

THE RED CONVERTIBLE

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I was the first one to drive a convertible on my reservation. And of course it was red, a red Olds. I owned that car along with my brother Stephan. We owned it together until his boots filled with water on a windy night and he bought out my share. Now Stephan owns the whole car and his younger brother Marty (that's myself) walks everywhere he goes.

How did I earn enough money to buy my share in the first place? My one talent was I could always make money. I had a touch for it, unusual in a Chippewa and especially in my family. From the first I was different that way and everyone recognized it. I was the only kid they let in the Rolla legion hall to shine shoes, for example, and one Christmas I sold spiritual bouquets for the Mission door-to-door. The nuns let me keep a percentage. Once I started, it seemed the more money I made the easier the money came. Everyone encouraged it. When I was fifteen I got a job washing dishes at the Joliet Café, and that was where my first big break came.

It wasn't long before I was promoted to busing tables, and then the short-order cook quit and I was hired to take her place. No sooner than

you know it I was managing the Joliet. The rest is history. I went on managing. I soon became part-owner and of course there was no stopping me then. It wasn't long before the whole thing was mine.

After I'd owned the Joliet one year it burned down. The whole operation. I was only twenty. I had it all and I lost it quick, but before I lost it I had every one of my relatives, and their relatives, to dinner and I also bought that red Olds I mentioned, along with Stephan.

That time we first saw it! I'll tell you when we first saw it. We had gotten a ride up to Winnipeg and both of us had money. Don't ask me why because we never mentioned a car or anything, we just had all our money. Mine was cash, a big bankroll. Stephan had two checks—a week's extra pay for being laid off, and his regular check from the Jewel Bearing Plant.

We were walking down Portage anyway, seeing the sights, when we saw it. There it was, parked, large as alive. Really as *if* it was alive. I thought of the word "repose" because the car wasn't simply stopped, parked, or whatever. That car reposed, calm and gleaming, a FOR SALE sign in its left front window. Then before we had thought it over at all, the car belonged to us and our pockets were empty. We had just enough money for gas back home.

We went places in that car, me and Stephan. A little bit of insurance money came through from the fire and we took off driving all one whole summer. I can't tell you all the places we went to. We started off toward the Little Knife River and Mandaree in Fort Berthold and then we found ourselves down in Wakpala somehow and then suddenly we were over in Montana on the Rocky Boys and yet the summer was not even half over. Some people hang on to details when they travel, but we didn't let them bother us and just lived our everyday lives here to there.

I do remember there was this one place with willows, however; I laid

under those trees and it was comfortable. So comfortable. The branches bent down all around me like a tent or a stable. And quiet, it was quiet, even though there was a dance close enough so I could see it going on. It was not too still, or too windy either, that day. When the dust rises up and hangs in the air around the dancers like that I feel comfortable. Stephan was asleep. Later on he woke up and we started driving again. We were somewhere in Montana, or maybe on the Blood Reserve, it could have been anywhere. Anyway, it was where we met the girl.

All her hair was in buns around her ears, that's the first thing I saw. She was alongside the road with her arm out so we stopped. That girl was short, so short her lumbershirt looked comical on her, like a nightgown. She had jeans on and fancy moccasins and she carried a little suitcase.

"Hop on in," says Stephan. So she climbs in between us.

"We'll take you home," I says, "Where do you live?"

"Chicken," she says.

"Where's that?" I ask her.

"Alaska."

"Okay," Stephan says, and we drive.

We got up there and never wanted to leave. The sun doesn't truly set there in summer and the night is more a soft dusk. You might doze off, sometimes, but before you know it you're up again, like an animal in nature. You never feel like you have to sleep hard or put away the world. And things would grow up there. One day just dirt or moss, the next day flowers and long grass. The girl's family really took to us. They fed us and put us up. We had our own tent to live in by their house and the kids would be in and out of there all day and night.

