests before we can think of allowing her back.”

I found Lucy sitting alone in a small classroom at the back of the building. The grey fall light made her look very small and pale and vulnerable, and her eyes were still red from crying. A young blonde-haired assistant was sitting at the next desk, reading a story about a girl who fell in love with a bear, and gradually changed into a bear herself.

“Look, Lucy,” said the teacher, closing her book. “Daddy's here.”

Lucy climbed off her chair and came slowly toward me. She tried not to cry at first, but then her face collapsed into painful sobbing. I picked her up and held her tight. “Come on, now, sweetheart; Daddy's here. Everything's going to be fine.”

“I didn't mean to,” she wept, “I didn't mean to.”

“Sure, sweetheart, I know you didn’t. Come on, hush now. We’ll go home to see mommy now, shall we?”

The teacher said, “She’s very upset. I did what I could to cheer her up.”

“What’s that story you’ve been reading her?”

“Oh, that. It’s an old Navaho legend. We do try to raise the children’s awareness of Native American culture.”

“Well, I’d rather you didn’t try it on *my* kid, okay?”

The teacher looked taken aback. “I’m sorry you feel that way,” she said. “We like to think that it’s enriching.”

I didn’t bother to argue with her. My own encounters with Native American culture had been dangerous, frightening, and often tragic; but it would have taken too long to tell her about them, and I doubt if she would have believed me anyway. She looked like one of those bright young college girls with plenty of moralistic opinions and no experience whatever. I just wondered how she would have reacted if *she* had been faced with the Lizard-of-the-Trees, or the hunched and shadowy shape of Aktunowihio, the dark presence that drags people down to the so-called Happy Hunting Grounds.

I left the school with Lucy huddled in my arms and by now word about the play-yard incident must have gotten around, so when I walked through the hallway all of my women friends somehow contrived to be looking the other way, or rummaging in their purses, or having some trouble with their contact lens. When your kid gets into trouble, you soon find out who your friends aren’t.

My new white Caprice was parked under a tree and a flock of starlings had spattered it. By the look of it, they’d been lunching at Lutece. I let Lucy into the back seat, made sure she was buckled up, and then drove back home. It was only nine blocks but owning a car was still a novelty as far as I was concerned, and I was prepared to put up with any kind of traffic snarl-up just for the joy of my own air-conditioned environment, with soul music on the CD, and my sugar plum fairy sitting in back, jabbering on about what she was doing at nursery school.

Except that today my sugar plum fairy didn't jabber. She didn't say a word. She sat staring out of the window, her head sadly inclined to one side, and nothing I said to her made any difference. For some reason, I kept thinking of the story that her teacher had been reading her. "Gradually, the maiden underwent a change. Her teeth grew long, her nails became claws, and soon her whole body was covered in thick, black hair."

I glanced in the rear-view mirror. I had never been a father before, but up until now it had all been pretty straightforward. A stomach was empty, you filled it. A diaper was filled up, you changed it. You taught her not to say "horsey" and "baa-lamb" and you tried to teach her a little basic math, like daddy + mommy + sugar plum fairy = great contentment. I don't mean to sound too gooey about it, but marrying Karen and having Lucy had fulfilled me more than anything I had ever done before. It was just as if I had been sitting in a gloomy room, right up to the age of 43, and then suddenly God had opened up the door and let the sunlight come flooding in, and said, "What have you been doing in that gloomy room all of these years, Harry? Your life has been waiting for you out here."

We reached our apartment on E 86 and I managed to park in a space that was just big enough for a bagel cart. No wonder I used to call myself the Incredible Erskine. I carried Lucy out of the car, and up the steps, but when we reached the door she said, "I want to get down, please, daddy. I don't want you to carry me anymore."

I put her down. "Okay, fine, whatever you want."

She looked at me with big, dark, serious eyes. She wasn't what you'd call a pretty little girl. She wasn't a Shirley Temple or anything like that. She had straight, dark hair, cut in a bob, and the same delicate bone structure as Karen, elfin almost. I always thought she looked too pale, but then most city children do. She had such skinny arms and legs, you felt you had to be careful when you held her, in case you broke her wrist or something.

"Listen," I said, "mommy's going to ask what you happened. What are you going to say to her?"

A single tear slid down her left cheek, and dripped onto the collar of her little blue-checkered blouse. "I didn't mean to," she wept. "I told them they were all bad, which was true, and then they got angry and I had to make them go away."

“You told them they were bad? Why did you do that, sweetheart?”

“Mulgrews, Cullens, they’re all bad. They kill people. They kill babies.”

I stroked the tear away from her cheek. “They kill *babies*? Who told you they kill babies?”

She sniffled for a moment, but then she raised her head and looked me directly in the eye. “The *mistai* told me. The *mistai* never tell lies.”

I felt a feeling go through me like swallowing a large lump of ice, painful and very cold. “The *mistai*?” I asked her. “The *mistai* told you? What do you know about the *mistai*?”

But immediately, Lucy burst into tears, and clung to me; and there was nothing I could do but open up the door and take her inside. The lobby was clad in marble, with a compass-rose pattern on the floor. There were mirrors and fresh flowers everywhere, and a reassuring smell of ‘expensive’. Soon after Karen and I were married, her aunt had died, Aunt Millie who had doted on her, and she had left this fine three-bedroom apartment on E86, fully furnished in a style you could have described as ‘Walt Disney goes to Versailles’, with gilded chairs and rococo dressers and brocade drapes that you could have cut into 500 new uniforms for the Vatican Guard. In other words, quantity and tastelessness, in equal proportions. But I never complained. Don’t look a gift apartment in the mouth, that’s what I always say, even if it does look like Marie Antoinette’s second-best boudoir. And I especially don’t look in the mouth the \$2.1 million that came with it.

I carried Lucy into the apartment and set her down on the wide yellow-striped couch. Karen was sitting at the small walnut desk in the corner, breathlessly preparing her accounts on a laptop computer.

“Hey...you’re home!” said Karen. “I won’t be a moment...I just have to download the Foggia case.”

I came up and laid my hand on her shoulder. We had been together for five years now, and she was still just as pretty and fragile as the day she first came to see me. There are some women you love because they’re best friends, and they’re sexy and supportive. But I loved Karen because I *had* to love her. She was my destiny. If the Lord

God had put me on the earth to do anything, he put me on earth to take care of her, and I did.

“Listen...Lucy’s been in trouble at nursery school.”

“What? What kind of trouble? Lucy! Are you all right?”

Lucy turned her head away and wouldn’t look at her. “This might be serious,” I said, “There’s more to this than meets the eye.”

“Harry, stop being all mysterious and just tell me what’s happened!”

I went over to Lucy and sat down next to her. “Come on, kiddo. Why don’t you tell mommy what happened?”

But Lucy shook her head, and buried her face even more deeply in the cushions.

“Okay,” I said. “According to the school – and before you blow your top, I’m only reporting what they said to me, and I don’t believe it either – *according* to the school, Lucy threw Janice Mulgrew five or six feet across the play-yard, so that she sustained multiple bruises and a sprained ankle. She then smashed Laurence Cullen into a wall, so that he damn near broke his nose. Then she did a Bruce Lee job on seven other kids, knocking them over, scratching them, biting them, and kicking the boys in the heritage department.

Karen stared at Lucy and her face was bloodless. “That’s *insane!* Look at her, she’s the second-smallest kid in her class! She *threw* Janice Mulgrew? I never heard anything so ridiculous in my entire life!”

She stalked over to the eighteenth-century-style telephone table, and picked up the phone.

“What are you doing?” I demanded.

“I’m phoning the school, of course. Nobody, but *nobody*, accuses my daughter of violence! She’s only a baby, for God’s sake!”

I walked over and pushed my finger down on the cradle. “Don’t call anybody, not just yet. There’s something else.”

“Harry, what are you talking about, this is our *daughter!*”

“Exactly. And we both know how and when we conceived her, don’t we? Which makes her something of a special case.”

Karen slowly raised her head and touched my sleeve as if to reassure herself that I was real. “I hoped we’d forgotten all that. God, Harry, I never even *dream* about it!”

“All the same, when Lucy was talking to me downstairs, she mentioned the word ‘*mistai*’. Not just once, but twice.”

“*Mistai*? Where have I heard that before?”

It wasn’t easy to tell her. Karen had suffered more than anybody, and the last thing she wanted to hear about was Native American ritual. I had first met her in the mid-1970s when the Algonquin wonder-worker Misquamacus had tried to use her body to return to New York, for the sole and dedicated purpose of taking his revenge on the white men who had decimated his people. He had used his immense magical powers to impregnate himself into her body, and it was only with the help of a modern medicine-man, Singing Rock, that we had managed to save her. Only four years ago, Misquamacus had tried to possess her for a second time – and it was then, under the shadow of his influence, that Karen and I had first had sex together, and Lucy had been conceived.

