

The Birthday Cake

by Raymond Abbott

It was an unusual day that Jack didn't have one or more of the ten women in the group on his doorstep with a complaint. He would hear, "Jack, did you know Helen Two Teeth, she's taking beadwork and selling it at Vetal and keeping the money for herself?" Vetal was a nearby off-reservation town where there was a cafe-liquor store-pawn shop. The cafe owner bought Indian crafts, if they came cheap.

Jack was what was called a scholastic, which meant he was considering the priesthood himself some day. He was doing an understudy, if it could be called that, at St. Andrew's Indian Mission.

Father Lane was his superior and it was this crusty old cynic who had said first thing, "Now you be sure to lock the tool shed when you get done each day. And count the bags of beads and the strips of leather. Don't forget the leather, whatever you do. It is a hell of a lot more expensive than beads." What he was really saying, and it was clear enough, although he didn't say it outright, was *don't trust the Indians too much, Jack*. Although at other times that summer he was very open about his basic distrust of Indians. "It comes with time," he said with a tired smile late one night.

It had been Jack's idea to form the craft guild (what he liked to call it) and it had been accepted right away by the Indian craft workers, who were mostly women. They recognized the need for what he proposed. How it was to operate, if everything went right, and it seldom did, was that the craft people in the community would come together and form a cooperative, an association of workers who previously had worked alone, mostly because of distrust of one another. He theorized that in this way they should receive a higher market price for what they made. Now, most workers frequently were unable to sell what they produced, or if it did sell, it went for a small amount to an off-reservation truck stop or bar such as at Vetal. Jack believed that once organized and working in one space, space provided by Father Lane, they could purchase materials in bulk orders and save.

Jack understood that Father Lane offered the space because he figured it would be easier to keep controls on the project, and Father Lane expected the organization to fail, but he didn't say this. After all, a scholastic assigned to him had to do something and this project promised to demonstrate to Jack Dalton how Indians fight amongst themselves, especially Indian women.

Jack's job, quite simply, was to keep the organization together, no small task, he saw right away. He kept the books, handled the money, and ordered the supplies, duties he didn't wish to have, but recognized he had to do. No one else could be trusted.

But most of his time he spent mediating arguments, or correcting misunderstandings. There were endless squabbles, as Father Lane had predicted there would be.

Jack hoped the one big problem, pilfering, would disappear in time, but when it didn't he brought up the subject at their weekly meetings, careful to accuse no one. So that there were no misunderstandings, he let Elmer Runs High explain the problem in the Indian language to the ladies, but he wasn't well satisfied with the way Elmer explained things, for the women sat there chuckling, and so did Elmer. Jack didn't see anything funny in what was happening, and since he spoke not one word of Indian he had no idea what Elmer said. After a while he stopped asking Elmer to explain the difficulty and laid out the problem in English which everybody, except Mrs. Black Bull, understood quite well, and if the truth be known according to Father Lane, Anna Black Bull understood English as well as, if not better than, the others in the group. Be that as it may, but for all the time Jack was in Cut Meat village Anna spoke not one word of English in front of him or to him. She usually brought along her daughter, Helene Yellow Hawk, to do the translating.

The way Jack spoke to the women might not have been described as polite. In fact he frequently gave them hell, and they knew they were getting hell, too. There was no giggling when he spoke about the stealing that he said threatened the survival of the organization.

"Look here," he said, "we can't have members carrying off the beadwork or the other supplies and selling them on the side. It just won't work long if we do that. We have plenty of work, more than we can do, and there is enough money for everybody to earn. But earn it is what you must do. And remember we still got to fill those orders for the tipis for the Great Sioux Encampment."

The tipi order was special—a one-time project—for a replica Sioux village that was going up near Rapid City. It was for the tourists and was a massive undertaking by South Dakota standards. Somehow the organizers of the Encampment had heard of *Sioux Frontier Art Crafts*, what the group called itself, and was in touch with Jack about members of the organization doing the work with the materials being provided. The women had only to cut and assemble the tipis, but as it turned out the work was done almost exclusively by two women, Mrs. Black Bull and Mrs. Fast Pony. They were the senior members of the organization in years and in know-how, and they were also the only ones who could do this kind of a project. The younger craft workers simply had no idea how to cut and sew a tipi. They would have to have learned as they went along, and that was unacceptable. At first Mrs. Black Bull and Mrs. Fast Pony worked well together, or so Jack thought. He supposed they were good friends, and judging from all the joking and good-natured banter that went on between them, that was a reasonable assumption. Soon, however, Jack learned that neither lady trusted the other, and it wasn't long before first one or the other was coming around to see him with stories about how the other, or the other's relatives, were doing something wrong. Stealing usually was the complaint.

