

Comanche Is Not My Name

Editor's Note:

I was not the first editor asked to work on this remarkable document. My possession of it is the result of a chance meeting with the noteworthy scholar of Anglo-American literature Mr Thaddeus Turnipseed Jr at the 2021 conference *Reimagining Western Literature* (Grimsby, UK). There he read his paper, *Rearticulating Ontological and Metonymic Dialectics in Postmodern Transatlantic Literature: Disruptive Contextualising and Why It Matters*, to an astounded audience.

As I was leaving Mr Turnipseed accosted me and informed me he had come into possession of a manuscript which, as a writer of 'popular' fiction, I might find curious, and in which he retained no further interest. The work arrived a month later together with an excess postal charge and this explanatory note.

Dear William (if I may be so bold),

This manuscript arrived through my letterbox unsolicited. It was bound in newspaper with a large amount of ready cash and the redundant note, 'I know where you live.' I am not at liberty to disclose any further details pertinent to the source of the document.

That prefatory declaration dispensed with, I turn my attention to the text. As you will see, it is hand written and contains numerous marginal notes, redactions and amendments. The work employs a cavalier approach to the rules of grammar and syntax, and its author appears nescient of basic verbal conjugation, to say nothing of spelling. The style, if such can be discovered, is discursive and idiomatic to the point of obfuscation. Structure is incoherent, both thematically and sequentially. Putting to one side the supererogatory and asinine alliteration, most irksome is the narrator's fondness for what he calls 'fancy words' over which the reader is repeatedly compelled to stumble — an indubitable rune of the dilettante *littérateur*.

Initially I considered just how many alterations, deletions and rewritings I ought to undertake, before I tossed it aside in frustration. It was evident that the task would be onerous and time consuming such to exceed all normal duties expected of the professional editor. I therefore, in the spirit

of Duchamp, decide to leave the document 'as found' and vouchsafe it to you. The only redactions I suggest you make are to passages where the text is of such utter gibberish or the profanities so numerous as to preclude further progress.

It may be admitted that the work possesses singularity and a naïve charm. Some may find certain episodes entertaining - if they are amenable to the vulgar picaresque. Our untutored narrator has discovered a knack of 'hooking in' perhaps a less-discriminating reader. Furthermore, those more qualified in such matters than myself may declare it an important artefact of 'The Frontier', and that to tamper with it excessively would be to destroy its authenticity. Indeed, a cursory comparison of historical fact with narrative episode has revealed coincidence. But this may be, if you will allow me, coincidence.

If you decide to persevere with this vexatious work I bid you good luck, and recommend the agricultural approach: Plough in. You may uncover the stony tilth of a story. And may the superfluous sod be pushed aside.

Thaddeus Arbuthnot Wilson Turnipseed (M.Dip)

I agree with Mr Turnipseed's supposition: this work *is* an important artefact of the 'Frontier.' And if I may strain Mr Turnipseed's metaphor further, the furrows may be coarse and crooked, the soil stony and strewn with superfluous clods, but the story uncovered, if you will permit a sceptical old editor a less detached opinion, is a hoard of gold.

William Isambard Fagus, 2023

PROLOGUE

So how to begin this thing to hook you in.

Try this on for size.

The Irishman, dodging about behind me, his striker down there dying, I realize he is using me as a goddamn shield, and a couple or three intended for him thud into me. I flinch some but hold still, save for that bottom lip what has commenced flapping. The sun obliterated by dust and gunsmoke, I can scarce breath and see. The Irishman shouts something at me, but I am deaf now on account of the roaring gunfire and the shriek of eagle bone whistles. I feel his weight drag on my neck. A bullet has destroyed his knee. He looks about at them other dead nags forted up. He yells, and this I do hear, I got to do this Comanch,' and he raises his pistol. Goddamn him. All my earthly has arrived at this.

That'll do her.

Part 1

My Life on the High Plains

CHAPTER 1

Dumb humanos have called me a hero. I don't know what in hell that is. I seen heroes in action, and I ain't sure I'd want to get lumped in. I'm a survivor I guess, but that's mostly the doings of luck. And gumption.

Sundry tales have been wove about who I was, where I come from and how the Seventh US Cavalry, God bless her, got its hands on me. There's some as say I was took during a raid on the Comanche on the Salt Fork of the Red. Some say I was bought off of horse traders at St Louis what had rounded me up a mustang in Indian Territory. But only yours truly knows God's honest truth and how I came to be the one and only living survivor of the fight known as the Little Big Horn.

So here it is. Straight from the horse's mouth. So to speak.

I was birthed in the wilderness, on the high plains, what them conquistadores dubbed the Llano, dropped on the red dirt in an arroyo little bigger than a crack in the earth. Take out a map now and look where the whites done drawn their straight lines and changed the names of the rivers and I guess you'll see where the Llano abides. Course it was all Indian country back then.

The first memory I got is my ma licking the dirt and slime off of me. When was that? Well, here's the first thing you humanos got wrong. They say I was six years old when the US Seventh Cavalry brung me in. How in God's name they know that? Tell you how. Some boss-eyed horse trader his brain hobbled by busthead and stinking of lard-fried meat pries open my mouth, squints at my choppers, and says it. But let me tell you, I'd seen seven summers by the time them thieving bastardos took me that day up on them windblown flats south of the Kaw. And let me tell you I'd lived one hell of a life before then. Now I'm saying seven summers here, but to thwart future eyebrow hoisting I should state at the outset of this tale so you is fully apprised of the long and short of it, in matters arsmetrick I ain't to be trusted.

I'll append a little about the Llano just so you know what kind of a life us bunch scraped out for ourselves there. Only the Lord himself knows why our ancestors took us to live on the high plains of the Llano when there are so many more congenial places to abide on his earth. If you'll forgive my pithy manner, if your huevos ain't froze off by the winter, come summer the heat shrivels them into cocklebur husks. And don't be picturing them famous northern plains here. I was to see that country later in my earthly, rolling like ocean waves so they tell me, although I take that on trust being me I never cocked an eye on a body of water wider than the Mississippi. The Llano, it is flat. But that don't do it. Like saying the sky is high or water is wet. I'm trying to whittle a fancy likeness here of the type those of literary ambition might use, but the bottom of it is the Llano ain't like nowhere else.

I'll settle on this to express its topography. Those conquistadores what straggled through never needed worry about misplacing ammunition. Drop a cannon ball and it'd stay put, by dint there ain't nowhere for it to roll. The horizon, it looks as if it been laid out by a pernicky individual possessed of a straightedge, and laying aside the soapweed stabbing the sky, a cholla or three, ain't nothing to obstruct the view. Come a limpid evening, you'd believe you could follow their shadows clear to the horizon, if you was quick enough.

If you is quick on the uptake, you'll understand from that latter out on the Llano no feature exists to interrupt the light of the sun. We ever come across a tree, a fight would break out as to who'd get to stand under it. Ain't no agua neither, well none that any humano can see anyhow. Yours truly, I was born in a river, but I don't recall getting wet, actual liquid being viewed as an added bonus in such watercourses. Any summer rain what fell, it only had a fifty-fifty chance of reaching the ground. You might think grass grows green. You'd be wrong. Up there yellow abides, a blasted whiskey-brown come the fall.

Our lives was ranging the Llano looking for comida y agua. I don't never recollect not feeling hungry and thirsty but one time, that winter after the boss mare got took and we become nothing but sacks of bones. But the life gnarled us like a lightning-struck pine. Gave us gumption. We was lean and fly. Go for miles at a steady lope till we found fresh grass or sweet agua, a ravine to

shelter us from a winter storm. Outwit a rattler weren't nothing, scent a grizzly before it were even a speck on the horizon. The wolves bothered us some, took the old and the infant, but I kicked many a sassy lobo's choppers down his flytrap. Course, after me the whites come along and exterminated them the same they done the buffalo, which would render life a whole lot less interesting if I dwelt there now. But I can't see even the whites ever taming that wind-scoured wilderness.

A mare led our little herd of around a score of raw-boned beasts, roan with white socks and a mane like streamers in the wind, teeth what took a hunk out of you size of a plum. Course the spotted grey stallion thought he ran the show, with his quick hooves and swinging ballocks, but that weren't true and we all knowed it. It was her knowed where all the agua was, find a spot looked like any other on the seared plain, and paw dirt till it oozed wet. She'd stare out to the shimmering horizon across a sea of shortgrass and dirt, sniff the air, and trot us over to a saucer of ground located below the level of the plain nobody else had saw, and a pool'd be there what didn't taste of burning. Intelligence passed down since them old ones what brung us here. Those crazy bastardos.

Even if you was to lay aside the wolves and the grizzlies and the catamounts and the rattlers, we remained in perpetual jeopardy from the goddamn meteorology.

Dust storms packed dirt into every bodily crevice, rain instantly froze so you had to shake yourself get the ice off, tornados, blizzards, bolts of lightning, buckshot hail. You might conclude it were the Lord's practice ground for the Day of Judgement. One time a hailstone size of a peach knocked a colt witless and he was obliged to stagger about blind till he regained them priors. One time it rained prairie dogs. Swear to God, up there on the Llano. Tornado must have sucked them up somewhere and fading now was dumping them onto the plain. Wonder if they was all cogitating on their future prospects as they was swirling around in the sky. Maybe extend the burrow some come fall, kick out them goddamn owls living gratuitous. Industrious creatures is

them rodents, but when they thunked onto the Llano their enterprising days was over. Emitted a kind a squeak they did.

Whisking my tail on a rise one time in prickly air, watching a plum-dark cloud belly-out, debating whether to run for it, a grey hawk tearing by dropping a hint. The cloud sent down a fang, wreathed in lightning it were, and it touched the plain, transformed itself into the mouthpart of a blowfly.

We ranged that plain from the Pecos to the Palo Duro, north to the breaks of the Canadian where we wintered. Our grass-chewing quadrupedal companions was antelope and elk and buffalo. Come a spring rainstorm and the Llano turned into a carpet of croakers and you had to watch where you stepped. I never calculated it so then, but looking back and knowing what I know now, they was the salad days. Albeit I'll pass on them honking cranes of a winter dawn ruining my slumbers.

Humanos? We saw but few of that species. In all my time up there I never saw a white. You heard gunfire, some individual after game. Come a fall evening you might hear the soft talk of the ciboleros sifting through the haze, catch the stink of roasting meat, maybe spy the silhouette of a waggon, a hide or three hung up to dry. Come the next day we'd wander over to pick around on the chance they left a corn husk to chew on, an apple if we was lucky, and if we beat the coyotes to it. We never lingered. Them giblets littering the plain, the scent of blood, it put the willies up you.

The Comanche. Of all the jeopardies of the Llano, our biggest foe weren't no beast or meteorology or topography. It were the Comanche. They rode through, feathers and paint and sharpened objects their most notable aspects, riding on trails only they knew, en route to molest Mexicans, returning with booty comprising horses and kidnaps. You know what Comanche means in Ute? One Who Wants to Fight Me All the Time. I don't claim it the acme of concision, but I was henceforth to spend considerable time in the company of them humanos, and I'd say it about pegs it.