It had been up to me to save her that time; Misquamacus had killed Singing Rock by beheading him, just to make sure that his spirit would never find peace.

Karen and I would always have that bond between us. We had both faced the same hideous danger, and survived. But even for survivors, time moves on. These days, Karen was spending more and more time away from home – business meetings, conventions, foreign travel – and as much as I loved her, as much as our lives were intertwined, we had grown more distant in the past eighteen months. But for Lucy’s sake, and maybe for our own sake, too, this was a time when we needed to be close.

I took hold of Karen’s hand. “*Mistai* are what the Pawnee Indians used to call ghosts. Lucy said that the *mistai* told her that Janice Mulgrew and Laurence Cullen were bad people. They killed babies.”

“How on earth could Lucy know about Pawnee ghosts?”

"I don't know. They teach Native American mythology at Lennox. Maybe she picked it up from there. For Christ's sake, she's only four. You know what imaginations they have at that age."

Karen took hold of my other hand, and gripped it tight. "Did she really throw Janice across the play-yard?"

"I don't know. Ms Eisenheim says they've got witnesses – but, well. You know how unreliable witnesses can be, especially kids."

"Do *you* believe that Lucy threw Janice across the play-yard?" asked Karen intently.

I shook my head. "Of course not. Janice is twice Lucy's size."

Karen released my hands and turned away. "I've been afraid of this," she said, her face silhouetted against the window. "I've been afraid of this ever since I found out I was pregnant."

I didn't say anything, but came up and laid my hand on her shoulder.

"It's too much of a coincidence, isn't it, her talking about *mistai* on the same day that she attacks all of those children."

"Come on, Karen, you're not trying to suggest -"

"I'm not trying to suggest anything. Lucy is a gentle, loving, sweet-natured little girl, and the only way that she could have done what she did today was if somebody took hold of her. Somebody stronger – somebody strong enough to throw Janice Mulgrew six feet in the air and hit all of those other kids. Somebody that nobody could see, because he wasn't standing behind her, he was right inside her, the way he was right inside me!"

"Karen -"

"I knew this would happen! I knew it! I knew that he would never leave us alone! He wants a way to get back and the only way he can do it now is through Lucy; the same way that he tried to get back through me."

"You really believe that? Come on, Karen, it's been years."

Her eyes were bright with fear, but they were determined, too. "When he was right inside me, I could feel what it was like to be him. It was like a raging fire. I felt that I could do anything, and nobody could stop me. I could have killed people then, I could have smashed their heads and cracked their bones, and relished it. I'll never forget it, Harry, and I don't want it to happen again. Not to Lucy, please."

Neither of us dared to say the name *Misquamacus*. For nearly five years, we had liked to believe that his spirit had been sent back to the skies, or the underworld, or the Hanging Road, which is what the Indians used to call the Milky Way, the sparkling highway of dead souls.

We didn't want to think that he had somehow managed to influence the one person we both cherished more than life itself: our own daughter, Lucy.

"Hey...maybe we're being oversensitive," I suggested. "Maybe it was just a tantrum. Kids get tantrums. Their adrenaline builds up...you know what people are capable of doing, when their adrenaline builds up. There was that woman in Indiana who lifted a two-ton Pontiac station-wagon, because it was crushing her son. I mean they proved scientifically that she couldn't have, but she did. Maybe that was what happened to Lucy."

"I'm going to have to call Janice's parents," said Karen. "Laurence's, too."

"She hurt seven other kids besides," I told her. "And if I were you, I wouldn't start admitting any liability just yet, in case they start thinking about lawsuits and compensation. For the first time in my life, I've got a little money. I don't want to lose it all because of some rumpus in the romper room."

"Besides," I added, very uncomfortably, "Ms Eisenheim won't let her back until she's had a psychiatric evaluation."

"*What?*" Karen demanded. "Is she trying to suggest that my daughter's mentally unbalanced? Don't talk to me about lawsuits and compensation! That woman! I'll hang her ass out to dry!"

I tried to calm her down. "Karen...this is crazy. We don't exactly know what happened. There's no point in getting hysterical about it?"

I held her close against me. She was warm, and she smelled, as always, of Chanel. I loved her so much you couldn't believe it. But I was beginning to feel that so long as she and I stayed together, the shadow of Misquamacus would dog us, the way that Indian hunters had dogged their prey over miles and miles of empty prairie, so that in the very end, they could cast their shadows over their enemies' graves.

The next morning was sharp and sunny. Lucy was sitting in her room playing with her dolls house. Barbie had been trying to climb out of the upstairs window, and had got her bust stuck on the windowledge. I sat crosslegged on the floor watching Lucy while she played; and then at last I said, "These *mistai*."

She turned and stared at me with those coal-hole eyes. "What *mistai*?"

"Those *mistai* who told you that Janice and Laurence were bad. I mean – how did you know that they were called *mistai*?"

"Because they were."

"You saw them? What did they look like?"

Lucy thought for a moment, and then covered her face with her fingers, so that only her eyes looked out. If you hadn't known what she was doing, you wouldn't have thought anything of it. But I remembered what the old texts had said, the old texts about Misquamacus. *'On being ask'd what ye Daemon look'd like, the antient Wonder-Worker Misquamacus covered his face so that onlie ye Eyes look'd out, and then gave a very curious and Circumstantial Relation, saying it was sometimes small and solid, like a Great Toad ye Bigness of many Ground-hogs, but sometimes big and cloudy, with no Shape, though with a face which had Serpents grown from it.'*

"They had their hands over their faces?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "They had *no* faces. They were *mistai*."

"They came to the schoolyard and spoke to you?"

"Sure. They were all grey and I couldn't hardly see them but they said that Janice Mulgrew was bad and Laurence Cullen was bad and some of the other kids. And all I did was say that they were bad; because they were."

“Then what?” I asked her.

She looked away. “Then Janice tried to hit me and I told her to fly through the air.”

“You *told* her? You didn’t pick her up?”

“Janice is too fat. I couldn’t pick her up.”

“Then what? You told Laurence to push his face into a wall?”

“Unh-huh. I never touched him.”

“You told them and they did it? Just like that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And what about the other kids? The same thing with them?”

“That’s right. They wanted to hit me but I told them all to fall over, and they did.”

I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes. This was serious. This was even more serious than I had imagined. If Lucy had told Janice to fly through the air and hurt herself; and forced Laurence to run into a wall; then she could be using a hugely powerful form of Indian magic known as Enemy-Hurts-Himself, a form of supernatural judo, in which all of your opponents’ hate and aggression is turned against him.

I could feel Misquamacus. I could feel his influence, like a huge dark sea-creature resting hundreds of feet below the surface of human consciousness. In his day, in the 1600s, he had been the most startling medicine-man of his age – the only medicine-man who had dared to make direct contact with the ancient gods of North America, the Great Old Ones. His magic had been legendary. He had changed the course of rivers, caused it to rain, and been seen by reliable witnesses on both sides of the American continent in the space of a few hours – at a time when it had taken months to cross from the eastern seaboard to the west.

I could almost *smell* him, he was so close. He has been there when Lucy was conceived, with his black, glittering headdress of living beetles, and his hard-hewn face, and his eyes that were filled with all the rage and malevolence of a man whose people

had been systematically wiped out, and whose world of natural magic had been overwhelmed by money and guns and the principle of manifest destiny.

“Have you had your breakfast?” I asked Lucy.

She nodded. “Lucky Charms.”

“Oh, sure. And I bet you ate all the mallow bits and left all the plain bits.”

She laughed. She seemed perfectly normal now. But Misquamacus had always proved himself to be fiercely unpredictable, and there was no telling how or when he would choose to make his presence felt. I closed Lucy’s door and went back to the living-room, where Karen was reading *Architectural Digest* and drinking espresso.

“I’m going to call Norman Vogel,” I told her. “Maybe he could see Lucy this afternoon.”

“Harry, you know that there’re nothing wrong with her, not psychiatrically.”

“Of course. But she’s still going to need a clean bill of health from a psychiatrist before they’ll let her back into school. And if I can take her today, she’ll get one. She’s calm, she’s rested. She’s going to be fine.”

“And what if she goes back to school and the same happens again?”

“It won’t. I’m going to find out if it *was* Misquamacus who made her behave like that; and if it was, I’m going to make sure that he leaves her alone. And leaves her alone permanent.”

“-ly,” added Karen. She was always correcting me.

I poured myself a cup of coffee, sat back on the sofa and picked up the phone. However, I had hardly finished dialling Dr Vogel’s number when we heard a piercing screaming coming from Lucy’s room. I banged down the phone, jumped up, and knocked espresso all over the lemon-yellow carpet. Together, Karen and I ran along the corridor and opened Lucy’s door.

