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THE NEBRASKA DISPATCHES

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CHRISTOPHER
CARTMILL

>> THE NEBRASKA
DISPATCHES

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
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To Joyce and Renée—strong souls and loving mothers.

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>>DISPATCH: PRELUDE

New York City, New York

These dispatches are taken from a series of emails sent to family and friends during the almost three-year process of writing and researching a new play. The play is done. It is titled *Home Land*. But it is only one part of a deeply personal journey. These dispatches are fragments of that journey, of my still-growing awareness, of a creative process, and of an understanding of the power of place and the power of the past. The events are true. The names of the living are changed. The signs were there. All weather portrayed was real.

So, like another more famous odyssey begins: Speak to me, Spirits, and through me tell a story of home. Wait. This is my home, this is our home—isn't it?

>>DISPATCH: A STORY OF MY PARENTS

A Hazardous Attempt at Autobiographical Context

I remember when I was a kid thinking that the house we lived in was on top of an enormous hill. At the time we lived in a part of Kansas where there are no hills. That's what memory does.

While other kids' houses smelled of beef barley soup, our house glowed with the scent of whiskey and Miss Dior. My father was a handsome self-made man from the southern great plains who had been something of a ne'er-do-well in school—caring more for golf than education. That is, until he married my mother. She was a part-time model and self-made woman of great energy and beauty and education. Her passions were for the theater, for teaching, and for my father.

Robert Samuel Cartmill was a grain merchant. When I explain that my family moved around a lot while I was

growing up, most assume I was a military brat. My brother and sister and I grew up following the harvest, literally and figuratively. For a couple of years we lived in hotels as my father worked his way up to becoming an important figure in the industry, to this day remembered and respected by those who worked with and for him.

Everywhere we lived my mother made it a home. She had a magic energy. She made it appear, to everyone around, that we had been living in each place for years. Not only were all boxes unpacked in a matter of hours, but we were embraced by the community and treated like natives within weeks of our arrival. Joyce Ellen Cartmill had glamour, yes, but also a charm that made everyone feel as a truly treasured friend.

By the time I came around, my parents had seemingly lost interest in photographic documentation. There are only a handful of pictures of me in early childhood, and almost all are the same: usually my brother is in a sporty, crisp suit, my sister is in a sweet little dress and shiny shoes, and I am in nothing but my underpants. There's me standing by a birdfeeder—in my underpants. There's me on an Easter morning—in my underpants. There's me at my father's side near the Christmas tree—in my underpants. There's me playing what seems to be a game of Cowboys-and-Indians—in my underpants. My mother told me many pictures got lost in one of our moves.

I felt distinctly out of place most of the time. Only two things fascinated me: playing at theater and observing all the interesting people my parents entertained. I would stage plays and monologues for family and guests and sometimes had to be restrained in my enthusiasm for telling stories. I loved making them and hearing them. On one extraordinary

evening I sat at the end of our long dining table while a Japanese associate of my father's told his story of being a kamikaze pilot who never took off. Just as his squadron was getting set to take off, he told us, the end of the war was declared. He was just one interesting person among many.

My father was never keen on my theatrical interest. "Acting is for the flighty and the neurotic," he once told me. "You're not that. But you'll do what you must. Whatever you do, son, you'd better do it to the best of your abilities—nothing by half and no mediocrity. You come from better people than that." The artists he respected most were writers. I started writing while he was sick, working on what eventually became my first play.

My father didn't live to see it produced or to know me as a writer. My mother took my hand on the opening night of that play when it premiered in Chicago and said, "It's nothing by half." It certainly wasn't. My first play was a six-hour epic about the French Revolution. My mother never missed a performance or an opening night of it, no matter when or where. She worked very hard to understand my work, not just support it. She became an artistic home for me.

>>DISPATCH: HOME

August 1979. Lincoln, Nebraska

My family's home, when we first moved to Lincoln, was on the last street in the city, officially. To the south and west was an undulating expanse of corn, soybean, and wheat fields. Now, from that same house urban development stretches as far as the eye can see. Home is a constantly changing thing, I guess. Growing up, home was indeed a changing thing. I was born in southern Kansas near the

Oklahoma border, but my family lived in seven places before I turned seventeen.

