

Trouble

Raymond Abbott

The trouble didn't begin for Leon until his wife Ellie, who hadn't had a drink in five years or more, started back with serious drinking that spring. What bothered him almost as much as the drinking itself was the dressing-up in fancy white women's clothes including high heel shoes. Then she paraded around the joints off the reservation. She was making a complete fool of herself, and him too.

The best he knew how he watched out for the children, ever thankful though that the three were almost grown. They had two girls and a boy; the oldest, Linda, was fifteen and Stanley fourteen and Lucille nearly twelve. There had been other children too, by earlier marriages, a couple for each of them, but those didn't count any more. They had grown up and moved on a long time before.

Leon Little Sack would be fifty-six his next birthday and Ellie, carrying on now like a teenager, was past forty by a year or two. He wasn't sure of her exact age but he was sure that she looked mighty foolish in that white woman's get-up. Lately, it included a sun bonnet with a wide brim and yellow plastic flowers, even a veil when she wanted to be mysterious, ridiculous as that seemed to him. And if it hadn't been for the fact that she was often drunk and in a nasty mood when he got to see her—when she came home that is—he might have grinned at how she looked. But it wasn't a funny subject for him, and to smile at her was to invite more trouble and a whole lot of it at that. She didn't take to him making fun of her.

Things went on like this for one summer and into the fall. And he was thankful that she hadn't begun acting so crazy in the winter months when there were more pressing problems such as keeping warm and hunting for firewood, a chore that involved everyone in the family who was able-bodied. Also, in the summer there wasn't the worry of losing cattle in a fast-moving blizzard or a late spring northwester blowing in and killing off the new-born calves.

The truth was, and he knew it, he would have had to do something about her erratic behavior long before he did had there been snow on the ground and it was cold. Up to now it had been an unusually dry summer approaching drought conditions in parts of South Dakota. Water was more of a problem this year than he could ever remember. Still, he was managing, keeping things together as well as might be expected, as he waited for Ellie to come to her senses. This was the situation, that is, until she came home drunk one evening still wearing that absurd outfit which he was getting used to while at the same time coming to despise the more he saw of it. She was somewhat more sober this night, but he didn't pay too much attention to her condition because

he had become adjusted to her marathon drinking sessions and knew there were lulls when she was likely to be less drunk than at other times. He knew because he had been there himself. This wasn't the hard part anyway. The hard part was the people around him, his own people, Indian people, in some cases his family and friends. They could be the big trouble because they made quitting the booze more difficult for Ellie. It had been the same for him when he quit. He recalled how they were all the time at him, ridiculing him for trying to quit, calling him a snob and suggesting he was somehow better than they were because he didn't want to drink anymore. And there were others who tried to force him to take a drink. Once he was actually offered cash if he would take only one swig from the whiskey bottle being passed around so generously. And another time, when he'd stopped at an off-reservation cafe to buy a package of cigarettes, several drunk Indians had grabbed him and forced him to take a swallow of their cheap whiskey.

Yet through it all he'd stayed sober; sometimes he didn't know how. And after a while he was left alone and he liked to believe he began to be respected, if only for his stubbornness. He wished Ellie could get through this period the way he had, but the sad truth was that she had only four or five years of sobriety behind her. He had something like twelve.

Ellie was a tiny woman, slight actually, but now there was a change in her—a noticeable change. She had gained weight through the middle and around the hips; not a lot, but enough to notice. *She's pregnant, damn it*, he thought immediately. Four or five months pregnant, he guessed. He asked her about this and she didn't deny it, snarling at him in a more sober voice than he could recall since this entire sordid business began.

"Yes, I'm pregnant," she said in Indian, "and you aren't the father."

He thought about the statement for a moment. He smiled. She didn't see the smile, however. Not so startling news, he thought. He knew he couldn't have been the one. It had been that long since they had been together in that way. He wished he were, but he wouldn't tell her this. For some reason the news didn't upset him. It had happened in this way before. Children were born on the reservation all the time without fathers. This one would be luckier than most because he would be its father just as he was for his own children. He would do well by it, whatever it was, no matter who the father was.

Ellie kept on talking, her voice taking on a new hostility, he thought, an anger he hadn't picked up on before—or maybe he wasn't listening as carefully as before.

"The baby's father isn't Lakota," Ellie said all of a sudden. It just jumped out of her. "The father's a white man, a rancher I met over in Valentine, and an awfully nice guy, too. He knows how to treat a lady."

Yeah, he thought, *it appears so*. He heard the words, but their meaning didn't sink in right away. Pregnant by a white rancher and a local white man, no less. It might even be somebody he knew or had to do business with. Someone he bought cattle from or sold to, and someone who would hate the thought of fathering an Indian kid and wouldn't want it known he had been with some reservation squaw. And if the news got out, as it surely would, he would be ridiculed and laughed at for what he had permitted to go on. That's what it all came down to now for him and it was a degree of shame he wasn't prepared to accept and have carried into his home.