Lucy’s dolls house was in flames. Its roof was alight and already the sides were burning. Lucy had her hand caught in one of the windows, and was screaming wildly as she tried to pull it out. Without a second’s hesitation I pulled out the whole plastic

window-frame and freed her, but all the same I burned the back of my hand. I said, "Here!" and handed her to Karen, while I went over to Lucy's bed, pulled off the quilt, and dropped it over the dolls house to smother the flames.

It was all over in seconds, but the bedroom was filled with smoke and Lucy was totally hysterical, screaming and coughing and kicking her legs. Karen carried her over to the washbasin and we ran cold water over her fingers. They didn't look too badly burned, but I thought we ought to call the doctor to make sure they were bandaged properly, and to give Lucy something for shock. After we had kept her hands under running water for a while, she began to calm down, but she was deathly pale and she was shivering all over.

While Karen wrapped her up in a blanket and carried her into the living-room, I cautiously lifted the quilt off the dolls house to make sure that the fire was out. The plastic roof had been reduced to stringy, rancid loops, and the wooden sides were badly charred. Inside, Barbie had half melted. Her hair was nothing but a blackened brush and one side of her face was distorted. What made her look even more grotesque was the way she was still smiling at me, as if she had enjoyed her immolation.

I carried the dolls house out of the apartment and into the elevator. Mick the doorman opened the door to the back yard for me. He peered inside at Barbie's remains and said, "That'll teach her for smoking in bed."

Dr Van Steen came around a half-hour later. He didn't usually make housecalls, but he had known the Tandys even before Karen was born, and he was a close family friend as well as a physician. He was white-haired, immaculately dressed in black and grey, with shining steel-rimmed spectacles and shining patent leather shoes.

"Well, now," he said, sitting next to Lucy on the sofa. "I understand your dolls house burned down. How did that happen?"

Lucy said nothing, and turned away.

"There were no matches anyplace around," I said. "I can't understand how it happened."

“Let’s take a look at those fingers,” said Dr Van Steen, and took hold of Lucy’s hands. “They’re a little blistered, aren’t they, but they’ll heal up all right. Little girls of your age, they heal so quick they’re usually better before I can get around to see them.”

Lucy turned back and stared at him. “I wanted Barbie to die,” she said, very clearly, and with great emphasis on the word ‘*die*’.

Dr Van Steen looked over at me with his eyebrows lifted. “That wasn’t a very nice thing to do, was it? Why did you want her to die?”

“Because she’s a yellow-hair.”

“A yellow-hair. Don’t you like yellow-hairs?”

“All yellow-hairs have to die. And all white faces.” At that, she covered her face with her bandaged hands, so that only her eyes looked out.

“Just a little joke of hers,” I put in. I didn’t want Dr Van Steen to push her any further.

After he was finished bandaging Lucy’s fingers, however, I took him into the hallway and closed the living-room door behind us.

“Between you and me, doctor, Lucy’s been acting real strange. She had a fight in the schoolyard today and hurt some of her classmates. The school won’t let her back until she’s undergone a psychiatric evaluation. Now this.”

“Is there anything worrying her?”

“Not that I know of. What does a four-year-old have to worry about? Too many repeats of *Sesame Street*? The rising price of M&Ms?”

“You’ll forgive my being personal, but are you and Karen getting along okay? There aren’t any domestic upsets?”

“Well, Karen’s been working pretty hard lately, and we’ve had one or two contretemps about that. But nothing else.”

“She’s not being teased or bullied at her nursery-school?”

“No...no indication of that.”

Dr Van Steen said, "What's all this about yellow-hair? Do you know what that means?"

"Yellow-hair used to be the Native American name for a blonde. Like General Custer, for example."

"Why should a four-year-old Caucasian child say that all yellow-hairs must die?"

I shrugged, I had my own theory about that, but I wasn't going to tell Dr Van Steen. Before I stirred up any old and unwelcome influences, I wanted to make absolutely sure that Lucy wasn't simply suffering from some conventional psychiatric glitch.

"I'm taking her to see Dr Vogel," I said. "Maybe *he* can work out what's wrong."

"Let me know how things go," said Dr Van Steen. "And – oh – if you find out, let me know how Lucy could start a fire without matches."

He gave me an odd, knowing look, as if he suspected that I was holding something back. I was; but even if I had told him what it was, he wouldn't have believed me. I didn't want to believe it myself.

The following afternoon we took Lucy to Dr Vogel's clinic on Park Avenue. The city was covered in low, grey cloud, and it was raining. Lucy wore her red hooded raincoat and her little red rubbers, and carried her favourite doll with her, a grubby, floppy thing with the highly original name of Doll.

Inside Dr Vogel's office it was all dark oak panelling and gloom. Dr Vogel looked more like a bear hunter than a psychiatrist. He was broad-shouldered, with a huge brown beard and bright blue eyes, and hands as big as snow-shovels. He wore a blue-checked backwoods shirt and stonewashed jeans, and he laughed a lot. He had been recommended to me by Dr Hughes, the tumour specialist who had helped Karen during the days when Misquamacus had attempted his first reincarnation. Dr Hughes had lost part of his hand to the ancient demon that Misquamacus had summoned to help him, the Lizard-of-the-Trees, and it had taken him years of surgery and years of psychiatric

counselling before he had recovered. Even so, he had lost all of his hair and all of his spirit; and I had never seen a man so broken.

“Well, then, little lady,” said Dr Vogel, “It sounds like you’ve been having some pretty good fun at school.”

Lucy clutched Doll, and swung her head from side to side.

“So...not so much fun. Huh?” asked Dr Vogel.

“Mulgrews and Cullens kill babies,” she said.

“They kill *babies*? What babies?”

“All the babies at Sand Creek. All the babies at Washita River.”

Dr Vogel looked at me in perplexity. “Sand Creek? Washita River?”

“Indian massacres,” I told him. “Worse than Wounded Knee.”

“Indian massacres? What the hell have you been teaching her, Harry? She’s four.”

“I never taught her that. They’ve been teaching her all about Native Americans at nursery school...but not about Sand Creek, for Christ’s sake. Leastways, they’d better not.

“So how does she know about Sand Creek and Washita River?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have any idea. I just want to know if she’s sane.”

Dr Vogel was silent for a moment. I liked him; I trusted him; but I didn’t have any alternative. I had to lie to him because I wanted him to tell me that Lucy was suffering from juvenile depression or playschool psychosis or neurotic aversion to the alphabet.

I wanted him to tell me anything except that Lucy was possessed.

Karen and I sat in the waiting-room pretending to read last month’s copies of *The New Yorker* and *Schizophrenic News* while Dr Vogel ran a series of tests on Lucy’s intelligence, sensitivity, audio-visual responses, and what she thought an ink-blot in the shape of Cookie Monster looked like (Cookie Monster). On the wall of the waiting-room was a brass plaque which read ‘Anybody who goes to see a psychiatrist needs their head examined.’

Eventually we were called back in. Dr Vogel unwrapped a strawberry sucker and gave it to Lucy, and then sat back with his legs crossed, looking serious. "I have to tell you, Harry, I never came across anything like this before. Lucy appears to be highly intelligent, *highly* motivated, with perceptual and analytical skills that are way above her age group. She also has extraordinary gifts of intuition."

"But?" I asked him.

"But she persists in this aggressive delusion that her classmates were responsible for killing babies, and that they not only deserved the whupping she gave them, they actually deserved to die. And she's full of this Native American mumbo-jumbo. For instance "- he frowned down at his notepad "- do you have any idea what a *mistai* is?"

"Sure. It's an Indian ghost. It frightens people by tugging at their blankets at night. It's kind of a messenger too, and it whispers in people's ears and tells them what the spirits want them to do."

"Lucy said that the *mistai* told her to kill any yellow-hairs...though why she should have started by burning her Barbie doll, I really couldn't say."

"The Indians set great store by doll-figures," I said, "The Crow used to have a sundance doll made of beads and animal skin. If you danced with it, and stared it in the face, it would tell you where to find your enemy, so that you could kill him. To an Indian mystic, a doll-figure like Barbie wouldn't be a toy...it would represent everything that white people had done to destroy his culture and his religion."

"You're something of an expert, then?" said Dr Vogel.

"There was a time when I had to be."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that Karen and I have had encounters with Native American mysticism a couple of times in the past."

"And you think that Lucy's present condition might have something to do with these encounters?"

Karen nodded. "Since you say that she's sane and intelligent, we can't think of anything else that could be making her behave this way."

"I see," said Dr Vogel, although he looked deeply troubled. "You don't think that Lucy's behaviour could have been affected by your talking about this Native American mysticism in front of her, or when you thought you might have thought that she couldn't hear you?"

