

Pink Flower Creek

by Raymond Abbott

It was nearly eight p.m. when Black Horse remembered he was supposed to pick up a can of soup for his mother. He knew the store would close at eight and so he hurried to clear away his paint equipment. He was at work on a painting of a coyote, one he felt pleased with for a change, and he was almost finished.

At Smith's Market the shades were already drawn and the front door locked, but there were lights on inside and he expected to be let in when he knocked, and he was. He bought the largest can of soup on the shelf, not paying particular attention to what kind it was.

Outside again, he walked toward his mother's house which was located on the edge of Corn Creek not far from the dried-up creek bed known as Pink Flower Creek. Once pink flowers abounded there in the spring; now it served as the town dump for Corn Creek. He passed the post office, a small building attached to the market where he spotted Jake Whipple sitting in a car with two other fellows. The car was large, a Buick maybe, with a dented front end, not a new car by any means. Dawson Crazy Cat was in the car. The other man he didn't know. He was surprised to see Dawson back in town. Last he'd heard of Dawson he was running from the tribal police who were supposed to be looking for him concerning the death of the Running Bear boy months before. He couldn't remember Running Bear's first name now. The killing had happened long enough ago so he couldn't even remember the details, aside from the fact that Running Bear had been pulled out of the Little White River with several knife wounds in his back and his head caved in. Crazy Cat was thought to be responsible, or so it was rumored. He was considered the only person capable of such a gruesome act. And when he quickly disappeared, this only confirmed the suspicion. Now he was back, so something had to have changed in the investigation.

The man in the car, the one he didn't know, was named Ellis Big Crow. Ellis had longish hair pushed back on the side in the style of the fifties. It looked greasy, and it was. His face was a literal eruption of pimples and the young man was painfully aware of how he looked, a mess.

Jake Whipple was behind the wheel of the Buick, and the first to speak. "Where you going in such a hurry, Elijah? Slow down and take it easy some. You'll live longer." He spoke in Lakota, and clearly he was drunk, not falling down drunk, but drunk. Black Horse wondered where he got the money this time of month. Almost nobody had cash midway through the month.

"I'm going home to dinner," Black Horse told him truthfully. He grinned and held

up the bag with the can of soup inside. "So where are you going?" Black Horse asked. Going home to dinner didn't seem like much of a thing to be doing, he knew.

"Maybe to Vetal, maybe to Cedar Butte."

"You wanna come along?" Crazy Cat now asked in English. He sat in the front seat with Jake while Ellis was alone in the back.

"I got to have my dinner," Black Horse said again, but it was clear he wasn't convinced that eating now was so important.

"Come on, then, get in," Crazy Cat said, and so Black Horse did.

Crazy Cat was small and thick-built and mean as a rabid polecat when he was drunk, but he was cold sober now, although he had had a couple swallows from a bottle of gin on the floor next to his boot. He controlled the liquor. Jake had had much more to drink and it showed. He grinned in a funny way when drinking.

Soon the four were speeding along on the gravel road that led to the cut-across that would take them out to State Highway 83 and from there to the road that led off the reservation to a place known as Cedar Butte. Jake drove.

Crazy Cat generously passed the quart bottle of gin around, with Black Horse the last to take a hit from it before it got back to Crazy Cat. The liquor burned going down but he was used to gin and it was his choice of drink, when he had a choice. Often he didn't. He hadn't had a drink since he had been arrested the last time, and that was in a Valentine, Nebraska bar when he was hauled in with that Pine Ridge crowd. Valentine was an unfriendly town and that was a right hostile bunch to be in jail with, he remembered.

Jake made the turnoff from the state highway at the appropriate place and they headed northwest toward Cedar Butte where, in that tiny farm community, liquor could be bought by the bottle or the drink.

The ride to Cedar Butte was uneventful, quite ordinary in fact, and it usually took about thirty minutes from Corn Creek. But Jake was driving fast, as he usually did, and so they were there well before Black Horse got his third solid hit from that bottle of gin. He didn't worry about it, however. Nor was he much concerned about Jake's driving.

On the ride out to Cedar Butte Crazy Cat explained to Black Horse how it was that he was now back on the reservation and not afraid of being arrested. It seemed the tribal police would leave him alone now, he said, because there had been an official ruling that the Running Bear death was accidental. The police in doing this got off their books an unsolved murder by calling it something else. "Death by drowning" was the decision, but there was no explanation as to how the boy had so many nasty cuts in his back which looked suspiciously like knife wounds. Certainly they didn't come from sharp rocks, somebody said in a weak attempt at humor, and nobody asked many questions because a lot of time had gone by and the boy's family hadn't even shown up for the hearing. Maybe they knew the truth and accepted it as part of the violent reservation life, or maybe they had revenge in mind. That wasn't exactly unheard of, nor was it without precedent. Crazy Cat said he had been living these months in Denver, Colorado, not hiding out though, he insisted. He had a job with a federal program for Indians. Denver was all right and he made good money, he said, but it just wasn't the same as home.