One night the girl, Susy (she had another, longer name, but they called her Susy for short), came in to visit us. We sat around in the tent talking of this thing and that. It was getting darker by that time and the

cold was even getting just a little mean. I told Susy it was time for us to go. She stood up on a chair. "You never seen my hair," she said. That was true. She was standing on a chair, but still, when she unclipped her buns the hair reached all the way to the ground. Our eyes opened. You couldn't tell how much hair she had when it was rolled up so neatly. Then Stephan did something funny. He went up to the chair and said, "Jump on my shoulders." So she did that and her hair reached down past Stephan's waist and he started twirling, this way and that, so her hair was flung out from side to side. "I always wondered what it was like to have long pretty hair," Stephan says! Well, we laughed. It was a funny sight, the way he did it. The next morning we got up and took leave of those people.

On to greener pastures, as they say. It was down through Spokane and across Idaho then Montana, and very soon we were racing the weather right along under the Canadian border through Columbus, Des Lacs, and then we were in Bottineau County and soon home. We'd made most of the trip, that summer, without putting up the car hood at all. We got home just in time, it turned out, for the Army to remember Stephan had signed up to join it.

I don't wonder that the Army was so glad to get Stephan that they turned him into a Marine. He was built like a brick outhouse anyway. We liked to tease him that they really wanted him for his Indian nose, though. He had a nose big and sharp as a hatchet. He had a nose like the nose on Red Tomahawk, the Indian who killed Sitting Bull, whose profile is on signs all along the North Dakota highways. Stephan went off to training camp, came home once during Christmas, then the next thing you know we got an overseas letter from Stephan. It was 1968, and he was stationed in Khe Sanh. I wrote him back several times. I kept him informed all about the car. Most of the time I had it up on blocks in the yard or half taken apart because that long trip wore out so

much of it although, I must say, it gave us a beautiful performance when we needed it.

I t was at least two years before Stephan came home again. They didn't want him back for a while, I guess, so he stayed on after Christmas. In those two years, I'd put his car into almost perfect shape. I always thought of it as his car, while he was gone, though when he left he said, "Now it's yours," and even threw me his key. "Thanks for the extra key," I said, "I'll put it up in your drawer just in case I need it." He laughed.

When he came home, though, Stephan was very different, and I'll say this, the change was no good. You could hardly expect him to change for the better; I know this. But he was quiet, so quiet, and never comfortable sitting still anywhere but always up and moving around. I thought back to times we'd sat still for whole afternoons, never moving, just shifting our weight along the ground, talking to whoever sat with us, watching things. He'd always had a joke then, too, and now you couldn't get him to laugh, or when he did it was more the sound of a man choking, a sound that stopped up the laughter in the throats of other people around him. They got to leaving him alone most of the time and I didn't blame them. It was a fact, Stephan was jumpy and mean.

I'd bought a color TV set for my mother and the kids while Stephan was away. (Money still came very easy.) I was sorry I'd ever bought it, though, because of Stephan, and I was also sorry I'd bought color because with black-and-white the pictures seem older and farther away. But what are you going to do? He sat in front of it, watching it, and that was the only time he was completely still. But it was the kind of stillness that you see in a rabbit when it freezes and before it will bolt. He was not comfortable. He sat in his chair gripping the armrests with all his might as if the chair itself was moving at a high speed, and if he let go at all he would rocket forward and maybe crash right through the set.

Once I was in the same room and I heard his teeth click at something. I looked over and he'd bitten through his lip. Blood was going down his chin. I tell you right then I wanted to smash that tube to pieces. I went over to it but Stephan must have known what I was up to. He rushed from his chair and shoved me out of the way, against the wall. I told myself he didn't know what he was doing.

My mother came in, turned the set off real quiet, and told us she had made something for supper. So we went and sat down. There was still blood going down Stephan's chin but he didn't notice it, and no one said anything even though every time he took a bite of his bread his blood fell onto it until he was eating his own blood mixed in with the food.

We talked, while Stephan was not around, about what was going to happen to him. There were no Indian doctors on the reservation, no medicine people, and my mother was afraid if we brought him to a regular hospital they would keep him. "No way would we get him there in the first place," I said, "so let's just forget about it." Then I thought about the car. Stephan had not even looked at the car since he'd gotten home, though like I said, it was in tip-top condition and ready to drive.

