

Independence. July 16th. 1878.

We departed for Topeka shortly after first light and made good progress throughout the day. I am informed that we have travelled a little over halfway, and can expect to arrive tomorrow afternoon.

I had assumed that a taste of life away from the din and stench of the city would serve as a spiritual awakening for a man with aspirations for adventure. However, I must confess the countryside has already caused considerable disillusionment. We are confronted by constant niggling obstacles: the midges and flies that swarm around the horses and food; the stings and irritation of plant matter to which my nostrils and eyes are unaccustomed; and worse still, the inability to escape one's travelling companions regardless of how tiresome they become.

Truthfully, I am also unused to many hours mounted on horseback. I will try hard to conceal my discomfort and splayed posture from my companions, for I believe they are ready to mock my greenness and their perception of my faintness at any given cause.

In particular, a carpenter by the name of Lee Adams tests my fortitude. As we rode earlier today, he took to enquiring about my inexperience with women. Did I know that "their breasts produce different fluids depending on their mood and diet?" Or that "they howl like wolves when kissed in a certain, secret place?" It is true I have yet to be with a woman: nevertheless I have some comprehension of the fair sex. I know Adams' assertions to be lies. Furthermore, I understand these fabrications are made wholly to indulge an insecure and ignorant nature, attaining cheap giggles at the expense of those he believes unable to defend themselves.

I think it likely that his ignorance encompasses many subjects. The name of Socrates, for example, and the interrogative method that bears his name. Accordingly I resolved to

challenge my intellectual inferior, to force him onto untenable ground and weave a noose around his neck until the only available recourse was to hang.

“Just how many women have you made howl this way?” I demanded once the communal tittering had ceased.

“More’n you can count” he replied, conveniently evading a direct answer.

“I do not relish boasting,” I lied. “But since you are forcing my hand, I assure you I can count higher than three. Besides which, I am sure we are unconcerned with particulars – more than two then? Less than a million? Provide an estimation.”

“Why should I do that boy?” I noted Adams’ has a curiously and unattractive habit when thinking; he pauses, blinks hard, and wets his lips with his tongue.

“Because if the phenomena to which you allude occurred only once, how are we to know that the poor woman in question was not afflicted with a unique and monstrous deformity? Or indeed that the creature whose secret parts you kissed was not, in fact, a wolf?”

His companions laughed at that and began their own taunts, derivatives of my own of course – did she remain on all fours throughout the experience? Were there any other among her pack who might be make themselves available? So forth.

Adams was deeply irked by this. Compelled to defend his honour, he began boasting of the many beautiful women he had seduced and bedded. His tales were crude and not worth relaying here. Nevertheless you may imagine he always told them in a self-aggrandising manner, portraying himself as the adroit and charming man that women cannot resist. The other men were soon guffawing at the right moments as he slowly regained social acceptance and legitimacy through this facile display of bravado.

I said nothing further to provoke the man, having no intention to instigate a personal feud so early into my journey. But in addition to being thick-headed, Adams proved thin-skinned, and I had provided him with a slight to avenge.

Perhaps an hour after our initial engagement, Adams decided – with lips freshly wetted – that it was time for a resumption of hostilities between us.

“The trick is this” he imparted. “You find no joy with the real beauties. So you find yourself the right kind of girl. Find yourself something you can just about stand the fucking of and feed lies to the bitch. You tell her she is the most beautiful girl in town – or that you ever saw. You take care to notice everything about the way she dresses, the way she wears her hair. You tell her you like any changes she makes. You ask about her day and no matter how much it ain’t interesting, you pretend like it is right? See, women are vain and tedious things; forever at the mercy of a man’s attention. Before you know it, they get excited for your kind words, look forward to it. You are soon the highlight of their dull days. At that point I can charm anything ugly enough to need it.” Adams pointed to me, and shouted “this one’s mother, for one!”

The men laughed at that – I am at a loss to say why. Mother passed two years previous, and in any case, she was a devout woman and dedicated to my father. I would be surprised if any of my companions had truly made her acquaintance, or were indeed aware of her existence as anything more than conceptual necessity. Nevertheless, in all probability the validity of the claim was not motivation for their mirth – nor indeed the wit required in conjuring the accusation. In all likelihood their laughter came from the expectation of stakes raised: the sense that now two combatants were engaged in a duel of wits and words.

I wished my opponent good fortune.

“It would seem then, Mr. Adams, that your tongue is woven from silk.” I gestured back towards the group of women and children riding behind us. “I am certain that any one of

the fair ladies riding with us would be enslaved by your charm should you choose to employ it... And yet, I cannot help but recall your attempt earlier this morning. Tell me: is it often that you find women – or indeed most people – are in a rush to be elsewhere when you speak to them?”

I completed the taunt with a specific mime, for Adams had attempted to sweet-talk a pretty daughter of the Mormon family. The girl was probably encouraged to demonstrate indisposition towards all outside the faith; but regardless she had plainly baulked at the twitching, wart-covered face and his lecherous grin, and exculpated herself without even the courtesy of an excuse.

The men laughed raucously at the memory. I saw Adams blinking; preparing to stick out his tongue, and felt sure he was mentally preparing an interjection. Rather than allowing the retort, I elected to conclude the argument emphatically on my terms.

“Of course sir, no one here accuses you of a disingenuous nature. We accept, despite all evidence to the contrary, that women have found you very attractive. Perhaps you would concur then that lies are the sad refuge of failures? That the men that sit in saloons fabricating tales of glorious deeds never realized, and beautiful women they pretend to have seduced are the most pitiful. I conceive that, in truth, their words are as meaningful as the words of the working girls who profess love to a hundred strangers.”

Our companions bawdily declared me the winner of the debate, chastening Adams into silence.

I must stress at this stage to anyone reading these accounts that my stated belief regarding liars was more than just conversational point-scoring, rather it is a sincere and deeply held conviction. At seventeen I am yet too young to require such tragic needs and, as such, I will take this moment to assure any reader of my account that I record my journey truthfully: without exaggeration or deception, regardless of transpiration.

A few unremarkable hours later we stopped to camp for the night. It will be light a few hours yet. A retired soldier by the name of Mr. Pollock offered earlier in the day to assist my attempts to master the art of shooting – perhaps I will find this man and remind him of the offer.

Topeka. July 17th. 1878.

We have reached Topeka. Greatly am I relieved to have shed my former companions. The merits of solitude and a little whiskey are most welcome, they have allowed me to repose myself sufficiently to record the disturbing events of the previous night.

After establishing a place to rest for the night, the men and women did as they needed and then as they pleased. Eating and drinking, some singing and joking around a fire until the gradual dispersing as excuses were made for bed. Sleeping outside on the ground is not an experience I am accustomed to, but after several false starts I passed into unconsciousness, lulled by the background chatter of the last of those awake and the crackling of embers. I never recall my dreams however vivid they were at the time. I believe I was following some lucid, secret path through a forest when some unseen branch sprang into my face, dousing me instantly of the phantom of pain and shock experienced in dreams.

Normally these feelings are a curious and amusing phenomenon – the distress dissipating the instant one awakes – yet this time the pain did not fade. Falsely I concluded that an unconscious movement must have caused some painful contact. Yet as I sat to deduce the situation fully I saw firstly a shadow, and then a clenched fist swinging from my peripheral and I hit the floor once more. The impulse to cry out took hold but before I could, I felt something shoved hard into my mouth – old linen that smelled and tasted of body parts

best left unmentioned. Vainly I pushed back against the assault and felt my body bucking against the compulsion to vomit but found myself unable to do either.

My attacker leaned closely enough that I was able to discern Lee Adams' face. He was drunk and hateful, a triumphant toothy sneer fixed malevolently on his face.

“That’s a weeks’ worth of wear there boy – two days hard riding too. I do not imagine it tastes too good. See, all afternoon I got to thinking of all the ways I could shut your fucking mouth and then it came to me...”