Now it ain't no feat to outsmart a white come galumphing toward you on his lumpy gelding - what we all snorted at of course. We found a gelded horse once wandering the plain, red with a long yellow mane and tail, a pretty horse, arrow sticking out of its haunch, crust of blood. No clue where it come from, had a wore-out Mexican saddle on it perforated with a bullet hole. We spent a fine afternoon aspersionizing that equine, peering atwixt its legs, acting perplexed. 'Muchachos! Los huevos? Donde estan?' we'd have said, were we blessed with the powers of speech, which we wasn't, further ribaldries when we led it to a mare dripping like a busted peach. Cojón, that'd made a fun name for it. Despite all our lively behaviour Cojón wanted to join our band. Guess it felt lonely. The boss mare chased it off. Slow moments I still picture Cojón, standing out on the Llano on three legs, the wind stirring his tail, muzzle about touching the dirt.

Anyhow, I got waylaid by that fine memory what come barging into my old noggin uninvited. The Comanche. Now, they was altogether a different proposition from the whites. You read the history books and they all say the Comanche was the finest horsemen what ever lived. Now I don't know if them thin-armed scholars ever went to China or any such place to study on equitatory matters, but let me tell you, it ain't no lie.

The thing you need to apprehend about a Comanche Indian is that he is half horse hisself. I put that wrong. Let me whittle on it. Better is, a Comanche needs a horse to complete him. Yeah, that does her. A Comanche afoot is a pitiful item, to be taken of no account, upon which a discourteous barkeep might empty his spittoon (an event I once witnessed upon a drunken individual). When mounted they is transformed and it is a majestic sight. He loops that noose around his pony's jaw and that Comanche can do whatever the hell he wants with it – as yours truly come to know well. But that ain't the totality of it. I'd say they fuse, as if into a single spirit. The Comanche, they believe in magic, what they call puha, and when you see them ahorse like that, I ain't about to deny the existence of that item.

The females, by God, they also ride, and a damn sight better than most whites of my acquaintance. Hell, I venture the Comanche would copulate and give

birth ahorse were it not for the logistics of it, and it'd be no surprise to me if the more enterprising individuals ain't attempted it.

We was lucky. To the best of my recollection the Comanche only come after us three times. Could be they thought us too scrawny a bunch to bother with. First time I were little more than a colt and they rode in and cut out a couple of us easier than you going to the store and picking a victual off of the shelf.

The second time they took the boss mare. I was, what, maybe five summers by then. We was watering up by a little playa we knowed and they slipped in and singled her out. She were by a good bit the best of our sorry bunch. Before we clocked it they had her roped, got a white's bridle on her, and only spiralling dust marked the event and their passage across the Llano, us bunch standing there with our tails up our arses.

A particle of my mind considered this rude behaviour on the part of the Comanche. After all, the rest of us bunch weren't no scrubs, but they'd paid us about as much cognisance as a discarded turnip top. The boss mare gone, we milled about like dumb cows at a railhead, the afternoon passing slower than a chapel service. Apropos leadership potential, the spotted grey was a leaky vessel possessed of big vocalizations and small ideas and an inclination to go absent when life got toilsome. Later in my earthly I was to encounter many a humano with them exact same qualities. Anyhow, I venture them Comanche could have rode in whooping and beating a war drum and took the whole bunch of us and we'd have been glad of it. But they never. Next morning, four feathered riders crested a swell and gazed at us a good while, arms folded across the saddles, which got our hopes up. Then they swung their horses and departed. It was a hard winter. Come the spring they took me.

CHAPTER 2

By God, it were a rare spring. Frequent but gentle showers filled the swales and topped up the creeks. Even herons and pelicans showed up, and the Llano grew green grass and bloomed red, blue and yellow flowers of the ilk I'd never seen before, although I admit colours of things ain't my strong suit. We stuffed ourselves and, for the first time ever, life loped along easy.

We was dozing by a poppling creek, crowded below a single ragged cottonwood, the catkins dusting us red, tails swishing flies. Fish was leaping out the water, Lord knows where they showed up from, dragonflies whirring, bees buzzing and birds goddamn tweeting, the caw of a raven, and were I an indigene at that point in my earthly I'd have taken that latter as a portent. I recall looking down my flank to attend to a bite and shock at seeing flesh in lieu of hide-clad ribs. That bite was the spotted gray's, inflicted on me after he had caught me sniffing the clefted region of one of his mares. But he was old by then. We beat him to agua, outpaced him when we was fleeing wolves. I was dodging his kicks and bites by then, that recent wound a lucky swipe. My chance was nigh. This summer, by God, I was going to get laid.

I was cogitating thus, when they was among us.

To this day I don't know how they stole in like that. Our nostrils and lugs let us down bad that day and I reproach them now. A black colt was our sentry and I figure him dozing having just filled his paunch, maybe distracted by an odorous mare. They had me roped just as I hit a gallop. Almost snapped my neck it did. Picture a pertinacious guard dog, a clumsy intruder, and a chain of generous but insufficient length.

Naturally, I pitched and kicked, but the Indian jumped off his pony, got a tiny noose about my lower jaw and dragged my muzzle into the dirt, what almost broke my neck afresh. I admit that settled me some, me being partial to my neck. But that didn't content that Comanche none and he proceeded to yank further on that rope. Air became awful difficult to draw into my lungs and as for my head, it seemed to be expanding.

He talked to me, that Indian, the first time in my earthly a humano addressed me in person. The words wasn't coarse, but neither was they smooth, and if you was in want of a picture to fix it I'd say they was molasses with grit stirred in, the same words repeated over and over. I didn't understand Comanche then and had no clue to their import, but what he ought to have been saying was, You think you are going to breathe, caballo? Well you can forget it.

I tell you, I believed I'd sucked in my last draught of sweet air. My highly refined optics bulged like waggon-wheel hubs, such that I believed them about to pop out my head. My heart thudded and seemed set to do likewise, hopefully out my breast. My eyes filled with roiling red clouds pierced by blinking stars, black bleeding in from the peripheries. As if all that weren't sufficient on the suffering side, a pang of regret shot through me. I was about to meet my demise unlaidd.

It was then, thank the Lord, he slacked off the noose. He lifted my head and held my muzzle and blew up my nostrils. Further molasses words issued forth from atwixt his choppers and they balmed my panic. But if I gave sign of fight, he yanked down afresh on that noose. I figured he had no prior appointments, being he grasped my mane and spoke treacle words no little time, blew up my nose again, what got right ticklish and a good bit irksome I can tell you, that breath rank with ill-digested buffalo.

He let me go, and it were the goddamnedest thing. The urge to fight had departed like a gadfly inspecting a candle flame. And that weren't the curiousest aspect to it. At that instant, I'd have leaped a conflagrating thornbush and a ditch of boiling tar for that Indian.

They led me and two of my kin off to where a bunch of riders had been observing developments, likewise undetected by our neglectful lugs and nostrils, goddamn them. I tried to turn my head to look back at our bunch, but the pull of the rope stymied such efforts, and I never saw them again.

[break]

I will now proceed to break off from the narrative.

Now I imagine some of you is hoisting an eyebrow at the fancy lexicon employed herein. I picture some of you tossing this volume aside, regretting your purchase, wishing you hadn't bunted the corners. Maybe you is judging it the ramblings of some flaneur and you is on the wrong end of a hoax. I venture them thin-armed types what have made it this far are already tutting at my slapdash syntax and cavalier conjugations and asinine alliteration. Such types is generally acumened-up on the grammar side and ain't lackadaisical about letting others know it. Well, you'll find out soon enough where I learned such swanky yap. You'll just have to run with it for now, or to hell with you. Go ahead. Toss me aside. Won't be the worst thing ever happen in my earthly, me being the one and only living survivor of the fight known as the Little Big Horn.

I will proceed to return to the narrative.

[break]

Them Comanche confabulated a piece, stretched up and looked behind, and confabulated a piece more. I got carte blanche now.

I guess it might be expedient to take advantage of this hiatus in the action to intelligence you up on my new companions. Remembering my capacity for numbers, they was about eight riders in all, five or so fully-growed with bodies hard as griddle iron, couple of surly youths skinny as pick handles detailed to guard the possibles and the caballada.

The aspect of the Comanche, well I'd say they looked as if they'd been moonlighting in a butcher's shop, the proprietor a man of sloppy habits. I calculated they'd been engaged in mayhem down in Mexico or at the settlements then shoving onto the high plains. Bruised and leaky they was, paint half rubbed off and bodies covered in trail dust, and I figured they'd been on the wrong end of the fight. The individual what'd captured me I now saw

had a poultice strapped to his thigh oozing red. It made me feel even more miserable about getting caught.

They was a goddamn arsenal, that bunch. Bows and arrows hung about their bodies. Knives, hatchets and pistols of assorted vintages were stuffed into belts and dangling from tack. Couple carried beat-up rifles, one an old sawed-off cap-and-ball for close-range work. The remainder carried lances, feathers flapping, discoloured by resent usage. Painted shields dangled feathers and wispy scalps. It was a marvel they could achieve forward motion they was so encumbered. One individual had painted a skull on his face, and enough of it remained to prove discomfiting to a humano I'd venture, but it didn't bother me none.

Thus far unmentioned was the white. A clod of hair the colour of sun-scorched grass trampled, golden speckles on his face, arse-fluff beard, clerk's hands, naked. A mudslide belly damned by the saddle tree concealed his privates. That'll do her for the general picture of him. The sun had blistered his speckles and the brush had whipped his shins red. He was attached to his saddle by means of rawhide thongs what bit into the flesh, and had already been molested some to the extent a good part of one ear was absent and a flap of skin hung from the ball of his shoulder that resembled a tiny hatchway into his inner workings, left ajar.

You can imagine, that boy was no wise smitten with his situation. He had fixed his chin to his chest from which location it did not depart, and was weeping, shoulders jerking in unison, eyes staring toward his invisible privy member. If he was concerned about the future prospects of it and hisself, he had every right.

A further rider was present, but he weren't a horse of his own volition. A comrade, corn-sack slung over the back of a paint, shot up, and my nostrils caught the stink of him turning. A sorrel packed with booty stood nearby, his head turned away from the stink, high-shouldered, boulder-haunched and bony-faced, goddamn palfrey horse such as a lady might ride out of a Sunday

afternoon. His hide was lathered to suggest bathwater had been discarded in his direction, though he weren't doing naught but standing there.

The caballada, they stood about swishing their tails, chawing on sparse herbage, a couple napping. They was comprised in part of Indian ponies took along as spares, and when they drove yours truly in every last one looked down their considerable noses at me. Them asleep woke up to do it. The remainder was sundry horseflesh the Comanche had recent acquired, some packed, all looking embrangled by their new situation. How many was there? I refer you to my hereunto mentioned remark concerning my abilities arsmetrick. But it only took one of them two boys to drive us bunch.

[break]

We loped north towards a dusty horizon under a sky the colour of a robin's egg polished and fading to yellow. The Comanche didn't stop to water themselves nor their ponies. We passed a small herd of buffalo trundling north and they left them unmolested.