When Crazy Cat mentioned Doris Mae's name just as they got to the edge of Cedar Butte the raucous mood in the car changed. What he did in fact was to tell Black Horse something about Doris Mae he hadn't heard before, and he'd heard plenty about her already.

"You know that woman is seeing one of the young Running Bear boys?" he said. "Just a kid, he is. Seventeen or eighteen at best, I'd say."

Black Horse turned away from the bottle of gin just long enough to miss his turn.

"You're joking," he said in Indian, then in English, remembering Crazy Cat understood little Indian.

But he knew Crazy Cat wasn't the sort to joke about anything, much less joke about Doris Mae. Then too, Crazy Cat didn't much care for any of Running Bear's kin, especially since the accident, as he liked to call it, and he suspected they were waiting to get back at him when he was off his guard. As it was, he had been beaten up once or twice by the older boys, not alone but in a bunch. But he knew one of that bunch at least would never do any more beating, and the thought of this was satisfying to him.

Overall though, the Running Bears gave way to few persons, and Crazy Cat might well have been one of them. They feared him, or so it was said, because of the way he had dispatched one of their clan. They feared him and hated him at the same time. But knifing someone in the back a dozen times was a sufficient message to even the Running Bears that they were dealing with a maniac, and they were careful, very careful, around Crazy Cat.

"What do you care, Elijah?" Crazy Cat was saying now. He had the bottle which he passed back to Ellis who still had not spoken a word since they left Corn Creek.

"She's a no-account runaround any way you add it up. You ain't married to her, are you? Why don't you just bounce her out and be done with it? Send her back to where she comes from, wherever the hell that is." He laughed. "She's a Blue Horse, ain't she? Comes from down around Spring Creek, I bet."

Black Horse didn't reply. He was thinking about Doris Mae and that Running Bear boy. Richie—he bet that was the one. Then he thought about Doris Mae being a Blue Horse. She wasn't a Blue Horse. She was a Sharp Fish and from Soldier's Creek, not Spring Creek, but he didn't tell this to Crazy Cat because he thought he remembered hearing Crazy Cat was related somehow to Sharp Fishes and he might not want to know Doris Mae was family.

That entire family of Sharp Fishes was nothing but trouble, Black Horse remembered. Doris Mae had one brother, Ronald, away in state prison in North Dakota someplace for a life term for murder. He killed a man after a quarrel, but he didn't just kill him. He ran over the guy with his car and then backed up a couple of times more to make sure he did the job right. It was an Indian he killed, but the incident was so disgustingly brutal Sharp Fish got the maximum sentence they were giving in those days in North Dakota, and that was life in prison. He was lucky, it was said, he didn't get sentenced to die, because those North Dakota ranchers were plenty upset with him. It was almost like he had killed a white man. Sometimes Doris Mae talked about visiting him. Doris only talked about Ronald when she was drunk so he didn't see that she had any real intention of going clear up to North Dakota to make the visit.

He laughed. Doris Mae was too scared to travel all the way to North Dakota, he thought. She got nervous enough when she had to leave the reservation with him for even a day or two.

Still, this news about the Running Bear boy disturbed him. He'd fix her, he decided, and all those Running Bears too if he got an opportunity. He wasn't scared of any of them.

He pried the bottle of gin roughly from Ellis' hands, spilling some and almost starting a ruckus in the back seat. Ellis held himself in check though, not because he was afraid of Black Horse, but because he knew they would come into Cedar Butte in a minute or two and there would be plenty for all of them to drink. He knew Jake

had received a veteran's check and he always bought enough for everyone until the money got used up.

Their time in Cedar Butte was brief. Usually it was just about long enough for Crazy Cat and Whipple to get out of the car and go in the cafe for the booze and then stop to piss on the way back. The store had the appearance of a trading post and hardware store, except that the big business was selling liquor to Indians from the nearby reservations.

A white man by the name of Emery ran the place and his wife helped him. They had no children and were near retirement age and had plans of selling out in a year or two. When he got the right price he would be gone to Florida to retire, that was his plan. It was hard work keeping the place up, and in addition to the hard work, it was getting very dangerous. His wife had been robbed twice while she was in the place alone. Robbed at gunpoint each time, and each time the robbers were Indians, drunk, crazy Indians with guns, and that was a new development that worried him. It got so bad that Emery had to keep a loaded rifle nearby and a handgun, too, and he gave up his ranchwork to help out his wife and assure her safety. Once he had to back several drunk Indians out of his place at gunpoint. They had been demanding he give them something he didn't have in stock, some kind of liquor he didn't even keep. They didn't have the money to pay for it if he had it. That was the bizarre part. It was a crazy world out there on the reservation, he liked to tell strangers, and one he wished to be away from as soon as it was possible, and before somebody got hurt. But the money the place earned was substantial and so he stayed on, all the while looking for the right buyer.