He wheezed one slow exhalation of laughter at his own cruel joke before he whipped out a long knife and pressed it against my throat.

“Still, another way would be even better... Once I take my johns out your face, you’ll be back to your smart-cunt little ways no doubt, but this way... Well, count yourself lucky we’re in company and you ain’t worth the hanging for.”

Adams relaxed his grip on his undergarments. I was able to withdraw them and tried hard not to retch with the knife still pressed against my throat. In the darkness I could not see, but felt sure the tension had heightened my sense of hearing accordingly that I could hear his facial twitches and self-licking as he considered his next move.

“How it will work tomorrow is this: you don’t tell another soul about this, you don’t talk to me or even fucking look in my direction. Just ride at the back with the cunts and the babies. After Topeka, you best hope we don’t cross paths again.”

I nodded as best as I could with the knife still pressing, before Adams withdrew the blade, gave me a parting kick, and left me to heave and spit until near-dawn.

As we remounted the following morning I briefly considered defying his command, if only to evince a lack of cowardice. Yet despite Adams’ rational acknowledgement that our feud was not worthy of execution, push a man too far and murderous rage can supersede

rationality and even self-preservation. Duly then I fell in behind the men and rode alone between the two sub-groupings of our caravan.

I would have been content enough this way throughout the remainder of the journey, but the Mormon father rode on to accompany me, probably sensing a lost soul to comfort.

“It’s a beautiful day” he observed as he rode alongside me.

I offered the awkward smile of a man too polite to spurn company. The Mormon looked around at the clear blue sky, the array of fields, flowers and trees stretching alongside the roadside.

“Yes sir, a beautiful day indeed. Praise the Lord.”

I said nothing in return, and hoped that by adopting the guise of a dullard, the man might tire and return to his flock. Instead he began to hum a melody, eventually erupting into lyrical flourish before completing the chorus to some hymn or other. I kept my tongue and thought of happier things. As the chorus concluded, he turned to face me.

“God Be My Light – do you know it?”

I told him I did not.

“Well, you just heard yourself the tune, want me to teach you the words?”

I told him I did not.

“Why not? You have to praise the Lord and, if you’re asking me, I’d tell you singing is the best way to thank Him.”

Motivated by stung pride, or perhaps the way the man smiled at me with his mouth stupidly agape, even when silent, but either way I felt no inclination to offer thanks for much, and told him so.

“If you stop admiring creation, stop admiring all that is remarkable and good in the world I fear eventually your soul will be lost,” he replied breezily. “Today it’s just cynicism and coldness; tomorrow its pride, sloth and all five of their friends. After that comes the

damnation and hellfire, sure as effluence runs downhill. Best way to stem the decay is by staying humble, staying grateful and being pleasant to all – just praise Him with me, look at this beautiful day. Isn't it remarkable?"

"With respect sir, it is not" I replied "it is July. Far from remarkable, I would say this day is typical. If we reached these temperatures in mid-winter than, hallelujah, a minor miracle perhaps. Until then you might just as well sing your little ditties about how a piss is needed after drinking too much beer."

We rode on in silence after my outburst. I felt him staring at me, no doubt trying to gauge the fruitfulness of further discourse. In no mood to discuss Theology or social manners, I kept my eyes focused straight ahead in a sullenly protracted display of proud indifference.

"I think," he began in a voice quiet and subdued, "that you have made your feelings clear. Good luck son, in whatever endeavours you attempt. May I offer a piece of advice for the road?" He pointed at my neck where Adams' blade had scored and left a mark. "The Lord is not the only source of self-knowledge. Perhaps watching that tongue amongst strangers would be a useful resolution."

He slowed his horse down to re-join his family. I spent the remaining few hours reflecting that just perhaps he had a point. Father would often tell me that I am an irredeemable sinner: prone to frequently indulging all of the mortal sins, and none more so than pride. Perhaps however, belief that I was victorious in any conversation on my travels will likely offer little consolation if I am to end up bleeding out from a shot in the stomach, or the victim of some savage act of scalping.

No one had any particular want to bid farewell at the town gates. Consequently I excused myself and set off to discover the location of my brother's butchers practice.

William and his wife are due to close the day's business very shortly. I must ask beg their

favour. They have permitted me to bath before we convene properly over an evening meal. I will go now to prepare: I must exhibit myself at my most charming and erudite this evening and hope my request is permitted.

Topeka. July 18th. 1878.

I woke today filled with elation, tinged with nervousness. Secretly there was a small part of my being that hoped my brother would find the means to thwart and comprehensively quash my proposal.

At first we indulged in idle conversation while his wife served some venison, along with vegetables and bread. It was the first hot meal I have eaten in nearly a week and I fought hard to maintain a dignified composure and to eat at an acceptable rate; resisting every urge to treat the meal as a reacquainted lover.

My brother's wife is named Mary and, between you and I, that is fitting: an unremarkable name for an unremarkable person. William's reasons for marrying her are plain enough: he has mistaken fair hair and a petite figure for prettiness, a common enough error in the judgement of men. However if and when I take a wife, I hope to find a face with more character and a little more intelligence behind it.

Thus, the first hour or so in the company of my hosts passed not so much spent in conversation as it was enduring observations on the rudimentary particulars of immediate phenomena: "The weather is hot in summer" and "I look better rested for having a rest" – and so forth.

After the initial round of pleasantries we talked of the passing of our father. Invariably an element of grief permeated these proceedings, all borne no doubt from nostalgia and not affection. When Mother passed it had been different and our collective sadness was very real.

However, Father had been a difficult man in every sense of the word: at times difficult to like, always impossible to love. He was quiet and private and always looking for more tasks, more work and more ways to distance himself from his family. I grew to feel as if there was little chance of us ever truly understanding one another. Or perhaps otherwise, that there simply was little to understand of him. As William and I confirmed the death and read the official testimony it was as if we were compelled to recite the correct words, but they were little more than a façade – pleasant noises concealing hollow feelings.

When the lives of our parents had all been accounted for, I had been entrusted to deliver the sum a little under four hundred dollars to William.

Father had not planned to expire at this time and so we both agreed that the distribution of the inheritance had been clumsy and favoured the eldest nominally and without due consideration. I put forth my case that William already had established his business, settled, and secured an income. That additionally, the proper duty of a brother would be to divide our parent's money equally. Furthermore I confessed to spending forty already, to purchase the horse I had travelled on, this I assured, would be taken from my half. William considered my argument, produced a bottle of whiskey he had been saving for an occasion and drank. After some deliberation, he consented.

“What will you do?” He asked me pouring us a second. “I already have an assistant; he's a good man and a hard worker. It would be grossly unfair to dismiss him, and against my wishes besides. Nevertheless, you can sleep in the spare room for free while I refine what skills you remember, or while you seek employment elsewhere?”

The offer was made through gritted teeth. The spare room would be for the children Mary bore; from the looks of her it would not be spare for much longer.

Butchery is our family practice. Our father taught us both the essentials of the craft. Yet to my mind it is a grim and dirty living, the constant odours of blood and death holding

as much attraction as working the dung heap. My revulsion and natural inelegance resulted in my father neglecting me to devote his time and efforts more fruitfully to improving William into a fine practitioner. I did not mind, this left me free to develop my own abilities. I possess a good mind, a sharp wit and way with words. Through perseverance and persuasion I was able instead to secure apprenticeship with the Independence printing press. Consequently, I am wasteful when skinning and gutting a carcass, but learning to read, write, and most crucially, to think for myself is ample compensation.

“Thank you brother, your offer is both kind and fair. However you cannot instil a work ethic in me, nor skill with my fingers, any more than father could.”

William tried and failed to hide his relief.

“Think of it this way – I am free. I have no ties to a profession or a family, and no duty to anyone. I am seventeen and keen to take full advantage of this fact.”

“Meaning?”