It was travelling fit to ruin a white's nag, victualed on oats and corn and such and habituated to a straw-strewn stable, but it didn't bother me and my kin none being born to the hard life. The boy had found a bent stick and had sharpened the end and was employing it to encourage the booty-toting sorrel. The sorrel began to lag nonetheless. Late in the afternoon the sorrel halted and looked back, as if it struck him he'd forgot to latch the henhouse door, his bellows issuing the curious wheeze of a maltreated concertina. He bowed his head, and refused to budge no matter how hard that boy lashed him, and his sweat mingled with the blood and dotted the plain. Then, like a barn door come unhinged in a sudden wind, he fell over sideways and died in a cloud of rosy dust. I estimate that sorrel had decided this future life weren't for him and wanted to take no further part in it.

I knowed his pump had ceased chugging because that boy leapt off his horse and stuck a knife into the neck for a sup of blood to slake his thirst, aboriginals despising the squandering of resources as they do, and only a trickle come out.

That didn't discourage him none, and he plunged his knife into the belly and hooked out a gut, sliced it open and guzzled on the mush, half-digested herbage and such. He scooped out a slug and gave it to his compadre who took it with considerable gusto. Being an equine myself, I found these gustations peculiar and no little discouraging.

The Comanche conferred as to what to do with their booty. They looked down at the packs still strapped to the spilled-gut sorrel and then around at the caballada and shook their heads. Indian ponies can get right hoity-toity about being packed and are apt to chunk it off, them of the opinion it is labour for a dog or a mule. I guess the Comanche didn't want to ruin another of them whites' horses, being after more umming and ahing they made a cache by a playa we just come upon, next to an ancient stump. They dug shallow, them Indians possessing nothing in the line of excavatory equipment and not wanting to ruin weaponry, and they didn't trouble to pat the dirt down and arrange scrub over it neither. So I guess by then they figured they wasn't being trailed.

By sundown the horizon still weren't no closer, but we dropped into a ravine, invisible until you about fell into it. The sides was declivitous such you'd think it impossible for a goat to descend, lay aside mounted nags, but them Comanche and their ponies knowed their topography, and them ponies pricked their ears and picked out a route of tiny switchbacks and narrow ledges, from which rocks tumbled into the void. I got the idea they was showing off. We slithered out snorting on our haunches accompanied by an avalanche of stones and followed a foamy tree-lined stream. The trunks was debarked and rubbed smooth by generations of scratchy buffalo, and clumps of hair was hanging and being taken by nesting birds. Well good for them.

The ravine narrowed. We was obliged to get our feet wet, and as them walls reared up and blanked out the yellow sky, I admit I experienced a dark moment psychologically speaking. What that boy done to that stable horse was a stone in my hoof. We wasn't the finest specimens of horseflesh you could rest your eyes on, and I sure hoped we weren't destined for a tribe teetering on the brink of starvation.

We rounded a bend, testing the wet stones with our hooves, our flanks grazing the mossy rock. The defile widened and we was dazzled by the globe of the setting sun, and we trotted out into a grassy bottomland studded with tipis washed red, save for their smoky tops.

CHAPTER 3

Captive of the Lords of the Plains, future prospects unknown. That about précises my situation. As a future acquaintance of mine was apt to say, Such tiz, and can't be no tizzer. The village, I didn't know if it was a big or a small example, yours truly never having endured a congregation of humanos prior in my earthly. I'd estimate it around couple of score and a half of tipis, but I'm likely wrong. Let me whittle on it.

This might work. The sum of appendages belonging to five horses, heads, tails, legs and etcetera, omitting any privy paraphernalia. How about that. But maybe I ain't got the five right. Jesus, you'll just have to run with it.

The tipis wasn't all clumped together. They was grouped in individual circles, straight lines generally being disagreeable to an Indian. This being the nub end of the Comanche Empire, I was to find out this bunch weren't all of one tribe. They was remnants of disparate bands, survivors of pox and cholera, the dearth of buffalo scared off by shoving whites, depredations of rangers and United States troopers equipped with artillery and canister shot, but still retaining enough pride to decline the indignities of the reservation, the maggoty beef and the sandy flour.

We paused a good distance off and they sent out a boy to announce their arrival. Meantime they tidied theirselves up. They went down to the creek and splashed about and reapplied their paint and fixed their braids. One fellow owned a wood-framed looking glass to expedite the process. They plucked coarse grass and shined up their nags' coats. They cut poles what they de-twigged and suspended scalps therefrom. Them tasks completed, they mounted up and surveyed each other, nodded approval and hoisted up them scalps.

Trotting towards that village that salubrious spring evening, two things clubbed my senses. First item was the goddamn racket. Out on the Llano no noise exists to plague your ears on a daily basis. Admitted, you'd get bangs of thunder, the roar of a storm, that sawing din the stallion made when engaged

in the act of copulation, but the Llano was mostly a silent realm. Just the yip of a coyote, or the howl of a wolf on a moon night, call of a buffalo bird come spring, thrum of a hummer, goddamn buffalo bellowing, elks bugling, the wind howling. Now I whittle on it, the Llano was a right rowdy place and my contention is crumbling like the clay bank of a river in spate. But I'll be damned if I don't finish it.

Still, hot days, down in the draws, you can hear the creak of the mesquite pods as they swell. There, goddamnit. Anyhow, bunch of canines spot us, and spring up and come yapping on. Folks turn and whoop and holler and commence singing songs. Children truncate chores and games and come running, yelling and shrieking. I conjecture they might have fired off guns if ammunition weren't so precious. Off yonder, feeling excluded I guess, a tethered eagle was screeching and beating the ground.

Soon we was surrounded, and for the first time in my earthly I suffered the humano's penchant for pointless jabber. Us captured equines, we was pinched and poked and prodded, our tails and manes yanked. The speckled boy suffered similar treatment, but applied with greater severity, and soon they'd got him off of his horse and he was being drug off by his curly fair hair. He made no protest at this treatment, which I figure went on his debit side.

Meantime, a rotund yapper took it upon itself to nip my ankle. I applied my rear hoof to him and sent him bowling across the grass like tumbleweed. It lay still a piece before trotting off sideways, and I worried my action might meet with retribution from my hosts, but by then they had discovered their mouldering comrade and their energies was devoted to weeping and wailing. A shaver seen it though and he come by and give me a kick.

We proceeded on through the melee. I kicked over a buffalo skull and a shaver ran over and hit me with a stick and replaced the skull in erstwhile location. I looked back and saw a crescent of such items, the empty sockets all regarding the camp. I had blundered in and ruined the composition. Goddamnit. An early faux pas in my nascent life as a Comanche. And there was me thinking on first impressions so as not to get et.

The wind shifted, and the second item clubbed my senses. My nostrils back then was finely tuned instruments, designed to scent a grizzly stationed on the horizon, sniff out agua located under a yard of dirt, detect a ripe mare at a thousand paces hiding from me in a draw. The olfactives there you could chew on. By God, what a stink.

Pungent was the animal hides stretched out on wood frames or pegged out on the ground, and strips of flesh suspended on rawhide lines such as a white might hang his socks out on a breezy day. Further aromas clumb the interior of my nostrils and prickled my thropple. Buffalo-chip smoke streamed from cook fires and tipi tops, billowed from stone-rimmed pits dug to cure meat; buffalo flesh boiled and barbequed over them fires and pots rolled with hooves and horns, to God knows what end. On top of this heap of stink add the smell of canines and equines and horse shit and the odour of the Comanche themselves.

I ought declare that by taking up this olfactive topic I don't mean naught deprecatory toward the Comanche. If I was aiming to be such, other aspects of the Comanche character supply drier ammunition. Throughout my earthy the most frequent modifier I heard whites apply to indigenes was, stinking. Now they might not admit to it, but white folks also stink. Of sour milk and urine and lard and fried meat, of incompetently wiped arses and festering underwear, of sweat emanating from armpit, crotch and arse, each with its patent tang. Their towns stink of frying and liquor and beer and horse shit and wood smoke and sewerage materials disposed of in casual fashion. And I've been told by whites times unnumbered that I stink, though my nostrils can't detect it, bar for when I rattle out a rich one.

Well the chatter and wailing went on for a good deal longer, then a sprout fetches up, naked but for a breechclout and moccasins even though the evening was coming on chill, porting three short lengths of rawhide, a loop at either end. These he places around the front fetlocks of us Llano horses. He planted a kick on my hindquarters for reasons unknown. I puzzled a good bit

as to the purpose of those ropes, until our party moved off to the tipis and cook fires, and I attempted to follow.

We was left to graze on that good fresh grass, the like of which I'd never tasted before, and I stuffed myself till my belly swelled. I figured our forefathers decided that river bottoms lush with green grass and flowing with agua what didn't taste of burning led to the easy life and slack musculature. That ain't for us. No sir. Let's go head up onto the Llano. The buggers.

Yonder was the Comanche horse herd, and a goodly number there was too if you include the mules, thrice the number of Indians I figured. The Comanche sure is partial their equines. Puku, they call a horse, a bunch of other names I done forgot, and during the night them puku drifted over and snorted insults upon us parvenus, even the goddamn mules.

That night, after a spell feasting and dancing, the Comanche set about the speckled youth. Now those of you who fancy yourselves savvied-up on the whites' frontier in general and the habits of the Comanche nation in particular will be licking your lips here. You is expecting me to descant on his shrieks as they toasted his extremities, how they tied him upside down to a waggon wheel and opened his belly and unwound a gut and staked it out for hie eyes to ponder, the same as they did in the old country to any who rebelled against their big chief, so the Cornishman told me, before they poked out them orbs and excised his privy member and placed a glowing coal inside his open belly. About how they prolonged his agony for days, until they tossed him still alive onto a bonfire.

Well you is about to get shafted. I won't be furnishing no such description to titillate your base desires, being them disobligements never occurred.

What they did was the women formed two lines like railroad tracks. A woman of some heft and square in form, whose acquaintance I was later to make, took a big stick and by applying it to his hindquarters drove him atwixt, whereupon the women applied their own sticks and quirts and whips and he got a good fustigating, them all shrieking and yelling and laughing while they was at it.

Them more vinegary of temperament had selected thorn switches. Being his hands was still tied together, you can imagine he weren't in no position to do no fending, and he received innumerable stripes and welts from these ministrations, responding thereto with a litany of whimpers and squeals and the hereunto mentioned shrieks.

Now, if there is one thing a Comanche can't stand, it is the inability to show indifference to extreme pain, and them vocal ejaculations only served to put the mustard up them females. Thenceforth the arc of them thwackings grew wider and was considerable lubricated with elbow grease. He staggered to the end of the line and collapsed and drew his knees to his belly and they gathered round and beat him further and heaped aspersions upon his character. Then they wearied of it and went back to the party. The square woman detoured and gave him a kick in the ribs and spat in his general direction, although I estimated the sputum fell short. Later a boy come and hobbled him and put a bowl of water and a collop of jerky by his head. He was obliged to lap the water like a dog, and while he was thus engaged one of them latters snuck in and took the jerky. My highly refined auricles was obliged to listen to his goddamn whimperings the entire night.

