

INDIAN ROSE

A Martin McDonough short story

By Bruce Rubenstein

Indian Rose Rademacher was no rose. She wasn't an Indian either but she was raised as one. Charlie Kills Plenty told me how that happened when he hired me to find her.

"This was a year or two before Prohibition hey. Her mother used to come around the bar where us Indian loggers drank. The wasetchu were so crazy to get all the trees cut down they even hired some Indians back then." - He paused and shook his head in wonderment at what struck me as a simple manifestation of one of the basics: Greed trumps everything. - "They paid us fair," he continued, "treated us alright in camp, but we couldn't drink in Brainerd. No Indians allowed hey. So we went to this roadhouse a half-blood owned - wasn't even a saloon really. Just a shack outside of town."

The way he described Rose's mother, she sounded like the kind of white dame you'd see in a blind pig. Twenty-five going on 40, whoring for drinks while her daughter begged for coins. "Rose might'a been five at the time," he said. "Hard to tell, she was so skinny and ragged."

He was toying with his beer as we spoke, in that way people have of handling a glass when they don't really want what's in it. This fascinated me. It ran counter to everything I'd ever heard about redskins. He took a sip now and then, so you couldn't exactly call him a teetotaler.

"Everybody else was stinkin' drunk one night," he told me, "but me, I'm gettin' bored. I noticed Rose by the door and it dawns on

me that I haven't seen her mother all night. 'Where's your mama?' I asked. She just shook her head, wouldn't say a word." He smiled a rueful little smile. "Rose was stubborn even then."

He followed her into the woods at closing time - by the light of "the hunting moon,"- and watched her duck into the wreckage of what had been a crude shelter made of sticks. "I saw two bare legs sticking out. Rose, she dug in and snuggled up around the rest, but there was a kind of bad smell and I didn't like the look of things. I pulled the sticks away and sure enough that gal was dead hey. Some drunk must'a beat her brains out, kicked that shack of theirs down. Rose just clung to that corpse for dear life, bit me and scratched me when I tried to pick her up. She calmed down after awhile though. Then she hung on so I could hardly put her down for a few days."

It was easy to see why a traumatized kid might cling to Charlie Kills Plenty. He was a soft-spoken, bear-like guy, with long hair pulled back into a knot that brushed his thick neck. Judging from the expression on his mug life amused him.

He'd told me his name when he called, so I figured he was a redskin. I suggested meeting at Tin Cup's, and being a solicitous fellow when it comes to prospective clients, added, "don't worry, you'll be ok as long as you're with me."

"Ok?" he said.

He chuckled when he took my meaning. I could see why when he walked in. He was as tall as me but bigger. I guessed him at 6'1", 230. He had some fat on him, but you could tell the way he carried himself that there was muscle underneath it. The brawlers at the bar gave him a once-over and put their noses back in their drinks.

I gathered from Charlie's account that the village raised Rose. Men didn't have much of a role when it came to girl children, he explained. "Mostly I bought her clothes, made sure the women had enough money to feed her."

He said Rose had been a well-behaved child but she'd been trouble the moment she started hanging out in town.

"They'd just built the dance hall at Gull Lake, and she began meeting guys there that summer. You know how some young gals get when they see the power they have over men. This one fella, Fred Pfeffer, he gave her a car and taught her how to drive. A nice LaSalle. He left his wife and kids for her, but Rose dumped him and came down to St. Paul. She was back and forth a few times. Last time we saw her was about a year ago. The women say she was real upset about something and nobody's seen her since.

"Poor dumb Pfeffer came down here looking for her and stayed," he added. "Now he's on skid row hey."

Charlie said that Rose had fallen in with a tough crowd in St. Paul, and made it clear that he didn't expect me to find her alive.

"Are you looking for revenge?" I asked. The coppers didn't like it when the information I gave my clients, which nine times out of ten the cops had given me, resulted in violence.

"Not me," he said.

"Word of honor?"

"Honest injun'. Just want to find her and bury her right. And I could use that LaSalle hey."

It sounded straightforward enough. I asked how he heard about me.

"I do some guiding, show people where to fish, how to hunt moose. This fisherman fella, Frank Ahearn, he told me about you. 'Get hold'a Martin McDonough,' he said. 'He'll find her.'"

I remembered Frank. He was a retired investigator, much older than me but he'd been on the police force when I got started. He'd hung up his badge in the midst of Prohibition, when the bootleggers were throwing big dough around. Lots of coppers took long

vacations in those days. Frank just made his permanent. I inquired after his well-being.

"He's fine. Him and Captain Billy know how to have a good time hey."

He spoke of this officer as if I should've known who he was but I didn't, so I asked.

"You never heard'a Captain Billy Fawcett?" He was incredulous. "Everybody knows the Captain around Brainerd, but he comes from the city here. Made a fortune with the penny dreadfuls. I hear he put up the money for the Gull Lake dance hall. He's building some other stuff too. Fishing camps, a hotel."

"Somehow he escaped my attention."