"We *never* talk about it," said Karen, emphatically.

"Well...I wouldn't mind running some more detailed tests," said Dr Vogel. "Maybe you could see how Lucy gets along and then bring her back in a couple of days."

"If you think it'll do any good."

"I don't know...do you have any better ideas?"

"Not really. Except that I'm going to try to find out what it is that's making Lucy behave this way, and once I know what it is, I might have a chance of getting rid of it."

"Well, be careful," Dr Vogel warned me. "Lucy's very impressionable. Whatever you do, you shouldn't give her the impression that you believe in any of this mysticism. You'll run the risk of reinforcing her delusion, and make it doubly difficult for me to readjust her."

I didn't say anything. I was used to scepticism. Before Misquamacus first reared his head, I used to be a card-carrying member of the National Society of Sceptics myself. I used to pay the rent by telling fortunes to rich old ladies, under the name of the Incredible Erskine, and you needed to be a sceptic to make a living like that. If you really believed what the Tarot cards foretold, you'd go right out, put bricks in your pockets, and drown yourself in the East River. You really want to know when you're going to lose your loved ones, and how? You really want to know when you're going to die? Not for me, *gracias*. Since Karen had come into some money, I had hung up my spangled cloak and put the Tarot out to grass, which was just as well, because I had seen things that still gave me nightmares, and I believed in 'Native American mumbo-jumbo' because it was just as real as I was.

"I'll give you a call," I told Dr Vogel, and stood up. "Thanks for taking a look at Lucy, anyhow."

"There's just one more thing I wanted to ask her," said Dr Vogel. "How did she manage to set her dolls house alight? You said there was no sign that she was playing with matches."

"I just burned it," said Lucy.

Dr Vogel leaned forward and gave her an encouraging smile. "Yes, honey, we know you burned it. But *how* did you burn it?"

Lucy blinked at him as if he were totally stupid.

"I burned it," she repeated. "Like this."

She looked over at his desk, and pointed her finger at it. There was a moment's pause, and then a wisp of smoke started to rise from the papers on the blotter. Then there was the softest of flaring noises, and every paper on the desk burst into flame.

Dr Vogel jumped up. "For God's sake! What the hell are you doing? Harry – there's a fire extinguisher in the waiting-room – quick!"

But flames were already leaping upward, and the desk's leather top was beginning to shrivel like human skin. Dr Vogel picked up a folder and tried to beat the flames down, but all he succeeded in doing was fanning them even higher, and sending showers of sparks all over the carpets and the furniture.

I managed to wrestle the fire-extinguisher free from its bracket on the waiting-room wall. I hurried back in and sprayed powder all over Dr Vogel's desk, and onto the seat of his leather chair, which was already starting to smoulder.

Dr Vogel picked up his half charred report. "What the hell have you done?" he bellowed at Lucy. "Do you know how long it took to – For God's sake, Harry! What the hell has she done?"

Karen put her hands protectively on Lucy's shoulders. "Dr Vogel – please don't shout. It was just an accident."

“Accident? That was no accident! She deliberately put out her finger and – and – look at this mess! This is going to take me days to sort out! Weeks!”

“Come on Michael, quiet down,” I told him. “There’s no way Lucy could have started it.”

“Then what?” He shouted. “A cigarette? I don’t smoke. A short-circuit? All I have is a battery-operated calculator. An Act of God? Or a Goddamned act of vandalism? Get her out of her, go on. I don’t want to see her again. Think yourself lucky if I don’t sue you for criminal damage.”

I was trying to think of something to say that would calm Dr Vogel down when Lucy pointed her finger at his face. Again, there was a moment’s pause; but then Dr Vogel suddenly clamped his hands to his face and let out a terrible shout. His beard had burst into flame, hundreds of pinpricks of orange fire, like a burning brush. His hair suddenly caught fire, too, and then his shirt collar and his cuffs. He screamed and beat his face, stumbling from side to side in agony, but in only a few seconds he was blazing from the shoulders upward.

I stripped off my leather jacket, bundled it over his head, and pushed him heavily to the floor, jarring my knee against the side of his desk. He writhed and struggled and kept on screaming, and I turned to Karen and said, “Get Lucy out of here, fast! And call an ambulance!”

Dr Vogel stopped screaming and began to whimper and shiver, I carefully lifted up my leather jacket, and the smoke that rose from underneath it smelled as if somebody had accidentally barbecued a cat. Dr Vogel’s face was unrecognisable – not just as Dr Vogel, but as a human being. His beard had burned down to fine black ash, his nose and lips were swollen and raw, and as he breathed out, smoke poured out of his nostrils.

“Hurts,” he mumbled, quaking as if he were cold.

“Hold on,” I told him, I was shivering almost as much as he was. “The medics won’t be long.”

“Hurts, Harry,” he repeated. “Hurts like all hell.”

“Don’t worry, Michael, they’ll soon give you something for the pain.”

He tried to open his eyes, but the skin around his eyelids had fused together, so that his eyes looked like two roughly-peeled plums.

“Did she really do this?” he asked me.

“You mean Lucy? I don’t know. Maybe not Lucy, but whatever’s taken control of her.”

“I’m going to die,” said Dr Vogel. “This hurts too much. I’m going to die.”

He didn’t say anything else. I stayed beside him until the paramedics arrived, and then I took one last look at him and left the office. Karen and Lucy were waiting for me in the reception area, talking to two police officers.

“You’re this lady’s husband?” asked one of them. “Can you tell us exactly what happened in there?”

“Dr Vogel caught fire,” I told him. “I don’t know how it happened. He just spontaneously combusted, right in front of us.”

“Do you have any idea how that could have happened?” the policeman asked me.

I shook my head. But Lucy took hold of my hand and looked up at the officers, and said, “He was a yellow-hair.”

The officers grinned at each other. But if only they had understood the significance of what Lucy had told them, they wouldn’t have been grinning. They would have been putting as much distance between themselves and Lucy as they possibly could.

\* \* \*

“You realize how dangerous this could be?” said Karen, as I drew the drapes and blocked out the daylight.

“I can’t think of any other way,” I told her. “Who’s going to believe that a four-year-old girl has been misbehaving at school because she’s possessed by an Indian medicine-man? Who’s going to believe that she can start fires just by pointing her finger?”

“Wouldn’t Amelia help?” she asked me. Amelia was the spirit medium who had first contacted Misquamacus. She and I had later become lovers, on and off, and usually more off than on. I hadn’t seen her in a long while and I couldn’t ask her to risk her life again.

“It has to be me,” I told her. “The whole reason this is happening is because of me. It’s like an unwritten law. If an enemy defeats you, you can’t just turn your back and go on to other things. You have to return to his lodge and seek to defeat him in return. There’s no way that Misquamacus can regain his honour until he’s had his revenge.”

“Why didn’t he try to possess you, or me, instead of Lucy?”

“Maybe he isn’t strong enough. Remember that the last time we beat him, he literally *dispersed*, like electrical energy. And what can Lucy do – pushing her schoolmates around, starting spontaneous fires – that might be frightening, but it isn’t exactly the stuff of great tribal magic, is it? In his heyday, this guy could literally move mountains.”

Karen pressed her hand against her forehead as if she had an incipient migraine. “I’m so frightened,” she said. “What if anything happens to Lucy? I couldn’t bear it, Harry. I think I’d die.”

“Karen,” I said, “we have to. Otherwise, who knows how many people are going to be hurt?”

I had moved a circular card-table right into the middle of the living-room, and covered it with a maroon blanket. There was a small bronze Japanese nightlight in the centre of the table, and I lit it. Then I went around and switched off all the table-lamps. The nightlight cast flickering shadows of Japanese ideograms on the walls all around.

“Why don’t you go get Lucy?” I asked Karen. “Tell her this is just a new game we’re going to play. Kind of like hide-and-seek.”

I sat down at the table. In front of me was a long bundle of old, uncured leather, tied with cords made of tightly twisted hair. I hadn't opened this bundle since it was first given to me, over twenty years ago, by the son of Singing Rock. It had been intended as nothing more than a sentimental reminder of a man who had given everything in order to prevent the forces of the past from destroying the equilibrium of the future. Singing Rock had sympathized in many ways with Misquamacus, but he hadn't shared his thirst for revenge. Singing Rock had believed that what is past is past, and that all you can do is wipe away your tears so that you can look more clearly to the future.

I picked open the knots with my thumbnails and loosened the strings. Then I unrolled the bundle and revealed its contents; two human thigh-bones, decorated at each end with red and white beads and hanks of human hair, dyed blue. They had been taken from the body of White Bull, the medicine-man who had made a magical war-bonnet for the legendary chief Roman Nose. It was said that when they were beaten together, up and down, White Bull was running into the world of spirits, and whoever was holding the bones would be carried into the world of the spirits behind him.