I was on a school trip when my parents moved us from the place I loved the most during our family's nomadic life—the wooded river city of Memphis, Tennessee—to our new home on the edge of the horizon. On the evening when I arrive to be introduced to my new home, I am greeted by massive billows of charcoal-colored clouds that roll in and devour the western twilight. A storm like no storm I had ever known before seems to surround us. The house shakes, and rips of lightning tear down and across the sky. Welcome to the Heartland. Welcome home.

According to the teachings of a people who came to this land ages ago, before there was a Nebraska to be made my home, this storm, like all others, is the work of the Thunderbirds. Thunderbirds are part of the Great Spirit. Their power protects and destroys; it is good and bad. It's also believed that certain stories come from the thunder—stories of honor, but also of shame. Speak those stories and the earth shakes. A story brings you power, I am told, but you do have to pay for it.

>>DISPATCH: A VERY BRIEF GEOGRAPHY AND EUROCENTRIC HISTORY OF NEBRASKA

Where the West Begins

Out where the handclasp's a little stronger,

Out where the smile dwells a little longer,

That's where the West begins . . .

—Excerpt of poem by Arthur Chapman, 1917

In case you're wondering, the exact place where the handclasp is stronger and the smile is longer, it is the intersec-

tion of 13th and “O” streets in Lincoln, Nebraska. Truly. There is a large brick star to mark it. And if you want to find where the West begins: Nebraska is a state bordered by Iowa to the east; Missouri to the southeast; Kansas to the south; Colorado to the southwest; Wyoming to the northwest; and South Dakota to the north.

For millions of years Nebraska was underwater—and home to nautiloids, squid, and octopuses. When the Rocky Mountains began to rise up to the west, everything dried out and the dinosaurs died out. But before it all got too settled, the Great Ice Age scoured in and roughed up the place. Woolly mammoths, rhinoceroses, and pigs seven feet high shared the land with a relative newcomer, humans. As the glaciers retreated they left the eastern part of the land—near the Missouri River—rubbed, dented, and caressed into gentle hills and scenic bluffs. Going west the landscape transitions into the Sandhills and then the High Plains.

Out where the skies are a trifle bluer,
Out where friendship’s a little truer,
That’s where the West begins . . .

Nebraska seems to have gotten its name from an indigenous word for “flat water,” likely a reference to the Platte River that runs through the state. Europeans considered this land part of what they called “The Great American Desert.” They didn’t mean it had a landscape exactly like the Gobi or the Sahara. The word “desert” comes from the Latin “desertum,” meaning simply “an abandoned place.”

Before the mid-nineteenth century the plains had been abandoned to the Indians, many of whom had been pressed from the east. But in 1854 the Nebraska-Kansas Act created the Kansas and Nebraska territories. It was all a part

of trying to keep the country from the precipice of the unavoidable that was the Civil War. The act gave settlers in the territories the right to decide if they wanted to allow slavery within their borders. Kansas became the bloody battleground for the mess Congress had created. During the 1860s, and despite the controversy, settlers poured into the territories to claim free land offered by the government. The majority of the settlers—homesteaders—were foreign born: Germans, Swedes, Irish, English, Czech.

Nebraska was made the 37th state of the Union just after the Civil War came to an end. The state capital was moved to Lincoln, an outpost formerly known as Lancaster but renamed in honor of the beloved dead president. By 1870 the population of the state was numbered at 122,993. As of 2008, the population was estimated at 1,783,432, which is only about 100,000 less than the same year's estimation of the population of the island of Manhattan.

When I tell people who don't know the place about Nebraska they will invariably say something like, "Oh, I drove through there once." It's as though the state motto should be "Nebraska, the Way to Get to Colorado." Nebraska is more than a liminal experience. It is the Heartland. Nebraska gave us Arbor Day, CliffsNotes, Willa Cather (though originally a Virginian), the Union Pacific Railway, Henry Fonda, Johnny Carson, Warren Buffett, and the Vise-Grip. Good representatives of a place that's growing, impatient, novel, standard gauge, wryly humorous, entrepreneurial, and practical. Kool-Aid was invented in Nebraska and is still the official soft drink of the state. No other state in the Union has an official soft drink—though it should be noted that the official state "beverage" is milk. Nebraskans are mad for football—University of Nebraska football. Memo-