"Then I suppose you never read Captain Billy's Whiz Bang. One of the great achievements of wasetchu literature hey. Corny jokes. Women in tight dresses and high heels."

"I'm always looking for a good book."

"It's a pulp magazine. The priests at the Mission School put it on the list, so I read every one I could get my hands on. - Think you can find Rose?"

"I'll do my best, but I don't give a money back guarantee." I told him my price and he didn't flinch, another surprise. "I didn't know you people had that kind of do re mi," I said without thinking. Later it occurred to me that he might've taken it wrong, but he just said, "Some of us do ok. We take care of each other. You and me got a deal?"

"Yeah."

He reached across the booth and we shook hands. He wrote three names on a scrap of paper and handed it to me: Annie Rossydoos; Philomene Chouinard; Fred Pfeffer. "Talk to them. It'll get you started," he said. "Find the LaSalle and I'll give you a fifty buck bonus, how's that?"

"Excellent. Where do I find madams Rossydoss and Chew - Chow -"

"Sha-nair. Fee-low-men Sha-nair." His eyes crinkled with amusement at my mangled frogtalk. I noticed he looked a tad myopic. "Annie and Phil came down here with me. I'll get you together with them. You're on your own with Pfeffer."

"Think he did her in?"

Charlie just shrugged. He pulled out a roll, thumbed off my advance and excused himself, leaving most of his beer behind. The tough guys waited until he passed, then turned and stared as he walked out the door. They shook their heads in unison, as if to say that some things surpassed their understanding. Which was certainly true. They were arranged around the first horseshoe of the long Tin Cup's bar, a regular rogue's gallery of fellow Mick hootchers. I slid in among them and ordered a whiskey.

"Saw you shakin' hands with that redskin," said Bertie Crimmins.

"Testin' his grip," I said.

"Oh yeah? How was it?"

"Firm."

Bertie was trying to start a fight. He was in a state of acute frustration because a stranger had come and gone unchallenged. He probed again. "They say the redskins live like royalty up on those whatchamacallums - those resurrections."

"Last time we talked, Bertie, they were saying the dinges are moving out of Rondo."

"So?"

"So who are 'they?' And how come they know so much about the colored?"

"I only know what I hear," he said.

Harv Bailey was positioned directly across the horseshoe, listening with half an ear to our verbal joust. Harv was a copper on the night beat so he had an excuse for imbibing before noon. I motioned for the bartender and pointed at his glass. "When he's ready."

"Ain'cha gonna buy one for me," Bertie inquired. I shook my head no. "Why not?" he demanded.

"Because you only know what you hear."

I moved around next to Harv and got to the point. "I'm looking for a down-and-outer. Guy name'a Fred Pfeffer. Came here from Brainerd chasin' a dame, and hit the skids."

"Hard times, Martin. Lotsa bums around. How far away is Brainerd?"

"Maybe a hundred and fifty miles."

"That's a start. If it's more than a hundred miles he qualifies for Migrant Services. Could be he went in for some grub."

I shudder to think where I'd be without the help of the police.

Charlie called early next morning and said he'd pick me up. I wondered what kind of Okie rustbucket I'd be riding in. Wrong again. He was driving a neat Model A, green, with a canvas top. All we needed was a flapper in the rumble seat and it could've been the good old days. But it wasn't, it was the middle of the Depression.

"What do you do for a buck, Charlie? If you don't mind my askin'."

"A little bit of everything hey."

Point taken. I amused myself by guessing which hostelry let rooms to redskins as we headed toward downtown. It was a moot question. We crossed the Third Street Bridge, hooked up with Highway 61 and drove south along the Mississippi.

The concrete petered out into a gravel two lane just past the barge terminal. Charlie leaned forward and squinted intently at the

roadside, which all looked the same to me, thick brush, red sumac, an unbroken line of trees. The way he was squinting I wasn't sure he could see much anyway, but he spotted something. We swung left across a weedy embankment, bumped through a meadow shaded by a grove of oak, and drove straight into the woods on ruts that might have been made by a horse and wagon. We crawled along for maybe fifteen minutes until the ruts ended alongside a stream moving at a pretty good clip toward the river. It flowed down from the bluffs, through a canyon awash in leaves of scarlet, orange and gold.

"Battle Creek Ravine," said Charlie. "We're camped upstream."

He parked the car and locked it. I wasn't dressed for a hike, but didn't mind. The sun was shining, the creek was gurgling, the leaves were beautiful colors. In fact it was a perfect autumn scene, except it was almost eighty degrees out. I told Charlie how us white folks referred to weather like this.

"I've heard 'Indian-giver,'" he said. "That's when the wasetchu give the Indians a little land back, then find out there's gold or something there, so they grab it again hey. So maybe Indian summer means a little taste of summer that Jesus gives his children, then takes right back again. - Watch out. It's mushy here."

We skirted a wet patch. Charlie parted some nettle that bordered the stream. I saw two tents on the other side, and a couple of redskin women kneeling on the bank, washing clothes in the water. We took off our shoes and splashed across.