The women come laughing and chattering along and repeated the treatment nightly. Quarter moon it took before the message chipped its way into his thick noggin. His whimperings, they ceased and he even kicked the jerky thief. He got to marching through them lines holding his shoulders and head erect with scarcely a flinch, actions what received nods of approval and approbatory comment. Even bestowed a sneer one time. One night he reached the end and turned wide-eyed and bracket-armed and yelled malediction and threat. That were the end of it. After that he were put to choring.

Life as a Comanche is comprised of frequent discomforts and foreseen and unforeseen pains, and if they is thinking of allowing you into their tribe they better make sure you is up to it. You can't be having no feeble types encumbering you if you is hunting wild buffalo or getting hunted yourself by barbarous Texans. That youth, he were on the divide between boy and man,

and the Comanche they figured his character still pliable. Half-dozen moons older and they'd have killed him where they found him.

Now I can see you savvy types curling your lips and corrugating your noses at this episode. Why the Comanche was the vilest, most pitiless, most bloodthirsty and butcherous savages whatever stalked the plains. They took folks alive just so they could delight in torturing them, turned it into a goddamn spectator sport. They roasted and ate their captives half alive, sacrificed their children to heathen gods and chewed on the tender parts. Ain't this joker read the goddamn history books?

A trio of rejoinders here. As you know I is illiterate as a knob of clay, so you can shove your history books up your rear aperture. Apropos them character slurs, I never met the whole Comanche nation and can only speak of my experience with this diminished bunch, and they didn't have no spare waggon wheels laying around anyhow. I'll admit, there is always bad apples, and you'll find out my new associates bunch weren't no bunch of Quakers. But you excogitate on this. Who wrote all them history books?

I done with that speckled boy for the present.

[break]

The morning after the party, not early, being a Comanche on furlough from warring and hunting ain't afraid to be lazy, the Indian what captured me come perambulating over with a similar.

I never recognised him. Looked like he'd been to the creek and scrubbed hisself with sand. The paint was gone from his face save for a couple of recent-applied stripes of crimson. He had re-fixed his braids and exchanged his garments for examples unsoiled by bodily fluids. I figure he'd repacked the poultice being the leg weren't no longer staining the leggings. He wore a bear-claw necklace, walked with his chest puffed out in the manner of a sage hen when courting.

I ought adduce a word here about the Comanche male. The Comanche male is possessed of a tremendous vanity. He spends hours bathing and primping, fixing his hair into those twin braids they favour, weaving beads and strands of precious metal and other hardware therein, even tying in buffalo hair to eke it out to flaunting length. He twangs all the tiny hairs from off his face, gets his paint just right you'd think he was Michael Angelo. Picks the dangle berries out his posterior cavity for all I know. Worse ever than a female a Saturday dance pending. He'll own a collection of necklaces, maybe done in fancy beadwork or the dontics of deceased animals, a porcupine-quill breastplate or three for special occasions, a whole junkyard of bangles and bracelets stole or traded to be selected from according to whim. With a little time on his hands he gets a colleague to tattoo his face or around his favourite scar. Now, such vanity when practiced by a white incites mockery. Undesirables might throw sticks and mud in his direction. I ain't never seen no man mock a wild Comanche and live.

Being I'm discoursing on the topic, I'll say a little more about the general appearance of the Comanche, now they're all but wiped out and you may never clap eyes on a bona fide specimen yourself. Although their race is watered down a good piece by their habit of blending in captive blood, the Comanche in general is a strong-featured, if not always handsome, individual. Their faces appear like they've been chipped out of a Llano tree stump baked and froze over and over since Noah intoxicated hisself. As you know, whites have soft faces, made out of all that cow milk and cheese and cake they eat. But don't be picturing no chisel-chested marble-thighed Noble Savage here. The Comanche are a sawed-off race, bandy-legged by dint of being constantly ahorse and, partial to their chuck as they are, owners of puppy-dog bellies, if they ain't been depredated to a state of starvation.

So anyhow, them two Comanche stand there jawing and gesticulating in my general direction. I was to learn the names of them individuals later, but to expedite the telling of the tale I'll supply the monikers at this juncture. The Indian what captured me was called Walks Slowly. I must say I was a mite chagrined to discover this, thinking my conqueror would have swankier nomenclature. His companion, who turns out is his older brother, is Humps a

Lot, the translation of which I have eased back a notch being I don't want to offend your sensibilities. The Comanche is in no wise chary of interlarding their conversation with vulgar expression.

Walks Slowly is the lead jabberer. He holds out his arm towards me as if he is giving travel directions to a stranger. He strolls around me and slaps my hindquarters, and feels down the length of my legs, points out my one white sock, tugs at my mane, yanks open my eyelids, all the time firing glances at his brother. He takes off my hobble and trots me around. He smiles a lot, which is unusual for an Indian, and describes my finer features. It is a disappointingly brief discourse, but I get the gist of it. By God, I am his gift to Humps a Lot.

Humps a Lot's eyes range over me. His arms stay folded. He possesses a wide, fat-lipped, downturned mouth, and the more he looks at me, and the more Walks Slowly jabbars and grins, the more that mouth takes on the aspect of a barbwire staple. Humps a Lot clearly ain't acquainted with white man's etiquette regarding gift horses, being he stalks towards me, yanks open my mouth and looks inside. This inspection takes no longer than I took to kick that yapper, then he marches around my entirety once, grumbling like an impending thunderstorm.

The two stand side by side, arms folded, legs spread like they is expecting an earthquake, regarding yours truly. Humps a Lot wrinkles his nose and rolls his eyes to a location them orbs can glare at his brother. He throws up his arms and issues a pithy phrase from his flytrap what I never learned the meaning of till much later in my sojourn with the Comanche and refuse to translate here, and he marches off such you'd think he got overtook by sudden urgency for the privy.

[*break*]

Life is full of disappointments, and this rebuff was one of mine, not least because I figured it might put me further down the menu should grub run short. My mood plummeted further when around noon a couple of fellows strode over and led off my two cousins without no palaver.

I tried to cipher out what it might be. Could be I was too tall. Most of the horses in the Comanche herd was ponies, so they could be sprang aboard easy in moments of fleeing. But no, I ain't no tall nag. Could be I was too broad in the hindquarters. I possessed a clumsy gait, that'd be it, something I'd never give a thought to. Or my single white sock was deemed bad medicine. Could be my butcher-block noggin offended the optic nerve.

I admit in subsequent days I indulged myself in one of life's greatest sins, self-pity. I was left pretty much alone, what with my cousins vanished to locations unknown and them Indian ponies being snobs. I was now convinced I were about to get et. I pictured them slavering over the green grass I just et and half-digested for their convenience.

Many moons later my then jockey told me what it'd been. My colour for one. A Comanche male don't like a plain sandy puku. He favours a paint. Humps a Lot also thought my legs appeared to be sawed off, and I looked dumb to boot, which is the one thing I goddamn ain't. Humps a Lot had taken it a great insult to be offered such a beast, which made me wonder why Walks Slowly had made the offer. I speculate now it was some political machination beyond my nous.

When I saw my cousins again, they was being rid, and I was shocked to see they was liking it. One rider was mounted backwards. The Comanche possess a blithe attitude to jeopardy allied to a predilection for flauntation, a philosophy what can put them in avoidable predicaments. Them Indians charged about whooping and gesticulating a good spell until my kin was blowing. Then they dismounted, whereby I mean leapt off going full gallop.

They turned my cousins loose into the pony herd. They didn't even hobble them. Turns out them ponies was much the same as us bunch up on the Llano. Like most of the humanos of my later acquaintance, they had a lead mare who did all their thinking for them, and she were hobbled.

Seeing my kin nuzzling in with them ponies, it was then I hit self-pity's cold dirt floor. There I was, lonesome, maybe some fellow yet unidentified about to come over with a big knife and chew on my warm guts. Surrounded I was by green grass but scarce able to crop a blade I was so depressed. That goddamn hobble thwarted my locomotive efforts, and even if I could abscond myself, I had no clue how to find my way back to my kin. I tell you, we horses is tactile beasts. Up on the high plain we'd always be rubbing and butting up to each other, inspecting each other's arses as we do, even them nags we didn't care for. I never did figure out why. Find a sunny spot in a cool day and we'd nuzzle in and doze noon to sundown side by side, nose to tail, swishing the flies from each other's maws.

Now I've got you and me bemired in a state of melancholia, it was next morning, at the nadir of rock bottom, so to speak, a thin rain falling what'd already done give me the shivers, I sees this character come tripping along. I'll supply a picture.

Tall and limber, a white might say gangly. Me, I saw bones growing and skin and flesh struggling to keep up, much like myself when I were a colt. An easy gait, moccasins scarce skimming the top of the grass, and is staring off into the middle distance looking at nothing of any particularity. I said tripping, but it weren't no fancy picturing, being on at least three occasions that Indian trips over a root or a twig or a termite for all I know, turns and fires a glance at the culprit. Wears no paint, only habiliments what from the ground up comprise moccasins and leggings made from the skin of a deceased deer. A traded calico shirt terminated below the hips, colour of a ripe plum done out in a pattern of swirls and dots unlike anything I ever saw in nature. The only concession to adornment were blue thread the colour of a dayflower at dusk entwined in a lock. I see a handsome kind of youth, some Spanish blood flowing through the veins, a nose suggesting the beak of an eagle, not like them spread examples what you think frequent adorn an Indian, full lips what might engender ridicule from the ignorant. The only items letting down the confection, pair of lugs poking out suggesting jug handles.

Carries a knife on the hip, like they all do, and as that Comanche nears and evaginates that item I think, Ahh this is the one been sent to do it, and I realize I don't care much one way or tother. The Indian laps that knife twice on the leggings, and in dreamy fashion studies its edge and mutters approval. I picture my neck punctured, the back of that head, the black hair pushed back, my blood guzzled, my flanks shuddering, a wipe of the chin on the back of the hand. A bloody belch.

That adolescent looks in my eye and says soft words, trying to put me at my ease I figure so I don't struggle overmuch and cause inconvenience, walks around me once, my head about touching the dirt, expecting it now.

The Indian stoops and slices through my hobble and tosses it onto the grass, puts back the knife. Then, a plain unvarnished act, but an act reverberating in my brain like it were done today's dawn. That sprout pats my neck. Pats my goddamn fat neck.

CHAPTER 4

I realize my attempt to build up trepidation like that were a foolish act, making out that aboriginal was about to neck-hole me, when you is prior apprised of the intelligence I am the one and only living survivor of the fight known as the Little Big Horn. But I guess to keep an endeavour like this lively you have to risk some nose-wrinkling from the persnicketies.

The nomenclature of that Indian is Looks At The Sky. I know this because Looks At The Sky says, Good morning, Samohpah, and slaps the upper regions of the purple shirt, raises the eyebrows and says, Looks At The Sky, an action repeated until the information sinks into my noggin. I found out later that for reasons withheld this was a redacted version. The full name was Looks At The Sky Too Much. Any rate, Looks At The Sky reaches up and rubs my ears and I allow it, rubs my muzzle, tousles my mane, blows up my nostrils, an act what makes my socked foot stamp, though don't recollect ordering it to do so, and speaks treacle words like them spoke by Walks Slowly out on the Llano. Jabbering on, Looks At The Sky loops a lariat around my neck and leads me off in the direction of the creek. The rain has now ceased and a watery sun is shouldering the clouds aside, to the extent you might think I am inventing that meteorology here for reasons symbolic. But it were just so.