Karen came back into the room, holding Lucy's hand. It had been two days now since the burning incident in Dr Vogel's office, and Lucy was beginning to get over the shock. Although she had been used to channel the power that had started the fires, she was still a little girl, she was still my little sugar plum fairy, and afterward she had been just as distressed about what had happened as we were.

Karen and Lucy sat at the table.

"Why is it so dark in here?" asked Lucy, looking around.

"It's dark because we're going to play a new game."

"What game?" she wanted to know. She peered at the two thighbones lying on the table in front of me. "Knick-knack-paddy-whack-give-a-dog-a-bone?"

"Unh-hunh. We're going to play a game of imaginary friends."

"What's that?"

“That’s when we call pretend people to come and play with us; and we see whether they really do.”

“That’s silly. There’s no pretend people.”

“What about Miss Ellie? She was pretend.” Miss Ellie had been Lucy’s invisible companion for over a year, and a goddamned nuisance she had been, too. She always had to have a place laid for her at the table, and we could never drive anywhere until Miss Ellie had buckled up.

“Miss Ellie’s gone now,” said Lucy. “She’s gone away and she’s never coming back.”

“Well, let’s see if we can find another pretend friend. If Miss Ellie’s gone, how about finding Miss Quamacus?”

Lucy put her hand to her mouth and gave an affected titter. “*That’s* a silly name!”

“All the same, let’s give it a try. What we have to do is think very, very hard, and keep on saying, Miss Quamacus, I want to see you. Miss Quamacus, I want to hear your voice. Miss Quamacus, I want to feel your hand. Do you think you can do that?”

Karen was staring at me in apprehension. I didn’t say anything, but I gave her a look which meant that we had to go through it. There was no other choice.

“Right,” I said, “We tap these bones together and we think very hard and then we start chanting. Miss Quamacus, I want to see you. Miss Quamacus, I want to hear your voice.”

I held the thighbones, one in each hand, and began to tap them rhythmically together as if they belonged to a man who was walking across a prairie. Imagine the grass, Singing Rock had told me, as deep as your knees. Imagine the tiny white flowers. Then imagine the prairie growing darker and darker as evening falls, and the shadow of Aktunowihio falling across the land, Aktunowihio the spirit of the night. Imagine the tiny white flowers have become stars, sparkling in the heavens, and that you are walking through the world of the spirits now, accompanied on all sides by *tasooms*, the souls of the dead who are rising into the sky like the smoke from the lodges in which they once lived.”

I closed my eyes, I kept on knocking the bones together at a slow walking pace. The three of us kept on reciting the words that Singing Rock had taught me. *“Misquamacus, I want to see you. Misquamacus, I want to hear your voice. Misquamacus, I want to touch your hand.”*

We went on like this for almost five minutes, and I began to think that it wasn't going to work. I might have White Bull's thighbones, and I might be reciting the right words, but I was a white man, out of touch with the spirits of the earth and the sky, the manitous of rocks and trees and running water. *Singing Rock*, I thought, *help me. I'm not getting anywhere here, I just can't do what you used to do.*

I was still crossing that grassy, flower-speckled prairie, to the clacking rhythm of White Bull's bones. But I distinctly felt a shiver in the grass, as if a cold wind had blown across it. In my mind's eye I felt a stormcloud moving in, as dark as slate, and the feeling that somebody was walking close beside me. I could hear the rustling of his feet, and the closeness of his breathing. It wasn't frightening. It was a good feeling: a feeling of companionship.

*“Misquamacus, I want to see you,”* I chanted, and this time I could hear another voice joining in; a deeper voice; a voice right inside of my head. *“Misquamacus, I want to touch your hand.”*

In my mind's eye, I turned my head, and for one instant I saw Singing Rock walking close beside me, dressed in all the feathers and beads and finery of a fully-fledged wonder-worker. But the second I looked, he vanished; and when I turned back, I wasn't walking through the prairie any longer, I was walking knee-deep in stars – high in the sky, in the Hanging Road, where the spirits walked beside me.

I heard a sharp electrical crackling. I opened my eyes. Both Karen and Lucy had their eyes closed now, and they were still chanting, soft and monotonous, as if they were hypnotized. The shadows from the Japanese nightlight dipped and flickered like dancing ghosts. I heard the crackling again, louder this time, and I smelled the raw ozone aroma of a powerful electrical short-circuit. The area around Lucy began to ripple and distort, the way that heat ripples on a midsummer sidewalk.

Karen's eyes suddenly opened. She looked toward Lucy and saw what I could see, too. A huge, hunched shape, formed of shadows and refracted light, almost invisible to

the naked eye, shifting and changing but so intense in its presence that neither of us could mistake it for what it was.

It was a man, wearing an immense head-dress that appeared to have feathers and beads and even small skulls dangling from it. It was impossible to make out his face. It shifted and changed like the surface of a shallow pool. I was sure that I could see clouds reflected in it, and smoke, and fog that hung heavy over winter reservations.

The crackling of static grew louder, sparks jumped around Lucy's head in a crown of electrical thorns. Karen half stood up, and reached out toward her, but I shouted, "*No! Don't touch her! He's all around her!*"

The crackling was suddenly filled out with a heavy rushing noise, like a badly tuned radio turned up to full volume. Through the noise, I could just hear somebody speaking – a slow, cold, emotionless voice – a voice that should have been silenced for ever more than three hundred years ago.

*"The spirits...will bring me justice...my weak white brother...the spirits...will reward me for what I have done...and will fill you with...all the arrows of sacrifice..."*

"Misquamacus," I said. I was trying to sound challenging, but my voice was wobbling all over the place. "What kind of warrior are you, that you have to take the spirit of a four-year-old child; and a girl-child, at that? I thought you were brave! I thought you could work amazing wonders!"

*"You speak to me of bravery...you that used nothing but cunning and trickery? Now you shall know what cunning and trickery are."*

"Leave my daughter alone," I told him. "I don't care what you do to me. But you leave my daughter alone."

*"Don't you remember...your daughter was mine? I possessed your woman when she was conceived. This child is heiress to my heritage, not yours. She is my way back...into your world...and when I am returned...she will be my princess, and a worker of wonders, too...and her name will be Nepauz-had, which means Moon Goddess."*

"You can't have her!" Karen screamed at him. "She's our daughter, not yours! You couldn't have me and you're not having her, either!"

The shifting shape turned towards her, with a harsh splitting of static. I could *almost* make out Misquamacus' flint-like profile. I could *almost* see the folds of his deerskin robes. But then the vision melted and changed again, and all I could see were thin red flickers of electricity, like graveworms crawling over a body that had already been devoured.

*"Remember that fate chose you to be my vessel,"* Misquamacus told Karen. *"When I was nothing but the smallest spark of life, carried over three thousand moons to find justice for my people, you were waiting for me. When I lost all physical existence, you and this man created a new way for me to walk once again in the world of men. I was reborn in your daughter; and now that I am strong enough, I shall take human shape, and finish the task the gods appointed me to do."*

"Bullshit," I told him. "If you so much as pluck one hair out of my daughter's head, I'll take your medicine bundle and shove it so far up your ass you won't be able to sit down until the drying grass moon."

*"You were always a man of no respect,"* said Misquamacus. *"But now is your chance to be the greatest living wonder worker. I will leave this child alone if you allow me to take your substance...if you surrender your flesh and your blood and your bones so that I may once again live not only as a spirit but as a man."*

"What the hell are you talking about?" I snarled at him; although I had mostly got the picture already. He had used Lucy's spirit as a way of returning to the material world, but now he needed real sinew and real muscle. In other word, I may have been thinning on top and seriously unfit, but he needed *me*.

As Misquamacus spoke, Lucy's eyes glowed an eerie phosphorescent blue, and her skin turned as white as plaster. I felt like snatching her away, but I knew enough about Misquamacus to realize how dangerous that could be. He was only able to make himself visible by externalising some of Lucy's spirit, and to try to tear her away could easily kill her.

*"We must go to the sacred place where I was born; and on that spot I must invoke the spirit of Ka-tua-la-hu. You will become nothing more than a spirit, a tasoom, as I am now, while I will regain the form in which I was in the great and magical days before the white devils came."*

"You're going to *kill* him?" asked Karen, desperately.

*"I am going to send his spirit on a journey to the Hanging Road."*

"You can't do that!" Karen insisted.

*"Then I will have to take the child; and bring her up as Nepauz-had; and teach her the ways of magic, until she has the power to release me."*

When he said that, Lucy's eyes blazed like two blowtorches, and she stretched open her mouth in a terrible grimace. Misquamacus was showing us that he could do anything he wanted with her.