Charlie said something to the women while they looked me over. I reciprocated. The older gal, who'd stood as we approached, was flat-faced and husky, more weathered than wrinkled. She had a flinty look in her eye. I guessed her at fifty.

The young one, maybe 16, looked up at me with a smug expression, as if she knew what I was thinking. She was right. I'd

never seen a girl quite that beautiful before. She had straight black hair so thick it looked like a curtain drawn to reveal her lovely oval face. Her lips were reddened with some kind of rouge-like coloring and her doe-eyes peered out between long dark lashes and high cheekbones. She had skin the color of a well-circulated penny.

She'd remained on her knees at the water's edge during the introductions. The way her buckskin skirt clung to the faint swell of her thighs made me wish I was 20 years younger for a moment, but the moment passed.

"This is Annie Rossydoss," said Charlie, gesturing toward the old gal. "And Philomene Chouinard."

Annie said something to the girl. She stood quickly and walked off toward the tents. My gaze must have lingered a bit because Annie gave me a hard look, which Charlie noted with amusement.

"Watch out," he said. "Annie'll sucker punch you if you get out of line. Anything you want to ask?"

"They speak English?"

"Annie doesn't. I'll translate. Phil speaks something old Chouinard taught her. Not English, but close."

I made a broad inquiry of the old dame just to see what came up, what kind of girl Rose was or something like that. Charlie relayed my question. They chewed it over. I guess you'd call their language guttural. I did pick up that "hey" locution a few times.

After a minute or so of conversation Charlie turned to me. "Annie says Rose was a good kid but reckless."

"It took her that long to say that?"

"She talked about our naming ways, what we told Rose about herself. You don't care about that stuff."

"Try me. You never know what might be important."

Turned out the redskins tell stories to get their children acquainted with the past, and explain how they fit in. Rose was a special case, but they didn't sugar coat things for her.

"I knew her mother's name was Rademacher," said Charlie, "so we always told her she was Rose Rademacher. As soon as she was old enough to understand, we told her a bad man had killed her mom and that was why Annie and the other women were raising her."

Annie interrupted, and they had another palaver.

"She says Rose was taught to honor her mother and father," said Charlie.

"Who was her father?"

He shrugged. "Could've been the guy who killed her mother."

"Jeez. Why would she honor him?"

"It's her duty," he replied. He explained that if by some chance Rose were to discover who her father was, and it turned out that he'd indeed murdered her mother, then she was required to see that he got justice in this world. So he didn't have to face it in the next.

The best way to honor her mother, he said, was to make sure she didn't share her fate.

The old lady stared at me intently as he spoke. Something occurred to me, but I didn't know if I should just blurt it out. We stood there silently, listening to the leaves rustle.

"Doesn't sound like she did so well honoring her mother," I said.

Charlie shrugged. "That's why it's important to find her hey. Sing the honor songs. Help her get down the spirit road."

I asked Annie if she'd seen Rose the last time she'd been home. She had. She didn't know why Rose was upset though.

I said I had some questions for the girl and started walking toward the tents. I hadn't gone two steps when the old gal was breathing down my neck. I turned to Charlie. "Could you explain

that I need to speak to her alone. I don't want anybody putting words in her mouth."

He shook his head and smiled. "Abandon all hope of getting into a tipi alone with Phil while Annie's around," he said. "Nothing personal."

Charlie lifted the canvas flap and the three of us entered. Annie folded some blankets into squares, arranged them on the ground, and we seated ourselves. They all seemed comfortable, even Charlie, ponderous as he was. I found it excruciating. It was like trying to sit on a barstool if it didn't have a post. I hurried through some perfunctory questions. Philomene's answers were brief and nearly unintelligible. Yes, they were friends. No, she hadn't heard from Rose since she was home last.

"Think Fred Pfeffer was the kind'a guy might harm her?" I asked.

"EH?" Did I mention she had a voice like a foghorn.

Charlie repeated my inquiry in their language. She rolled her eyes, then performed a little pantomime while she replied. She placed her hands flat on the ground in front of her, padded them toward Charlie as if they were feet, and hung her tongue out of her pretty mouth. Annie frowned but kept her counsel.

"What'd she say?"

"She said Fred Pfeffer was like a hound with a hard on around Rose," said Charlie. "If Rose so much as scratched his ears he'd roll over and wave his paws in the air."

I had to smile at that. So did Charlie, and after a few moments Annie did too. I was glad to see she knew how.

I asked if there were any men in Rose's life that she felt differently about.

"Vairn Mee-lair," she said, without hesitation. "Rose, she go sampawl with ham, she love ham."

I checked with Charlie to make sure I'd heard right. "Did she just tell me Rose fell in love with a guy name'a Vern Miller and went to St. Paul with him?"

"Right. You heard of him hey?"

"Oh yes."

* * *

St. Paul was full of infamous gangsters back then because the police ran a protection racket known as "the layover." Gangsters who behaved could lay low in St. Paul for up to a year if they behaved themselves. Most didn't last that long. They committed some infraction, usually involving guns, and got the boot because in those days the kind of psycho who enjoys shooting people could call it a skill and get paid for it. Their kind made a fat buck settling disputes for bootleggers, knowing full well that the coppers couldn't care less what happened to their victims. They got into the habit of terrorizing with impunity and that's a hard habit to break.