rial Stadium, on the campus of the University in Lincoln, can and does hold more than twice the population of the state's third largest city. On game days it is a giant bowl of the color red that I am certain can be seen and perhaps heard from space. Nebraska teaches that we should never be deceived by the seeming uniformity. The place has its singularities. Nebraska is the only state in the country with a unicameral legislature, meaning a single house. It doesn't make the politics any better, it just puts it all in one room. Nebraska is politically conservative and yet has a history of activism and reform. One of the first national chapters of the NAACP was established in Omaha in 1912. The state motto is "Equality Before the Law," but for many years the state slogan was "Nebraska, The Good Life." For many it's a good place to call home.

Where there's more of singing and less of sighing,
Where there's more of giving and less of buying,
And a man makes friends without half trying—
That's where the West begins.

>>DISPATCH: TWO RIVERS, TWO RAINBOWS,
AND ONE BEGINNING

Friday, August 16, 2002. Niobrara, Nebraska

A sudden storm blows through and hail comes down like it's being thrown. My mother and I take shelter under the bullhorns and antelope heads of the Two Rivers Wild West Saloon, Gas Station, and Hotel. We'd come up the 4½ hours to Niobrara from Lincoln for the annual Ponca Tribal powwow. You see, for some inexplicable reason I had gotten it into my head that this was something I needed to do, and my mother wanted to come. My mother often said "yes" to adventure.

There among the antlers I see, in a place of honor all its own, a single large photo of a noble Native chief wrapped in a blanket, wearing a single black-tipped eagle feather. I know he has a story to tell.

Soon it stops hailing but the wind's up. As we drive into the Ponca Agency the sky opens up to blue and the sun comes down as if it's being thrown. A high double rainbow arches over the fences to the east. Later I am told by a Native friend and teacher that the rainbow was a sign—a sign that we were supposed to be there. A promise. I also found out the identity of that Indian chief: the famous Chief Standing Bear of the Ponca Tribe.

Not famous to you? Some will tell you the story simply: Standing Bear was a man who lost his home and won it back.

>>DISPATCH: HOME AGAIN

Four Years Later. July 2006

My father is gone. My mother is gone. She died in her own bed three years earlier to the month, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. Since that time I've been losing my connection to the home I had known in Nebraska. I can no longer go to the house where my father toasted my mother on their last anniversary just before he died, almost twenty years ago. My stepfather estranged himself from me by remarrying only a few months after my mother's death. Many days I feel it's easier just to let my Nebraska connections go. But I have a commission for a new play, a commission from the Lied Center for the Performing Arts. I'm to tell the story of Chief Standing Bear. I am to go back to Nebraska for a month to work on the play

and, ostensibly, to get the blessing of the Native community. How naive I am in so many ways. How naive I am to think I couldn't possibly come home a stranger.

>>DISPATCH: MY NEBRASKA

July 31, 2006. Lincoln, Nebraska. Temperature: 105°

First things first. Car. I don't have a car in New York City. I walk. In Nebraska you walk for exercise, not for transit. It's not just a matter of distance. It's psychological. The Lied Center has made an arrangement with a local car dealership. I'm dropped off at the car lot and see my "deal": a little black Aveo. I remember thinking, "Aveo. Aveo. It could be an Indian name: *Aveo*." My trusty steed—my very tiny trusty steed. On the highway, the wind from semi trucks can and does blow me onto the shoulder of the road. But it is acceptance at first sight.

*The Same Day, 5:00 p.m. Madonna Rehabilitation
Hospital, Lincoln*

I have a family visit to make. Deb Steinkolk is the daughter of Alma Kisker, who was my mother's maid for twenty-three years. Deb has had a mysterious and rapid onset of multiple sclerosis—from symptoms to coma in ten days. Deb has just been brought out of intensive care. She is paralyzed from the neck down and can speak only about one word at a time. Deb knows my name and keeps repeating it. I'm pretty certain her mother prompted her. But before I leave, to Alma's amazement and clearly unprompted, Deb starts repeating "The Way Home." *The Way Home*. "*The Way Home*" is another play of mine, one that Deb had been a part of when we produced it in Lincoln years before. *The Way Home*. She starts to cry, even though her

face is immobile. Deb has two kids. One is fifteen months old. Deb is twenty-five.

