



“The Wonder Bull”

an excerpt from the novel by
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I don't give out autographs anymore – gave it up just like Paul Newman. Newman don't give out autographs no more since this one time when he was trying to go to the bathroom in private. See, he was at an airport one time when this guy in the urinal next to him flat out asks for his autograph, right there on the spot. That did it for Paul Newman. No more autographs from that point on.

I feel the same as Paul.

I don't let people touch me to see if I'm real. I don't let em take my picture. And I have no desire whatsoever in my whole body of hustling white people anymore – pretending to be a phony boloney so they can get in touch with their “Indian inner selves.” Believe me, that means turning down a lot of dough cuz if I think about it there aint too many folks around L.A. who don't have at least one Indian in their ancient history.

How I got into doing that gig is a real mystery to me. It was near the end of the month and I was working the business with Edward as usual. Edward knows astrology pretty good, and sometimes, just like that, on the spot, he can make twenty bucks off strangers by giving em astrological advice, like insight into the rotation of Pluto or Mars and how they should be conducting themselves, like laying low, not going to work on Wednesdays, not answering the phone on Thursdays, not using the microwave on Fridays.

I really can't tell you how he does it, except that he can spend hours alone at night waiting for what he calls “the epiphany.”

When I opened my door that morning I seen Edward was raring to go. His curly black hair and bushy mustache were all slicked back with dye cream underneath his lucky Lakers cap, and his fold-up chair (red, white and blue plastic stripes) was leaning up against the wall at the top of the stairs.

I had my shrunken T-shirt tucked in the tightest jeans I have. I made a quick trip back to the bathroom to touch up my hair tips with a dab of gel and sprinkle on a little Old Spice on my neck that Edward bought me for the business. I then grabbed the rest of the business gear – blue shopping bag filled with Edward's clipboard and magic markers.

“Starlight, starbright!” Edward said as we headed down the stairs.

We took the Metro to the North Hollywood stop and got down to business. Edward sat in his fold-up chair near the top of the escalator with his clipboard, drawing star maps. I leaned over the cement railing and looked down to the bottom.

Edward says you have to catch people when they're coming and not going. People heading down always think they're in a hurry. They don't give a damn what Pluto is up to if they're running late. Edward says the best potentials are people who look worried, scared to death, afraid the sky's falling in. “People's desperations is what keeps us in business.”

But sometimes things take a little left turn or wild twist, right? Like in the case of our hustling without luck most of that day in the Valley. Edward said his back needed to take a break. See, when it comes to Edward's back, the doctors don't come through with enough pills. “Pain management” is

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what he calls it. But even with what little he's got leftover after rent and things it aint enough to get him through the entire month. That's why Edward started the Starlight Starbright astrology business.

While I paid for my Mountain Dew at the gas station, Edward stood out front smoking the last of his cigarettes. He was bended over, stretching his back and staring at this white lady putting gas in her BMW. I came outside and offered Edward the first taste of my soda, but all he said was "Do you know we're down to our last nickel after your spending spree?" I didn't say nothing, just waited while he watched that young blonde woman's every move.

She turned around – catching me with her eye. She was stopped dead in her tracks. I can't never explain it, but I *knew* that look instantly. She clipped her purse shut and pulled her long blonde hair behind her ears staring at me as if I was some long lost Cherokee relative. I guess since there are more Cherokees than most other Indians the odds are pretty good that white people could be Cherokee, you know? Believe me, I met more Cherokees in L.A. than I think there really are in the world.

I was already preparing to give her one of my "no hablo Ingles" lines, which I do from time to time when confronted like Edward taught me to do when we'd take the train or be waiting at the bus stop, when instead, Edward winked at me behind her back. I went along with him wanting me to keep my mouth shut cuz I know when Edward's working the business he has to be smart and quick on his feet.

"Martin is no ordinary Indian," he said to her. "He's a shaman."

Now that scared the Hell out of me cuz I don't know barely anything about my dad's tribe, which is in Oklahoma. Edward got the library lady to show me some things on the internet computer once, but that's about it. My dad never even taught me how to talk Indian.

Once she was disappeared inside the store Edward put his hand on my shoulder. "Just follow my lead. When she comes out let me chat her up. Then, when I look at you, you're gonna whisper in my ear, like this. See? That will be the sign."

"Sign? Sign for what?"

"You're gonna be whispering some Indian secret to me. You're a shaman, Martin."

"I don't know any Indian secrets, Edward."

"You don't have to. Shamans don't talk directly to white people, only to interpreters, like me."

"I never heard that!"

"Who cares! She don't know it aint true. Just play along."

Edward knew I was very uncomfortable with this new situation. I told him that even though he might be right on the nose about shamans not talking directly to white people, even though all I had to do was fake whisper some Indian secret in his ear, "the fact of the matter is, Martin is not a shaman!"

"Relax, calm down! Just follow my lead. And don't smile. Shamans never smile. And whatever you do, don't say a word. No offense, but we don't want your accent to turn her off."