“I would like to use my share of the inheritance to entice the aid of those that know the Indian lands to the South-West.”

“Why in God’s name would you do that?”

“I would find Uncle Jack.”

William’s face broke at that announcement, as if he would have preferred to hear that I intended to spend the money on a concerted effort to die a syphilitic death. We argued back and forth for some time over the point, but he had already consented to giving me the money, and I have chosen my path. Once William exhausted his counter-arguments he conceded that agency is mine and mine alone; and that although his concerns were duly noted, he possessed no authority to impede me further. He has informed me as to the saloon where the travellers, the adventurers and the outlaws convene. I will go there today, at once, and recruit a guide before my nerve deserts me.

Topeka. July 19th. 1878.

Topeka defies my preconceptions. The name conjures allusions of its past: an outpost on the frontier of civilization, a city half-Shawnee Indian, and half-White. I had expected to find outlaws, whores, and other refugees from the encroachment of legitimacy, hidden in dark dens of vice and violence. Instead, I learned that the name translates to “a good place for potatoes” and that the character of the place is equally functional. There are solid builds, and nearly as many facilities and comforts as can be found in Independence. Moreover the river enables constant trading and money-making. In short, it has become content and fat, devoid of the dangerous and the clandestine. An increasingly ordinary place indeed.

I took my personal money out with me and purchased effects necessary for a lengthy venture: a sharp knife, a wood axe and a good flask. After some deliberation I decided in favour of the acquisition of a pistol. As mentioned in entries previous I am inaccurate with firearms, and severely lacking in confidence. Nevertheless any enemies met on the road will be ignorant to that fact, allowing the weapon to function as a deterrent, if nothing else.

William had instructed me to enquire for guides at a saloon near the outskirts of town. As the day lengthened I estimated that the likeliest candidates would be those with no other preoccupations in their days, and would therefore have taken to drinking in the afternoon.

Inside there must have been at least two dozen men engrossed in conversations held in a variety of tongues and all vigorously engaged in the art of intoxication. I purchased several beers for myself and forced down the revolting, sour beverages to induce courage while I scouted the room.

The offer I could make was thus: I could spare 120 dollars in the hiring of one or two guides. We would depart for a tribe of Osage Indians that I believe to reside South-West of

Topeka in a journey that may take a week or more of riding. I would pay forty percent of the fee on departure, with the remainder to stay with William until my guide returned either in my company, or bearing a signed agreement.

I took this offer unsuccessfully to a number of tables before eventually catching the interest of two fur trappers: a loud Frenchman named Bertrand Dupont who gesticulates wildly as he talks in heavily-accented English, and his companion Willem Steenwijck who seemed surly by comparison. All matters of conviviality aside, the two men claimed to know the region well, and have had dealings with the Osage dwelling there. They consented to accept my money on the promise that once at our destination they would be allowed the time to trap and hunt. We drank a toast to the arrangement and agreed to depart immediately upon the following daybreak.

My intentions of leaving at that moment were thwarted when the door opened and the carpenter Lee Adams strode in. He took up a position at the bar near the entrance and stood, ordering for whiskey with another man that had walked in alongside him. I asked my companions if they did not begrudge my company for another round of drinks at my expense while I awaited a moment to pass Adams discretely. Dupont seemed glad of the drink and observed that we would be spending perhaps two weeks together, so what is half an hour? I concurred, gave him some money and sent him to the counter in my stead. We spent this second drink together (and my fifth in total that day) in empty conversation while throughout I maintained watch on Adams.

Remembering the threat made at camp, and believing that I should hope to embark uninjured, I hoped for opportunity to slip past him. In the waiting, my fifth became my sixth, and then my seventh drink as I was forced to wait a further hour. I have only drunk this much twice in my life so far, once at the funeral of my mother and once again on my seventeenth birthday. I assure you that neither occasion proved out favourably either. As Dupont

countenanced yet another drink, I felt I must decline as a sudden rush of hot blood rushed to infuse me with reckless abandon: the tune of the fiddle-player was calling, enticing me to take to the table-top and attempt a dance.

I resisted this compulsion, but welcomed the dawning realization: the drink was stupefying me, a longer stay was an invitation to jeopardy. Once more I had them repeat the time and address of our meeting tomorrow before excusing myself and making way to the door. I had made it halfway across the bar when a large man at the counter, heavily muscled and marred by facial scarring, turned to Adams.

“Bastard. Son of a whore” the man slurred at Adams, pushing him slowly but powerfully to ensure he had caught attention.

Naturally, I lingered to observe the spectacle.

“What seems to be the matter sir?” Adams replied, finding a better class of manners when intimidated.

“Pig-fucker! Don’t lie to me – give it back or I’m smashing every god-damn tooth out that ugly, twisted face of yours.”

“Give what back?” The man answered wordlessly; choosing instead to seize Adams by the crotch, clamp hard and bring him close to. Adams emitted a noise half-way between a gasp and squeal.

I tried hard to suppress a smile as I pointed Adams out. “Thief!” I bellowed in my most theatrical of voices. Both men turned to view me, Adams’ eyes widening as he shook his head at me, imploring me to stop. However, the devil had entered me by then. All I could do was maintain the card-man’s face as I fabricated a story.

“There’s the man who took our purses on the road yesterday! He fled with over three hundred dollars in cash!”

A clever lie I felt, enough money to suggest to Adams' attacker that he could not possibly have spent it all in one day, thereby bestowing double motivation. Adams began to counter my accusations, his eyes blinking frantically and his tongue flapping in panic. But any attempts to form noises into credible words were cut short by a second squeeze of his nethers. The man tending the bar sighed as if bored by another display of the arbitrary violence engendered by his trade.

"If you're gunna do him Dan, take the poor bastard outside this time."

The big man punched Adams fully in the face before half-carrying and half-dragging him through the doors. I found myself shrugging at the bar-keep before excusing myself from the building. The sudden harsh glare of the summer evening and the rush of alcohol re-circulating around my head as I stood made my head swim and my legs unsteady. I took a moment outside to acclimatize and to watch the big man's assault. Adams had gone to the ground and was trying to adopt a position that would save his head and stomach from the barrage of kicks and punches he was experiencing. The big man turned to me to inform me that I would be allowed to join in what he termed "the fight" if I so wished, though any money recovered from it were his alone. I declined the offer and watched on awhile, until guilt urged me to intervene.

However as I stepped forward Adams defecated in his trousers from a combination of the fear and pain. With a gut full of drink, the sight, stench and sheer pitiful calamity of it all is almost as bad a memory as it was at the point of occurrence. As I collapsed against the side of the saloon, fighting the nausea I recall the big man stopped his attack and turned to me.

"I like it when they do that" he assured with a sadistic laugh.

Neither William nor Mary were pleased with my brash return from the bar. A ruder guest has not been welcomed into a home, perhaps since Odysseus crept from his horse. All civility was expunged by the alcohol and the fire it had lit in my blood. I was later told that as

they conversed I frequently interjected with some crude observation or half-baked witticism. With every intention to stabilizing or silencing me, Mary forced me to force a meal down. However I was unable to resist the abrupt and instinctive reaction within. I believe I soaked her dress and dining table with the bile of drinker's remorse; shortly after I had helped to clean I excused myself for the night as quietly as was possible.

Chase County. July 21st. 1878.

We have ridden for two days which have passed pleasantly and without sufficient impetus for immediate recording. Now granted a private hour amply bathed by the light of dusk, I will recount our progress thus far.

The morning of departure I made preparations with sincere apologies to my hosts, who woke with me to formally observe my leaving. Mary provided some provisions for the road and bade me farewell, along with a hope that she would see me again. I noticed her words were devoid of any depth of genuine feeling: her hopes that I would not perish were uttered with all the passion of a casual wish against rainfall.

William took me aside to chastise my drunkenness, to accuse me of rashness and self-centeredness once more. He informed me that if my nerve had privately deserted me there would be no shame in abandoning the expedition. He offered, quite kindly, to partially reimburse the advance for our guides himself.