When Prohibition ended they slid right into bank robbery. They had the same license to kill they'd had with the bootleggers for awhile given Depression attitudes toward bankers, but that had changed by the time I was hired to find Rose. People had realized that it was rarely the officer in charge of farm foreclosures who got shot. It was the teller, or the hayseed who showed up to make a deposit at the same time John Dillinger arrived to make a withdrawal. In other words, they became aware of something the St. Paul police had known for a long time. There were distinctions to be made between one stick-up man and another.

Vern Miller had some traits that endeared him to his hosts. He was the kind of bank robber who'd rather nobody got hurt, and on top of that he was a charming rogue who enjoyed regaling all and

sundry with tales of his escapades. Lots of gangsters liked to talk but most of them were loudmouths who bragged about the trail of blood and guts they left. Not Miller. I once sat in the Green Lantern with him and a couple fly-cops, and listened to his recounting of a robbery. It ended with the bank president shaking his hand and wishing him well before he departed with \$25,000 in cash and negotiable paper. It was a good story well told, and he bought the drinks.

Miller was so beloved by the buzz that I thought they might have looked into his murder, which had happened about a year ago. John McCormick Jr. disabused me of that notion over a whiskey at Tin Cup's.

"Couple of us wanted to, but Tommy put the nix on it You know him."

I did indeed. Eternal Tommy Brown, Chief for Life of the saintly city's police force. Tommy knew that I relied on his crooked minions for the information that was my stock in trade, and he took full advantage. The vagaries of the layover often dictated that a civilian perform tasks that normally would have fallen to the coppers. I'd risked my neck countless times in The Eternal One's service, but 'what have you done for me lately' was always the question.

Tommy had famously summed up his attitude toward the misadventures of the hoodlums who took refuge here a few years back, when Bugs Moran killed Sammy "The Comedian" Silverman. Sammy was another guy the coppers liked. A reporter asked Tommy if his boys were looking into the murder.

"I don't give a crap what those palookas do to each other as long as they don't kill a citizen," he said, "and I'll fire any cop who wastes his time investigating. You can quote me."

"Are you lookin' into Vern's murder?" John asked me, hopefully. "Couple'a us might put together a few bucks if you wanted to."

Now there was a proposition I'd never heard before, and it came from one of my key sources of information. John's father had been the Chief when the layover was formalized, at the dawn of Prohibition. Bootleg hootch soon deprived John Sr. of his wits, which sad befalling ushered in the reign of Eternal Tommy, but John Jr. retained responsibility for many matters pertaining to the layover as a kind of sinecure.

"I'm looking into something that might be connected," I said. "I'll let you know what I find out. Ever hear of a gal name'a Rose that Miller hung around with?"

"Let's see, Vern was quite the ladies man.....oh yeah, Indian Rose. I know who she is. So do you."

John spent way more time at the Lantern than I did , but when he described the tomato he was referring to I remembered. She was the kind of gal that made an impression - not exactly gorgeous, but sexy and flamboyant. She dressed in those slinky outfits with the fringe that jiggled when she moved. She had bobbed hair, a loud laugh and her lips were always painted fire engine red. I told John that she'd disappeared about the same time Miller was shot. It was news to him.

"Maybe what happened to her had something to do with what happened to him," I said. "Know why he was killed?"

"I heard one of his own torpedoes done it," said John, "but I don't even know who his guys were. You know how things are."

Things were in flux. The G-men were hounding the infamous thugs with the well-organized gangs relentlessly. Dillinger had been ambushed and shot by the Gs a few months past, and several of his gang were holed up in St. Paul, wondering what to do next. Many

an experienced jug-buster was in their shoes. Lots of soldiers, no generals. Loose alliances on a project basis seemed to be the M O. I bought John a drink and asked the next best question.

"Why was Vern Miller killed?"

"Somethin' to do with a bank robbery. Maybe an argument about the loot. That's usually behind those kinda rubouts." He shook his head. "Too bad. He was quite the lad." John touched my glass with his. "To Vern Miller, may his soul rest in peace." He dabbed at his eye with a bar napkin.

We'd reached that stage. Next thing you knew, somebody'd play Danny Boy on the Wurlitzer and John would be singing along. I succumbed as easily as anyone, but unlike the others I hated myself next morning. It was time to bring things to a conclusion. I did some vigorous prompting.

It paid off. John told me that Miller almost certainly used the services of Jelly Nash, reputedly the best jug marker in the business, and he could give me plenty of information if I could locate him.

"Jugs" were banks, in the parlance of that trade, and once a plan to bust a jug was finalized it was considered "marked."

Jelly Nash was a born actor with a photographic memory. His specialty was putting on a suit and tie, and pretending he was a business man looking for a secure place to deposit his money. Supposedly he could sweet talk any bank officer in America into giving him a guided tour of the premises and a detailed description of the security system.

