

the faithful companion at forty

This one is also for Queequeg, for Kato, for Spock, for Tinkerbell, and for Chewbacca.

His first reaction is that I just can't deal with the larger theoretical issues. He's got this new insight he wants to call the Displacement Theory and I can't grasp it. Your basic, quiet, practical minority sidekick. The *limited* edition. Kato. Spock. Me. But this is not true.

I still remember the two general theories we were taught on the reservation which purported to explain the movement of history. The first we named the Great Man Theory. Its thesis was that the critical decisions in human development were made by individuals, special people gifted in personality and circumstance. The second we named the Wave Theory. It argued that only the masses could effectively determine the course of history. Those very visible individuals who appeared as leaders of the great movements were, in fact, only those who happened to articulate the direction which had already been chosen. They were as much the victims of the process as any other single individual. Flotsam. Running Dog and I used to be able to debate this issue for hours.

It is true that this particular question has ceased to interest me much. But a correlative question has come to interest me more. I spent most of my fortieth birthday sitting by myself, listening to Pachelbel's *Canon*, over and over, and I'm asking myself: Are some people special? Are some people more special than others? *Have I spent my whole life backing the wrong horse?*

I mean, it was my birthday and not one damn person called.

Finally, about four o'clock in the afternoon, I gave up and I called him. "Eh, Poncho," I say. "What's happening?"

"Eh, Cisco," he answers. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," I tell him. I can't decide whether I am more pissed to know he remembered but didn't call than I was when I thought he forgot.

"The big four-o," he says. "Wait a second, buddy. Let me go turn the music down." He's got the *William Tell Overture* blasting on the stereo. He's always got the *William Tell Overture* blasting on the stereo. I'm not saying the man has a problem, but the last time we were in Safeway together he claimed to see a woman being kidnapped by a silver baron over in frozen foods. He pulled the flip top off a Tab and lobbed the can into the ice cream. "Cover me," he shouts, and runs an end pattern with the cart through the soups. I had to tell everyone he was having a Vietnam flashback.

And the mask. There are times and seasons when a mask is useful; I'm the first to admit that. It's Thanksgiving, say, and you're an Indian so it's never been one of your favorite holidays, and you've got no family because you spent your youth playing the supporting role to some macho creep who couldn't commit, so here you are, standing in line to see *Rocky IV*, and someone you know walks by. I mean, I've been there. But for every day, for your ordinary life, a mask is only going to make you *more* obvious. There's an element of exhibitionism in it. A large element. If you ask me.

So now he's back on the phone. He sighs. "God," he says. "I miss those thrilling days of yesteryear."

See? We haven't talked twenty seconds and already the subject is *his* problems. *His* ennui. *His* angst. "I'm having an affair," I tell him. Two years ago I wouldn't have said it. Two years ago he'd just completed his est training and he would have told me to take responsibility for it. Now he's into biofeedback and astrology. Now we're not responsible for anything.

"Yeah?" he says. He thinks for a minute. "You're not married," he points out.

I can't see that this is relevant. "She is," I tell him.

"Yeah?" he says again, only this "yeah" has a nasty quality to it; this "yeah" tells me someone is hoping for sensationalistic details. This is not the "yeah" of a concerned friend. Still, I can't help playing to it. For years I've been holding this man's horse while he leaps onto its back from the roof. For years I've been providing cover from behind a rock while he breaks for the back door. I'm forty now. It's time to get something back from him. So I hint at the use of controlled substances. We're talking peyote and cocaine. I mention pornography. Illegally imported. From Denmark. Of course, it's not really *my* affair. Can you picture me? My affair is quiet and ardent. I borrowed this affair from another friend. It shows you the lengths I have to go to before anyone will listen to me.

I may finally have gone too far. He's really at a loss now. "Women," he says finally. "You can't live with them and you can't live without them." Which is a joke, coming from him. He had that single-man-raising-his-orphaned-nephew-all-alone schtick working so smoothly the women were passing each other on the way in and out the door. Or maybe it was the mask and the leather. What do women want? Who has a clue?

"Is that it?" I ask him. "The sum total of your advice? She won't leave her husband. Man, my *heart* is broken."

"Oh," he says. There's a long pause. "Don't let it show," he suggests. Then he sighs. Again. "I miss that old white horse," he tells me. And you know what I do? I hang up on him. And you know what he *doesn't* do? He doesn't call me back.

It really hurts me.