"I feel no fear brother, but thank you nonetheless" I lied.

"God-dammit Ben. I believe it would easier to teach a pig to sing than teaching you good sense. You know, I never knew the man much more than you did; but from the stories they told, I did used to wonder if you might not have secretly been Jack's boy all along."

I laughed at that. William touched on private, yet pervasive, thoughts never expressed to any other. I have always been so different from all immediate family that the only true kinship I ever felt was through the tales of “wild” Jack Carson and his misadventures. Certainly I learned nothing of risk-taking from mother who, despite many fond memories, I cannot truthfully recall deviating from routine once in my lifetime. Likewise I cannot credit father as a source of wit. For him the pinnacle of amusement was that someone somewhere might lose their balance or otherwise trip over at an inopportune moment. Yet Jack’s compulsion for conflict and romance are innate facets of my soul; my keen wit and gregarious nature clear traces of my Uncle too.

That is of course, not to say I believe Uncle Jack to be my true progenitor. Mother would not countenance adultery with any person, let alone a person as morally repulsive as her husband’s brother. Besides which I believe dates and circumstances would rule such a crude revelation an absolute impossibility.

But family blood does not flow through the generations as predictably as water falls downstream; be it chance or fate, the inheritance of familial blessings and curses find themselves interestingly distributed.

My guides arrived soon thereafter. William paid the men the advance, noting, with unwarranted distaste, that neither were of English descent. Afterwards he too said his goodbye, and the three of us set off from Topeka.

We spent that first day in high spirits. Rather mercifully Mr. Dupont transpired to be the cheerful type who laughs at jokes and interjects with his own. He asked of me if my accusation in the bar against Adams held any credence whatsoever, I told him of my recent history with the man and showed him the mark across my throat. Dupont bellowed with laughter as he deduced the manner in which I had counterfeited the guilt of my rival. Mr. Steenwijck found the matter less amusing and inferred that we may have an enemy to our

rear. Dupont and I disagreed, noting that the condition in which we last observed the man would take perhaps four days or more of recovery.

After this we spent the day discussing our professions, the art of trapping and skinning the animals of the region, their stories of close encounters with big cats, massive bears and Indian people. I asked how they had found themselves on this part of the world. I persuaded the taciturn Steenwijck to introduce himself more fully. I learned that he had outcast himself from his hometown in a Lowlands province called North Brabant. He fell in love with the daughter of a popular local minister and took to following the girl obsessively, often in states of extreme intoxication. He did this until the girl became afraid for her well-being and reported Steenwijck to her father who confronted him publicly. In a drunken stew of melodramatic rage my new companion claimed that he would sooner die than live without this girl, but she spurned his advances nonetheless. Believing his position to be a choice of suicide or exile, Steenwijck chose to travel to America.

“Tell me true, do you believe that – had you stayed – the men of your village would have forced a gun to your head?” I asked of him, stifling my mirth. He said nothing in reply, though his face flushed red with embarrassment.

Dupont informed me that they met on board that boat and soon became fast friends. For Dupont, America was the answer to turmoil in his home country.

“In France, always there is war, or there is revolution,” he mused. “Yesterday’s traitors are the martyrs of today and then back again tomorrow. It is easy to choose the wrong side, no? Fuck France, fuck Kings and Emperors, fuck the revolution too – we are living in the true land of *liberté* and *égalité*!”

Dupont shouted the last, his passions stirred in the way that those of Latin blood find altogether natural. It is as if these are a people forever half-drunk. The logical mind of the

northern European can therefore see why our southern cousins are doomed to career perpetually between powerfully irreconcilable ideals.

As dusk approached we made a private camp for the night. I was tasked with lighting a fire while my companions hunted rabbit for the evening meal. To my shame they returned successfully from their endeavour before I had lit the flames. I told them I knew the process in theory, but was finding the generation of sufficient friction rather more challenging than I had anticipated. Steenwijck took control of the task while Dupont skinned the rabbits and passed their carcasses to me for butchery. In truth, here too, my efforts were dissatisfactory and I passed back the animals mutilated and mangled.

“And you told me you were a butcher’s boy!” Dupont complained as he skewered the meat and roasted it on the fire.

“I take my name from my father, but little else. It is a particular quirk of linguistics that one word can describe vastly different singularities. Some friendly advice, for instance: should anyone offer to show you their pecker, always decline. For they may not have ornithology in mind.”

Dupont laughed and produced a flask of hard apple cider and shared it around the fire.

Progress today was even better. As a consequence, conversation flowed less freely, but we covered our ground with swift efficiency. Just before midday the rain began to fall intermittently throughout the remainder of the afternoon, it fell warm and light and our clothes dried out quickly in the hot and dry spells between.

Steenwijck stopped his horse a few hours before dusk and bade us to listen. Across the horizon we saw a horse that looked to be saddled and laden despite a lack of rider. The creature was distressed, pelting forwards and pursued by a group of some six or seven wolves. I had never seen one like that before, dead and skinned of course, alive once at a travelling fare where the three they had chained looked almost dog-like in subservience. Here

they were ferocious and wild; but wild with intelligent purpose. They attack in coordination, collectively gaining incrementally on their prey and taking it by turn to leap forward and bite at the legs in order to maintain pressure and fear on the larger creature in addition to draining it of strength and stamina. As the creatures disappeared from sight I wondered what had become of the horses' master, and reflected that I would sooner turn my pistol on myself than die torn apart by the teeth of wild beasts.

It was the afternoon still when we saw a sizeable camp of some thirty people or so, setting fires and preparing for an evening by a lakeside. We agreed that although it might cost us two or three hours of riding, the human comforts and safety of numbers was worth that sacrifice. The group accepted us cheerfully enough and explained that they were diverging the following morning, with the majority of the travellers joining a homestead called Cottonwood Falls to the West, and the others continuing south towards unassigned lands in Kansas.

Steenwijck joined some of the men at the lakeside in hunting its ducks and fish. Dupont produced another flask of his sweet strong cider.

"When we reach the Osage, what do you want of them?" He asked after the long drink of a genuine thirst.

"My Uncle joined a tribe, some eleven years ago. Perhaps he remains with them."

"You have savagery in the blood!" His exclamation was part-surprise and part-amusement.

"Is that so? Eleven years is a long time, no; perhaps he is no longer, perhaps he is dead? It is quite some money to spend on perhaps."

I shrugged at his comments and took a long sip of cider. Dupont laughed as he retrieved his drink.

“Then you do not care. You spend your money, our time and risk all our lives without a care.”

“What is a life time spent without risk?” I countered. “Does it not seem a shame to live the same day, the same week, the same year until God takes you?”

“I see Benjamin. Then you are better than ordinary... This is a song I have heard before – though usually its singer has taken more than just a few sips of cider! I have lived longer and spoken with more people and can tell you that even a lowest-born pig farmer will tell you why he deserves to be Emperor if he is indulged long enough.” Dupont grinned and slapped me hard on the shoulder. “Me? I say: fuck that pig farmer, and his assumption God owes him something more. Let him drown in disappointment.”

There were still hours left of light, yet we were tired enough to just lie on the grass; to eat, drink and talk of nothing. Steenwijck produced a flask containing what I believe to be the most disgusting fluid ever to be labelled “rum”. I took one drink and found myself spluttering on all fours, hoping to find the position from which the vomit would not flow. Dupont was soon drunk and laughing at my inability to drink the drinks of frontiersmen.

Shortly afterwards a woman who could only have been a whore, staggered over in an extreme condition. Her fair hair was dirtied and greasy. Her face and figure gaunt and stretched. But what struck me most was the manic glint in her eyes; somewhere between merriment and destructive abandon.