Mrs. Black Bull—with her translator, Helene—in tow would say, "You know that Elsie Fast Pony, she's taking beads home with her and not telling anyone. She thinks I don't see, but I do."

And Elsie Fast Pony said, "That daughter of Mrs. Black Bull, Helene Yellow Hawk, she's no good. She's stealing from us, Jack Dalton. I see her do it but I don't say anything. I pretend not to see, but I do. I have to be careful because she can be awful mean, that Yellow Hawk woman. She gets plenty mad, especially if she is drinking. She drinks a lot, too, you know that, Jack?"

He would listen politely and nod his head that he understood, but seldom did he

say anything. Elsie usually would give her report in almost a whisper, looking around to see if somebody might be listening, even though she would be in Jack's room with the door closed and they were alone.

By this time, Jack had pretty much determined that it was in fact Helene Yellow Hawk who was doing most of the stealing, if not all of it. That isn't to say others weren't taking a bit for themselves now and again, and Jack wouldn't have been surprised to find that Elsie had a few strings of beads at home. But it was Helene who was doing the major stealing, and she did most of the selling off the reservation at Cedar Butte or Vetal. Someone Jack trusted had seen her doing this, and more than once, too. Probably she was trading the craft work for a bit of wine or a six-pack of beer and giving the liquor to her man, Ed Plumming.

One Saturday morning in early July, Helene came to Jack's door, all alone. Usually she was accompanied by Mrs. Black Bull, and the reason for coming often centered around a bit of gossip they just had to make known to him. He almost looked forward to these visits for he was lonely in this village, as well he might have been, being one of about three whites and a stranger to most folks. But now it was just Helene. She was a thickly-built woman about 28 or 29, but she looked older. She had heavy, muscular arms with a tattoo on each bicep.

She greeted him with her usual big smile, showing a set of teeth with many missing in front where it counted most.

"We're having a party for my mother," she said right away. "Her birthday is Monday."

"So what can I do for you?" Jack asked.

"I need to use a good cookstove like yours where we can bake a cake for my mother. I wonder if it would be okay if I came around Monday and made the cake in your oven?"

"No problem," he said. He knew how primitive the conditions were in her house. There would be only a rusted-out wood stove for heat and nothing suitable for baking a cake. His place couldn't be described as luxurious; he had to carry his water and had no indoor plumbing. Nevertheless, he did at least have a gas range, an old one, but one that worked, and he didn't see why it wouldn't bake a cake, although he had never tried to do it himself. She had what she wanted and so left and he went back to his paperwork, which was an order for more leather and beads from Tandy Leather Company in Rapid City.

On Monday morning there was a light tap on his door. At first he thought it might be Mrs. Black Bull or Mrs. Fast Pony, for they often came early and went through his room to an adjoining room, which actually was a hall, where the tipis were laid out. The work was much too large for the regular work space Father Lane provided, so Jack had convinced the priest to allow the two women to work in the front part of the building.

He opened his door not to Mrs. Fast Pony or Mrs. Black Bull but to Helene Yellow Hawk, who carried an armful of pots and pans and cake mix, and who knew what more.

Ah, the cake, he thought and he didn't think anything more about it, and Helene went right to work at the stove. She didn't tell him, however, that she had locked the outside door to keep her mother from walking in on her and spoiling the surprise. Had she told him this, he would no doubt have remembered that the two elderly women were not planning to work that Monday morning because Mrs. Fast Pony had to be in Rosebud for an appointment with the tribal chairman, Amos Featherman, and Mrs. Black Bull simply would not work alone. For two people who spoke so harshly about

each other, they sure didn't like to be separated when it came to doing their work, Jack thought. It never occurred to him, however, that this might be the case only because one didn't wish the other to accuse her of doing less work or stealing supplies. It was about 11:00 a.m. when Jack finished his work at the desk. He then got up and went to the post office nearby for he wanted to mail the letters on the 11:30 mail coming in from Kodaka. Helene was still busy at work baking the cake, he noticed, but he didn't see that the door had been locked all morning. When he returned, Helene was gone and she had cleaned up the place and put everything away and left a note inviting him to the party that was to be that afternoon at 3:00.

