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From the Hilltop

Native Storyiers
A Series of American Narratives

Series Editors
GERALD VIZENOR
DIANE GLANCY

From the Hilltop

Toni Jensen

University of Nebraska Press • Lincoln and London

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Set in Minion by Bob Reitz.

Designed by R. W. Boeche.

For my family

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Chiromancer

The redhead in the poodle skirt grabbed me up from where I hid between two giant palm fronds, dragged me to the stage, told me I was the rockabilly Indian, here to save them all. I told her I wasn't him, was just myself. That there would be no saving, that the band wasn't that bad, anyway.

By the time I moved my eyes from her, to the exit, back to her though, I was up on the stage, the drummer saying, Yeah, man, and keeping time with my steps. The redhead had her hands all over the front of my shirt, her red mouth all over the microphone, saying something loud that went out into the Easter morning crowd and bounced.

The minute before, I had been standing in the back of the hotel conference room-turned-dance hall. I was scanning around for my brother-in-law and my nephew. I was trying not to think about where my sister Linda was. I fingered the knife in my pocket, the piece of paper folded four ways. I said,

No, no thank you, no, I don't dance, to all the girls with their dark hair, which swooped down over their foreheads in neat little half moons that almost touched their eyebrows. It was like being back in time—all the guys with Elvis hair, the girls with skirts that made circles when their partners twirled them out onto the checkerboard floor. It was like being forward, too—the girls so grabby and bold, most of them as tattooed as the guys, the checkered floor just contact paper peeling up a little in the corners of the room.

With the lights in my eyes, the drums so loud behind me, I couldn't think, couldn't focus entirely on any of it. I was squinty, was hot in the leather jacket my wife Diane had made me bring. It's not cold in Las Vegas, I told her. It's cold in Minnesota, she told me, and that's where you're coming back to. She said it in a nice, even voice, but it came out like a threat somehow, anyway. That's how it's been with us for going on ten years—somebody threatening somebody quietly, somebody wearing the jacket.

The redhead with the red lips let go of my shirt to stroke the microphone with both hands. She yelled something like Viva Las Vegas, something about this being the last day of the greatest weekend ever.

I'd only been on a stage once before, and then not really on it, more like at its edge. Senior year of high school, the year Diane moved to St. Paul from Alberta, the year she asked me to take her to the prom. She didn't know that many people yet, was too pretty for most of the guys—Indian, white or otherwise—including me. Back home, her family the Roubidauxs, were famous for having pretty girls, and Diane had been homecoming queen three years running—the only métis

girl to ever do that. In St. Paul, she was nominated royalty, too. My biggest claim to fame was being the fourth best-looking Indian guy in school. After my last brother Richard graduated, I was the only, and therefore, best-looking, Blackfoot. So I walked with Diane up the stairs to the edge of the stage, held her arm for her when she stepped up, and then I let go.

This time I forgot who I was for a minute, forgot to suck in my gut and turn my head to the left so my good eye pointed forward. I grinned, did a little dance, and sent out a wave to the crowd before jumping down, ducking into it. I dodged the redhead's big, reaching hands by bending forward, making myself small, and pushed my way through the kicking legs and flying skirts. I ducked and wove—moves, I had moves—heading for the lobby, out into the slots and poker tables. I feigned left and moved right, just escaping a big, pointy-toed shoe when I saw them—the short legs in blue jeans, dancing around a step and a half behind the beat. Just like his uncle. I grabbed his arm, pulled him around closer to me.

Randy, I said, where's your father?

En garde, Randy said. He bent his four-year-old legs into a fencer's stance and brandished the sword he'd made by sticking three striped drink straws together.

Randy, I said

En garde, Uncle Pete, he said. Who goes there?

He threw back his head and laughed at that like an old man telling his best joke. Someone had cut his hair short since I'd seen him last, and it stuck out from the top of his head, fine and electric. Two palm fronds were tied onto his belt loops. A new tradition, I guess. They fanned out behind him and almost reached the ground.

Next to us, a tattooed guy held a girl with a long skirt in the air a moment, and then she was straddling him over the checkerboard, him on a black square, her dangling above a white one, her legs wrapped around his waist. He was wearing a wife beater to show off his tattoos. A giant blue snake rose from his pale chest and circled the bear on his shoulder. Whiskey hung in the air as the guy swung the girl back and down. Her hair brushed Randy's.