“Opium!” She cackled, “I have opium, will swap Opium for whatever you’re drinking.” Dupont waved her away dismissively, Steenwijck shook his head. I shrugged at the woman to indicate that I was in the possession of no alcohol of my own.

“Look at this young face,” she bent and grabbed hold of it and pulled it close to, I tried to smile politely and hope that my noticing of missing teeth was not plain to her. “I bet

you can't even be much more than sixteen. Nice young lad like you, still girl-pretty. See, this is how I like a man!"

"Ben's no man – a man holds his drink!" Dupont replied pointing to the latest pool of my refutations.

"Believe me, he's all the better without it. Enjoy your life boy, it hasn't made you bitter and angry yet. Why – I bet you haven't got a single wart down there yet either. Have you even been with a girl? You haven't, I can tell."

She winked, let go and stood. I noticed that she was swaying so badly that a mild breeze might have tipped her over. For a moment she seemed entirely lost in private contemplation before she lifted her skirt to three of us to reveal only the second pudenda I had glimpsed in my lifetime.

The first had been a purely accidental incident. I wondered behind a tree back home and observed a girl urinating behind it. The girl was as young as I and the sight had been respectable enough. If the woman's before me had ever looked similar, time had not been complimentary. I found myself looking immediately down into the grass below.

She laughed wildly at my unease.

"Not ready to become a man today then? Well if either of your friends fancy the fucking – come, follow me."

The woman staggered off, not looking back to see if any of us followed. Dupont shook his head incredulously and lay onto his back to stare at the sky.

I watched the woman recede into the group and wondered if she had ever been a respectable or pretty woman, and what may have happened to lead her to such a state. I was on the verge of asking my companions if they believed her solicitation to be sincere, or simple provocation, when I noted Steenwijk had stood wordlessly and was following the

woman. He put his hands on her hip and diverted her towards the bushes by the lake. I told Dupont as much, but he had closed his eyes and was either asleep or feigning so.

Sedgwick County. July 23. 1878

We have spent much time on the Great Plains; the vast openness of our terrain inducing a state of reflective reverie within me. Dupont assures me we are close to the town Wichita. The Osage reservation lays a further day or so beyond. I do not know when next I will have such time as this again, and so I will relate to you the story of "Wild" Jack Carson.

I met my uncle only a few times in infancy, but even I could see there was presence and a power about his person. When Uncle Jack entered a room the chatter from others inside would recede into silent anticipation, all eyes would turn his way.

Jack was a striking man; well over six feet in height, handsome and blessed with an air of rakish intelligence that made many onlookers feel instantaneously party to some great act of mischief. For us children Jack became temporarily one of us, always ready and willing to join our imaginary fights, often raucously adopting the persona of some great outlaw or Indian chief as he chased us down. On one occasion, we lured Jack into an ambush and collectively brought him to the ground, whereupon he pretended to submit. I can still recall the great pride I felt as he insisted on surrendering to me personally, making me chieftain of our imaginary tribe.

I was mesmerized by Jack. Watching on from the margins I took care to learn as much as possible about how a man should carry himself. Now older I realize that his humour was less clever than my own perhaps; but whereas mine has a tendency to make enemies of acquaintances, his was kinder and made instant allies of all he approached. Even those surly old men who never liked anybody and criticized all that came from the mouths of their

juniors could not help but break into smiling as Jack took time to indulge them; pitched the exact quip for their enjoyment; or simply bought them a drink on pay-day.

But Jack's passion was to be found in neither children nor in old men.

A long-unmarried man is usually the subject of gossip and slander. Other men and spurned women will begin to peddle malicious lies about their compulsion to sodomize their closest friends, or perhaps livestock or wild beasts instead. However no one could have accused Jack of anything less than a voracious appetite for the fairer sex.

To see him at work was to see a master musician, instinctively aware of what notes to play and when. Jack always spoke directly to women, never through or over them as most men do. He would not presume to know their thoughts, feelings or desires either, but listened to them as if they were equal. Jack would complement their appearance, assist with everyday acts of gentlemanly conduct and so on – but these bland niceties were just a facet of an elaborate roguish performance. With well-placed smiles, sly winks he would always suggest his availability to his audience, allowing them to establish their own Rubicon-crossing points.

His antics left many of Independence's women weak-kneed and giggling. I overheard several nursing genuine belief that it was they who were special in the eyes of my uncle and more frequently still, lamenting their marriages to other men.

I always assumed that it stopped there. That the tales of his scandalous seductions and de-flowering of many young girls were fabrications passed around by those bored sufficiently to require embellishments and exaggerations to enrich their own mundane existences. Yet as I developed a truer understanding of how love and honour work these stories became ever-more plausible in my mind. If only half of his conquests proved real, I wonder to this day how he had the nerve to walk about town, unafraid of challenges laid down by cuckolded husbands and dishonoured fathers. Though I suppose his other reputation may have proved a sufficient constraint against such vengeance.

Jack was a skilful and enthusiastic fighter; both as a boxer and marksman. He had joined the army before the war and fought with distinction on the side of the Union. When last I saw him he had returned from military service in 1866 and told us harrowing accounts of “Hells’ half-acre” at the battle of Stones River: The possibility of a complete Unionist route stemmed by an impregnable defence.

“We took their victory and made it god-damn Pyrrhic – turned it to ash in their bastard mouths.” he once boasted.

After the war he returned home a while, but stayed with the military. Six months later, Jack was posted at Fort Reiley in Kansas, and that was the last our family saw of him.

It was the following summer that the soldiers came to our door, asking for him. They tore father’s house to pieces before accepting our ignorance of his location. They told us the story of a beautiful daughter of Jack’s commanding officer. Naturally Jack spent his off-duty time attempting to seduce the girl, despite orders for immediate cessation. Allegedly my uncle pretended in public to abandon his pursuit, but was later caught in the act of love with her against the side of the Fort stable. Jack was immediately placed under arrest, chained, beaten and stripped of his rank before being sentenced to death by firing squad the next day. Facing execution, Jack somehow broke free. We would later hear of the rumours going around the fort that Jack proved too popular among his fellows, that the girl freed him for love, or that he simply succeeded by virtue of his own wits and charm.

However we may speculate on how he achieved his freedom, Jack’s cell was vacant by morning, and a cartful of weapons and ammunitions had vanished with him.

Our family presumed never to hear from him again and mourned him as a dead man. Yet as the years marched on and other soldiers retired, or were otherwise discharged from Fort Reiley, they brought back strange tales of Uncle Jack, now riding with the Osage people. Jack had taken them firearms and instructed them in use. He had taught them discipline and

modern military tactical thought. He had accompanied their chieftains in great battles against the Cheyenne people and re-established the Osage as the pre-dominant Indian force in the region. Jack had also imparted secret knowledge of where the U.S. army was strong and weak, when to attack and when to hold back. Together they raided even white settlements and were growing increasingly wealthy. For all this Jack had been awarded a name and rank amongst these people. He had even been presented with an Osage wife – no less than the Chieftain's own daughter – as a show of gratitude and deep respect. They said that she was the most beautiful specimen ever of Indian descent; and every bit as wild and fierce as any man among their warrior tribe.

I always liked to hear these stories and often sought out any returning soldiers for more tales such as these. I had hoped to convince the Independence printing press to write a story about my uncle, the war-hero turned savage outlaw, but now I am as close as one day's ride away and cannot wait to see him for myself.

Osage Territory. July 24th 1878

We have made contact with the Indians. I consider it my first *real* encounter.

Now and then, some Indian people passed through Independence of course. But it was they who had been out of place, wearing the clothing of white people, and speaking our language. In many ways they were much like the Negroes: stripped of their strength and power, and knowing fully it is best to remain courteous and live by white terms, or risk of severe consequences.

Today was different. I cannot vouch for Dupont or Steenwijck, who have met these people many times previously, but to my shame I was filled with a profound fear that would drag its heels in dissipation.