He had no idea at that moment that there was trouble coming his way, not until he met up with Tuffy Bordeaux, a seventeen-year-old boy who sometimes hung around the church hall in the evenings when Father Lane was having what he liked to call "recreation hour." Every so often Jack got trapped into supervising these so-called recreation hours, which usually soon got out of control and stayed that way the entire evening. He called it "rowdy hour," but not in front of Father Lane. The old priest actually believed the time spent was vitally important to the development of the youth of the community. Maybe it was, Jack thought. He simply didn't wish to be part of that aspect of development if he could avoid it, and he usually did.

When Jack saw Tuffy he was drunk as could be and leaning against the tiny silver trailer that belonged to the old Swede Fred who ran the town's one gas station and who had been in Cut Meat about as long as anyone, white or Indian.

"You better watch out, Jack Dalton," Tuffy called out to him as he walked on by, this time headed for Dillon's Market. He usually tried to ignore Tuffy when he was drinking, for the liquor changed him considerably, as it did many Indians he knew. But he caught what Tuffy said all right and was curious what he could have meant. Just more meaningless talk brought on by too much to drink, he decided, as he kept walking. Or it could signal another of those verbal blasts Tuffy was famous for and usually for no reason other than that he was drunk. He had not done anything to Tuffy. In fact, he liked to believe he had been kind to Tuffy and tried to help him. But one time Tuffy had even threatened Jack's life, and why Jack never did learn, except that the boy was drunk that day too and in an especially ugly mood. That time, though, Tuffy's mother heard about the threat and she made him return and apologize, which Jack said wasn't necessary, and which proved embarrassing for both him and Tuffy. Maybe that was it. Tuffy had not forgotten that awkward moment, although Jack had tried to make it as easy as he could for the boy to apologize, and he was getting his revenge now.

When Jack returned from the store, Tuffy was still there as if waiting for him. He was so drunk he could barely stand. Apparently he didn't wish this time to call him down in public or threaten to fight him, which he was always doing. No, now he had something else in his head, and it came out as a warning.

"Ed Plumming is looking for you," he said, with a smile that said more. It said, *I know something you don't*. "He's gonna kill you, Jack."

Kill me? Why me? Jack thought. But he didn't ask the question, obvious as it was. *It's got to be the liquor talking again*, he thought. *Crazy talk that doesn't make any sense at all.*

"You was in bed with his woman, he thinks. He's saying it all over town. Telling everyone he is gonna get a gun and kill you. He might be looking for you right now. He knows Helene was in your room all morning and that you had the door locked to keep him out. She went in early in the morning and stayed until noontime and with only you in the room with her. He must have been watching the place. Ed Plumming is like that, you know. You wouldn't even know he was around if he wanted it that way."

Where did anyone get such a notion? Jack wondered, his alarm rising now. Sure, Helene had been in his room baking that damn cake for the party, but that was all she was doing. But he supposed Ed could have thought there was something going on between them, especially when she stayed for so long. But the door locked? He hadn't locked it, but had Helene, and why? Of course, to keep out her mother or Mrs. Fast Pony, to keep them from going through Jack's room to get to where the tipis were laid out. That was how the door came to be locked, he realized.

He could now picture Ed trying that door and finding it locked, and probably he was sober then, but a few drinks later and after he considered what a locked door meant, he must have reached this awful conclusion that Jack was with his woman. Obviously a complete misunderstanding, but not one that would be easy to explain to Ed Plumming.

"You better be careful, Jack," Tuffy was saying now and grinning and looking like he might fall over as he waved his arms and leaned away from the trailer he was still using for support.

"He will kill you if he gets a chance. Hide in the dark when you're out some night, like when you go over to Eagle Feather's place. He will jump out and cut your throat from ear to ear." He demonstrated what he meant, but Jack didn't need to see him do this. He knew Ed Plumming's reputation; everybody in town did.

Ed's name came up often whenever anyone talked about the axing murder of old Leo White Hat the year before. The crime was never solved, but people in the village, perhaps even the police, acted as if they knew who did it all right. And it was a grisly act indeed. Somebody came up to the door of Leo's cabin one dark night, called out his name, and when the old man opened the door to see who was there, this person nearly cut off White Hat's head with an ax. And now of all things the number one suspect in this awful crime, Ed Plumming, was supposed to be after him. *My God*, he thought. What could he say to make things right? He would go to the birthday party for Mrs. Black Bull that afternoon, he decided, and ask Elmer Runs High and some of the others just what he should do to convince Ed Plumming he wasn't interested in his woman. It was a dangerous situation.