I'm not a brave person, never was. I dodged the draft and I would always rather conciliate than start slugging. But I knew then that I had to do something brave. If the price of Lucy's survival was for me to take an early journey along the Hanging Road; then that was the price that I would have to pay. I was her father, it was my responsibility.

I took hold of Karen's hand and I felt calmer than I ever had before. "Okay, then," I said. "Where's this sacred place of yours?"

*"You will have to search for it in your maps and writings. Its name was Natukko, and it was here on this island."*

"But supposing I can't find it?"

*"You will have to find it; and you will have to be there tomorrow, when the moon rises. Otherwise, I will take Nepauz-had and you will never see her again."*

Karen's cheeks were stained with tears. "That's impossible!" she shouted. "That's impossible!"

But there was a deep, sucking sound like an ocean breaker sliding back over a pebbled shore; and then the tiniest sparkle of static, and Misquamacus had vanished. The air in the room was cold that our breath smoked.

Karen and I looked at each other; and then at Lucy. At that moment, Lucy's eyes rolled up into her head and she collapsed onto the floor like a broken doll.

I spent a bad night, and I was already standing on the steps of the New York Public Library when it opened at ten. I hurried directly to the Main Reading Room, and logged myself onto a computer. I needn't have rushed. By mid-afternoon I was still frowning and tapping away at the keyboard, while the fall sun moved around the room and lit up one section of grandiose paneling after another.

I was almost ready to give up when I located a book entitled *Native Locations* by Professor Harvey Fischer, from the Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts. It was an extensive list of Native American place names in New York and New England, what they meant, and where they used to be. I surreptitiously ate torn-off pieces of a KFC chicken burger which I had smuggled into the library in my pocket, and searched with finger-lickin' greasy keypads for *Natukko*.

I found Pontanipo (meaning 'cold water'); and Cowissewaschook ('proud peak'); as well as Ammanoosuc ('small fishing river'); and Uncanoonucks ('hills that look like a woman's breasts'). At last I located Natukko. It meant 'clearing' or 'clearing ground'. A few more punches on the keyboard, and I found its exact location, from a map of Manhattan Island dating from 1624, when it was owned by the Dutch West India Company. The map was signed 'Pieter Van Huiven fecit'. I superimposed a modern streetmap of Manhattan on top of the old map, and apart from some minor distortions along the coastline, they matched surprisingly closely. There was only one problem that I could see. The clearing called Natukko was positioned on the Conrail tracks just where they came out of the tunnels at 96<sup>th</sup> Street.

I sat back and stared at the screen in total despondency. When would the gods *ever* give me an even break? Here I was, trying to make the ultimate sacrifice to save Lucy's life, and they couldn't even give me a nice piece of lawn to be sacrificed on. I had to make my grand gesture on a goddamned railroad track.

I was still sitting there with my chin in my hands when a pretty girl student came up to me. Her hair was long and braided, and she wore a navy-blue duffel coat.

"Are you through with that terminal yet?" she asked me. "I have some really important work to do."

"Oh, sure. Sorry."

“There’s one thing you ought to remember about computers,” she said, putting down her bag of books.

“What’s that?”

She smiled. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“I’m sorry. I seem to be out of the loop here. Don’t you tell I’ve forgotten *what?*”

“The one thing you ought to remember about computers.”

I stood up, and brushed chicken burger crumbs from the chair. We seemed to be having one of those conversations that goes around and around in circles until it disappears up its own medicine-case holder.

The girl said, “Computers are *your* friends.” She emphasised ‘*your*’ as if to imply that they weren’t *her* friends.

I still didn’t understand it. I shrugged and said, “Well...sure, it’s all technology these days. Even reading a book.” But as I turned to leave she sat down, and lifted her left arm so that the sleeve of her duffel coat dropped back a little way. Around her wrist was a bracelet of bones and beads, entwined with hair. An Algonquin charm bracelet.

She had already started to work, so I didn’t disturb her. Besides, I now had some inkling of what she had been trying to tell me. Computers are *your* friends. Meaning you, as a white man; because she was obviously Native American. As my old friend Singing Rock told me, everything in the natural world has its own spirit, its manitou, from the humblest stone by the side of the road to the greatest redwood in the north-western forests. In the great days before the white invasion of North America, Indian wonder-workers were able to summon almost every spirit, living, inanimate or dead, and use it to make their own magic. Water, fire, wind and earth, they all tumultuous natural power – and this power could be harnessed to strange and devastating effect.

But the white men had brought their own brand of magic with them; and what Singing Rock had taught me was that every object made by whites had a spirit, too; a manitou of its own. A clock has a manitou, a typewriter has a manitou. And computers have manitous too. We had used a computer to beat Misquamacus when he had first

appeared – not its calculating power, but its *spirit*, the essential meaning of what it was, and the creativity of the men who made it.

In his oblique way, Singing Rock had found a way of reminding me that I was a white man living in a white man's world, and that I was surrounded by influences and artefacts that could help me.

\* \* \*

I arrived back home a little after five. Karen was looking drawn and worried, but Lucy was playing quite contentedly in her bedroom.

“Well?” said Karen.

“Well, I've found out where we're supposed to go.”

“You have?” She touched my sleeve. It was obvious that she didn't know whether to sound pleased or sad.

“I checked it with an old map. It couldn't be more convenient, believe me. Right on the Contrail tracks at East 96<sup>th</sup>.”

“You're not serious?”

“Unless some seventeenth-century Dutch mapmaker called Pieter van Huiven didn't know his ass from his astrolabe, that's exactly where Natukko was located. Didn't I always say that Misquamacus was born on the wrong side of the tracks?”

“Harry, do you have to make a joke of it?”

“Goddamn it Karen, I'm as scared as you are. Scareder. But I think there's a chance.”

“What do you mean?”

I told her about the girl in the library; and the feeling that she had given me that she was passing on a message from Singing Rock.

“So what do you have to do?” Karen wanted to know.

“I have to use my head, that’s what I have to do. I have to remember who I am, and who my people are; the same way that Misquamacus is always aware of what he is. I have to have a sense of *tribe*. I have to have a sense of *belonging*, Karen, that’s all. It’s something that most of us white people have long forgotten.”

I went into the small, cluttered room that I liked to call my study. There was some pretty nostalgic stuff in there, from the days when I was still the Incredible Erskine, Fortunes Foretold, Futures Fixed, Destinies Dealt Out. Astrological charts, Tarot cards, mah-jongg tiles. A crystal ball that I had bought from an exquisitely beautiful hippie girl in the Café Reggio, in the Village, longer ago than I cared to recall (and was she so beautiful now?) On the top shelf of the bookcase, however, were more than a dozen well-thumbed books on Native American magic and mythology. I took down *Spirit Transference and Soul Stealing* by Louis Sola. It was a book I had turned to more than once. The last time I had put it back on the shelf, I had hoped I would never have to turn to it, ever again.

I sat down and started to read through it. Karen brought me a cup of coffee and stood beside me for a while, her hand on my shoulder.

“How long before the moon comes up?” she asked me.

I checked my watch. “Two-and-a-half hours.”

“What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure. Anything that could give me an edge.”

“Harry...are you sure this is the right way? Misquamacus can’t be that strong. Maybe you should try talking to Amelia...anybody. Maybe Lucy could be exorcized.”

“Believe me, Karen, he’s serious. If I don’t do what he tells me, he’ll take her away. You couldn’t bear that, any more than me.”

I reached up and squeezed her hand. “Listen,” I said, “thanks for the coffee; thanks for all of your caring. I love you. But right now I have to find some way of beating this son-of-a-bitch.”

She left me in peace, God bless her, and I went back to *Spirit Transference and Soul Stealing*. There were pages of dry discussion about the realities of Indian magic,

and whether it was really possibly for a spirit to return to the material world by possessing a live human being. 'After a death that has been brought about by the breaking of a tribal taboo it may often be so weakened that it is unable to make its journey to the Happy Hunting Ground. This happened to the Cheyenne warrior Roman Nose at Beecher's Island in Colorado in 1868, after he had unwittingly eaten food with a metal fork.'

Aha. This sounded like it. The last time we had managed to dismiss Misquamacus we had literally grounded his spirit like a lightning strike, using two metal forks. He had escaped, but his spirit had been discharged into the sky. I thought then that his life-force had been dispersed for ever. It just goes to show you, doesn't it, that even a genius can make mistakes.

I read more about poor old Roman Nose. 'For years afterward, his voice was heard in the dead of the night begging for his spirit to be made whole again. It wasn't until 1924 that the wonder-worker George Eagle Claw was able to give Roman Nose the peace that he so desperately wanted, in a very obscure Cheyenne ceremony known as *spirit-jumping*.