Now, the finger jabbers have spoke no little rot about the taming of horses in the old days. Them goddamn cowboys, they'd corral a horse, snub it to a sturdy fence, maybe get a brace of colleagues to hold it still, leap athwart and let him kick and pitch till his spirit was crushed. Some still do. Breaking, they calls it.

But weren't the Comanche way, notwithstanding his hereunto mentioned indifference to jeopardy and appetite for exhibition. Weren't never the intention to break your spirit and render you docious. The Comanche, they wanted to keep your spirit alive. That way they could exploit it. Looks At The Sky also called me Samohpah, which though I didn't know it then is Comanche for brother, and you ain't likely to ruin your brother, least not generally speaking.

We come to the spot where the creek widened out some, cottonwoods fringing, little kids splashing about, squealing and squawking like they do I venture all over creation. Without no expository preamble, Looks At The Sky marched me straight in there. By God, the agua felt good swirling about my legs and I bent my neck for a sup, but Looks At The Sky yanked my head up and said, Later Brother, that Indian of a sudden come over all bossy.

We adjacentized ourselves to a boulder, the water now up to the top of my sawed-off legs. I felt the bottom sandy, my hooves plug a little. Looks At The Sky unlooped the lariat and put a rawhide loop around my bottom jaw. I chawed down on that rawhide and didn't like the feel of it one bit, wordplay intended, but at that point I'd have done anything for that Indian. I don't know what it was about that nose-blowing malarkey, but I were always a sucker for it. Looks At The Sky clumb up on the boulder, what looked like it'd been placed there for this express purpose, and the shavers stopped splashing and settled theirselves to watch. Me, I'd previsioned what were about to occur, having prior witnessed my cousins' activities. Sure enough, in a single movement so I scarce knew it, Looks At The Sky was sat on my back.

Now I had prior determined to make no complaint at this event, partly by dint of the aforesaid nose-blowing, and partly by dint I had ratiocinated it out thus-wise. The life I was destined for consisted of a single truth. Get rid or get et. So I comported myself in the following manner. I stood. I stood calm and steady. Alright, I shook my mane a little. Come the point I let out a snort to break the tension, the ambience having suddenly gone right quiet such that a butterfly landed on the end of my nose. In my later career as Indian steed, however, I was to apprehend when it comes to equitatory affairs a Comanche is hard to please. I seen parvenus choked down because they bucked too much, and others consigned to the cookpots because they was too docile.

Now, I clocked them shavers and their downturned mouths, them all crestfallen at the dearth of spectacle. I sensed disgruntlement oozing from Looks At The Sky's arse muscles, if that ain't too disturbing a picture for you. Looks At The Sky articulated such sentiment by jabbing the heels into my flanks

and scrooching the arse back and forth, dandling the lines of rawhide attached to my jaw. That sprout was urging me to do something, though I'd be damned if I knowed what. Looks At The Sky grabbed my ear and yelled into it. I didn't know what them words were then, but gauging their jagged nature I figured they weren't no blandishments. A shaver took aim and chunked a stone at my hindquarters. It were then I twigged on. Lively as I could, I attempted to buck and kick, and it was then I discovered the purpose of the deep agua and sandy bottom. This were the taming pool.

Well having your feet plunked in a sandy river sure has a stymieing effect on gymnastic endeavours I can tell you, and my efforts soon rendered me sudorous and breathless. Looks At The Sky, to my surprise that Indian seemed contented by this outcome, and I felt a weighty slap on my neck and approbatory words was poured into my lug. We stood there a piece, me huffing as I got my wind back. Then Looks At The Sky dug the heels in afresh, scrooched the arse and lifted them lines again. Goddamnit, what now.

I stood a stretch trying to figure it, ignoring that sprout up there scrooching and yipping like a goddamn owl. Some new action was required from me, but the hell what? I done bucked already and was too winded to recommence. Looks At The Sky kicking me back there was getting right mithersome, but it kindled a memory. A hefty cibolero atop an indignant and stationary mule, his compadres ahead and receding. And it clubbed me.

As you already know, via the medium of heels and arse cheeks, Looks At The Sky was urging me forward. 'Vamos! Vamos!' that Indian was now yelling, so desperate turning to the Spanish. Well, alright then. I slooshed forward toward the shallows. Looks At The Sky whooped and bent my ear and spoke Comanche nonsense into it, slapped my neck to the extent some might take it as a spanking.

We departed the pool and I bucked again to give them kids a show and Looks At The Sky a chance to exhibit pacifying proficiencies. We proceeded forward a few paces, and it were then I discovered the point of that rawhide noose about my jaw, other than give my jockey something to do with the hands.

Looks At The Sky pulled it to one side. To resist that pull caused me pain in the flytrap, so I turned my head. Well as you know, when you are in forward motion it is only natural your body follows the direction your noggin is pointing, otherwise you'd live a life of obstacle-banging and the consequent concussive effects, so I turned my body. Looks At The Sky patted my neck and topped-up my lugs with encouraging words, pulled the lariat contrary-wise. I turned and walked in that direction.

Well, it don't take much to excite an Indian and the shavers all cheered and thrust their arms toward the sky. Looks At The Sky reacted like the sprout had been presented with the gift of a slave to do the chores, yelping and batting my neck the way you might beat the dust out of an old Persian. Speaking for yours truly, I was a good bit relieved deeds like walking and turning elicited such gratitude. I ever accomplish aught real complicated, Looks At The Sky might self-combust.

Turns out one more equitatory proficiency remained to be learned. We go along some, Looks At The Sky turning me, dispensing with the lines and using the opposing knee to nudge me in the desired direction, and we proceed in a lazy zig-zag, like we are trying to outwit a drunken grizzly with a paw lodged in a bucket. Looks At The Sky then pulls back on the noose. This impedes my progress some and is a deal irksome but I continue nonetheless. Looks At The Sky pulls harder, and my neck twists into a painful position. I must stop.

Stop. So that's all that Indian wants. Looks At The Sky is yelling, Yee! Yee! Bueno! Bueno! is slapping my neck again, me figuring you can get excess of a good thing. That youth kicks my flanks hard and lifts the lines and shouts, Yah! Me, I sense the jubilation and jump into a gallop.

Our route took us towards a bunch of compeers lounging on a log, doubtless engaged in dirty talk, surly like they are at that age until they make a joke for sniggering purposes. My jockey had attempted a wide circle about them fellows, but they yelled and beckoned us over. Looks At The Sky kept me in a gallop, and I worried for a moment I was to be required to jump them scamps, log and all, a request I considered premature given my limited equitatory

inculcations. At the last moment that sprout yanked me to a halt, a little roughly I thought but I let it go, and I sprayed them juveniles with dust. They flapped their hands to clear it and coughed and hoisted their heads to look me over.

Curled lips and hoicked eyebrows communicated they was unimpressed, but them types is usually unimpressible. Deprecatory remarks was then made, Looks At The Sky spitting back a few rejoinders. One fellow levers hisself up and approaches, looking back at his pals to make sure they is watching. I figured him about to do that leg-feeling jaw-yanking thing, that or enact some spiteful joke. But I ain't having it. I'll show them bastardos.

I tossed my head and curvetted, then I pirouetted about in a circle, my rear hooves the axle. For the piece de resistance, whatever that is, I reared up and flourished my front hooves at that bunch, them latters' jaws now dangling and their arms come slack and blowing in the wind. Feigning nonchalance, Looks At The Sky held on with one hand, and gesticulated at the sky with the other.

But I weren't practiced at this art. I could only hold the position a gallinipper's fart, and my hooves plunged down and plugged in the dirt. Naturally, I made it look all part of the act, and I pranced about a piece arch-necked, my tale held high like an agitated buffalo's, before I hoisted my hindquarters and kicked sundry clods in their direction. I jumped into a gallop again, Looks At The Sky kicking and yipping, but it was really my idea, and we departed them cronies, them maws still unhinged, tiny flies inspecting.

[*break*]

We stopped off at the home tipi. Looks At The Sky picked up a bow and fistful of arrows, took some time about it, and I heard the clapperclawing of a female I conjectured the ma. I was to hear that voice often, and to this day it still supplies commentary to my nightmares. Imagine the sound of rusty nails pried out of warped wood. That'll get you in the hereabouts.

Looks At The Sky exited the tipi sharpish, then words following on like flung crockery, and we headed off to a stand of cottonwoods, all busted out in green and red. We located a glade and Looks At The Sky leapt off and walked about in little circles, waving the arms as though attempting to discourage a bee, spitting out angry words.

That adolescent runs out of energy and flops on the grass and I wander off to the shade to try and out-distance the mithersome jabber. The birds is all twittering to get laid, a woodpecker is hammering at a hollow trunk. Bees is buzzing and the creek is poppling and doves is cooing, but that commotion don't blot out the jabber, and Looks At The Sky, a stalk of grass now bouncing atwixt the lips rendering the discourse even more unintelligible, is pointing at yours truly, repeating a short phrase over and over I don't get the purport of. Of a sudden I feel my eyelids come heavy and I cock my socked foot and blessed silence creeps in.

Later, while engaging in eponymous activity, Looks At The Sky watched an eagle turning circles overhead, silent now that Indian was, rapt, like the eagle was the curiosest example of creation, albeit of the kind I'd seen chewing on my deceased kin on frequent occasion. Looks At The Sky rose, craned the neck and talked to the eagle a spell, though I believed that avian too distant to hear. But eagles generally has a lofty character to match their mode of transportation and wouldn't be interested in the discourse of an Indian.

Looks At The Sky looked away from the eagle and pulled out a knife, cut a switch and cut it to a length preordained in the noggin, twice the span of a hand I'd guess, split it and took a sliver of bark and slid it in the split so as to trap it. Looks At The Sky observed it a spell, turning it, then tugged at the bark so it projected even on both sides, then regarded it further, held it up to the sun, and tossed it away. It never achieved no distance. It flew a loop back on itself and dived to the ground. Looks At The Sky huffed and picked it up and stared at it a long time. I tell you, it remains without the compass of my noggin to cypher what goes on in the humano head.

I was attempting shuteye anew when that Indian turned the wits to more practical matters. Up in a tree a dove was cooing. Big mistake that, drawing attention to itself. While sat cross-legged Looks At The Sky shot it, leapt up and gathered it and extracted the arrow and stowed the dove in the purple shirt, wiped the arrow on the grass and examined it for damage, nodded approval. That Indian then leapt on my back and we chisel off after a jackrabbit which gets skewered to the ground at first attempt.

Now apropos the finer points of archery, no wordplay intended, I remain ignorant as a hog on a dung heap, but that sprout jouncing on my back like that, the rabbit in erratic speedy motion, the arrow's flight no wise straight but describing an arc, seemed like an act of superior marksmanship to me.