At dusk we came upon a narrow gorge where the bank of a stream to our right pushed us close to a rock wall to our left. We were forced to ride through slowly, and in single file. Steenwijck was leading the way as was usual but he came to a halt so suddenly that we nearly collided.

“What is...?” I began to ask but he silenced me with a gesture and remained still and attentive. After long moments I heard the sound of a bird calling ahead and a second call atop the rock wall.

“It is only birdsong” I began naively, but Steenwijck had already thrown up his hands and bade me be silent.

“Do as he does” Dupont urged.

Steenwijck shouted something I presumed in the Osage tongue, and then in English “peace, trade, talk”. It was then that I realized we had been surrounded quietly and efficiently. Five mounted Osage warriors emerged to obstruct our passage ahead, while four had been following us at least throughout the gorge. Half a dozen or so had left their horses behind and were waiting at the top of the rock wall. They descended to complete the flanking manoeuvre, whooping and shrieking once noticed, and brandishing their rifles and bows. The stream blocked our one remaining escape route.

We were well and truly at their mercy here. Uncle Jack had taught them well, I thought, this location was perfect for our total annihilation.

As they drew near Steenwijck engaged their leader; speaking in a mixture of staccato English and broken Osage, complete with mimes and pointing at his pelts and weapons. It was a fine submissive performance that could have been understood as a demonstration of obsequiousness even without speech at all.

I devoted this time to a full assessment of the Indians. My initial impressions were that they were tall – taller as a general rule than those of European stock. The men near-

universally exceeded six feet in height. There were women in this group too, four I counted, and even they were more-or-less equal in height to myself and my companions. Both genders alike display their flesh seemingly without shame at the relative nakedness; I had to refrain from gazing too long at the glimpses of painted legs, stomachs and even the breasts of the women.

I promise any readers that one glance is adequate persuasion for any onlooker to be convinced of the sanguineous aptitude of the Osage; many men proudly wear scars and trophies taken from wild animals, and their weapons look so naturally suited to their hands that they resemble an extension of being. More than their physicality however was the way they stared at us; their gaze was free of malevolence, but filled with something worse, a composed and inscrutable assurance that they were ready to slaughter us in a heartbeat should we display aggression or attempt to flee.

Never before have I experienced such intense feelings of subjection. Even that night under Lee Adams' blade in the darkness I felt a modicum of reassurance, borne surreptitiously from a private belief that Adams' lacked the conviction to commit murder – a consolation thoroughly denied here.

After their deliberations the Osage retreated a little, giving us adequate space to strategize.

“They believe we are not here with malicious intentions. If they did, their leader assures me we would not have had time to scream before death rained upon us, our bodies hacked to pieces, defiled and displayed as a fair warning to other intruders.”

I found Steenwijck oddly nonchalant in his relaying of such an explicit threat.

“But make no mistake, we are on Osage lands now and must pay due toll for the privilege of passage. In short, they want our pelts Mr. Carson, some twenty-five dollars’

worth that I have on my person. Since we are here on your business, I trust you will reimburse us for this on our return.”

That I should bear the additional payment seemed excessive and exploitative; yet the alternative appeared to be an imminent and violent death. This proved a compelling and effective position to negotiate from, and I consented to pay the toll without outward complaint. Before Steenwijck rode over to hand over his pelts, I asked him to enquire about Uncle Jack. As I witnessed the back and forth between the Indian leader and my guide, I noted the Dutchman pointing me out. The Osage man rode to me, and leaned close to inspect my face.

Something about my person clearly amused him, as he broke into a broad and rather mocking smile. I did not know the correct response and so I found myself smiling and nodding back, vainly hoping that my countenance had not been betrayed by the nervousness felt.

I believe at this juncture the Indian was satisfied by sufficient similarity in my face to Jack's; or perhaps I had given him a gesture or motion that was suitably reminiscent in the way that family members sometimes do. Either way, the manner in which he greeted the kin of one of his tribesmen was bizarrely imperceptible to a man accustomed to European civility: the man barked out a raucous laugh, jabbed at my chest and barked something in his harsh and savage language. I tried to deduce his meaning but was only able to suppose that his slight intonations might have inferred questions. But if so, they were questions I was entirely incapable of answering.

The Indian stared long and hard before obviously concluding that the linguistic barrier between us was indeed an impasse.

He turned back to Steenwijck and his people barking out laughter and I believe the same sounds he had addressed me with. Collectively the Osage found this amusing and some

pointed me out. Dupont shrugged at me to demonstrate his own bemusement as my cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“It is quite possible I do not measure up to Uncle Jack” I murmured to him, reflecting on my own five foot and six, slender frame, and youthful face. They talked some more, gesturing to me, and then back over the horizon to the South-East before they nodded and Steenwijck rode back to meet us.

“Indeed your uncle is known to them, and is still living. They do not know him as “Jack Carson” however they call him...” at this Steenwijck made noises similar to the ones the Indian had made at me, I assumed they were Jack’s Osage name. “He lives with a tribe living half a day’s ride to the South East. They have granted permission for you to see him and travel across their land, they will even send guides on with us to prevent other Osage people from attacking us and to ensure we find our way quickly. For this service they would take your pistol and axe as payment. Furthermore they will allow us to spend time hunting on their lands while you reunite with your uncle so long as we give half our pelts and meat to the tribe – although that is perhaps of little interest or consequence to you.”

I accepted the offer gladly, allowing their leader to relieve me of my weapons and ammunition. They escorted us through the remainder of the gorge and to a suitable place to make camp for the evening. Afterwards the majority of their party rode on, leaving one of their women and one of their men with us as promised.

As they departed some of them smiled at me or laughed in ways that I instinctively disliked, muttering to each other rudely in their tongue. A braver man might have challenged them, demanding they explain their amusement in what English they knew – for I had heard some usage. Instead I allowed the opportunity pass meekly by.

Our new guides both look younger than the others in their party, perhaps not much older than I. They have more interest in discussing hunting methods with Steenwijck than

they have in my person. I have therefore left them to it, in order to record this entry and to regenerate some pride.

I may not be the man that Jack is, but I feel I have my qualities. I hope Jack will not mock me, as his new kin have; or that my visitation is not the cause of some mortal humiliation.

Osage Encampment. July 25th 1878.

I recall assurances made to any prospective reader of these journals in my initial entry; promises that I would relay the journey without embellishment or any economical verisimilitude. I believe I have done so admirably thus far, remaining truthful about my own ineptitude, moments of cowardice and vindictiveness along the road.

I do this as a matter of principle: lies being either fraud or delusion. The temptation I feel now to deceive my reader emanates clearly from the latter motive. I care little for the repute of the Carson family name. Instead, the disappointment that I am loathe to report is profoundly personal in nature. Yet report it I will, even if it the truth weighs heavy upon my heart.

Our guides took us quickly to the Osage encampment. We arrived after some hours of riding, during which I fell back from the others to ride alone with the purpose of gathering my thoughts.

To any other eye the signs of inhabitation were routine enough: farmed land that supported meagre amounts of livestock and produce, the youths and women tending it pausing to watch us as we passed. Yet I was overwhelmed. This was El Dorado: the home of "Wild Jack." A passage between legend and reality.

We rode uphill to the main site. I noted there were no walls or gates to pass through, just two parallel rows of wooden huts and canvas tents. Most of the Osage we passed were women, children and the elderly. Only a few men remained to guard, who looked on our passing with the over-curiosity of bored housewives.

The largest of the huts was situated at the exact centre. We stopped our horses, dismounted and let the female guide lead them away. The male bade us wait outside the hut before entering. Dupont turned to me and gave a nod that I presumed to be something of a token of encouragement. I found myself too nervous to smile in return. Shortly afterwards our guide re-emerged, accompanying a woman the like of which I have never seen before.

She was older than I, but young still. Her body highly decorated with paints, feathers, teeth and bones; a grander expression of the warrior style we had encountered the previous day. In truth I found her attractive, though only in the most literal definition of the word, her appearance received every bit of the attention it demanded.