In the ceremony of *spirit-jumping* a wonder-worker will invoke the spirit of the moon, which is the mistress of time. He can alter time so that his spirit can jump out of his body for a few brief minutes and into an animal such as buffalo or an elk or even an inanimate object such as a tree or a rock. This leaves his body empty of spirit – thus allowing the weakened spirit to occupy it, and to bring back together all of its different aspects – its voice, its memory, its sense of duty, its wisdom and its pride.

'In the wonder-worker's body, the newly-restored spirit atones for breaking a taboo by making offerings to the Great One. He makes offerings of sacred objects and he sings a song of remorse. He is then allowed to leave the wonder-worker's body and make his journey to eternal peace.

'After the spirit has left, the wonder-worker leaves his temporary host and returns to his own body.

'However, if the weakened spirit is *himself* a wonder-worker, he may find his own way back into the material world by occupying the body of an animal or someone who is much weaker than himself, such as a new-born infant. This accounts for several

interesting cases over the past century of very young children speaking in strange languages and exhibiting uncharacteristic behaviour patterns, such as sudden bouts of violence.

'In May, 1915, Nathan Toomey, a five-year-old from Casper, Wyoming, killed his six-year-old playmate with a heavy stone. When restrained, he began to shout in a language that the local doctor recognised as Kiowa. He transcribed it, and translated it, and it turned out that the boy (or whoever was possessing the boy) was promising to return to the world of men and seek his revenge on those who had murdered him.

'He appeared to be possessed by the notorious Kiowa wonder-worker Black Crow, the chief magical adviser to the rebellious chief Satanta. Black Crow had been captured by the military and imprisoned in Texas. The military reported that he had committed suicide by leaping out of his cell window.

'Once such spirits have possessed a human or an animal shape, they will attempt to increase their strength by 'jumping' to the body of an older and stronger person, until, in essence, they are 'real' again. They can only achieve this, however, by using the influence of the moon to force someone's spirit out of their body, leaving it free for occupation. There are only two known cases of this happening, although there are rumours of many more. In each case it was claimed that the invading spirit forced the spirit of his victim to 'jump' into an inanimate object – in one case, a large rock; in another, a tree.

'Some Native Americans say that this accounts for so-called 'haunted trees' and for poltergeist phenomena, such as chairs that move by themselves or gates that will never stay shut.'

I read the passage on spirit-jumping a second time and then closed the book. It looked as if Misquamacus was going to evict my spirit out of my body and set up home there himself. And what would happen to me? I'd wind up as a fence-post or a block of concrete, imprisoned for ever, with no hope of remission for good behaviour. It sounded ludicrous, but I had seen enough of Misquamacus' magic to know that there was nothing amusing about it, and that he was capable of turning the most ordinary day in your life into a nightmare from which you could never wake up.

At 96<sup>th</sup> Street, the tunnels underneath Park Avenue come to an end, and – as the ground-level falls away, the trains continue on elevated tracks all the way to the Bronx. When I was a snotty nosed kid with holes in the seat of his jeans, my friends and I used to climb up onto the tracks and walk along them. We had a fantasy about making our way through the tunnels as far as Grand Central Station, fifty-four blocks underground, so that we could exit by way of the platforms.

We tried twice, but we never managed to get any further than two or three hundred feet before we lost our nerve and made our way back again. The first time we were almost turned into puree of boy by a northbound commuter train and the second time we were caught by a railroad linesman, and we had to run for our lives, panting in panic as he came lumbering after us with a ten-pound hammer.

We climbed out of the cab and crossed Park Avenue, each of us holding Lucy's hand. The traffic booped and echoed all around us. Karen said, "I hope you know what you're doing, Harry. I really do.'

I suppose I should have said "trust me", but I didn't even trust myself. I just gave her my famous seasick grin, and said, "So do I."

I found the place where- all of those years ago – I used to climb onto the tracks. There was still a narrow gap in the fencing. I checked my watch. There were only six or seven minutes until the moon came up. I knelt down beside Lucy and said, "Listen, sugar plum fairy, we have to climb through this gap and over this wall onto the railroad. I know it's going to be frightening, but we have to do it."

She looked back at me with those big dark eyes and I thought for a moment she was going to say that she was too frightened, that she wouldn't do it. But then she gave me a wide, eerie smile, and nodded; and I knew then that even if I failed, and Misquamacus took my body, I couldn't let him take Lucy. She said something, but just then a train went rattling and clashing past, and I couldn't hear what it was. Only the last two words, "- *white face*."

I checked around to see if there were any police in sight. Then I pushed myself through the gap, and started to climb over the barrier. It was filthy – thickly coated in soot and grime. But once I was over the top I reached down for Lucy's hand and said, "Come on up, sweetheart, I've got you."

Lucy looked up at me, and she still had that creepy smile on her face. Somewhere inside of her, Misquamacus must have been relishing this moment – the night when he regained an earthly body, and the night when he finally revenged himself on Karen and me. Another train clattered past, and I ducked my head and kept myself low against the barrier, in case anybody was looking in my direction. The lighted windows passed me by like all the days in my life, one after the other and then they were gone.

I helped Lucy to climb up, and then Karen followed her, her trainers scuffling against the rusted steel. Then we dropped down onto the aggregate, and brushed ourselves down. Karen was shivering and her white cable-knit sweater was smudged with dirt. “Where to now?” she asked me.

Lucy took hold of my hand. “I know the way,” she said. She stepped over the tracks and began to walk toward the tunnel, hopping from one greasy sleeper to the next,

“Lucy, get off the track!” I shouted at her. But all she did was turn and laugh, and started to run. I went running after her, and caught hold of her hand.

Lucy kept on smiling at me. “We’re almost here,” she said; and suddenly her voice became overlaid with the harsh, echoing tones of Misquamacus. “This is my birthplace, Nakkro, where I first saw light of day.”

I thought I heard a train approaching, and I quickly looked around, but all I could see was the blackness of the tunnel.

“Come on,” said Lucy, and carried on walking toward the tunnel. As we entered it, I could hear the late rush-hour bustling and beeping of traffic, and the faraway wailing of sirens. Normal, everyday noises. I kept hearing clattering sounds behind me, and glancing around, but they say that railroad workers never hear the train that hits them.

Only a few feet into the tunnel entrance Lucy stopped, and pointed to the ground. “*It’s here,*” she announced triumphantly. “*This is the sacred place where I was born.*” She looked up to the sky. According to my watch, the moon must have risen, although it was impossible to see it behind all the buildings. “*This is the place, and the time has come.*”

Together, Lucy and I stood between the tracks, facing each other.

“What do we do now?” I asked her.

She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them they were glowing incandescent blue. Her shadow appeared to rise from the railroad tracks, like somebody climbing out of bed, and stand up right behind her, a dark and threatening outline of somebody tall, unnaturally tall, with a head-dress of skulls and tails.

Lucy clapped her hands. *“Let the spirit of the moon descend to help me! Let the moment be moved, let the night hold its breath! Spirit of the winds, blow away this man’s spirit out of his body and find a lodge for it in this woman’s body, along with hers, so they might live together for the rest of their days.”*

“What?” I demanded. “What the hell are you trying to do? You can’t lodge my spirit in Karen’s body!”

“Would you rather be a cockroach, or a piece of wood? I am giving you what you always wanted. A closeness that other lovers can only dream of!”

“Two spirits in one body? We’ll go insane in five minutes flat!”

*“It is my last act of mercy.”*

“You don’t have a merciful bone in your body. You’re going to take your revenge on all of us, that’s all. On me and Karen, by wrapping both of us up in the same body, and on Lucy, too, because Lucy won’t have a mommy and a daddy. Lucy will have nothing less than some screaming lunatic who has to be locked up.”

Lucy closed her glowing blue eyes, as if to indicate that she wasn’t going to discuss it any more.

*“Spirit of the moon, I worship you and serve you. Hold back the night for me, for the space of five long heartbeats. Spirit of wind, blow this man’s spirit out of his body, leave him empty. Find him a home in the woman’s body, two spirits in one earthly lodge.”*

Behind us, the night began to darken, and the wind began to rise. Scraps of newspaper and gum wrappers blew around the tracks, along with a fine stinging grit. I had to shield my eyes with my upraised arm. Above the clustering of the wind, Lucy was starting to scream – a harsh, high-pitched scream that was filled with unbridled fury.

*“Spirit of wind, blow this man’s spirit out of his body! Leave him empty! Spirit of moon! Command the night to hold its breath!”*

At first, I didn’t think that anything was going to happen. After all, Misquamacus was a seriously weakened spirit, and his only physical presence was that of a four-year-old girl. But then suddenly everything grew darker still. It was that darkness that closes in on you when you’re just about to faint – except that I didn’t faint. I was aware of everything that was going on.