That Evening

I am staying with my high school drama teacher. Her place is directly across the street from the house that had been my family home for seventeen years. In the summer evening heat I sit on the hood of the little black Aveo for a moment and look for any life that may be going on in my old home. I realize what a large task I have set for myself. The story of Standing Bear is powerful and large in so many ways. And personal. But why? What does this man and his journey have to do with me?

I have made it clear to the Lied Center staff that in order to do this properly I need to meet as many people as possible in the Native community and in the broader Nebraska community—before I write. I want to interview all sorts of people. I don't want to write a history pageant. I don't know what I want to write, specifically, but I want the work to have meaning now—meaning for the present. I want to strive for authenticity.

>>DISPATCH: AUTHENTICITY

Sometime in the Late to Middle 1990s

When I first move to New York City I am invited to a reading of a play. The playwright has the prophetically pretentious name of Ileana Bordeaux. Ileana Bordeaux has been given a large grant. She has spent a profitable two whole weeks in Nebraska. She certainly has taken ownership of her subject, because Ileana Bordeaux returns to New York City and pens what she calls a “deconstruction” of Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. She titles the play *My Nebraska*.

Okay, but if it's *her* Nebraska, why did she have to borrow it from Willa Cather? I can certainly say it isn't *my* Nebraska. At the performance of it I writhe in my seat, listening and getting angrier and angrier, then it comes to me that by "deconstruction" Ileana Bordeaux actually means an arrogant, acquisitive, and unimaginative "redecorating." Tart it up with clichés and paper it with shallow understandings. Rearrange the furniture and say you've built the house. Take a story and make it your own. That's not writing; that's conquest. But whose Nebraska is it?

>>DISPATCH: RESIDENCY

*August 8, 2006. The Kimmel Harding Nelson
Center for the Arts, Nebraska City, Nebraska*

Nebraska City is on the southeast edge of the state, on the banks of the Missouri. The center is a retreat for artists. I was the first writer invited to stay, just weeks after my mother died. I intended to write and research but I couldn't concentrate. I grieved. I have arranged to stay here again and use Nebraska City as my base for the month. I have my own office and studio overlooking the old brick streets of Nebraska City.

I have my resource books with me. My research: *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* by David Wishart; *The Omaha Tribe* by Alice C. Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche; and *Buckskin and Blanket Days* by T. H. Tibbles. I've also brought with me a copy of a photograph that my uncle gave me. It is a picture of a woman with piercing eyes—my great-great grandmother. My uncle has told me she was a full-blooded Native, likely Sioux, perhaps Cherokee. He doesn't know yet. So much is recorded of my family's history but this is a piece of which

little is known. Her name seems to have been written on the photograph but is unreadable now. I don't know what, if anything, she has to do with this work.

>>DISPATCH: HE' DEWACHI

Saturday, August 12. Temperature: 102°

I have driven the north-south width of Nebraska four times in two weeks. Attended the Omaha He'dewachi (essentially, powwow) in Macy, Nebraska. The Aveo and I are dribbled like a basketball all the way to the toll bridge at Decatur—"Proud to be Nebraska's Second Oldest Settlement," an ironic slogan for a town that lies just outside an Indian reservation.

Walking down to the powwow grounds I'm a little self-conscious. Wanting not to look like the cultural tourist I am, I went and bought a pair of boots—kick-ass boots. I got me some style and a hitch in my gitty-up. I think I look either very cool or like a reenactor from Decatur's Second Settlement Riverfront Days.

I am supposed to meet up with Susann Cloud Horse, whom I had met the week before in the company of her children. I accept that our meeting will happen in its own time—Indian time. It's like the clocks that say "Indian Time" that can be found for sale at the Lincoln powwow: no numbers, just free roaming hands.

I should just take in the fullness. And it is full.