That is not to say her features were unpleasant. I am certain that the aesthetes would have found little to criticize amongst her handsome and well-defined features. Yet equally, would many men proclaim her beautiful? Feminine beauty is prettiness, a delicate little thing to be privately admired and jealously cherished. The thought of any man attempting so with this one seemed almost preposterous. Nothing about this woman was demure, or concerned with the gaze of myself or my companions. Instead she emanated the overwhelming impression that any unsolicited hands that might touch her person would find themselves broken, mutilated and thrown back at the face of their owner.

She was attended to by less-striking companions. I assumed her therefore to be the wife or daughter of a Chieftain. I recalled those stories of the fierce Osage woman gifted to my uncle, and realized that, notionally, I could be looking upon an Aunt.

As the freedom to look elsewhere returned, I noticed the presence of a white man stood behind. My heart skipped a false beat, on the presumption of Jack. However the briefest of scrutiny revealed the man to be too short, too young, and with dark and serious features that were almost as contrary to Jack's as any Indian's.

Our guide spoke to the woman in their tongue and Steenwijck felt compelled to interoperate in a hushed voice: assuring that the Indian guide was notifying her of our identities and purpose. This superfluous information would not have been beyond the deductive capacity of a fool or a cretin. Nevertheless, civility compelled me to thank him for it. The guide then pointed to Dupont, and then to Steenwijck before the woman bowed her head, approaching in a solemn salutation.

She introduced herself in her own tongue, a name that I would later understand to be "Hula". Switching to reasonably fluid English, Hula assured them that hunters were a welcome presence amongst her people provided they dedicate time to contributing food for the tribe, and killed only what was needed. She assured them that many of the men spend their days riding out as far as the Great Plains doing precisely this, but always there could be more. As Dupont replied she cocked her head, looking near-pained by deep concentration.

"Bon-joor" she attempted "you maison Français?"

"Oui Madame. Je viens de Bayeux, la Normandie."

Hula tried not to show her lack of comprehension show too greatly, instead she nodded her head slowly and deliberately.

"That is good" she concluded making an awkward and clumsy sign of the Catholic cross over her shoulders, head and chest. Hula then turned her attention towards me. "And you?" she demanded, the token warmth and friendliness offered to the others rescinded in an instant.

“Please Ma’am, I am looking for someone. I have been told he is here. He is my uncle and I believe you call him...”

All day I had tried muttering his name in their tongue to myself, the exact sounds were already a hazy recollection but under the pressure of Hula’s glare it disappeared completely, I trailed off after a weak approximation of the first word. Hula snapped his Indian name back with in a questioning tone before, angrily, she added “Jack?”

I nodded, suddenly unsure of the reaction his name might elicit, and with awareness dawning that my understanding of his popularity had been furnished exclusively on hearsay and rumours.

“Are you the chieftain’s daughter?” I asked, panicking under her obvious disapproval. “Word back home was that you were married to my Uncle and that together you lead your people. I was told he is a great hero to you all.”

A congregation of curious bystanders had gathered behind me to observe the conversation. At my last pronouncement many collapsed shrieking in gales of hysterical laughter. It did little to alleviate Hula’s irritation. Even that serious-faced white man forced back the thin grimace that broke across his face. Hula’s eyes narrowed into intense fury, her lips curled into the look of a woman grievously insulted. Not for the first time, I was afraid of these people. As the laughter died down, Hula barked my uncle’s name at an onlooker who scampered off back into the village. She then gave what resembled a sour sort of smile, and ordered in English for me to follow her at a distance and she would show me the “Great Father” – words that snarled with insincerity.

We paraded downhill to a makeshift stable where several horses were tethered.

“Wait here. Watch.” She commanded, a little distance away before making her way towards the horses.

Horror stories are often told of the savage Indians of the Americas; their scalping's are legendary of course, trophies of heads and skin taken from bitter enemies and prestigious rivals. Superstitious Christians tell tales of pagan worship and the barbaric worship of death, pain and even the devil too. I stood feeling physically nauseous at those thoughts, and wondering what state Jack would be presented in. Perhaps he had fallen from grace, or betrayed the village and faced execution. Perhaps whatever his transgressions had been they would hold his family accountable for them too, and perhaps I would share whatever fate had befallen him.

Instead for the first time in over a decade, I saw Jack and beheld a pitiful sight.

The proud handsome man of his late twenties had acquiesced into a shuffling and staggering wretch, unable to graciously traverse the declining trajectory of the hill. His feet were bare, what clothes he wore were tattered and shabby. His hair grown long and matted and mingling with a wild beard inhabited by clots of blood and the remnants of food visible from twenty paces. So fixated was he on maintaining his balance and avoiding a fall that he failed to register the new presence of three white men beside him.

Jack lost his footing near the stable, and crawled the last few yards to rest before Hula. He made a slight bow in her direction. Hula clicked her fingers, and pointed to one of the horses. Jack pulled himself through the dirt and the horseshit, stopping parallel to the horse indicated and staring passively into the mud. Hula put her weight heavily on his back and he gave an involuntary cry of pain, before she hoisted herself onto the horse.

The villagers were laughing again, at Jack, and at myself. Unwilling to watch Hula ordering my uncle to remain in his humiliating position, and unable to look elsewhere for support I found myself following Jack's lead – examining the ground until I heard the sound of hooves clattering towards me. I forced back the tears to look Hula in the eyes.

“There is your uncle, the “Great Father” of our people” she snapped. “I am not his wife as you say. I would cut off his penis before I would let it near me. The father of my children is where a man should be – finding food for our people. This one spends his days in the sun, drinking devil water and trying to fuck any girl young and stupid enough to listen to his lies.” At this, Hula either exhausted her anger, or took pity upon me. “I will have my people tell Jack you are here. He can put his head in water and I will have him send for you when he is sober enough to believe the sight of you is not caused by the drink.” She turned to the serious-faced white man stood beside her when we first met. “Thomas, show them where they will sleep. And tell this one about his uncle, the “hero”.”

And with that, Hula rode away.

The dark and serious man ushered me back towards the huts.

“Hula is a proud woman. Perhaps to you it seems needlessly so. But these people have endured much. Many lies and many betrayals. You must appreciate that so much has been taken from them, that their resentment is not unjustified. You personally are not the source of her anger, do not take it to heart.”

We walked on in silence before I found the courage to ask.

“Uncle Jack is the village drunk? You know their language; tell me, what is their name for him?” The man paused in his answer, no doubt assessing whether to choose a lie or the truth.

“In their language he is called the “Stinking Drunken White Man”.”

“Folks back home were told he was a hero or a chief. Stories told by his comrades and close friends from the army.”

“Later you can ask him the truth of that yourself. I have only been here in camp for six months, and so cannot talk of these matters with any authority. Nevertheless I myself have heard talk of his first years here being conducted with more dignity and respect.”

“That Hula woman acts as if she despises him.”

“Unfortunately that is so. My understanding is that your Uncle once held romantic intentions towards her. Hula has never discussed this with me; but I witnessed the many moral failures of rejected men before, enough to presume why a woman might hate a man without knowing fully the particulars of the case. Certainly Hula takes many occasions to punish and humiliate your Uncle.”

I remained silent on this and he sighed as he showed me into one of the huts and bade me rest a moment.

“I suppose nothing less than as full an explanation of accounts will suffice” he began, full of reluctant obligation. “This is perhaps not my duty, but I recognize your immediate need for answers. Please appreciate that I did not bear witness to these events, but collective accounts are broadly consistent. All stories I have heard from those who witnessed his induction to the tribe tell claim that Jack Carson was a soldier. He fled execution after escaping his posting at some Kansas fort. Allegedly his commanding officer obstructed a great romance between his daughter and your uncle. Jack defended the honour of the girl and was duly punished for it. He took with him a wagon loaded with rifles and ammunition, and bought them here to the Wazhaze people, hoping to buy a place in their tribe. The Chieftain of the time accepted the offer – not least for the horses Jack had brought with him – horses and weapons being scarce after wartime raids on Wazhaze lands.” He saw the confusion flicker across my face “Wazhaze is their own word; Osage deriving from the French.”