One night Stephan was off somewhere. I took myself a hammer. I went out to that car and I did a number on its underside. Whacked it up. Bent the tailpipe double. Ripped the muffler loose. By the time I was done with the car it looked worse than any typical Indian car that has been driven all its life on reservation roads which they always say are like government promises—full of holes. It just about hurt me, I'll tell you that! I threw dirt in the carburetor and I ripped all the electric tape off the seats. I made it look just as beat up as I could. Then I sat back, and I waited for Stephan to find it.

Still, it took him over a month. That was all right because it was just getting warm enough, not melting but warm enough, to work outside, when he did find it.

"Marty," he says, walking in one day, "that red car looks like shit."

"Well it's old," I says. "You got to expect that."

"No way!" says Stephan. "That car's a classic! But you went and ran the piss right out of it, Marty, and you know it don't deserve that. I kept that car in A-1 shape. You don't remember. You're too young. But when I left, that car was running like a watch. Now I don't even know if I can get it to start again, let alone get it anywhere near its old condition."

"Well, you try," I said, like I was getting mad, "but I say it's a piece of junk."

Then I walked out before he could realize I knew he'd strung together more than six words at once.

After that I thought he'd freeze himself to death working on that vehicle. I mean he was out there all day and at night he rigged up a little lamp, ran a cord out the window, and had himself some light to see by while he worked. He was better than he had been before, but that's still not saying much. It was easier for him to do the things the rest of us did. He ate more slowly and didn't jump up and down during the meal to get this or that or look out the window. I put my hand in the back of the TV set, I admit, and fiddled around with it good so that it was almost impossible now to get a clear picture. He didn't look at it very often. He was always out with that car or going off to get parts for it. By the time it was really melting outside, he had it fixed.

I had been feeling down in the dumps about Stephan around this time. We had always been together before. Stephan and Marty. But he was such a loner now I didn't know how to take it. So I jumped at the chance one day when Stephan seemed friendly. It's not that he smiled or anything. He just said, "Let's take that old shitbox for a spin." But just the way he said it made me think he could be coming around.

We went out to the car. It was spring. The sun was shining very

bright. My little sister Bonita came out and made us stand together for a picture. He leaned his elbow on the red car's windshield and he took his other arm and put it over my shoulder, very carefully, as though it was heavy for him to lift and he didn't want to bring the weight down all at once. "Smile," Bonita said, and he did.

That picture. I never look at it anymore. A few months ago, I don't know why, I got his picture out and tacked it on my wall. I felt good about Stephan at the time, close to him. I felt good having his picture on the wall until one night when I was looking at television. I was a little drunk and stoned. I looked up at the wall and Stephan was staring at me. I don't know what it was but his smile had changed. Or maybe it was gone. All I know is I couldn't stay in the same room with that picture. I was shaking. I had to get up, close the door, and go into the kitchen. A little later my friend Rayman came and we both went back into that room. We put the picture in a bag and folded the bag over and over and put the picture way back in a closet.

I still see that picture now, as if it tugs at me, whenever I pass that closet door. It is very clear in my mind. It was so sunny that day, Stephan had to squint against the glare. Or maybe the camera Bonita held flashed like a mirror, blinding him, before she snapped the picture. My face is right out in the sun, big and round. But he might have drawn back a little because the shadows on his face are deep as holes. There are two shadows curved like little hooks around the ends of his smile as if to frame it and try to keep it there—that one, first smile that looked like it might have hurt his face. He has his field jacket on, and the worn-in clothes he'd come back in and kept wearing ever since. After Bonita took the picture and went into the house, we got into the car. There was a full cooler in the trunk. We started off, east, toward Pembina and the Red River because Stephan said he wanted to see the high water.