Noon, the sun burning down, and I estimated chores was to be done because Looks At The Sky rode me over to the pony herd, jumped off, babbled nonsense down my lugs and sprinted off in the direction of the tipi, the exterior of which I spied the stout square-bodied woman, a limb in each corner, and I figured her as the source of them prior flung words. She was in the act of kicking a yapper. So she couldn't be all that bad. Lofted the yapper some distance she did, and if the Comanche ever held a yapper-kicking competition I figured she'd be in with a good chance.

Looks At The Sky left me unhobbled and I could have galloped back to the Llano, them two boy guards dozing off with boredom. What I did was I stood a piece and pondered the morning's events. First off, I'd figured there'd be more to it, the equitatory curriculum. But I saw there weren't, with but subtle refinement, more than a trio of items to store in the noggin: go forwards slow, turn, go forwards fast, stop. And having a humano aboard weren't the cumbrance I'd anticipated. That sprout perched in the region of my shoulders, it could easy been a wren aboard.

I was cogitating in such manner when my cousins come butting and nuzzling up, and after inspecting each other's arses a spell we stood dozing adjacent the balance of the post meridian. The herd, while not exactly sociable, never come

and aspersionized my person. Could be maybe the Comanche life might not be so trialsome after all, perchance.

CHAPTER 5

The sun was halfway up the sky, the mist burning off, when Looks At The Sky showed up. I saw attempts had been made at personal adornment, a beadwork choker and two smears of vermilion below each eye the primary evidence. Looks At The Sky said, 'Good morning brother,' and proceeded to put a blanket and a saddle on my back. Now I say saddle, but don't imagine them fancy affairs I was obliged to tote as a member of the US Seventh Cavalry. It were little more than a sack of buffalo beards, but decorated with blue and red beadwork nonetheless, and you might consider it pretty if you was fashioned of that cast of mind.

Further ornament is in the form of an otter skin stretched over a metal ring, a drawing thereon of a stick man running with a lance, deer's tails and a couple of other gewgaws dangling. Looks At The Sky ties the skin to that lariat just where it enters my mouth, and I catch the fishy odour of the long-deceased piscivore. That Indian pats my neck and says that thing over and over, the locution repeated over in the trees the day previous. While saying it, Looks At The Sky jabs a finger into my breast, and it clubs me.

By God, I got a Comanche name. It were just a jumble of noise to me then and I didn't figure out the meaning till later, but it translates thus-wise: Yellow Crow With One Foot in The Snow.

Bit of a mouthful I grant you, and pretty soon it got truncated by all who deigned to refer to me as, Yellow Crow, a redaction thereof I was not enamoured. Didn't matter much anyhow, being life's caprices meant my possession of it come likewise truncated. Anyway, the explanation goes thus.

Yellow, well that's easy, on account of my sandy colour. One Foot in The Snow, because I got a white sock. Crow is trickier. Turns out it was because I learnt how to get rid real quick, which was news to me. I didn't know it, but the Comanche with time on his hands when he ain't hunting or counting coup on his enemies studies on matters ornithological, and a crow is watchful and quick to learn. Well, I'll be a goddamn son of a sway-backed carthorse.

So, there I was, nomenclatured-up, sporting my swanky new saddle and furbelow. Looks At The Sky even produced a pot of paint and daubed zig-zags down my flanks, took the wing of a deceased eagle and stroked my back and legs with it. Lord knows why. That Indian being decorated to boot, something weighty were afoot.

Looks At The Sky stuffed a couple of eagle feathers into that hair, them items evidently having slipped the mind, haste leaving them askew, and leapt aboard. At this juncture I'll addend a Comanche never mounts an equine in leisurely fashion as might a white. There is always some emergency needing attention or some fleeing to be taken care of. Failing that, flauntation to associates.

We trot over to where a bunch of rascality is loitering, them and their mounts similarly baubled-up, most a deal better than us pair. They is the surly types, the lip twisters we encountered on the log the day previous, topped up with a few more of their ilk. The pre-noon generally does not agree with such species, but this morning they is right sprightly and jabber without pause. Their ponies is excited too, nickering and prancing, and them nags don't let on to yours truly exactly why.

I'll mention the weather being it pertains. Rime of frost on the grass that morning when I jacked opened my peepers. Gentle norther blowing, and while a diamond sun now shone, it warmed the air about as much as a smouldering pipe in a tipi, the flaps left ajar by a neglectful male. Notwithstanding the frigidity, all these bucks was naked but for their necessaries: smears of paint, breechclouts and moccasins. Stripped for action, I'd say. Looks At The Sky keeps the shirt on, a sartorial decision what results in derision from them others, comprising diverse remarks germane to an unmanly sensitivity to cold.

A further character comes stalking over. This Indian is older and more appropriately attired for the inclemency, buckskin leggings and shirt what bulges over his belly, blanket about the shoulders. He wears a dark hat, brimmed but with the crown punched out, prior property of the US Military.

He ain't paid the same attention to the particulars of his personal decor, however, which comprise a uneven smear of black paint below each eye, and look like they have been applied with begrudgery, maybe occasioned by the words of a female as he drug hisself from a warm tipi.

He carried a lance, but the same estimation cannot be applied that item. At the business end, an iron head glinted what he must have traded, the Comanche generally not renowned for metallurgical abilities, suspended from it three scalps of some antiquity waving in the breeze. The iron head terminated a shaft wound with ribbons and bands of metal, interrupted with collars of white wolf fur. Sundry parts of other deceased creatures dangled to complete the confection. If somehow he stood on his own shoulders he would have been a good piece shorter than that lance.

This latter's nomenclature is Buffalo Wallows. Buffalo Wallows says a few pithy words to those rascals and their flytraps clunk shut. He shakes that lance and barks more uncongenialities. Looks At The Sky's heels nudge into my flank, and after a moment of blankness I remember to go forward. Looks At The Sky pulls back on the lines, and I remember to stop. I look around and sees we have arranged ourselves in a wavering line, the form of that creek down there. Them ponies is getting real excitable by now, and them boys is fighting to hold em. Me, I remain yet to twig what all the palaver is about.

By now assorted inhabitants of the camp have straggled over. I spy Walks Slowly and Humps a Lot, a number of others whose cognomens are unknown to me. They stand arms folded, hips cocked, skewed wire smiles fixed. Sundry females cackle, let off from their chores I guess, come to weigh their beaus.

Buffalo Wallows coughs and spits a neat gobbet of phlegm on the grass what he must have spent hours practicing and holds his lance aloft. His blanket slips and unveils an arm popping with veins.

By God, them ponies is going crazy. One individual snorts in my face like he intends to grind my ballocks into the dirt and urinate on the remains, though I trawl my mind and cannot fetch out any offence I may have given that

individual. Looks At The Sky is muttering nonsense into my ear as per. Yours truly, amidst the perturbed I stand unperturbed and ready for an action thus far undisclosed, and cock an eye on a buffalo in the far yonder.

That buffalo, the kerfuffle ain't perturbing him overly. He were as motionless as a shitepoke studying a frog. But, like all ungulates, buffalo are dumb as stumps and can easy get magicked into a trance. Them ponies can't be held no longer and Buffalo Wallows clunks the butt of his lance onto the ground, easing off I spy at the last instant because he don't want to incur damage to the butt. As one entity, them ponies all spring forward. Well alright then. Looks At The Sky is screaming something in Comanche and has commenced the scrooching and kicking and I remember this as the sign to go forward quickly, and this I do.

I hit a full gallop, but have already lost two, three lengths on them ponies, the riders all whooping and hollering like they got under-munitioned settlers surrounded. I figure the idea is for me to chase after them, maybe catch them. Looks At The Sky is yelling, Vamos! Vamos! and I soon overtake a couple of flea-bit specimens and Looks At The Sky yells, 'Yes! Yes! Go Yellow Crow!' By now I am getting the Comanche lingo and figure that Indian is already regretting the cumbrous nature of my name. Clods is kicking up into our faces and the spectators is yawping and throwing their arms about like bees is attacking. We come up on a rider. As we overtake he swerves into us and knocks us awry. So, it's like that is it. Well, alright then. I catch the stink of both as they barge in and I attempt a bite, but that nag is too fly. Looks At The Sky hurls an insult at the jockey implying effeminacy, which is about the worst thing you can say to a Comanche male.

Now I know you is probably all getting stimulated by now about what you all know to be a horse race here, but of which I was yet to apprehend the full substance, and I intend to digress some here, and if it takes a little ginger out of the tale well so be it. But you need to be apprised of this information so as to fully understand the upshot, so to speak.

Out on the Llano us bunch rarely galloped flat out. Most of the creatures that wanted to chew on us we could outrun easy, and most of them, like the panther and the grizzly, was bushwhack killers, and while they might be sharpish for a few paces, would soon give up the chase if we dodged their introductory swipes. The exception were the wolf. As I have prior alluded, we was lopers, accustomed to loping for miles looking for comida y agua. The wolf, now he could lope with the best of us, and nearly match us for outright speed. But we was possessed of the capacity to put in a burst at the crucial moment, that time you hear the blast of his breath and you know them fangs is about to snap shut on your hams.

But even them wolves wanted to avoid the palaver of a long chase if they could. So they'd spy out a rickety legged foal, a feeble decrepit, a sickened individual, and get it surrounded and lose all interest in the rest of us, and we'd stand by and watch the gore play out, our tails up our arses.

Racing, it never crossed our ignorant noggins. Hell, what would be the point of stumping out all that effort for no return? If you was ambitioning to be top stallion, you'd take a chunk out of somebody, plant a sly kick or three. So, to precis this divarication, at this point in my earthly I had scant practice of galloping flat out any distance. And they are the plain facts of it, no wordplay intended, bald as an egg.

Back to the race.

Well after that sly barge I regain my dignity and we fetch up at this buffalo. I expect we is about to attack it in some manner, albeit to do so them Indians would be obliged to employ their fingernails, unarmed as they is. But no. Instead they ride around it and commence barrelling toward us. Some is brandishing rawhide quirts, shards of metal bound into them a'twinkling. They are applying them items to the posteriors of their mounts, and I am glad Looks At The Sky is scant of such a device. Others, them at the extreme end of the Comanche bent for exhibitionism, have slid down their ponies' flanks and is pretending to fire pistols at the buffalo from under their bellies. One slips off and thunks onto the ground and gets a good kicking for his devilment and last I

saw he was laying there a jumble of limbs. That buffalo still ain't moved, and I see it is naught but a moth-et old hide arranged over a stick frame, horns and all.

Well, by now I'd got the purport, and although Looks At The Sky gives me the old nudge with the knee, I don't need no instruction to round that buffalo. The turn could have been a hair tighter, and the grass is greasy but I keep my feet unlike that nag what crashes down adjacent, a tumble of legs and arms and kicking hooves. I see humano teeth splash out. Best tell that Indian's ma to prepare soup for his supper.

I set my sights on the ponies ahead, see I am gaining, and by God I tell you it felt good. I weren't never no flash-in-the-pan sprinter. I was built steady for distance, and now I was coming into my territory.