"He diagrams it," John explained, "finds out where the vault is, who can open it and when, how long the deposits are kept, when they're moved. And on top of that he maps an escape route using back roads. Yeah, Come to think of it Vern must'a used him, because I heard they got away on some old logging roads."

"No kidding! Where was the bank?"

"Up north, had lots'a cash on deposit for some reason, lets see.... The Merchants Bank of.... Brainerd, I think."

Yet again I had to ask myself where I would be without the police.

Next morning I stopped by the Migrant Services office on 7th Street. A mockie with curly black hair ran the place. I could tell by his bloodshot eyes that he shared my weakness. We knocked one back at a bar around the corner, and discussed the recently concluded World Series. When we returned he instructed his clerk to give me what I needed.

Frederick Pfeffer, who lived at the Annbee Arms, 10th and St. Peter, had picked up a sack of commodities the previous Friday. My vast trove of useless information grew incrementally by virtue of a brief perusal of his file. Apparently the contents of said sack varied. He'd received a #4: rolled oats, peanut butter, a Powerhouse candy bar and a two pound bag of a substance which, if memory serves, they'd developed for the doughboys. Death in the trenches must have been easier to face when the alternative was powdered eggs.

According to the sign, furnished rooms were let by the week at the Annbee. My heart went out to the poor bastard when I saw how they were furnished. Naught but a cot with a lumpy mattress, a cane chair with a hole worn in the seat, and a night table with a lamp that was still burning. The shades were drawn.

Pfeffer 's fair-skinned mug was unshaven and his blond hair looked greasy. Traces of a shiner were visible under his eye. He was already into the sneaky pete when I arrived. He seated himself on the bed and gestured for me to take the chair, a vestige of what might have been a good upbringing. His pants needed pressing and the sleeves of his white shirt were frayed, but the clothes and the wing-tip brogans next to the bed were quality stuff.

Flies patrolled the rim of an open jar of peanut butter on the night table, and made forays over to some dirty socks on the floor as we spoke. Pfeffer was so beat he didn't even ask who I was or why I was questioning him.

Time hadn't healed his broken heart. "I loved her," he blubbered. He said he knew it was over when he saw her dancing with Vern Miller at the Gull Lake Ball Room. He didn't know where she was, or what if anything had happened to her. He put his head in his hands for a moment, then reached for the sneaky pete. He took a swig and offered the bottle, which I declined.

I gathered that he thought Vern Miller had some deeply ulterior motive for seducing Rose, but his mind was too sodden and his mouth too mushy to express what it might have been. Either that or he didn't want to discuss it. Instead he kept going back to their lovemaking, in a little more detail than I wanted to hear. He told me it took place on lonely country roads, in the back seat of a car. A wan smile crossed his mug when he recalled how it began.

"I picked her up in - inna LaSalle," he said. "Toll me she'd screw me if I gave - gave -"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Fred, listen to me. Did you give her the car?"

He nodded and took another gulp.

"Where did you get the moola to buy a LaSalle?"

Turned out he got quite a deal. It was a repo, and he had first dibs due to his job as chief loan officer of the Merchants Bank, Brainerd, Minnesota.

It took a few days to locate Jelly Nash, which irritated me in a peculiar way. I'm nothing if not a sleuth and when I can't find people I wonder if maybe I'm nothing. Truth be known, my sterling reputation rested on an accident of birth. I'd have been in a bread line if I was a swede or a mockie. My weakness for the hootch

virtually guaranteed it, but being Irish turned that particular liability into an asset. Tin Cup's was my office, and chinning with coppers who wouldn't give me dust if I wasn't Irish was my stock in trade. Therefore, the mysteries I was able to solve on my own were of great importance to me, even the small ones.

I knew nothing about Nash except his name and reputation. The obvious spot to look was the Green Lantern. He not only wasn't there, I was told he rarely came in. Understandably perhaps. The Lantern was a clip joint, but the gangsters seemed to like it. Nash wasn't a teetotaler, so where was he? My copper pal John Moylan (Officer Jack to the gangsters he brutalized when the need arose) offered to locate him. I'll find him myself, I muttered.

Charlie Kills Plenty called to check on my progress. "I'm about to make a breakthrough," I told him.

All I had to do was find Jelly Nash. I was pondering what I knew about him for the umpteenth time when something came to me. His skill and his moniker didn't jibe. I'd assumed without much thought that "Jelly" referred to the lignite paste that petermen use to blow a box. Sometimes they call it soup, sometimes jelly. But Nash was no safe cracker.

Gangsters often got their nicknames in prison....

I located Jellyroll Nash in a lounge in the lobby of the Lowry Hotel that was known as a fag hang out. He was seated at a small table. I pulled a up chair and joined him. "You're tough to find," I said.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and exhaled dramatically through his bent beezer. "Do I know you?" he inquired.

"Martin McDonough. I'm a private dick. We have some mutual acquaintances." I mentioned Officer Jack and a few more coppers. He nodded warily. "Drink?" I asked. "Sure," he replied.