The trip over there was beautiful. When everything starts changing, drying up, clearing off, you feel so good it is like your whole life is starting. And Stephan felt it too. The top was down and the car hummed like a top. He'd really put it back in shape, even the tape on the seats was very carefully put down and glued back in layers. It's not that he smiled again or even joked or anything while we were driving, but his face looked to me as if it was clear, more peaceful. It looked as though he wasn't thinking of anything in particular except the blank fields and windbreaks and houses we were passing.

The river was high and full of winter trash when we got there. The sun was still out, but it was colder by the river. There were still little clumps of dirty snow here and there on the banks. The water hadn't gone over the banks yet, but it would, you could tell. It was just at its limit, hard, swollen, glossy like an old gray scar. We made ourselves a fire, and we sat down and watched the current go. As I watched it I felt something squeezing inside me and tightening and trying to let go all at the same time. I knew I was not just feeling it myself; I knew I was feeling what Stephan was going through at that moment. Except that Marty couldn't stand it, the feeling. I jumped to my feet. I took Stephan by the shoulders and I started shaking him. "Wake up," I says, "wake up, wake up, wake up!" I didn't know what had come over me. I sat down beside him again. His face was totally white, hard, like a stone. Then it broke, like stones break all of the sudden when water boils up inside them.

"I know it," he says. "I know it. I can't help it. It's no use."

We started talking. He said he knew what I'd done with the car that time. It was obvious it had been whacked out of shape and not just neglected. He said he wanted to give the car to me for good now; it was no use. He said he'd fixed it just to give back and I should take it.

"No," I says, "I don't want it."

"That's okay," he says. "You take it."

"I don't want it though," I says back to him and then to emphasize, just to emphasize you understand, I touch his shoulder. He slaps my hand off.

"Take that car," he says.

"No," I say, "make me," I say, and then he grabs my jacket and rips the arm loose. I get mad and push him backwards, off the log. He jumps up and bowls me over. We go down in a clinch and come up swinging hard, for all we're worth, with our fists. He socks my jaw so hard I feel like it swings loose. Then I'm at his rib cage and land a good one under his chin so his head snaps back. He's dazzled. He looks at me and I look at him and then his eyes are full of tears and blood and he's crying I think at first. But no, he's laughing. "Ha! Ha!" he says. "Ha! Ha! Take good care of it!"

"Okay," I says, "Okay no problem. Ha! Ha!"

I can't help it and I start laughing too. My face feels fat and strange and after a while I get a beer from the cooler in the trunk and when I hand it to Stephan he takes his shirt and wipes my germs off. "Hoof and mouth disease," he says. For some reason this cracks me up and so we're really laughing for a while then, and then we drink all the rest of the beers one by one and throw them in the river and see how far the current takes them, how fast, before they fill up and sink.

"I'm an Indian!" he shouts after a while.

"Whoo I'm on the lovepath! I'm out for loving!"

I think it's the old Stephan. He jumps up then and starts swinging his legs out from the knees like a fancydancer, then he's down doing something between a grouse dance and a bunny hop, no kind of dance I ever saw before but neither has anyone else on all this green growing earth. He's wild. He wants to pitch whoopee! He's up and at 'em and all over. All this time I'm laughing so hard, so hard my belly is getting tied up in a knot.

"Got to cool me off!" he shouts all of the sudden. Then he runs over to the river and jumps in.

There's boards and other things in the current. It's so high. No sound comes from the river after the splash he makes so I run right over. I look around. It's dark. I see he's halfway across the water already and I know he didn't swim there but the current took him. It's far. I hear his voice, though, very clearly across it.

"My boots are filling," he says.

He says this in a normal voice, like he just noticed and he doesn't know what to think of it. Then he's gone. A branch comes by. Another branch. By the time I get out of the river, off the snag I pulled myself onto, the sun is down. I walk back to the car, turn on the high beams, and drive it up the bank. I put it in first gear and then I take my foot off the clutch. I get out, close the door, and watch it plow softly into the water. The headlights reach in as they go down, searching, still lighted even after the water swirls over the back end. I wait. The wires short out. It is all finally dark. And then there's only the water, the sound of it going and running and going and running and running.