So his second reaction, now that I don't want to listen to him explaining his new theories to me, is to say that I seem to be sulking about something, he can't imagine what. And this is harder to deny.

The day after my birthday I went for a drive in my car, a little white Saab with personalized license plates. KEMO, they say. Maybe the phone is ringing, maybe it's not. I feel better when I don't know. So, he misses his horse. Hey, *I've* never been the same since that little pinto of mine joined the Big Roundup, but I try not to burden my friends with this. I try not to burden my friends with *anything*. I just nurse them back to health when the Cavendish gang leaves them for dead. I just come in the middle of the night with the medicine man when little Britt has a fever and it's not responding to Tylenol. I just organize the surprise party when a friend turns forty.

You want to bet even Attila the Hun had a party on his fortieth? You want to bet he was one hard man to surprise? And who blew up the balloons and had everyone hiding under the rugs and in with the goats? This name is lost forever.

I drove out into the country, where every cactus holds its memory for me, where every outcropping of rock once hid an outlaw. Ten years ago the terrain was still so rough I would have had to take the International Scout. Now it's a paved highway straight to the hanging tree. I pulled over to the shoulder of the road, turned off the motor, and just sat there. I was remembering the time Ms. Peggy Cooper stumbled into the Wilcox bank robbery looking for her little girl who'd gone with friends to the swimming hole and hadn't bothered to tell her mania. We were on our way to see Colonel Davis at Fort Comanche about some cattle rustling. We hadn't heard about the bank robbery. Which is why we were taken completely by surprise.

My pony and I were eating the masked man's dust, as usual, when something hit me from behind. Arnold Wilcox, a heavy-set man who sported a five o'clock shadow by eight in the morning, jumped me from the big rock overlooking the Butter-field trail, and I went down like a sack of potatoes. I heard horses

converging on us from the left and the right and that hypertrophic white stallion of his took off like a big bird. I laid one on Arnold's stubbly jaw, but he cold-cocked me with the butt of his pistol and I couldn't tell you what happened next.

I don't come to until it's after dark and I'm trussed up like a turkey. Ms. Cooper is next to me, and her hands are tied behind her back with a red bandanna and there's a rope around her feet. She looks disheveled but pretty; her eyes are wide and I can tell she's not too pleased to be lying here next to an Indian. Her dress is buttoned up to the chin so I'm thinking, At least, thank God, they've respected her. It's cold, even as close together as we are. The Wilcoxes are all huddled around the fire, counting money, and the smoke is a straight white line in the sky you could see for miles. So this is more good news, and I'm thinking the Wilcoxes were always a bunch of dumb-ass honkies when it came to your basic woodlore. I'm wondering how they got it together to pull off a bank job, when I hear a horse's hooves and my question is answered. Pierre Cardeaux, Canadian French, hops off the horse's back and goes straight to the fire and stamps it out.

"Imbeciles!" he tells them, only he's got this heavy accent so it comes out "Eembeceels."

Which insults the Wilcoxes a little. "Hold on there, hombre," Andrew Wilcox says. "Jes' because we followed your plan into the bank and your trail for the getaway doesn't make you the boss here." Pierre pays him about as much notice as you do an ant your horse is about to step on. He comes over to us and puts his hand under Ms. Cooper's chin, sort of thoughtfully. She spits at him and he laughs.

"Spunk," he says. "I like that." I mean, I suppose that's what he says, because that's what they always say, but the truth is, with his accent, I don't understand a word.

Andrew Wilcox isn't finished yet. He's got this big chicken leg he's eating and it's dribbling onto his chin, so he wipes his arm over his face. Which just spreads the grease around more, really, and anyway, he's got this hunk of chicken stuck between his front teeth, so Pierre can hardly keep a straight face when he talks to him. "I understand why we're keeping the woman," Andrew says. "Cause she has—uses. But the Injun there. He's just going to be baggage. I want to waste him."

"*Mon ami*," says Pierre. "Even *pour vous*, thees stupiditee lives me spitchless." He's kissing his fingers to illustrate the point as if he were really French and not just Canadian French and has probably never drunk really good wine in his life. I'm lying in the dust, and whatever they've bound my wrists with is cutting off the circulation so my hands feel like someone is jabbing them with porcupine needles. Even now, I can remember smelling the smoke which wasn't there anymore and the Wilcoxes who were and the lavender eau de toilette that Ms. Cooper used. And horses and dust and sweat. These were the glory days, but *whose* glory? you may well ask, and even if I answered, what difference would it make?