I signaled the bartender, and sized up the joint while we waited. It was murky with tobacco smoke like Tin Cup's, but it didn't reek of stale beer, probably because everybody was drinking Manhattans. The guys at the bar were paired off, chatting and posing like couples everywhere, but they were all men. Some might've passed as tomatoes if they were dressed for it. Not Jellyroll though. He was thin and fragile looking, but he had a squashed beak like a boxer, which he certainly was not. Probably got it the same place he got his nickname.

"Those coppers I mentioned want me to find out who shot Vern Miller," I said, after his drink arrived. "The buzz can't look into it, but I can."

He rubbed his chin nervously, snubbed his butt in the ashtray and lit another.

I caught his eye and held it. "The coppers liked Miller," I said. "They get their hands on the guy who killed him....."

"Why'ya tellin' me about this," he said. He was trying to sound impatient, but he didn't. He sounded scared.

I leaned over the table, and spoke softly. "Because you killed him. He cut you out of the Merchants Bank heist. He didn't need you. It was an inside job."

I let that sink in, then dangled the bait. "I don't work for the coppers. I was hired to find out what happened to Indian Rose. You tell me why you killed her and where she's buried, and I'll keep what you did to Miller under here." I tapped my fedora.

"Indian Rose?" He seemed confused.

"Don't play dumb with me."

"You talkin' about that half-breed frail Vern hung around with?"

"You know damn well I am."

"God is my witness, I didn't kill her. I didn't even know she was dead." He took a big gulp of his drink, and proceeded to come clean.

I'd guessed right about his motive for killing Miller, but Rose barely existed as far as he was concerned. Miller had informed him that his services were not required for the Merchants Bank job, and he wouldn't even get a token cut. "Treated me like I was nothin'," he said. "No respect. Damn right I shot him."

He told me that when the rest of the gang found out he'd shot Miller they'd had to talk one of their members out of murdering him. "Jimmy Keylock was gonna come lookin' for me, but the boys wouldn't let him," he said. "They know what I'm worth. I'm the best jug marker there is."

I knew Keylock by reputation, and not as the sentimental type. "Why did he want to kill you?" I asked. "He a buddy of Miller's?"

"Keylock ain't nobody's buddy. He was lathered because Vern still had the swag and none of'em knew where he'd stashed it. They never did find out. Served'em right for lettin' Vern double cross me. As for the dame, if anything happened to her, Keylock done it."

"Why?"

"Maybe he thought she knew where the dough was. Maybe that was just an excuse. He's bugs, y'know. Enjoys killin' people, 'specially dames.

"Uses them keys of his to sneak into houses," he added. "They want him for rape and murder back in Toledo or wherever. - You ain't gonna tell the buzz about me'n Vern are'ya?"

I assured him I wouldn't and excused myself.

"Leaving so soon, blue eyes?" one of the patrons inquired as I exited, an odd query considering the source, but I barely took note. I was pondering a world in which some murders are crimes and

others are - what? Leverage? Currency? Zero? The coppers were used to making the call, but this was a first for me. I didn't like it.

I still didn't like it a week later, when once again I found myself in the woods with the redskins.

Keylock had been easy to locate. Officer Jack told him I had some clients who wanted to find Roses's body and it would be in his best interest to talk to me. We met at the Lantern, early in the afternoon.

He was a little guy with a mean face, a pug nose, and a way of snarling when he talked that made it look like only half his puss worked. He was reticent at first, but soon warmed to his tale. It left me cold.

"We found out Vern was dead a couple days after Jelly shot him," he said. "Tossed his place, couldn't find the dough. The dame already lammed. We figured she'd headed home, y'know, where the bank is. I was for goin' after her, but the other guys wanted to wait around, see if anybody showed. Next day we're parked down the block and up she drives in that car'a hers."

They marched her in and asked where the loot was hidden. She claimed she didn't know, but they didn't believe her. I asked why they were so certain she knew. Keylock said it was because Rose ("that dame," he didn't know her name) was living with Miller, and had been in on the heist from the beginning. She'd persuaded a loan officer she knew to mark for the bank for them, and she'd mapped their escape route.

I asked him if Miller had sweet-talked her with that in mind.

"Uh-uh," he replied. "Vern was gonna marry her. Reason I know, when we asked her what the hell she'd come back for if she wasn't after the dough, she said she only wanted one thing, and she went into a drawer and got it. It was a marriage license he'd taken

out. They had the blood test and everything. Bitch got all teary when she looked at it.

"Vern was actually gonna get hitched to that half-breed cunt," he added. "I fixed her wagon though." He passed his finger across his throat.

He told me he'd held her at gun point and made her drive down to South St. Paul. "Soon's we got off the main drag and drove behind the stockyards she knew what was happenin', but I let her think about it awhile. Kept goin back deeper in the woods."

He'd taken her past the old speakeasy next to the bridge pilings, beyond a row of shacks, and down a trail that led along the flats. It was late last November when this happened, and I could imagine what Rose's last looks at this world must have been; the bare black branches of huge old river bottom trees trembling in the icy wind, scraggly brown underbrush, barren sand dunes with a little windblown snow swirling across them. They drove for about half an hour. It was dusk when they stopped. He cuffed her to the wheel with some handcuffs he'd brought along.