Hundreds of people are moving clockwise around the powwow grounds. The sacred circle. As far as I understand, this placement is the same as that once used for the arrangement of the teepees on the annual buffalo hunts and mirrors the setup of the earth lodges back at the permanent settlement. The entrance is always at the east, the

direction of the rising sun. During the *he'dewachi* the dais for the tribal leaders and other dignitaries is at the west—a place they would take in the earth lodge. At the center of the ring is both a pole, or tree, and a tent for the host drum. The host drum is a group from the local tribe. Other drum circles sit around the edges of the circle in a pattern that is based on their affiliations. There are bleachers for tourists all around the arena, but most of the “relatives” (those of Native descent) are sitting in lawn chairs of a kind that you get used to seeing at powwows.

The circle is full. The drumming and singing is amplified. The sounds are countered by the running commentary of a master of ceremonies, which in this case is “Chiefie.” The emcee’s ongoing monologue is fascinating: part tradition police and part day-time talk show host.

The powwow grounds are filled with dancers in their regalia. That’s the proper word for the colorful, be-feathered, beaded, and tasseled dancing clothes. There are tail dancers, fancy dancers, shawl dancers, grass dancers, jingle dancers, and traditionally dressed women of all ages. Many are dancing without regalia. Everyone has his or her colors or mixes of colors. It’s a beautiful sight.

Susann is not the first to find me. Martin Cloud Horse, Susann’s six-year-old son, finds me first. He has a great grin that extends literally from one ear to the other and a child’s lisp he undoubtedly will grow out of.

Martin looks you right in the eye and could force a smile from a rock. When we meet he tells me he’s been following me for a while. He’s practicing, he says, his sneaking. I ask him where his mother is and he points out to the dancers. She is dancing with her mother, Elise, and youngest daughter, Jewel. Susann and Jewel are not in regalia,

but they are in pink. Susann's mother is in a traditional dress of blue with large intricate matching beadwork medallions attached to her long braids. The women's dance is an elegant and subtle step walk. The three generations are all holding hands.

When I turn around, Martin has disappeared (obviously practicing more sneaking) and is replaced by his older brother, Valdis. Valdis is a husky, sensitive, melancholy kid of eight. He's got years of sadness in his eyes. Valdis doesn't say anything, just looks at me and runs off. I get a tap on my shoulder. It's Sophie, Susann's eldest. Sophie is eleven, tall and quick.

Susann takes a break and wants to get out of the sun so we go to sit on the bleachers near the entrance to the powwow grounds to watch the dancing and talk. Martin practices sneaking through the bleachers and smiles at me when I catch him with my eyes.

Susann has had a tough year. She had some health problems and her husband of fourteen years abruptly left her and the kids. Susann is radiant and tall, like her daughter, Sophie, and formidable, like her mother. We sit half-listening to the speeches of the candidates for Powwow Princess. Chiefie is introducing each candidate and handing the microphone to each, who make candid statements of purpose. I catch a bit of a candidate's speech: "I don't do drugs or alcohol. I won't do like others may. I walk my faith and tradition."

Susann explains to me that this year has been a tough one for the Omaha—a rash of suicides among young people on the reservation. One suicide took place just the week before—and a murder the week before that. Drug and alcohol problems are epidemic, as are abuse and neglect. At

some point Sophie and Martin nestle close between Susann and me. Sophie shows me her vampire impression, which looks a lot like an English butler with an overbite, as she holds a clutch purse with both hands. Five-year-old Jewel laughingly jumps on Sophie with muddy hands. Martin chimes in that he's going to be Superman for Halloween. Valdis is nowhere in sight.

"I love my people. I won't disappoint my family by doing bad things. I want to make them proud." So says the final candidate for "Powwow Princess," holding an eagle-feather fan and wearing a high beaded crown and glasses. Susann goes off to check on her mother. Sophie stays sitting close. Martin grabs hold of my boots. And the question sweeps over me like the wind: "Who am I, really, in all this? I, with my jeans and just-bought boots?"

>>DISPATCH: EUGENE

Late Afternoon of the Same Day

Martin can predict the weather. Sophie tells me so while we're tossing a beach ball by the tent Susann's family has set up. Sophie lets the ball drop and says, "Martin, is it going to thunderstorm tomorrow?"

Martin stands stock still, stares off into some imagined horizon, then smiles and nods and runs to get the beach ball. Susann laughs and says that it's true. Then she motions me to follow her. Susann wants to introduce me around.