Lucy’s voice grew slow and slurred. *“Spppirriittt offff wiiiiinnndddd.”* Soon it grew so slow that I couldn’t even understand it, and then it stopped. In fact, everything stopped. There was total silence, and nobody moved. Newspapers that had been blown into mid-air over the railroad tracks remained where they were, in mid-air.

Misquamacus had done it. For me, at least, he had temporarily arrested time.

It was then that two things happened almost at once. I began to feel a *tugging* sensation inside of my head, almost as if somebody were trying to pull out my brain by the roots. I began to feel everything that I ever was being dragged out of me. My boyhood, my school days, my first pet dog. My mother, my father, my Uncle Jim, looning and laughing on my fifteenth birthday. Bicycle rides – baseball games – girls in starched petticoats and girls in pink-checkered swimsuits – trips to Coney Island and Brighton Beach – sunshine, cotton candy, electric storms – they were all being drawn out of me like brightly-coloured picture-cards being sucked into a Hoover. My soul was going; my spirit was going. Dear God, I was dying.

But the other thing was: a train was approaching, its lights reflecting from the tracks. It was momentarily frozen in time, but in the next few seconds, when Misquamacus had taken over my body, it would come out of the tunnel and bear down on Lucy and *that* was going to be the bastard’s real revenge, to wrap us together in the same body, and to kill our daughter, too.

At that moment, with my spirit being forcibly wrenched out of my body, I could have tried anything, with no guarantee of whether it would work. I could have run to Lucy and pushed her off the railroad tracks, but then I would have been saving Misquamacus, too. I could have accepted my fate, and let Misquamacus transfer my spirit into Karen’s body, and faced a life of complete madness.

Or - I could have remembered what Singing Rock had been trying to tell me – through the dark-haired girl in the library. Computers are your friends. Computers are *your* friends.

My spirit was being twisted out of my body like the guts out of a cod. It was like dying, only it was worse than dying, because I knew that I was still alive. I rose up, floating, and I could see my body standing on the railroad tracks. I could see Lucy, with her arms outstretched, her eyes ablaze, and the dark shadow of Misquamacus hovering above her.

I had left my own body now. It was the weirdest experience of my whole life. I was conscious, I was wide awake, and yet I had been pulled right out of myself, so that I was weightless, floating, with no substance at all.

I felt a wind catching me; like a kite being tugged, I spun, and turned, and I knew that Misquamacus had directed the wind manitou to take me to Karen. I could see her, motionless, her back against the wall, frozen in time like the whole of Park Avenue was frozen in time. I was blown nearer and nearer, and I tried to twist and spin myself away. If I ever entered Karen's body, she and I would both go mad, and die the kind of death that even schizophrenics couldn't understand.

*Computers are your friends.*

I twisted around just once more, and there was the train, pausing in time. A Metro North commuter service, on its way out to Westchester. A train with computers. A train with a soul. A train with its very own manitou, its white manitou, composed of every design that has ever been drawn for it, and every inch of engineering that has ever gone into it. A modest but direct descendant of the trains that had howled their way across the Great Plains, and had helped to bring about the final downfall of the Native American Indian.

And I prayed to that train. I *prayed* to it. *"Help me. Take me, I want to be part of you, rather than anything else. I want to meld into your metal and sparkle in your kilobytes. You have spirit; you have a manitou. Help me."*

But the wind was blowing more fiercely now, and I felt myself being buffeted across the tracks to the place where Karen was standing. She was still motionless, and

her face was rigid with fright. I didn't know how long Misquamacus had managed to hold back the night, but there couldn't be very much time left, only seconds. If I didn't find a host by then, my spirit would probably scatter and disperse, the same way that Misquamacus' spirit had scattered and dispersed.

I felt myself tilting. Karen was even closer. I tried to twist myself around, and all the time I prayed to that train, I *prayed* to that train, take me, you son-of-a-bitch, a train is stronger than wind and stronger than water and stronger than all of the wonder-workers ever assembled together, from Ute to Iroquois, so give me a break, will you, and *take me*.

Karen suddenly turned and looked up at me. I didn't know whether she could see me or not, but her mouth was open and she looked surprised. At the same moment the train started rolling towards us, and the traffic started honking and the sky started moving, and everything was back to normal. Except that I was jolted away from Karen and found myself plunging into aluminium and plastics. I was literally yanked into that train's conscious mind; and instead of finding myself shoulder-to-shoulder with Karen, two spirits jostling each other in the same body till death do us part, I found myself cool and clean and calculating; full of switching information and speed limits and braking distances. I was the train and the train was me, and we were rocking and swaying along the track past 97<sup>th</sup> Street, and there was *Jesus!* a child on the track, and a man, too; it was Lucy and it was me.

I saw Karen run across the track, snatch up Lucy in her arms, and tumble sideways in the aggregate. I saw my own body, standing in front of the train, which was me. Behind me, I saw the blackest of boiling shadows, which was Misquamacus. *His arms were uplifted, and his face was boiling with serpents. This was what he was, the servant of the Great Old Ones, no longer a tribal wonder-worker but a way through which the ancient and evil spirits of America could find their way back to reality; and destroy us all.*

He began to billow toward my abandoned body, like a black silk cover thrown over a bed. But I thought to myself; I'd rather kill him than let him do that. And because I had the mind of a train and the weight of a train, I short-circuited the speed controls and

the train began to pick up speed, pick up speed, until it was clattering toward my teetering body at 65 mph.

The black shadow of Misquamacus' spirit funnelled itself into my body like smoke down a drain. I staggered once, and then turned toward the accelerating train.

But it was too late. Inside the train's computers, my spirit was running like liquid fire through every speed control, through every braking check, and there was nothing on earth that could have stopped that mother from hitting me directly in the chest, so that I went spinning and cartwheeling off the track, with blood spraying like a pinwheel, until I came to rest on the opposite side of the tracks.

I closed my (metaphorical) eyes and shut the train down. Its brakes squealed and howled like a herd of protesting pigs, and showers of orange sparks cascaded from its wheels. Even as it slid past my crumpled body, however, I felt something change. A victory won; a burden lifted. From out of my body, a shadow now, a shadow as dark and as vengeful as anything you could ever imagine. Inside the train's computer, I could only perceive it through the black and white video system, but this is what I saw:

*A creature that was half-man and half-reptile. A man who had bargained so often with the gods that they had created him in their own image.*

The image rose out of my body and stood for a long time looking down at me. Then, quite nonchalantly, it took hold of the left rail and the right rail, and clutched them both.

*"Weejoo-suk,"* it whispered in Algonquian. The wind is blowing. There was a sharp scurrying burst of paper and grit, and then the black shadow was lifted away, flying out of the tunnel entrance and high over the streets of Manhattan like a bat or a bird or a memory of times that can never be redeemed. Way up in the sky, it caught the light of the rising moon, and the spirit of the moon was not in a forgiving mood. Misquamacus had promised her an offering, a sacrifice, and now he could offer her nothing but his own shadow.

The shadow flared like a loose-woven shawl that has trailed accidentally in the fire; and blazed for a moment; and fell from the sky as a shower of light grey ashes. They

sifted across the railroad tracks, and you would have been forgiven for thinking that snow was early this year.

I opened my eyes. Karen was standing next to me, and Lucy, too. Blue and red lights were flashing. A paramedic was kneeling next to me, fixing an intravenous drip. I looked down and saw that my left leg was sticking out at right-angles. I felt totally unreal. I didn't know whether I was a man or a train. But I could see the train twenty feet away, standing stationary, with six or seven cops and railroad personnel standing around it.

"You're going to be fine," the paramedic told me. "Broken leg, fractured wrist, possible ruptured spleen, multiple bruising. Otherwise, you're great for somebody who got hit by a train."

Lucy bent over and gave me a wet kiss. I looked up into those big dark eyes of hers and I'm sure that she understood something about what had happened; although I shall never know what.

"I love you, daddy," she said, and this time she meant it.

"I love you too, sugar plum fairy."

Karen bent over me and kissed me, too. "What happened?" she whispered. "What did you *do*?"

"I didn't let the wind take me where it wanted to, that's all. The train was stronger than the wind."

"You mean- ?"

"For those few seconds, *I* was part of the train. The thinking part. Misquamacus should have known better than to mess with modern technology."

Karen turned away for a moment. I didn't mind. She had a beautiful profile. But then she turned back and said, "Will be *ever* leave us alone?" And there were tears in her eyes.

Lucy was holding a police officer's hand. She was swinging one leg and chanting. "*Weksit-paktesk, weskit-paktesk, nayew neechnw, weskit-paktesk.*"

I squeezed Karen's hand. I simply didn't know what to say.

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