Black Horse was very quiet on the ride back to Corn Creek. The ride home seemed longer, although he was certain Jake wasn't going any slower. He never did. He had borrowed money from Jake to buy his own pint bottle of gin and sat quietly sipping it in the corner of the back seat, not speaking to Ellis who also now had his own bottle. He thought about Doris Mae and the Running Bear boy being together and he was angrier the closer they got to home.

When Jake finally arrived at the edge of Corn Creek it was after eleven and by this time Black Horse had just about forgotten about Doris Mae and was now joining in the laughter and loud talking and high spirits in the car. Nobody was on the streets of Corn Creek as they drove to the center. As they passed Smith's Market Black Horse hollered, "Let me out here, I got to go home to my dinner." There was more laughter and Jake stood on the brakes and the car slid along the road throwing up sand and gravel as it came to a stop about twenty-five feet beyond Smith's Market, which was now completely dark save for the fluorescent light in a refrigerated case in the back. There was more laughter as Black Horse stumbled getting out. He said his legs were not working so well now.

"You drunk or something, Mister?" Crazy Cat asked with a laugh. He started off on the short walk through the unlighted streets to his mother's house and he turned and waved but the car was gone. For what was usually a five-minute walk it took him twenty minutes. He fell down several times. He stepped in ruts left from a car that got stuck in the mud that winter and the ruts later froze. And there was trash left out by neighbors, including several old tires which he almost fell over. When he reached the gate that led through the wire enclosure around his mother's house, he heard soft voices and some laughter from the privy that stood a few yards behind the house.

Who the hell is in there, he thought, and he turned toward the privy, a tiny structure leaning to one side as if waiting for a strong wind to blow it over. A good hard shove might well have brought it down.

He was in a good mood now. He didn't care what Doris Mae was doing or not

doing. The hell with her, he thought. When he reached the door of the privy he pulled it open, but it only opened partway. Somebody was inside holding the door, so he tugged at it some more.

"Damn, let go," he muttered as he kept trying to get in. When he did get the door free he saw one of the Running Bear boys inside who obviously had been trying to screw Doris Mae on the floor to the right of the door. At first Black Horse didn't comprehend what was happening. All he saw was a guy with his pants down below his knees, and that's where pants belong when in the privy, but when Running Bear pushed past Black Horse and ran off into the darkness and he saw Doris Mae in there too, he understood what he had interrupted.

Doris Mae was so drunk she didn't understand what had happened or that it was Black Horse who was standing over her because she was busy being sick from the whiskey she had been mixing with beer.

"God damn you, Doris Mae," Black Horse said, and she immediately struggled to her feet, thinking how he would kill her if he got a good hold of her.

"No, Elijah, you got it all wrong," she said in a pleading voice. "He forced me in here. Really he did. I didn't do nothing. We just came in." She spoke in English. He spoke in Indian to her. Somewhat to her surprise he turned to leave, not sure what he wanted to do, and on his way out he bumped his head on a board that was sticking out. He stopped, and then with a quick pull he had the board in his right hand. He then turned on Doris Mae with a quickness that surprised her and he began to use that board like a club, swinging at her with all his might while cursing her. Somehow she managed to get past him, but not before being hit several times on the side of the face and neck. Once out of the privy she ran down behind the house and into Pink Flower Creek. Close behind was Black Horse, but because he was so drunk he had difficulty keeping up.

"When I get you . . ." he hollered, swinging the board at the darkness in front of him. He didn't finish the sentence.

Helen Black Horse was awake in the nearby shack and heard everything. She recognized Elijah's angry voice and she guessed at the rest. She didn't waste any time, quickly arousing her daughter Victoria and telling her to go uptown to Father Lane's place and ask to use the phone and call the tribal police.

"Tell them to hurry," she whispered to a sleepy Victoria who didn't want to go at all, but her mother insisted. It was well after eleven-thirty when she got to Father Lane's door and Victoria knew he would be a long time answering her knocks and not a bit happy with the purpose of the visit. The priest usually went to bed early and understandably didn't like to be awakened because of a fight among a bunch of drunks. He could be mighty hard with the person who disturbed his sleep for this purpose, and it was for this reason Victoria hadn't wanted to go.

The tribal police were a long time getting out to Corn Creek and they would have been longer if there hadn't been a patrol car in the general vicinity when the call came in. Corn Creek was sixty miles from the police center at Rosebud.