Her cousin Eugene is the first on her list. Eugene is a tail dancer. She points him out. He is dressed in a black and white shirt with appliqué silhouettes of buffalo skulls on the arms and chest. He has a horsehair bonnet topped with two eagle feathers and a big Sioux-style eagle feather bustle. And glasses. Susann says we should go over to

him before he goes back into the dance. Eugene is standing drinking an Aquafina with another dancer, who is wearing Day-Glo orange. The other man is quite short and a fellow tail dancer. Susann introduces me to Eugene. “This is Christopher Cartmill,” says Susann simply.

Pause.

“Cart-what?” Eugene asks with the flat downward inflection I am getting very used to.

“Cart-mill. He’s a playwright. He’s from New York City. Working on the Standing Bear story,” says Susann who, I think, sees that I’m at a loss. But she is willing to help me only so much.

Silence.

“You’re a playwright.”

Pause.

“I’m a playwright.”

“You’re a playwright.”

Silence, during which Eugene takes a swig from the bottle. “So. What do you do?”

Pause.

“I write plays.”

Silence.

Eugene’s friend laughs and looks at me. He shakes his head. I’m assuming he’ll be excited to see the play written by the articulate playwright from New York City—the new Beckett. The conversation stumbles along for about five minutes more. What interests me is that the stories Eugene knows about Standing Bear (who was from a different, though related, tribe) I have not found in any of the books I have used in researching the chief. Eugene’s stories seem to be at odds with the historical facts.

“Standing Bear. Five horses were shot out from under him by the white men in battle,” Eugene tells me.

“Really? But . . . we . . . Never mind. I . . .”

Eugene’s friend and fellow tail dancer wants nothing to do with our conversation. I feel out of my element. Before I can get even more confused and tongue-tied they both step into the dance. Susann motions me to follow her. She wants to introduce me to her aunt. Along the way, she looks at me with a sparkle in her eye and says, “Nice boots. You just need the cowboy hat to make it perfect.”

>>DISPATCH: TESTING

The Same Evening. 6:00 p.m.

We don’t find Susann’s aunt. But Susann is participating in an intertribal run from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota to the he’dewachi in Macy, Nebraska. Rosebud, South Dakota, is toward the panhandle side of Nebraska, so this is a goodly run. It’s been organized to support youth organizations and education—to raise awareness and prevention of youth suicide, addiction, abuse, and violence. Susann has been looking forward to the run for months and was the Omaha reservation representative on the organizing committee. Her job is to meet the runners in Vermillion, South Dakota.

I have no idea where Vermillion is. I just agreed to drive her because that gives us time to talk. We planned to leave around 5:00 p.m., which would give me plenty of time to drive the little Aveo all the way back down the Missouri to Nebraska City before dawn.

While waiting for Susann, I wander the grounds. I ask a young woman with lovely eyes and a particularly authen-

tic-looking regalia if I could take her picture. She tells me simply, “No.”

I look at the artwork being sold at a booth filled with non-Natives from Santa Fe. I almost buy a t-shirt. Then the evening round of dancing begins. The drums are giving a roll call. The tail dancers start. I observe some Mormon missionaries eating what’s called a Walking Taco, which is a potato chip bag filled with chips and heaped with beef and cheese. They eat with a missionary zeal.

Finally I see Susann moving through the tents. She’s speaking to a smallish woman in black. She waves me over. She wants to introduce me to her aunt. Finally. But I’m considering my ride from somewhere up in the unknown of South Dakota to Nebraska City. I’m considering the fact that I’ll be sleeping in my car somewhere outside Sioux City, Iowa. Still, I agree to meet Aunt Marguerite.

Marguerite Baker holds the most powerful female position on the reservation—the first-ever female tribal chairwoman. She is much more excited to meet me than anyone I’ve met so far. She thinks I’m a filmmaker. Even when Susann and I correct her she insists that she can’t wait to see my film. Suddenly, a frail, wrinkled man rolls up in a beaten-up old electric wheelchair. His head is tilted to his left and hangs there with effort. “I want you to meet my eldest brother, Albert,” Marguerite says, as she stops his wheelchair with her foot and leans down right to his ear.

“ALBERT, THIS MAN MAKES MOVIES! HE’S MAKING A MOVIE ABOUT STANDING BEAR!”