Ellie was quiet now, perhaps sensing that she had gone too far and had said too much. She stirred soup on the small kitchen stove and he, without a word of warning, swung her around and hit her with the back of his hand, knocking her to the floor. She didn't get up right away. She crawled into the corner where ordinarily there was wood

stacked. Finally, she got to her feet and he hit her again, this time square on the face with a closed fist. Again she went down—down to stay—and when she came around, he was gone. He quickly walked the two miles to his brother's house, and as he had guessed, there was a party going on. There almost always was a party at his brother's place when there was money for liquor, as there was this week. Several persons he knew were quite drunk and nobody seemed surprised when he began drinking with them, and this for the first time in a dozen years. Soon, he was wild-assed drunk and next thing he was doing was to borrow a few dollars, never an easy task on the reservation, and then he took someone's car and drove to nearby Vetal, an off-reservation town where he drank a good deal more cheap gin until the place closed. Then, it was back to Spring Creek and Ellie. He was drunker than he had ever been in his life. Still, he was on his feet and he was proud of that fact. When he arrived home, he was surprised to find Ellie still there. She was acting as if nothing had happened, as if there had been no beating, and if it weren't for her bruises to remind him, he might have thought he dreamt the entire affair. He could see she was frightened too, because she no longer could remember what he was like when he was drunk. She'd forgotten how mean he could become.

He talked at first as if he forgave her, although the subject of her pregnancy didn't come up. He offered her a drink from a bottle of gin he had in his coat pocket and she took a couple of long swallows. The liquor warmed her insides and she soon began to feel pleasantly intoxicated. What fun it might be for the two of them to go somewhere in the car, she said, the way they used to in the old days when they both drank. Maybe they would want to go over to Crockston, or perhaps as far as Valentine, Nebraska, she said, and party and get roaring drunk together.

He was slow to respond to her idea but finally he decided it was a good suggestion and so they left Spring Creek, driving south in the direction of Crockston, Nebraska, by way of the cut-across, a sandy trail which leads to the mostly straight oil-surfaced road into St. Andrews community. At first Leon drove slowly but once on the straight oil-surfaced road he pushed the accelerator to the floor—50, 60, 70, 80. Ellie talked on as if still in the house. She didn't seem to notice the speed. She was in a happy, indeed festive, mood. It was as if the trouble hours before hadn't happened nor had there been peculiar behavior on her part for months before this night, and above all else, no news of her being pregnant by a white rancher. While Ellie may have forgotten so easily, Leon hadn't. He knew where he was and what he was doing and what he thought he had to do next. Next to him was his wife Ellie and she was carrying a child by a local white man. That was the fact that stuck in his head like glue, and no amount of drinking could change this for him.

He said later it was the liquor that made him do it. What he did, and without so much as a word of warning, was to reach across Ellie's lap as if adjusting her door, but instead of adjusting anything he opened the car door on her side and shoved her out and she was gone into the darkness. The next day she was found unconscious but alive by a white rancher in a pickup truck who saw the brightly colored white woman's outfit she still wore. She was taken to the reservation hospital where the pregnancy had to be terminated. There were other serious injuries as well—a broken leg, a fractured wrist, and a head injury—but she survived after being hospitalized for a month or more. She was transferred to a Rapid City hospital for treatment and remained on in Rapid after her release.

In the meantime, Leon went on a nearly four-week drunk and when the tribal police caught up with him to ask him about what happened with Ellie, all he could remember of the incident, he told them, was leaving his place at Spring Creek. He thought

maybe she fell out of the car, he said. The police went away threatening to return and arrest him, but he knew they wouldn't. The day they came to see him, Leon was somewhat more sober than he had been the day before and certainly more sober than he would be the day after. He was then in the process of selling off his small herd of cattle, head-by-head. It had taken him a decade to accumulate that herd. He sold his stock to a white man in Nebraska, a man by the name of Schmidt, a man he had done business with for a number of years. He and Schmidt were good friends and when the white rancher saw Leon's condition, he knew what it meant and could mean to Leon's chances of surviving as an Indian rancher. He tried to convince him not to sell.

"Not now my friend," he said. "Wait a few days, then come see me if you want." But the words were for nothing. Leon wanted to sell now, and for no good reason aside of being drunk he began to verbally abuse this white man who was just trying to help. Schmidt wanted no part of an Indian in an ugly mood like this one was, friend or no friend.

But it wasn't until after the cattle were sold to Schmidt that Leon got really crazy. He talked foolish, making outlandish assertions, Schmidt later said. "I don't need any crazy Indian going around accusing me of sleeping with his woman," he'd complain. "I don't consider that a compliment, even if I am 64 years old."

He wondered where Leon got such an idea in his mind. But Indians were funny like that, he told his worried wife, Eleanor. Indians frightened her, even after living near them for 38 years. Still, to see so much that was good undone so quickly made Schmidt sad for Leon Little Sack. There was no explaining it, he told his wife, except to say it was no less true today than it was years ago, that Indians and drink didn't mix well. "Never have and never will," he said, more certain about that than he was about most things in his life lately.