Two officers were in the police car and after some difficulty they located Helen Black Horse's house in the northwest corner of Corn Creek. Because Doris Mae had managed to hide from Black Horse, the urgency of the call was less. But Black Horse was down in the trash looking for her, sloshing around noisily among the empty beer cans and other throw-aways, screaming like a banshee, telling Doris Mae what he was going to do to her when he got hold of her.

Abe LaPointe, a large beefy man and the senior officer, was one of the tribal police. He peered down into the dump where he could hear Black Horse but not see him. He

thought of the rats that must live down there and a shiver went up his spine. Damned if he would go down there after any man, he thought.

In the meantime, Doris Mae had climbed out of the creek bed and was now safe with Black Horse's mother.

Abe's partner was a new officer by the name of Jeffrey Falling Leaf. He was with Helen Black Horse and he called out to Abe that the guy's wife was okay and with them.

"Well, isn't this wonderful," LaPointe muttered. "She's up here and that idiot is down there with the rats looking for her."

He pointed a powerful flashlight into the creek bottom, swinging it from side to side trying to see Black Horse, but he still couldn't locate him. He could hear him, though. That once lovely creek was a sea of cartons, wrappers, beer cans and bottles, and who knew what else. Hundreds of rats was a safe bet, he knew. He was surprised he hadn't seen any with the flashlight.

"Get up here," LaPointe called out to Black Horse in Indian, calling him by name, but Black Horse either didn't hear him or if he did, he chose to ignore him.

LaPointe, big as he was, could easily get out of breath exerting strenuous activity, so even if he wanted to he couldn't imagine climbing down there, not that he had any intention of doing such a reckless thing.

Falling Leaf on the other hand was in his early twenties and in good shape, although a bit on the heavy side too. Abe had observed the young man was willing to do tasks others simply couldn't or wouldn't take on. Still, LaPointe had no plan to ask Falling Leaf to climb in after the drunk Black Horse. Nobody ought to be asked to do that, he thought. But when Falling Leaf joined him on the bank of the creek and peered into the darkness he said, "The old lady is worried, Abe. She thinks he will climb out eventually, when we leave, and start in beating up on the woman again. She wants him arrested and taken to Rosebud. She's his mother, knows him good, I guess. She's been crying up there and begging me to do something. I feel kind of sorry for them. And the wife, the one he is chasing after, she's terrified too and doesn't want him around either. She claims he is just plain crazy when he gets like this."

LaPointe sighed a deep sigh. "You ask what started all of this?" Falling Leaf shook his head. He hadn't asked. It didn't seem important to him.

"If it is okay by you, Abe, I will go get him and bring him out." LaPointe looked at Falling Leaf, smiling, but Falling Leaf couldn't see the smile in the dark.

"If you really want to do it, go ahead. But don't ever say later that I ordered you down there or even encouraged you to go."

"I won't," the young man promised with a laugh.

"Hold the light just ahead of where I am walking," he told Abe as he picked his way slowly in the rubbish heap. He jumped back several times when he saw a rat run ahead of the light.

"Never would I go down there," Abe muttered. "Not for anything or anyone."

Falling Leaf soon reached Black Horse and he grabbed him by the arm and spoke to him in a soft voice. "Come on, you fool. Your wife and mother are waiting for you on top." He spoke in English.

Black Horse didn't resist or argue. He was tired and confused and a bit sick from the gin. He followed the young officer out of the dump, falling every few yards as they made their way to the top.

LaPointe thought, Falling Leaf will do anything if he will do this. I've got to give him credit. He was grateful and amused and above all else, happy that he wasn't down there among the rats and the shit.

On top, the three men slowly walked toward the small cabin. There was no sound nor any resistance from Black Horse. Abe LaPointe hoped the man had sobered up sufficiently so that they might talk some sense into him and maybe even leave without making an arrest. He was about to suggest this to Falling Leaf when Black Horse saw Doris Mae and immediately began to curse her. Then he made a move toward her. Apparently Falling Leaf had anticipated this happening because he was standing between Doris Mae and Black Horse, and with an unusual quickness and a level of brutality Abe found somewhat disturbing from such a young officer who could at other times be so calm and peaceful, Falling Leaf began to hit Black Horse with his club. He hit him hard and fast, so much so that Abe intervened by a firm hand on Falling Leaf's shoulder. He didn't have to say anything, but he said one word. "Enough," and that was it.

"Bring the car around Jeff, and we will load this guy in before he comes around." He didn't believe he would come too soon, however.

LaPointe was breathing hard from this minor scuffle and he thought, I'm getting much too old for rough stuff. It is for kids like Falling Leaf. At forty-six he would much prefer a desk job, but there were few of those available. And he had no way of knowing, of course, that he would be stricken by a fatal heart attack before he saw his forty-seventh birthday.