“Is he?”

“Yes, sir. I have been working with the Lied Center and have a—”

“What’s he saying? What?!”

“Uncle Albert is a little hard of hearing.”

“Noise. Too much noise!” Uncle Albert says as he rolls away from his younger sister.

“You should speak with him. He knows everything about the old days. WOULD YOU LIKE TO SPEAK TO HIM, ALBERT?”

“Not here. Too much noise! Come on!”

I look over at Susann, knowing that she has to meet up with some folks who’ve run half of South Dakota and will have a sizeable chunk of Nebraska still to run, and I will have to drive back from wherever we’re going. Already we’re almost two hours behind the schedule I had in my head. But this is a chance I might never have again. Susann shrugs as if to say, “The choice is yours.” She smiles and laughs, I think because I look so worried about everything but where I am. I am not being present.

“Too noisy! Come on!” With that, Uncle Albert shoots across the dirt path and leaves Susann and me scurrying after him. He keeps talking while he rolls in-between parked and moving cars. He darts between two vans. I’m behind him by about two steps, wondering if I should grab the handles. But before I can even touch them Uncle Albert abruptly turns right and shoots up a small hill. “Up here! Not so much noise!”

He shoves himself in-between vans and gets caught on an Escalade’s trailer hitch.

“Do you need any help, sir?”

“What?!” He puts on the gas and the right wheel spins in the mud. I reach for the handles, thinking to lift him up and off the hitch. “I’m fine!” And with that, he pops off the hitch and skids up into a white tent at the edge of the grounds.

“Here’s a place for you to sit.”

I sit and don’t know what to say. Susann is waiting. Uncle Albert is waiting.

“If *you’re* not going to talk, I will. My grandfather knew him, Standing Bear. They were Ponca. We let them come here. Like the Winnebago. No place to go.”

“Sir, your hospitality as a nation is famous.”

“Gets us into trouble, though.”

I look again to Susann. Nothing. This is my show. I notice how dirty Albert’s white t-shirt is, how everything about him leans to the right. How dark his skin is. How the wrinkles around his smile let me know he likes to laugh. How his eyes sparkle like obsidian.

“Standing Bear. Five horses were shot out from under him by the white men in battle.”

The same thing Eugene had said, but as far as I know, as far as any historian has told me, as far as I have read of Standing Bear’s own statements, Standing Bear never fought against the American military or any settlers. I think it would be disrespectful to question Uncle Albert on this point and, anyway, what the hell do I know? What do historians really know? So I say, “Tell me, sir, about what this place was like before?”

“Beautiful land. Beautiful land. The Mandan were here before us. They’re gone. The others were sent off but we stayed. The treaties let us stay. We were smart. Not so smart to let the Winnebago come here. But the government lied, like they lied to the others.”

He goes on and I don’t understand what I hear. I can’t think. I nod and ask other questions I forget the minute I say them. I’ve never been this nervous on stage, so why

here? The next thing I know, I'm saying, "What vision do you have for the future here, sir?"

"Education. Education. We need to learn the old ways and the new."

He winks at Susann. It's then that I notice, though it's been there all the time, of course, is that Uncle Albert is wearing an official-looking army veteran's cap.

"You were in the army, sir?"

"I was a sergeant in Korea. Big battles."

"My father was in Korea. Well, not actually in Korea. He was stationed in England but it was during the Korean War. Well, a few years after. I don't really know."

"You don't know? Well. What else don't you know? That was hard fighting in Korea."

While we are talking another man comes and sits down beside Susann. He is in his late sixties, impressive and thick-lipped, with a long gray ponytail. He looks very suspicious of who I am and what I want. He is staring, piercingly, never taking his eyes off me.

"Sir, I saw a soldier from Iraq dancing with his family."

"Good boy."

"There's been a strong history of Indian soldiers fighting bravely for this country. Why do it, sir, for a government that you say lies?"

"Either we fight . . . or Leavenworth."

The expression of the man who had joined us darkens and he crosses his arms. Susann rises and motions that I should be done. I say thank you to Uncle Albert. As we walk away I look back and see Albert Leclerc wheeling around to watch us as we go. The impressive ponytailed man places his hands on Albert's wheelchair. His expression looks anything but benign.