I'll say this for him. He stuck to his task. He built a fire and spent the night, he said. "Every once in awhile I'd walk over and ask where the dough was. She was shiverin', scared, but she wouldn't say nothin."

He said he'd dozed off after awhile. When he woke up the fire had gone out and he was cold. Rose was barely conscious. He roused her and asked again. She began shivering so uncontrollably she couldn't speak, but she shook her head no. He could see she didn't have long, so he decided to take advantage of what life remained in her.

"I done it to a stiff once," he explained, "but it wasn't the same. That was the only time she screamed, when I pulled her legs apart. I asked her one last time when I was done. She tried to spit on me."

He laughed. "It just drooled down her cheek. I felt like shootin' her, but that was too quick. I just left her there."

It was his recollection that it took him more than an hour to walk back to the stock yards.

"Think you can find the car?" I asked.

"Yeah. Anything to keep Officer Jack happy. He said you'd want me to take you there. Says some redskins hired'ya." He paused as if that were a question. I didn't answer.

"I heard you was classier than that," he said.

I smiled. "You're pretty classy yourself, Jimmy."

"Thanks. My friends call me Keylock." He dangled a ring full of keys and selected a small one. "This here is for the handcuffs. I was gonna go back and get'em sometime anyways. - She should'a told me where the swag was. Think maybe she didn't know?"

"Makes no difference now." I stood to leave. A copper I knew from Tin Cup's spotted me and waved. I just nodded. I wasn't in the mood for small talk.

"I'll set things up with my clients for tomorrow," I told Jimmy. "We'll get this over."

I could barely put key in the ignition, kept missing the keyhole. You've got to calm down I told myself. I drove around most of that afternoon turning things over in my mind.

No question I worked the edges of a system that the coppers were right square in the middle of, and I don't mean the layover. That was just part of it. The whole force from Eternal Tommy down to the humblest flatfoot knew all sorts of things that they couldn't prove, things that would never lead to an arrest let alone a conviction. I made a living cajoling that information out of them. It was a craft I had to work at, because they hoarded knowledge and traded on it same as I did, sometimes for cash, but more often for their notion of justice. They didn't like me filling in the blanks for

people who wanted vengeance, not just because it made work for them, but because they didn't get to make the call. That was a prerogative they guarded zealously.

So there I was, with solid information about two unsolved murders. The one that interested the coppers didn't matter much to me. Vern Miller was an ok guy, but he should've known better. The killing of Indian Rose was different. Charlie had given his word that he wasn't looking for revenge, and it wasn't my business - literally - so what was I supposed to do?

Without realizing it I'd been driving down Concord Street. The tainted breeze told me I was nearing the stockyards before I saw where I was. I parked in front of the South St. Paul Police headquarters and within minutes had an audience with the Chief.

I could tell he was intrigued by the idea of busting a red-hot like Keylock, but he had to balance that against the squabble it would cause with his colleagues upriver if he arrested a dues-paying hood on the layover. In the end Indian Rose herself tipped the scale.

"Redskins ain't my problem," he said. "Killin' one of them bow'n arrows is like poaching a deer as far as I'm concerned."

"She was just a kid," I said.

He shrugged. And that was where matters stood two days later when Jimmy Keylock and I met up with Charlie, Annie and the girl, about two miles down-river from the South St. Paul bridge. I'd driven my bucket back there with Jimmy. They'd paddled over from the east bank in a birch bark canoe they'd hacked together for the occasion.

"We want to take her bones back on the water," Charlie explained.

Charlie had seemed stoical when I told him what happened to Rose. That was a disappointment I must confess, but it wouldn't have made much difference. Jimmy wasn't taking any chances. He

took a 38 out of his overcoat pocket the minute he laid eyes on Charlie, and kept it in hand from then on. "In case he gets any ideas," he said to me.

"Ok," I replied. "But they're my clients. Anything happens to them happens to me, and if anything happens to me you'll answer to Officer Jack. Understood?"

"Yeah. I don't wanna get scalped is all."

"That alright with you?" I asked Charlie.

"No problem," he replied. Jimmy seemed surprised he spoke English.

The women unloaded a drum made of animal skin, and couple packages wrapped in woven cloth, one the size of a candy box, the other a little bigger.

"Medicine bundles," Charlie explained. "For the ceremony when we find her." He had that amused look on his mug as we started walking into the woods. I had to wonder if it was real or the result of his squint, because this wasn't amusing anybody else, especially not the gals. They looked grim.

But grim or not, Philomene had a face that could cure a hangover, which didn't escape Jimmy's notice. "Got a date tonight, Pocahantas?" he inquired.

She didn't even look at him.

It took just a few minutes to locate the LaSalle in the woods back near the bluff. It was a two door five passenger sedan, with streamlined fenders and a long vented hood. The windshield and windows were so pitted we couldn't see inside. A determined sapling had forced it's way up through the grill. Its red leaves waved in the breeze as we approached. The remains of the fire Jimmy'd built when he murdered her were right in front of the car, where she could look at the flames while she froze to death.