Ms. Cooper gets a good whiff of Andrew Wilcox, and it makes her cough.

"He's right, little brother," says Russell Wilcox, the runt of the litter at three-hundred-odd pounds and a little quicker on the uptake than the rest of the family. "You ever beared tell of a man who rides a white horse, wears a black mask, and shoots a very pricey kind of bullet? This here Injun is his compadre."

"*Oui, oui, oui, oui*," says Pierre agreeably. The little piggie. He indicates me and raises his eyebrows one at a time. "*Avec le sauvage* we can, how you say? Meek a deal."

"*Votre mere*," I tell him. He gives me a good kick in the ribs and he's wearing those pointy-toed kind of cowboy boots, so I feel it, all right. Finally I hear the sound I've been waiting for, a hoot owl over in the trees behind Ms. Cooper, and then *he* rides up. He hasn't even gotten his gun out yet. "Don't move," he tells Pierre, "or I'll be forced to draw," but he hasn't finished the sentence when Russell Wilcox has his arm around my neck and the point of his knife jabbing into my back.

"We give you the Injun," he says. "Or we give you the girl. You ain't taking both. You comprenez, pardner?"

Now, if he'd *asked* me I'd have said, Hey, don't worry about *me*, rescue the woman. And if he'd hesitated, I would have insisted. But he didn't ask and he didn't hesitate. He just hoisted Ms. Cooper up onto the saddle in front of him and pulled the bottom of her skirt down so her legs didn't show, "There's a little girl in Springfield who's going to be mighty happy to see you, Ms. Cooper," I hear him saying, and I've got a suspicion from the look on her face that they're not going straight to Springfield anyway. And that's it. Not one word for me.

Of course, he comes back, but by this time the Wilcoxes and Pierre have fallen asleep around the cold campfire and I've had to inch my way through the dust on my side like a snake over to Russell Wilcox's knife, which fell out of his hand when he nodded off, whittling. I've had to cut my own bonds, and my hands are behind me so I carve up my thumb a little too. The whole time I'm right there beneath Russell, and he's snorting and snuffling and shifting around like he's waking up so my heart nearly stops. It's a wonder my hands don't have to be amputated, they've been without blood for so long. And then there's a big shoot-out and I provide a lot of cover. A couple of days pass before I feel like talking to him about it.

"You rescued Ms. Cooper first," I remind him. "And that was the right thing to do, I'm not saying it wasn't; don't misunderstand me. But it seemed to me that you made up your mind kind of quickly. It didn't seem like a hard decision."

He reaches across the saddle and puts a hand on my hand. Behind the black mask the blue eyes are sensitive and caring. "Of course I wanted to rescue you, old friend," he says. "If I'd made the decision based solely on my own desires, that's what I would have done. But it seemed to me I had a higher responsibility to the more innocent party. It was a hard choice. It may have felt quick to you, but, believe me, I struggled with it." He withdraws his hand and kicks his horse a little ahead of us because the trail is narrowing. I duck under the branch of a prairie spruce. "Besides," he says, back over his shoulder, "I couldn't leave a woman with a bunch of animals like Pierre Cardeaux and the Wilcoxes. A pretty woman like that. Alone. Defenseless."

I start to tell him what a bunch of racists like Pierre Cardeaux and the Wilcoxes might do to a lonely and defenseless Indian. Arnold Wilcox wanted my scalp. "I remember the Alamo," he kept saying, and maybe he meant Little Big Horn; I didn't feel like exploring this. Pierre kept assuring him there would be plenty of time for trophies later. And Andrew trotted out that old chestnut about the only good Indian being a dead Indian. None of which were pleasant to lie there listening to. But I never said it. Because by then the gap between us was so great I would have had to shout, and anyway the ethnic issue has always made us both a little touchy. I wish I had a nickel for every time I've heard him say that some of his best friends are Indians. And I know there are bad Indians; I don't deny it and I don't mind fighting them. I just always thought I should get to decide which ones were the bad ones.

I sat in that car until sunset.

But the next day he calls. "Have you ever noticed how close the holy word 'om' is to our Western word 'home'?" he asks. That's his opening. No hi, how are you? He never asks how I am. If he did, I'd tell him I was fine, just the way you're supposed to. I wouldn't burden him with my problems. I'd just like to be asked, you know?