Happy Easter! Randy said.

The girl laughed, moved deeper into the snake eating the bear. Randy jumped up and down, waving his sword, shaking his fronds. The girl moaned. I scooped Randy up by the waist, pulled the room key from his back pocket, and ran.

I was trying to sneak up on the room, on Randall, Senior, if he was in there practicing his Elvis, lying to some new woman. But as we moved down the hallway, closing in on the room, Randy kicked his legs and sang out, Room 262, 62, 62, over and over like a mantra. He grabbed my face with both hands, assaulting me with his little kid breath—barbecue chips and orange soda and bubble gum.

Sing, Uncle Pete, he said. Sing the Room Song.

This was vintage Randall—teach the kid a song to remember the room number and turn him loose in a hotel.

Shh, buddy, come on, I said. Let's play the quiet game now.

I made my eyes real big, aware only one was cooperating, and moved my finger up to my mouth in the *shh* gesture. Randy mirrored it, said, Shhh! as loud as possible, then drew his pudgy finger up to my bad eye. He ran his finger along my eyebrow and squinched one of his eyes down small to look like mine.

I put my ear to the door first, then my good eye to the peep-hole, which never works from the outside. Really, I was just stalling. The new knife in my pocket felt flimsy and cheap. Randy started up the kicking again, bouncing his foot off the wall. I figured we had already alerted anyone within fifty feet, so I took a deep breath, slid the card into the slot, and we were in.

Randy ran straight into the bathroom, calling, Dad, Dad, but no one answered. My breathing finally slowed, some.

The place had been trashed—Diet Coke and Orange Crush cans making a new carpet, Styrofoam containers with bits of dried food on top of the tv, the beds. I flipped the lights on, looking around for Randy's things while he jumped on the beds, fencing an imaginary enemy. I pulled open the closet door and stepped back.

An altar, a shrine of some sort. A black cloth had been hung over boxes, which were lined up like stairs. On top sat four unlit candles, a handful of rocks, a few feathers from a black bird—a crow, maybe—a small pipe, a picture of the redhead from downstairs in a polka dot bikini, a deck of Tarot cards with historic Indians on the faces, and a lock of someone's hair. New tradition number two. I knelt down, my knees cracking and popping, and took a corner of the fabric in my hand.

You're not supposed to touch that.

Randy had stopped his bouncing. He sat on the bed, surrounded by the take-out containers, one palm frond bent under him, one hanging off the edge of the bed.

I pulled, pulled harder, and everything tumbled. Randy ducked down behind the Styrofoam.

You're in so much trouble, he said, covering his face with his hands.

Two old gray Samsonites had been the base of the altar, with smaller, shoe-box-sized cartons on top. I grabbed the biggest suitcase. Two of the cartons flipped off it. The first held hot pink fliers with Southwestern designs on the borders, with the heading *The Amazing Randall Mesteth, Native Psychic and Chiromancer to the Stars*. Tradition number three, only this one wasn't so new.

When they lived in St. Paul, Randall had, for a time, been billing himself as a Native Psychic and Healer, until the night he gave Linda a black eye and nearly broke her arm. I pulled him out of the bar, into the alley behind—the first fight I'd been in since high school. He said, *Not in the face, man, not in the face*. I said, *Heal this, you prick*, but he just kept saying it—*Not in the face, not in the face*. Though he was Italian, not Indian, he had close to a perfect cigar box profile. He was worried about his nose. I did my best to break it before he sobered up, before he remembered he was bigger than I was.

It took me a minute, but I recognized the photo in the center of the flier—Randall shaking the hand of some celebrity, some musician after a concert in St. Paul. Diane had taken that picture. We had all gone to the concert and to the IHOP after. And then it hit me, what was wrong with it. Linda had been on the other side of the singer, had been cropped out. If you looked close, you could see her shadow, falling onto the singer, crossing over onto Randall.

I kicked the box hard, bumping it into the other carton, knocking off its lid. More fliers, turquoise, this time, with a photo of Randall in full Elvis regalia. Rockabilly Randall slanted across the top.

Hey, Randy said. Hey, Uncle Pete, want to know what your future holds?

He'd picked up the cards from where I'd kicked them, had stacked them out in front of him in three neat piles. Past, present, future, all laid out.