I spy the equine what'd snorted to my face and had implied injury to my ballocks. Well goddamnit, if you'll pardon my French, I'll show that bastardo. Of a sudden it's like a stiff breeze has sprung up is applying its push to my arse. I draw alongside him and hold myself there, his bellows blasting and I get speckled by the foam flying off of him. His tongue is flapping like a buxom female slapping a washcloth about her privy regions. I got him beat. His jockey, he turns his quirt on to me, yelps unkind remarks at Looks At The Sky. That quirt stings me, even draws a little juice of life, but I am in the grip of some kind of medicine now and I remain blithe. My legs get to it, and I slip by easy, and I admit I plant a kick on that nags lower jaw. I lost a little ground, but hearing them jaws clonk together, joy don't get near it.

Now, I'd like to tell you that I ran all them nags down, my mane flaming out, lunging forward to take the prize by a single hair protruding from my nostril, that all them Comanche females come running and hung garlands about my sweaty neck while I pranced and heaped reproach upon my rivals. That Looks At The Sky got shouldered off in triumph, the jug ears ringing to clangourous cheers.

Weren't so.

Come the point when I knowed I was going flat-out but I weren't closing on them leaders and never would. I weren't blowing like the rest, but them short pegs of mine, no matter how I cajoled them, they just wouldn't go no faster and that were the end to it.

I vanquished maybe a brace more mounts. I could maybe have run down another, but I blame that failure on pausing to kick the malefactor and the impedimenta of my jockey's ears. I cantered past Buffalo Wallows and his fancy lance, whose demeanour hadn't perked up none, and I guess I finished in the middle of them nags, and I figured I ain't done bad for a nag with sawed-off legs. Looks At The Sky, that sprout appeared satisfied, and gabbled on, tousling my mane and pulling at my lugs. I directed an eye toward Humps a Lot, him who done rejected me as gift, but he were occupied surveying the hindquarters of a female. Humano, not equine.

So that were that. I'd never be a swift horse, and what can't be cured must be endured. But by God I'd out-wind the bastards. Them ponies roundabout, their bellows was heaving, flanks quivering, all lathered-up, laying aside the winner who was a prancing about barely a fleck of sweat on her. I'll say more about that individual later. One nag was even collapsed, by God. Yours truly, I'd barely broke sweat. I arched my neck and high-stepped around my rivals. I was ready for more. Bring it on. It was them days on the Llano, out-pacing the lobos, quartering the plain for grub and water. Indian ponies, they might have the smarts. But them particulars can be learned.

Buffalo Wallows stalked off in the direction of tipi, blanket pulled tight, nary a backward glance. Him departed and them ponies their wind restored, the bucks commenced disporting themselves. Such acts comprised sitting backwards holding on by the tail, dismounting while in rapid motion, running while holding onto the tail of a known kicker. A boy swung under the belly and came out tother side in one slick movement, his pony at a steady lope. I have to say, while a foolhardy deed, it impressed me no end. My own jockey kicked me into a likewise stride and attempted to stand erect on my shoulders,

indeed managed to stretch out the arms to form kind a crucifix affair. I took this to be a slur on my spirit, so I give a little jerk and bumped the scamp off.

Though thirsty to spit feathers, that creek bubbling away just a stone's throw, I was forced to watch these goddamn fanfaronades till the shadows shortened and the smell of the cookpots drug them off to their tipis. I tell you, there must exist an unassuming Indian, but I never met one.

CHAPTER 6

Life is always apt to throw a spoke in the works, and sure enough it transpired more were to the getting rid malarkey than mastering them few aforementioned rudiments of proceeding forward, proceeding forward rapid, turning, and stopping. I will proceed to enucleate these proficiencies by rank of increasing mither.

Pick items up off of the ground. Looks At The Sky wanted to pick items off of the ground while mounted. These items began with an arrow poking out the plain whereto I was obliged to approach at a trot. Looks At The Sky leaned over while I maintained locomotion and picked up the arrow. Weren't nothing.

The items to be picked up increased in complexity commensurate to an increase in velocity. The task culminated in yours truly hammering along full chisel toward a comrade feigning injury, Looks At The Sky meantime leaning over and attempting to haul that latter aboard. Looks At The Sky wanted me to maintain forward motion, but I tell you the task was rendered a good bit easier if I halted. But Looks At The Sky objected to such fixity, figuring I guess when it come to actual battle projectiles is more likely to strike stationary items, though as far as I can see you is just as likely to run into one. Enduring the burnt end of harsh words, I concluded I was overthinking it. Initiative just weren't required. I would take care of my end, gallop at full lick, and leave the rest to Looks At The Sky. After that it were a piece of cake, albeit more'n once my jockey finished chawing on grass.

Jockey to jump off while going full lick. This task comprised a psychological aspect for me to choke down. Looks At The Sky kicked me into full gallop, pushed my head forward then leaped off fully armed, contemporaneously attempting to maintain a full run. You all seen hobos leaping off of moving freight trains. Well akin to that, but the action unfolds rapider and encompasses the danger of self-impalement. Again, all I had to do was keep galloping, Looks At The Sky handling the difficult end. That psychological

aspect to it were this. Looks At The Sky was practicing for when yours truly packed his own nostrils with dirt, having got shot-out from under.

Allow comrade to hold onto tail. So far them learnings had been more about developing that Indian's proficiencies than mine. The digestion of this particular pedagogy was down to me alone.

Now, having some creature holding on to your tail rubs against every fibre in an equine's mentality. In what circumstance would you ever allow that to happen? It might be a goddamn wolf or panther clamping his choppers for all you knows. The noggin don't enter into it. Your legs decide and kick out with everything they got and you flee, other considerations superfluous. I once saw the boss mare kick the head off of a uppity coyote. No word of a lie. I might have told you that already, but such incidents leave a brand on the mind. Were a sight to behold I can tell you, that noggin arcing over the Llano, that body still running on a piece.

Anyhow, Looks At The Sky puts me into a trot and tells some chump to grab hold as I pass. Like most Comanche activities, I calculate this example is concerned with battle and giving a tow to a colleague reduced to shanks'. The chump clamps on and I kick out. Looks At The Sky objurgates me and gives me a whack with a stick, not hard but sufficient to sting my pride. The chump, who was anticipating my riposte, had already ducked. I guess they cast lots for this duty.

How long did it take for me to accept this duty? I can't give you no figures even if I was able, and the Comanche's stolen timepieces had all stopped ticking, them Indians holding no interest in the hour of the day. Even connecting the act of kicking out to the consequent sting from that stick took an eternity to chisel into my noddle. But anyhow, it were shortly after their luncheon when we commenced, and them supper pots was bubbling steady by the time the chump could cling on to my tail while retaining surety of keeping his bean.

That latter inculcation I have to say left me no little discountenanced, reminding me of Humps a Lot's low opinion of my intellect as it did. That night, sleep dodged me like a housecat threatened with a bath. Seems Looks At The Sky got me pegged as a Comanche warhorse, and that life seemed apt to be mithersome.

[Break]

Nothing happened for some days, which I admit is no way to inveigle you into a new episode in my life as a Comanche. Mooching around cropping that sweet new grass were about the sum of it. Slabs of rain moved through. One morning I woke up with snow on my back. I nearly trod on a frog. I chivvied off a rattler or three. I watched the comings and goings of goddamn owls in and out of prairie-dog holes. Life can get awful tedious when you are a nag.

One point of interest to detain you. I did notice my privy part had begun to dangle some, first time since my recent discomposures, and I figured I was getting my ginger back. But most of the mares in that herd either weren't ripe or rebuffed my courtly gambits. And there was that mare what won the race. Black and white paint with a blue eye. A piece of horseflesh I'm telling you, but right snooty with it.

Maybe you are all expecting me to take advantage of this hiatus in the action to supply some insight into Comanche habits back in them days now they is all but exterminated, and I would have, excepting I spent most of my sojourn as part of the herd, stationed away from them tipis and cooking fires. I speculate that ma thought the sight of me picketed outside would lower the tone of the neighbourhood and attract undesirables. Nevertheless, to make use of this tranquil pass I'll supply these observations, maybe engage in a little philosophizing.

The Comanche male, like most wild Indians of my acquaintance, is a lazy fellow. Now, before you all throw up your arms and commence hrrumphing, I'll state I mean naught derogatory by this prefatory remark. I admit myself a partiality to the pleasures of doing bugger all. Why out on the Llano, if us

bunch was grubbed up and watered, we'd spend from noon to sundown loafing about, napping, nuzzling, swishing flies from our arses. Don't recall nobody never feeling guilty about it.

Whites on the other hand always have to be engaged in some kind of enterprise, usually with the aim of making folding currency so they can feel superior about themselves and render life more comfortable and get somebody else to do that work they done started in the first place in their stead so they can put their feet up on the porch and watch them at it, but which original enterprise often supplies a deal of abasement and discomfort before you get to the feet-up point, if you ever do get there, and most don't, and maybe they been duped at the outset. I hope you are getting the gist here.

An Indian by contrast, well if ever there were ever a contest held to see who's best at sitting and being, he'd be world champion. When he ain't out hunting or on the warpath the Comanche male will just loaf around on his blanket. He might smoke his pipe, he might jabber some to his friends. He'll gamble some, he'll primp hisself, race his favourite horse. If he is musically inclined he might toot on a bone flute or an eagle bone whistle, beat a drum or rattle a gourd. He might get a friend to punch a new hole in his earlobe or rebraid his scalp lock. He'll stare at the clouds for a spell, slip inside the tipi to mount his woman, slip off alone and sit by a rock and consult the contents of his medicine bundle and starve hisself in quest for a vision. But he'll accomplish naught enterprising as the whites would call it. Well, if pressed he might make hisself a lariat. Old men was scarce in our bunch, but the one we had was employed to fashion arrows, but I venture he was put to such task to thwart his wanderings about camp telling circumlocutory stories.

Now you is all saying, How can this chump be so spiteful about the indigene. He got in the stinking part in the hereunto, and don't he know they added lazy to that modifier.

I know that, goddamnit. I was there. Lazy stinking savages, they called them, and they was the milder epithets. Say it often enough and you conclude you

are doing them a goddamn favour taking away the land they are too lazy to enterprise the hell out of.

It ain't no spite. For all I know the lazy way is the way a humano should live. I'll add a Comanche can shoot an arrow clean through a bull buffalo going a full lick from a half-wild horse holding on with just his knees, and lean over and retrieve that arrow. And he ain't obliged to deal with no goddamn lawyers or puzzle out fiscal affairs or listen to an insurance salesman. And he ain't going to die a decrepit of no ulcer.

Now, the more gumptioned-up among you will note I repeat the term 'he' in that foregoing. The female is an entirely different proposition, entirely.

Their lives is spent scraping rotting flesh off of hides, rubbing in brains and marrows and livers and grease to render them supple, digging fire pits to smoke meat and suspend cookpots over, chopping meat for the pot. They trudge down to the river to fetch water and to scrub clothes, go to the woods to chop firewood and haul it back on a buffalo hide, the Comanche being short on wheeled conveyances. They go off on the plain and collect buffalo chips, grub up roots, gather their antiscorbuticals in the form of hackberry, plum and prickly pear. They pound traded corn into meal, pound traded metal into tools, twist fibres into twine, twist twine into rope, chew on tendons to make more cordage. They turn hide into halters, ropes, footwear, attire, tents, tack and tipis. If they is a poor bunch short on ironmongery, they make needles out of bone, scrape out buffalo horns to make cups and spoons. Time comes to up sticks, they are the ones that does it, dismantle the tipis, pack up the goods, bind the travois and load them up, the males all sitting about on their horses looking important, directing events. Only relief the women get is when kidnaps are brought in for them to whip into slaves. The only fun they get is when they play shinny, what they treat like war, them ignoring the ball and whacking them crooked sticks into shins any chance they get, and it just clubbed me maybe that's how it got its name.