Actually, Edward thinks I talk worse than I do. I admit I talk Oklahoma some. I got it from my dad. My dad's accent is the one thing that came and stayed with him when he moved to L.A. in 1957 on the day of his birthday with just twenty, thirty bucks in his pocket. My dad didn't give too many details when I was growing up, but back then the government was offering Oklahoma Indians a "chance of starting all over again" in big cities like L.A. When my dad got to the city he reported to the Indian Department downtown and they set him up with a room, job and school. That's how he became a car mechanic . . .

"Martin!" Edward said. "Pay attention! Here some comes."



When that blonde woman came back outside and laid eyes on me again, I just looked at her and tried to keep my mouth shut like Edward wanted.

“Cherokee, right miss?” Edward said. “That your tribe? “Well, Martin, here said he knew you were Indian right off the first time he saw you. Shaman powers, you know?”

She turned around and stared at me. I felt like she was gonna ask me if I was holding a lost puzzle piece of her life in my hand. Right at that moment I wasn’t really sure if she had the same thing on her mind as I did on mine when she fixed her eyes on my crumpled hand. I just quickly stuck my hand behind my back. If it weren’t for my hand Edward says I look pretty good in the body department. I might even be a seven or eight to most people, but you see, the fingers on my left hand are all curled up in a fist. My dad got real mad at me one time when I was younger and he slammed his good pipe wrench down on it a buncha times. It don’t hurt anymore, of course, but it aint much good use for anything, either. I can’t even move my fingers unless I use my other hand . .

“Martin?”

I turned and seen Edward giving me his secret little glare (eyebrows get closer) like he does when he’s irritated with something.

“I told her you were Cherokee too, Martin. Isn’t that a coincidence!”

I almost corrected Edward – that he should know that wasn’t the truth at all. My dad’s tribe is in Willow, Oklahoma. But instead I only nodded and stared up at the orange sky falling. I have to admit the only time I really, really like being in L.A. is right before the sun goes down. Things look calm, seem peaceful. See, when the sun starts dropping everything has this warm orange glow to it. The buildings sparkle and it just feels like a diffrent, softer place.

* * *

Things were faster than ever on the 101 that night, but inside the BMW it was all slow motion. I couldn’t tell if she thought I was rejecting her or if maybe she was like me – just quiet when there’s just nothing to talk about sometimes. Earlier she had offered to give me a ride home, but I said I didn’t feel right with that arrangement, with her going out of her way just for me. Dropping me off at the North Hollywood stop would be easier since the Metro goes right by my place, very convenient, right?

“You know, next month it will be three years since my grandmother died,” she said. “I have this same dream every year on her death night.”

I didn’t know what shamans were supposed to say when it comes to special dreams, so all I could think to do was just shrug my shoulders and smile.

“Aren’t you going to ask about the dream?” she said.

“You mean about your Cherokee grandma?”

“No. It’s about *me*. I’m in Oklahoma.”

“You ever been to Oklahoma for real?”

“Nope. Lived here all my life. I work for my dad. I’m Indian on my dad’s side. I’ll invite you over sometime and you can meet him. He’s a producer for a network show.”

“You mean, like TV?”

“Yes, silly. I suppose next you’re going to tell me shamans are forbidden to watch television.”

I was starting to feel like I was in a real trouble spot at that split second. I thought for sure she was gonna ask what else shamans aint supposed to do.

“Well, you see I’m invited to a special ceremony by this medicine man who looks a lot like you,



believe it or not. That's why I thought you were Cherokee."

"Does he have short hair or something?"

She lit up a cigarette and took a puff. "He wants to give me my Indian name at this ceremony in this very private place outside Tahlequah, that's where my grandmother lived. But while I'm walking towards that hill, the hairs on the back of my neck rise up. I hear these wild dogs howling. The closer I get to that hill, the louder the howling. It really scares me so I run back."

She blew smoke out and stared straight ahead at the freeway. "What's my Indian name?"

I looked at her ashtray filled with quarters. I aint one to go bumming for money, not cuz I think I'm better than anyone who does, but it just aint my way. It's what my dad taught me. It was his way too. He never asked for a dime from anyone even when he lost his mechanics job from his getting depression moods.

I thought I might try to steal a ride on the train if the cops weren't watching, but I never done that before and I didn't wanna risk it. So I had to get the guts to flat out ask if she had any spare quarters. She told me to take as much as I wanted.

"So, Martin? It's Martin, isn't it" she said. "I'm June. Would you want to come over sometime? My dad would just love to meet you. I can pick you up at your place or if you prefer, at the Metro station."

I had no quick answer to that offer. To be honest, I really coulda liked June in that boyfriend, girlfriend way. But I knew it wasn't the real Martin that June liked. She gave me a big smile. Right at that moment of her wanting me to come over, start spending time together, maybe spending the rest of my life with June, I had my own epiphany.

"I can't, June. I'm fixin to go to Oklahoma tomorrow. They got big doings and ceremony stuff going on in Willow. I won't be back for months, maybe never."

She nodded her head some. I watched her blow the last of her smoke into the silence. Then June reached for my crumpled hand. She tried to slip her fingers into mine but my fist wouldn't open. I seen that her eyes were wet before she wipe em with the back of her hand. She wiped her eyes one more time, then laughed a little. "Martin, I'm terrified of having that dream again. I'm scared to death of those wild dogs."