But he's got a point to make, and it has something to do with Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. How she clicks her heels together and says, over and over like a mantra, "There's no place like home, there's no place like home" and she's actually able to travel through space. "Not in the book," I tell him.

"I *know*," he says. "In the movie."

"I thought it was the shoes," I say.

And his voice lowers; he's that excited. "What if it was the *words*?" he asks. "I've got a mantra."

Of course, I'm aware of this. It always used to bug me that he wouldn't tell me what it was. Your mantra, he says, loses its power if it's spoken aloud. So by now I'm beginning to guess what his mantra might be. "A bunch of people I know," I tell him, "all had the same guru. And one day they decided to share the mantras he'd given them. They each wrote their mantra on a piece of paper and passed it around. And you know what? They all had the *same* mantra. So much for personalization."

"They lacked faith," he points out.

"Rightfully so."

"I gotta go," he tells me. We're reaching the crescendo in the background music, and it cuts off with a click. Silence. He doesn't say good-bye. I refuse to call him back.

The truth is, I'm tired of always being there for him.

So I don't hear from him again until this morning when he calls with the great Displacement Theory. By now I've been forty almost ten days, if you believe the birth certificate the reservation drew up; I find a lot of inaccuracies surfaced when they translated moons into months, so that I've never been too sure what my rising sign is. Not that it matters to me, but it's important to him all of a sudden; apparently you can't analyze personality effectively without it. He thinks I'm a Pisces rising; he'd love to be proved right.

"We can go *back*, old buddy," he says. "I've found the way back."

"Why would we want to?" I ask. The sun is shining and it's cold out. I was thinking of going for a run.

Does he hear me? About like always. "I figured it out," he says. "It's a combination of biofeedback *and* the mantra 'home.' I've been working and working on it. I could always leave, you know; that was never the problem; but I could never *arrive*. Something outside me stopped me and forced me back." He pauses here, and I think I'm supposed to say something, but I'm too pissed. He goes on. "Am I getting too theoretical for you? Because I'm about to get more so. Try to stay with me. The key word is *displacement*." He says this like he's shivering. "I couldn't get back because there was no room for me there. The only way back is through an exchange. Someone else has to come forward."

He pauses again, and this pause goes on and on. Finally I grunt. A redskin sound. Noncommittal.

His voice is severe. "This is too important for you to miss just because you're sulking about God knows what, pilgrim," he says. "This is travel through space *and* time."

"This is baloney," I tell him. I'm uncharacteristically blunt, blunter than I ever was during the primal-scream-return-to-the-womb period. If nobody's listening, what does it matter?

"Displacement," he repeats, and his voice is all still and important. "Ask yourself, buddy, *what happened to the buffalo*?" I don't believe I've heard him correctly. "Say *what*?" "Return with me," he says, and then he's gone for good and this time he hasn't hung up the phone; this time I can still hear the *William Tell Overture* repeating the hoofbeat part. There's a noise out front so I go to the door, and damned if I don't have a buffalo, shuffling around on my ornamental strawberries, looking surprised. "You call this grass?" it asks me. It looks up and down the street, more and more alarmed. "Where's the plains, man? Where's the railroad?"

So I'm happy for him. Really I am.

But I'm not going with him. Let him roam it alone this time. He'll be fine. Like Rambo.

Only then another buffalo appears. And another. Pretty soon I've got a whole herd of them out front, trying to eat my yard and gagging. And whining. "The water tastes funny. You got any water with locusts in it?" I don't suppose it's an accident that I've got the same number of buffalo here as there are men in the Cavendish gang. Plus one. I keep waiting to see if any more appear; maybe someone else will go back and help him. But they don't. This is it.

You remember the theories of history I told you about, back in the beginning? Well, maybe somewhere between the great men and the masses, there's a third kind of person. Someone who listens. Someone who tries to *help*. You don't hear about these people much, so there probably aren't many of them. Oh, you hear about the failures, all right, the shams: Brutus, John Alden, Rasputin. And maybe you think there aren't any at all, that nobody could love someone else more than he loves himself. Just because *you* can't. Hey, I don't really care what you think. Because I'm here and the heels of my moccasins are clicking together and I couldn't stop them even if I tried. And it's okay. Really. It's who I am. It's what I do.

I'm going to leave you with a bit of theory to think about. It's a sort of riddle. There are good Indians, there are bad Indians, and there are dead Indians. Which am I?

There can be more than one right answer.