The door clicked open. Big Randall and the redhead fell in, laughing. The phone was ringing, Randy saying, Hello, hello, in his small voice. But I was hearing another voice under it, the one from yesterday asking if I was Pete Rampert, saying something about the Vegas police, something about an incident.

Randall had his hands up under the redhead's chin, cradling her face as if to say It'll be okay, baby. Or maybe he was saying it. I was seeing Linda laid out on cold metal, a man pulling back the sheet, tucking it up under her chin like she was still a girl. Like she was just sleeping.

I charged at Randall, swinging the Samsonite, and it glanced off his shoulder, hitting the redhead square in the eye.

Ow, she said, you bastard.

It should have knocked her out, but she just stood there, making her hand into a fist.

Hello, Randy said. Hello. He crouched down between the bed and the table, the phone at his ear.

Listen, Big Randall said.

No, I said, you listen.

I pulled the paper out of my pocket and the knife came with it, dropped onto the floor. We both reached for it. I was closer but he was faster, and he grabbed it, shoving me out of the way. I landed hard on my tailbone, my head bouncing off the wall but not too hard. Randall flicked the knife open, swiped the air in front of him, laughing.

This, he said, swiping near my nose, is truly pathetic. Even for you, Pete.

The redhead was lounging on the bed near the door now, studying her nails. She laughed, a cross between a screech and a bark. I don't know how she wasn't unconscious.

You need to sign this, I said. I couldn't forget why I was there. I had already lost once—my other sister and her husband dead in a car crash, my niece adopted out of the family, vanished. I straightened my back and waved the paper.

You need to sign this and then I'll go.

And then you'll go, huh? Randall said. I say when you go. He whizzed the knife past my nose again, getting it this time. A bad nostril now to go with my eye.

Asshole, I said. I started lurching to my feet, swinging up at him, aiming for his face, and he swung the knife at me again. I missed, but my shoulder caught his arm, the one with the knife, right at the crook of his elbow. Something popped, loud, but I didn't feel anything. We hung there a second as if dancing then fell back onto the bed with the redhead. She jumped up and was out the door fast, one flash of red, then gone.

I pushed myself off Randall. He sat up, moaning, his right arm hanging at his side, the lower part flopping.

Randy poked his head up from its space between the bed and table, the phone still at his ear. He held it out to us. The dial tone droned.

It's my mother, he said. She says you're both in trouble.

Then he started crying—a terrible cross between a dying seal and a hiccup.

Come here, buddy, I said. It's okay. It's going to be okay.

But he shrunk down even further. I looked at myself in the mirror. Blood ran from the gash in my nose down past my mouth. It dripped into the carpet, onto the paper. I wiped at

my nose, picked up the paper, and waved it again at Randall, who was starting to whimper.

If you would just sign this, I said, I'll go.

But he was curled into himself now, fetal, and I didn't think he could sign anything with his arm like that, anyway. So I put the paper back in my pocket—along with one of the pink brochures—grabbed up Randy, who kicked and screamed, and ran.

On the plane, with an orange soda and peanuts in front of him, Randy calmed down some. His last-minute ticket had been \$542.87. He sat by the window, looking out with both eyes as big as they could get, his mouth a small, round gap he kept putting peanuts into. I'd given him mine though I was starving, and the woman across the aisle had given him hers too. She was a mom traveling without her kids, I thought. I smiled at her and she drew back a little at the sight of my nose.

I was going to have a scar, I figured, and I didn't mind too much, but Diane wasn't going to like it. She was already going to be mad at me for forgetting Randy's clothes, for not getting the signature.

I borrowed a pen from the mom and lined it up on the tray table with the pink brochure and the other paper, the one with the x and no signature, the one that could make Randy ours. I pulled the brochure in front of me and traced Randall's signature over and over, getting the feel of it while Randy popped peanut after peanut into his mouth. We had just about found a rhythm when he turned to me.

Read my palm, he said.

He said it like I'd heard other kids say, Tell me a bedtime story—that same half-sleepy tone. He spread out his hand, palm up, and it was sticky, peanut dust in the creases.

Chiromancer

Come on, Uncle Pete, he said.

I looked past him, out over the brown and green squares that made up everything below. I looked down at the pattern of lines curving around his hand.

Come on, he said, tell it.

I put down the pen and traced the sticky line from his index finger to the base of his hand. New tradition number four. I cleared my throat and began.