The party was late getting under way although Jack was early, as most white people were to Indian gatherings, and even though it was a bright sunny day he found himself looking behind him as he walked the short distance to the tool shed where the party was to be held. *A man can't be too careful*, he thought, not with Ed Plumming after him.

About half an hour after he arrived just about everybody from the craft organization was there, including the only two male members, one of whom was a man by the name of Elijah White Lance, and he had just got out of jail at Rosebud. Elmer Runs High, as president, spoke in Indian and everybody laughed a lot at what he was saying and Jack wondered how these people could be so gay when he was so upset and might be facing a death sentence. If Tuffy knew of these things, the others certainly had to have heard by now, but nobody acted as if anything were wrong.

Elijah White Lance was an oil-paint specialist, when he wasn't in jail. He greeted Jack in his usual friendly manner and began telling him how good it was to be home after ten days in the Rosebud jail where he said the jail food was bad, when there was enough of it, and there seldom was. But Jack had trouble concentrating on what the man was telling him. His mind was someplace else.

He looked for Helene Yellow Hawk and soon he saw her standing next to her mother. If anything was wrong, however, she wasn't showing concern or worry. Indeed, she was having a hell of a time. *Doesn't anybody care?* he thought.

When he was about to confront Helene with the story Tuffy had told him and to

ask her to intervene with Ed and reassure him that there was not so much as a crumb of truth in what he thought was going on between them, Elmer Runs High came over and spoke to him, asking where he had been hiding or something silly like that. Elmer was the comic in the organization or so he thought he was. Jack decided maybe Elmer knew what he should do and so he told him the story and about how concerned and nervous he was and what did he think should be done at this late time?

Elmer's smile disappeared and he stepped back and studied Jack for a long time. Then he shook his head and smiled and whistled a low whistle that was his way of saying a person, in this case Jack, sure did have himself in a mess.

"He's a crazy one, Jack. Damn mean, too," he said at last, almost in a whisper. "How come you allowed yourself to get locked in the same room with Helene? Didn't anyone tell you about how jealous Ed can be? Everybody in town knows how he is."

"But I didn't know the door was locked," Jack protested frantically, "or for that matter that anyone would think anything of Helene being alone with me in my room. The entire episode is ridiculous, except I can't ignore it, can I?"

"No, you can't ignore Ed Plumming."

Elmer smiled again and this time he winked at Elijah White Lance, who was nearby and listening to the conversation and smiling a lot himself although Jack saw none of this. He was too worried to notice anything.

It was when the party was breaking up that Helene wandered over to say hello to Jack. She said a few words about how well she thought the party had gone and how surprised her mother had been and how pleased, and she thanked him again for the use of his cookstove. Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, "Don't you go paying no attention to the crazy things Tuffy Bordeaux has been saying around town about Ed being after you. Ed ain't nowhere hereabouts. Elijah White Lance can tell you that. Ed's in jail at Rosebud and he's been there for the past three weeks. He's got two more weeks to serve, I hear. That right, Elijah?"

White Lance nodded his head that what she was saying was true. He tried not to look at Jack, but it was difficult for him to avoid Jack's incredulous stare, and he was having difficulty keeping from smiling.

"I simply don't know what gets into that boy Tuffy," Helene went on. "He tells such awful lies all the time, and when he's drinking acts so crazy. I bet he saw me go into your house and came around himself to see what was going on and found the door locked and that got him mad. I don't know why he couldn't just knock on the door, but he didn't, and well, you know the rest."

He sure did know the rest. He supposed he should have felt anger but all that came out was relief. He sighed a long sigh and decided this was something he wouldn't soon forget, for what he thought was happening could well have been happening. A white man in an Indian village couldn't be too careful—therein was the lesson. But there was a lesson—revenge even—that he would teach Elmer Runs High who now had disappeared in a hurry.

It might take me the rest of the summer to think up an appropriate response for Mr. Runs High, Jack thought, for he would now be looking for Jack to do something but he would think of a way to get back at him. That he was sure of now as he had a large slice of that birthday cake baked on his cookstove. A damn fine cake, too, he decided.