As I pull out of the grounds to begin our delayed long drive to South Dakota, Susann says matter-of-factly, “You know we’ve been testing you.”

>>DISPATCH: ADVENTURE IS NEVER PLANNED

Sometime around 10:00 p.m. My Cell Is Out of Service

On the road to Vermillion, South Dakota, Susann and I talk about the kids, her life these last months since her husband left, the fact that she has a strong circle of family and relatives that protect them all. Susann tells me about the school she wants to build for her children. She’s home-schooling so she can use traditional structures and language. She tells me she doesn’t think she’ll see it all come together in her lifetime.

“Remember the circle and the dancing?” She makes a circle on the dusty passenger window of the Aveo. “That is the sacred circle. It the only way to truly teach my people. The circle always has at the center a tree, the sacred tree. That is humanity, the individual, me, my children. The sky is above. The earth is below. With the four winds, the four directions—they meet all around us. If you are centered in this how can you ever be lost?”

I ask her how people outside the tradition can help. She answers, “Just get out of the way.” I smile and she tells me she thinks I’m “smart for a white guy.”

The road is empty and the night is black. My little Aveo headlights barely make a dent in the dark. There are no signs that even hint at Vermillion, South Dakota. I’m resigned to sleeping in the car. But then, just when the night is darkest, there it is like the proverbial dawn (if dawn were nine miles off the highway, just past the Super 8): Vermil-

lion, South Dakota. Susann guides me to the Native Cultural Center.

She looks very tired. I am anxious to get on the road but don't want to leave her there alone. Indian time is going to get me sleeping in my car. I say I am willing to stay. Susann's eyelids are heavy but she tells me to go. Adventure is never planned and can only be had if you follow your instinct and say "yes" to things presented.

I said "no." I should have stayed. I should have witnessed the arrival of the twenty or so runners, some of whom had come from the Rosebud Reservation to support the youth of the tribes in a year that has seen suicides, a murder, and trouble. Some of the runners are from Red Lake, who'd experienced the terrible shooting there in 2005. I should have slept in my car and followed them down to Macy. I didn't. Instead I drove into the night. The whole ride I am dogged both by regret and by the lightning and thunder off to the west, and gaining.

Outside Onawa, Iowa, is an enormous white billboard on which is ominously written PREPARE TO MEET THY MAKER. That night it's backlit by flashes of lightning.

Outside Council Bluffs I see the carcass of a good-sized doe that had met her maker with the likely assistance of a truck or SUV. It dawns on me that if I get hit by a deer while in this black peanut with wheels I'll be a goner. I grip the steering wheel at 10 and 2 and keep my eyes peeled, glancing regularly at the brush and trees on the side of the road.

I distract myself with thoughts of what I can accomplish tomorrow. I'll work on the Standing Bear play.

What's the play's structure?

Ideas. I know I will make all this a one-man show. Yes. I'll call it "Standing Bare"! Crap, that sounds as if it would

be a naked guy talking. I'm sure there's an audience for that. Not the audience I want.

Wait. "Standing Bare" might work. Yes, yes. I'm baring my—no, no. I've replaced a run for Native youth with this? Please, God, don't let a deer jump out and have "Standing Bare" be the last thought I have. Another deer carcass.

And there is the sign and the turn off into Nebraska City. That night I have nightmares of vampires with clutch purses, cowboy boots that walk on their own, and I'm a tourist in my own place of home. Could be test anxiety.

>>DISPATCH: DOCUMENTARIES

Wednesday, August 16. 8:00 a.m.

I have an appointment at 9:30 a.m. at Nebraska Educational Television (NET) to meet with Karen Fox. Karen is a nationally known and respected documentarian. She is also working on the Standing Bear story.

Karen is not what I expected. I expected, I don't know, a sort of academic Christiane Amanpour: editing with one hand, slapping her research assistant with the other, while screaming for more funding from the suits upstairs. Karen is unconventionally conventional. To give myself my due, she does look a bit like Christiane Amanpour.

We sit down and jump right into the Standing Bear story. Did you know? . . . Amazing, isn't it? . . . and, Have you read? This is what happens when you get some folks talking about Standing Bear.

Wait. I realize that many don't know the story. Okay. So here it is, my documentary.