Give me an idle moment and I try to cypher it out. Although I met exceptions in my earthly, the male humano is generally of greater dimension than the

female humano, and that's the sum, the nub, the long and short of it. The female don't do as she told, she gets her arse kicked. I hear the whites codified-up a law what states you can beat your wife with a stick so long as it is no thicker than your thumb. But jurisprudence ain't my strong suit so I can't vouch for that as actual fact, and surely even for the whites got their lines in the sand. And it ain't that the Comanche females was less cantankerous than their male counterpart, fact in my experiences they was more so. Just comes down to the matter of stature.

I should append that, as with all humanos, there is always some what like to boss the rest and get them to do their work for them, and it was likewise with the Comanche females. These was generally older and of heftier corpulence, their general disposition being that of a trod-on scorpion.

That's a surfeit of philosophical enquiry for now. Time for more action.

Day come when an Indian comes larruping into camp scattering yappers and shavers, his pony about blown. He is yelling what is gibberish to me apart from one word the Comanche use frequent. Kuhtsu! Kuhtsu!

That Indian had been out tracking antelope, when he stumbles across what he says was this great ribbon of trod grass heading in a northerly direction many ponies wide. He spreads his arms out wide to indicate the breadth. I seen it later and it was about as wide as the upper reaches of the Prairie Dog Town Fork, which is a right cumbersome name for the whites to give a river, but by then I was a Indian, so who am I to talk. Well, course I'd seen similar tramlings out on the Llano, and you don't need no telling that only one kind of dumb beast can cause that kind of destruction, telegraphing to all and sundry its numbers and direction of travel. Anyhow, that Indian dismounts and gets down on all fours and sticks his arse in the air and his maw to the grass. He places his forefingers aside of his head and makes thrusting motions. I calculate it a display intended for them Comanche slow on the uptake, although a good bit of one digit has been shot-off what ruins the effect. The upshot is the kuhtsu is no further a ride than the time it takes for a female to flesh-out one of their hides.

The Comanche didn't know that Indian's name, him being Comanche but no member of their band. He just showed up out of nowhere. Course, the Comanche believed him to be a buffalo in human form, come to direct them to the herd, them being short on the buffalo side of late. If you cogitate on it, it remains an outlook what don't sustain much scrutiny, unless that buffalo-human was a fickle and perfidious example bent on betraying his tribe for reasons unknown.

But like all humanos, the Comanche gave credence to magic. They believed a horned toad, if enquired of politely, will run in the direction of a buffalo herd. They believed buffalo procreated underground and come spring swarmed forth out of caves and ravines like bees, only of larger dimensions and scant of wings, and laying aside bees don't generally live underground. If such be so, it must be a tight squeeze down there, what with Lucifer and his hordes, and all them humanos what ain't cut the mustard.

I knew a trooper up on the Powder who swore geese hatched from barnacles, whatever they are, and barn swallows passed the winter in swamp mud, wouldn't brook no argument on the matter. Fabridzio Capeesh knew a Mexican from across the Pecos who knew a priest who during droughty spells slit his veins and water flowed forth. An Irishman on the Milk believed one of his saints got decapitated and then carried his head about and preached out of it. But we are getting into things here that my noggin can't bottom and I ought return to the point. I will make one final statement on the topic. I don't know if magic exists, but that Indian who come larruping in bearing the tidings, after we found the herd nobody saw him again.

I'll divaricate off here and tell you of my previous experience of the dumb ungulate known to the Comanche as kuhtsu, what you know as the buffalo. We seen herds out on the Llano, but we paid them no mind, bar to grumble when they chawed our herbage and objurgate them when they blundered close. Occasionally you'd spy a cloud of dust in the distance and knowed something had spooked them and they was in stampede. Cibolero maybe, grizzly, a June bug. Buffalo, being dumb, stampede easy. Then we'd be sure to

get out the way. No creature is as inconsiderate of its fellow beings as a buffalo in full stampede. But that were the sum of it.

Now, by pure coincidence, them last few days Looks At The Sky had begun my pedagogy on the buffalo side. That propped-up hide we had swung our arses around during the race, that was pressed into service as a mannequin upon which me and a trio of other novice nags learned our ungulate-hunting. These skills consisted of approaching the buffalo's arse-end going at full chisel while your jockey shot arrows into it, maybe stick it with a spear if it were considered to be blown, proficiencies Looks At The Sky seemed already savvied-up on.

After that, there ain't much more you can do with a replica. It ain't going to swing on you and hook you and toss you aloft. The only refinement that mithered me was ensuring my line of attack come from the correct flank.

It were like this. The other two jockeys was right-handed, and thusly approached dexter wise, such that their bows and lances was most conveniently oriented. Looks At The Sky was cack-handed, so I had to remember to approach on the sinister side, an action I failed to accomplish at multiple junctures.

I ought append here that during the tumult of a buffalo hunt some initiative is expected of a Comanche mount. The rider, well his whole being is consumed by the chase. He is surrounded on all sides by thundering resentful buffalos. He has to evade horns and hooves, sudden turns, clods of prairie, meantime he is trying to get his bow and arrows in order and giving due consideration to swinging under his horse's belly to shoot for exhibition purposes. He ain't expected to be constantly directing his steed knee-wise, laying aside no kind of bridle. So, after the first couple of passes, which I did right, Looks At The Sky left off the nudging, which is when I did it wrong. I state in mitigation, I was always last in line and following them ponies, and being new at the enterprise I just did what they was doing. That, and that snooty paint mare always seemed to be in my eye line.

It was the only time I ever knowed Looks At The Sky, who generally was of benign and patient temperament for a Comanche, irascible up with me. Left off slapping my neck did that scamp, which was the first bad indication, and set to bellowing vituperation in my highly refined ear, including the word dumb, like my jilter Humps a Lot done.

Them two other nags having done performed competently and gone off to chew grass, I venture Looks At The Sky was embarrassed on my behalf. We stayed out till the sun spilled over red until I finally I got it. I got a perfunctory pat on the neck, but as Looks At The Sky walked me back to the herd, my head hung low and perturbation pervaded my belly. During the bedlam of a full-out hunt, I might prove a leaky vessel.

We weren't done with the inculcations. To add to my discomfiture, transpired there was further refinements to be absorbed. The next day when we go at it, the moment the arrow twangs free, Looks At The Sky gives me a knee-nudge away from the dummy.

Now, good reason exists for this veer-on-the-twang expedient. Think on it, imagine if some malefactor stuck a spike in you while you was dawdling along minding your own business. Well, a careering buffalo is likewise vexed and owns the apparatus to communicate that vexation in ruinous manner. I should add for the benefit of those callow of the buffalo-hunting enterprise, one arrow, even if it hits a vital, won't kill a buffalo right off. You can put a fifty-calibre shell plumb through the pump and that buffalo will stumble on and retain the ability to put your life in jeopardy.

But before I know it that Indian is expecting me to veer off without the nudge. Jesus. You humanos rubbing your bellies and patting your heads don't come close. Looking back now I venture Looks At The Sky ought have taught me the veer-on-the-twang move the day prior, but had forgot. I imagine the dinner conversation went something like, Did you teach that dumb beast to cut away as soon as you twang that arrow? Um ...

I ain't dumb. Out on the llano I seen wolves hooked and airborne and re-acquaint theirselves with tierra firma a sack of bones. By God, one time I even saw a grizzly hooked and flee with a gut dangling. You think I'm going to gallop adjacent to a late-perforated buffalo admiring the scenery and studying the botanical delights? I am only adjacentizing myself to the goddamn buffalo in the first place because some Indian blew up my nose. It were bad enough the dexter-sinister thing befuddling my noggin, and now I had to remember to veer-away-on-the-twang-without-the-knee-nudge, when I wouldn't have been putting us in jeopardy of my own volition, if it weren't for the nose blowing which befuddled my wits. If you are getting my drift.

So in light of the hereunto you may picture my tangled mentality when that buffalo-Indian come barrelling in bearing the glad tidings. Why that very day I was due more practice. Slow horses had been picked out special, although it remains beyond my wits as to why a Comanche would possess a dawdling horse. They'd secured Buffalo hides on them latters' hindquarters. The idea being they'd be put in motion, and our jockeys'd fire blunted arrows at the armoured hindquarters. That way so us nags could get habituated to them firing on a moving target without no animal getting injured, and veer off on the twang minus the nudge. I tell you, them Comanche, they'd got it all worked out.

So, typical of my luck, following the buffalo-Indian's recital, that inculcation got procrastinated. So I'd be going in half-cooked. The camp, it bust into action like an ant's nest poked with a stick. They sent off sprouts to gather up the best horses. The males set to selecting weaponry while the females organized buffalo harvesting accouterments, dismembering axes and skinning knives figuring large in them items. It was going to be a family outing, and if these was any other tribe of Indians, the women would proceed by shankses and tote them accouterments. But this was the Comanche, about birthed a'horseback, possessing more ponies than you could shake a stick at, and I would estimate the worst female could have outrode a white male of more than middling quality.

I admit the perturbations returned to my guts when me and Looks At The Sky gathered with the rest of them ponies, them equines all knowing what they was about and what was afoot. Looks At The Sky had gone to the inconvenience of applying paint, and not only that sprout's own body. A brace a big circles was daubed on either side of my fat neck, sundry stripes and chevrons down my flanks. They was executed pretty much at a lick though, the paint still running and I cannot vouch for their artistic merit. This creative endeavour depressed me further. This was evidently a signal day for that sprout. First buffalo hunt for all I knowed. I hoped I didn't embarrass myself.

Now there we all is about to go off on a buffalo hunt, and I might be taking the mustard out the tale here, but I'll be damned if I don't state the following. I wish I had an apple for every buffalo-hunt story I ever heard spouted. I venture I'd be knee-deep in them items now and weary of the taste and of the seeds atwixt my choppers, notwithstanding I am as partial to apples as a crow is to eyeballs. I'm talking such examples told by plains parvenus and captives to add spice to fanciful memoirs wrote to convert such experiences into folding currency. Way they tell it, weren't one of them characters ever passed on a buffalo hunt. Thundering hooves and nodding heads and nostrils ploughing prairie and pawing bulls at bay tossing dust sure is hackneyed themes, by God, and weren't one such type what declined to chaw on a still-twitching liver seasoned with bile. So I admit to have pondered at length on whether to redact this forthcoming episode. But the Comanche was experiencing nostalgic feelings that day, and the topography in which we was located allowed them feelings to get corporealized, so to speak. So I'll tell it, being you might depart with a diverse aspect of the wore-out affair, them dumb ungulates now all annihilated.