Charlie had to jerk at the door hard, and when he got it open an indescribable stench emerged. Annie and the girl commenced howling. Charlie stepped aside while the air cleared. I saw what was left of Indian Rose Rademacher - a skeleton with some blackened shreds of flesh and rotted garments clinging here and there. Her wrist bones rested in the handcuffs. Charlie slipped them out and laid her remains on the ground. Jimmy made a big production out of holding his nose.

Annie and the girl regained their composure. They opened one of the bundles and removed some ribbons, a clump of some kind of weed, and a clump of tobacco. The three of them set about tying strips of ribbon to the car, to the sapling protruding from the grill and on some nearby trees. Annie laid the weed and the tobacco on the hood. Charlie held matches to both clumps until they started to smoke.

They began chanting and swaying, and Charlie beat the drum. The smudge from the smoldering clumps masked the odor of death but it lingered on my tongue. I almost gagged a few times.

"This their idea of a funeral?" said Jimmy.

He still had the pistol in his hand, but it dangled carelessly toward the ground. I could have easily landed a blow that would disable him. Then I could have had the pleasure of beating him senseless, but unless I killed him I'd have to worry every time I stepped out of a door for the rest of my life. So I did nothing.

The ceremony didn't last long. "We about done here," said Jimmy when they stopped chanting. He'd taken a key from his ring, and he held it up for us to see. "Handcuffs," he said. "I'm gonna get'em now that the mumbo-jumbo's over."

"We're almost finished," Charlie replied. "Just a minute."

He ducked into the car, pushed the front seat forward, and started heaving and straining at something in back. I couldn't see

what he was up to, but when he stepped away the rear seat had been pulled off the floor and he had a canvas bag in his hand. He reached in and took out a handful of bills.

"I'll settle with you now, Martin." He began to count off my fee.

You could've knocked me over with a feather.

"THE HELL!" said Jimmy. "WAIT A MINUTE YOU! THAT'S MY MONEY!"

Charlie paused with about half my fee paid. "How do you figure?" he said.

"THAT'S THE BANK LOOT! I RECOGNIZE IT!" He was beside himself. "GIMME THAT!" He pointed the pistol at Charlie, and looked at me. "TELL HIM IT'S MINE!" he demanded.

"Easy, easy," said Charlie. "Just explain why you think it's yours."

"We stole it, that's why."

"Ah." Charlie's smile broadened. "Truly, the wasetchu have much to teach me. I couldn't learn it all if I had two lifetimes." He resumed counting off my fee. "Actually, most of this money belongs to Captain Billy.....And fifty for finding the LaSalle." He proffered a nice fat wad in my direction.

"Listen McDonough," said Jimmy. "You better tell him I'm not screwin' around here. I want that money or -"

Maybe it's false pride, but I think I got a whiff of what was going down a moment before it happened. I'd noticed Annie opening that second bundle while Jimmy was focused on the dough. Nevertheless I was nearly as surprised as he was when she stuck the barrel of a Colt revolver in his ear.

"Oh," said Charlie, "I forgot to tell you. Watch out for Annie. She'll sucker punch'ya hey."

The old gal said something low and hard. "That means drop it," Charlie told him.

Jimmy hesitated. She jabbed at him with the barrel. He complied, foolishly in my opinion. He could've saved himself a lot of grief by taking one in the head right then. Charlie scooped up his pistol.

"HA!" the girl guffawed. "Ham be scare, look at ham."

Charlie put a finger to his lips. "Be respectful," he said.

Jimmy was scared alright. The blood had drained from his face. He looked like he was dead already.

"It's time for you to go, Martin," said Charlie.

I could see the wisdom in that. Jimmy viewed it as the last nail in his coffin. "Jesus, don't leave me here, McDonough, please," he pleaded. His voice was shaky and so were his legs. He sunk to his knees when I turned to leave. Last I saw, Annie was motioning him to get up.

Charlie accompanied me part way to my bucket. "I suppose he's gonna walk the spirit road," I said, before we parted.

He smiled, but he was always smiling. "I think he'll be driving down the spirit road. In Rose's LaSalle."

Seemed fair to me at the time and it still does, although I've often reflected since on how easy it is give up somebody else's life.

We shook hands. "You should get yourself some eyeglasses, Charlie," I said. "I can tell the way you squint."

"It's crossed my mind, but so far I haven't needed'em hey. I tell people where to look and they find things for me."

A few weeks later, must've been around Christmas, Frank Ahearn was in town. He stopped by Tin Cup's but we didn't get a chance to talk. He was busy gabbing with some older coppers, men he'd served with.

Not long after that a rumor went around that Jimmy Keylock had been murdered by his own gang because they'd discovered he'd killed Vern Miller. John McCormick told me about it. "Well what do you know," I said. "I suppose you're huntin' high and low for his killers."

He laughed, but soon grew maudlin. "To Vern Miller," he said, raising his glass.

"And to his bride to be," said I. John's eyes filled with tears, and if memory serves so did mine.

END

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