I didn't say anything. She reached for my hand again, squeezing it tight this time. I just turned away, staring out the window at all those lights flashing across the city. For a minute it seemed like the sky dropped right down on everything. L.A. was lit up with stars. I felt like I was right in the middle of the universe, and that anything that popped out of my mouth would be the perfect thing to say to June.

When we stopped at the Metro station I looked right into her shiny brown eyes. After I got out, shut the door and started to cross the street June rolled down her window. "Hey? Mind if I take your picture?" I kinda froze right up, not saying yes or no to her. She flashed me her smile. "Don't tell me shamans aren't allowed to have their picture taken!" I didn't see no harm in one little picture so I stood there in the street with my crumpled hand behind my back looking into her camera.

"You know, you could smile."

I shrugged my shoulders and looked down at my new Spaldings. The shoe laces on my right foot were untied.

"Martin, I want my dad to know what you look like."

And so I did. I smiled real big for June. She wanted to take one more picture just in case, but when I heard a cop car siren, howling by I put my fingers in my ears and told her no.



She just stared at me, her smile disappearing. I waved and turned to go. But out of the corner of my eye I watched her drive off. I watched June leave forever.

On the train I wondered about her dream during the ride home. I kept thinking if I had said something when I had the chance at that one, right moment in her BMW I coulda made her feelings better about those wild dogs. I just knew if I had said that right something it woulda been exactly what she should do the next time she hears that howling in her dream. But I couldn't figure out why I never said a word to June. I couldn't figure out why, all the way to my Wilshire/Western stop.

* * *

Back at my building I seen that Edward's door was open. He was cranking his music. I could see his cigarette smoke drifting into the hallway, almost dancing to his Mexican beat. As usual I went straight to my place, But in the off chance he was interested in how my night went with June, I decided to make sure to shut my door real soft like once I got in. I wasn't up for any of Edward's "debriefing." I didn't wanna take a few minutes to go over the act – fine tune what really worked and throw out what didn't – I just wanted to be alone in my own place to think about June.

There was a yellow note taped to my front door. I knew it was from Samuel. I knew it was another of his ways of just trying to boss me around like I was the last Indian in the city. See, I know Samuel's wrinkly-face way. I feel like I known him since before I was born. My dad knew Samuel, first. He met Samuel when he moved to L.A. Samuel worked for the Bureau like his dad done before him and so on. He's the one who got my dad into school, to become a mechanic. At first my dad trusted Samuel's help. They even became pretty good friends. But then my mom died in a car crash when I was maybe three years old. That's when my dad got his depression moods. He couldn't hold down any mechanics job for very long so Samuel started coming by our Bell Gardens apartment almost every day. He'd bring food like apples or canned ham. Sometimes he'd bring me new clothes he picked up at rummage sales or the Salvation Army. Samuel did this til I turned eleven years old.

But my dad never trusted Samuel's handouts, said they were just part of his scheme to keep him from packing up and moving back to Oklahoma, and taking me with him. He was so suspicious of Samuel's way, most times he wouldn't let me wear my new clothes. I even had to sneak bites of that ham he hid in the bottom drawer of our refrigerator.

I can't count out how many times I told Edward that I thought Samuel doing that to me was an abuse of his job even though he retired from the Indian Department years ago.

"I wouldn't be putting up with him like I do, Edward. But the reality is, Samuel is my payee, right?"

"Yes, I know, Martin. You've told me a million times about how he's in charge of cashing your disability check, the seven hundred fifty seven dollars the government sends you on the first of every month to survive on. Yes, you've told me all of that a million times, Martin."

But on this one night, to be quite frankly, I was not in the mood to consider Samuel's dumb marching orders. I swear I could see him pasting up that note like it was a court order – his green eyes bulging out of his skeleton head, sleeves rolled up to his alligator elbows, .

"Don't make me reschedule again, Martin. I know you are just willfully and intentionally skipping out on appointments to see that gorgeous new residential. I sure hope you haven't been hanging around that Boulevard again. I want you home and raring to go tomorrow morning when I come by to pick you up, mister. Got it?"

That really burned me up. Right then and there I wanted to give him a piece of my mind for his accusations. *You go to Hell, Samuel! For your information what I do on my own time is none of your*

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beeswax, mister! Got it?

But instead I just tore down his note and ripped it up a million times.

I turned on the bath water like usual after a day of working the business. Then I pulled off my T-shirt and sat on the edge of the tub. I almost decided to shut the water off and go right to bed. But then it came to me why I could never say the perfect thing to June. *Martin is not a shaman.*

* * *

I soaped myself up very good that night and I got to thinking long and hard about Oklahoma, about Willow having Indian ceremonies going on all the time. I was sure that Oklahoma was a place where that warm orange glow goes on nonstop. I wanted to be in that glow, be in that calmness, that softness forever. And as I pulled my crumpled hand open, rinsing away the soap between my fingers, I wondered what a real shaman was like.