I asked him then of the rumours of marriage within the tribe, of the great military victories won together. He shrugged in reply.

“It is possible that they fought together but to my knowledge Jack was never given tactical command of any Wazhaze, and I have never heard him spoken of as a great warrior. I gather he was well-liked by the Chieftain of that day – Hula’s father – but I have always

supposed their relationship was more a friendship than anything greater. While that Chieftain lived they drank together. Whiskey. That was Jack's primary contribution to these people. That contribution endures to this day; Jack retains smuggling contacts from outlaws around Wichita. The Wazhaze are just as disposed towards drinking as any Europeans I have encountered. They happily trade food, pelts, even money. A small, but important percentage of whatever the tribe possesses is exchanged for regular deliveries of Whiskey. This does nothing to appease Hula's distaste: Jack encourages the men to take precious resources away from their children, simply so that they can poison their minds and bodies with European vices. She has watched strong young men from her tribe following your dull and useless uncle down the path of the degenerate."

I asked the man his name, and why he was with the Wazhaze given their apparent dislike of the white man. He introduced himself as Father Thomas Calvert, a Jesuit priest of British decent.

"The hostility you perceive is not a matter of dogmatic opposition towards whites. Indeed the Wazhaze remember both the French and the Catholic Church quite fondly. They have requested Jesuits, such as myself, to live among them and help administer protection against diseases. Often they tell me of the similarities they believe exist between their beliefs and mine; the mysticism and the belief in the transcendental. However, it is true that they have no great love for the whites. They have seen them steal land, impose compulsory repurchases of reduced spaces at inflated rates; they have seen supposed allies break promises, raid against them or arm their rivals according to the needs of the day. Currently the Wazhaze await long-overdue payment for the lands they were forced to sell in Kansas, and are living now on meagre rations. Some, such as Hula, think white people to be moralizing hypocrites, in servitude only to their own ends. Perhaps these beliefs are not entirely without justification."

There was nothing more to say for either of us then. Father Calvert offered something of a sad smile and patted my shoulder as he excused himself. I had word from an Osage man that Jack was ready to receive me in his hut, but I sent the man back to inform him we would meet tomorrow instead. I have had much to digest, enough for one day. I did not venture out again instead relaying all that I could while the details remain.

I find that it speaks to the volume of shame my uncle must feel that he did not seek me out. And, on sad reflection I was glad of it.

Osage Encampment. July 26th. 1878.

Jack visited our hut first thing the following morning. His greeting was an approximation of cheeriness, severely diluted by palpable confusion. I noted that age had diminished my Uncle Jack's ability to charm strangers into friendship. Once I believe Jack would have created an instant bond with Dupont at least; in that bawdy manner in which newly-acquainted extroverts compete in displays of charisma.

My guides took the earliest opportunity to excuse themselves, assuring me that they would return at dusk after a day in the fields.

Jack positioned himself on the floor, not quite opposite me. He shuffled uncomfortably and produced a half-drunk bottle of whiskey. While conceiving of the best route into the conversation he would sip intermittently from his bottle, without once extending the offer to me.

"My God, you really are here" he eventually offered in a tentative tone that I felt somehow uncharacteristic. I have since realized that I could not now make a single certain claim about his character, and that perhaps I never could. As he sat close by I studied his face in detail. Jack was always clean-shaven. I took this as symbol of pride and assurance in the

fine qualities of his face. Now the patches of skin visible through the tangled masses of hair were blotchy, dried-out and flaking away; and either as a result of natural decay, or the consequence of some violent altercation his smile lacked teeth.

I could not help but recall the name Father Calvert had told me, “Stinking Drunken White Man”. The description was doubtless meant as a token of disrespect, but the intention did not contravene its accuracy: the stench emanating from Jack was dirt, whiskey and perspiration. Needless to say, were the women of Independence to see my Uncle in his present condition, their knees would stand resolute and firm.

I forced a smile in return and found this to be a rare occasion in which a riposte was not forthcoming.

“How on God’s... or more importantly, why are you here Ben?”

The truth of that answer was merely a private surge of silent sadness. I found myself unable to profess a lifetime of adoration for this man, and unwilling to articulate the sense of deep affinity I’d assumed existed between us. I told him instead of the death of Mother and of Father. Jack nodded sadly at the news yet by then his brother and his brother’s wife were distant memories to him, hazy indifferent silhouettes where clarity once had been. I informed him too of my brother, his burgeoning family, their butchers practice, and his offer I had spurned to journey here.

I confess I had mentally rehearsed that moment and fantasized many replies: I thought of Jack, slapping a knee, barking with laughter and declaring that I was clearly above such a life. I hoped for an offer to immediately embark together on some grand adventure. Not once in my imaginings did Jack simply nod with a bemused expression on his face and take a stultified swig from his whiskey bottle. I concluded weakly, expressing a vague dislike for regularity and routine.

Jack took my tailing off as an invitation for the guidance and advice he seemed to suppose was the purpose of my visit. He paused to drink and contrive of some.

“As you entered our settlement, did you notice the arrangement of huts? Two parallel rows: half facing south, the rest face north. This is because we Osage understand that there are two soul-types. Those on the south are Earth people; grounded and practically minded. Your brother is an Earth-soul, he requires labour, his sense of happiness derives from a job well done. Your Father too. Hell, Hula is an Earth person, all that “get food, get water, do this, do that...” The people of the north are Sky-souls Ben, people like you and me: we need the higher things in life – romance, escapade, ambition, danger... But you see, the souls face each other because not only do they complement each other, but they need each other. The Osage taught me these ideas Ben. Oneness: God, nature, people all part of the same energy. This means fear and courage; desire and shame; sin and redemption – they are one too. What I’m trying to say is that whole lifetimes can be spent contesting against themselves, but to fight your nature is futility itself.”

I sat, listened and learned nothing. I heard only a man absolving himself from failure and error.

“You mention sin. Are you a sinner? Are you are ashamed of things you have done?”

I eventually asked him.

“The hell makes you think to ask that?”

“Because here, you are a footstool.” I was glad of the angle he had chosen to sit at.

We mutually averted our gaze quite naturally.

“I am no footstool Ben. That is simply part of a ritual, a ritual that is a condition of my staying here and one that has not been exercised in many dozens of moons.”

“That woman, Hula, did she levy this condition upon you?”

“It is a contentious issue, laced with intricacies. One that outsider would not fully comprehend.” Somehow, I remained unconvinced and elected to incentivize further elucidation with silence. “Shame is no concept for the Osage. Shame is a Christian philosophy, a burden designed to ensnare and drag a man down into a meek and petty life. You think yourself intelligent enough for unencumbered thought, so tell me; should the Greeks and the Romans feel shame for the many practices we would call sinful today?”

I realized Jack retained some astuteness. I had gifted him glimpses of my personal predilections and aversions. Glimpses that he had duly seized upon. Those subtle allusions and contrasts recalled my earlier musing on greatness and mundanity. He was playing to the gallery then, in a manner sufficiently sophisticated that most interrogators would have been misled and charmed into allegiance. But I am not most interrogators, I will not let him retreat behind an adopted culture.

“Why does Hula loathe you so?” I asked. Jack twitched uncomfortably in response.

“She was promised to me once. She felt inclined towards another and persuaded her Father to withdraw the offer. I confess I did not take this news well. Have you tried to convince a little girl, rendered stupid by love, to see wisdom? What an honour such a betrothal would be: a white man, a war hero, the “Spirit Bear”. Our children would have toured the world, Paris, London... away from these fucking mud huts and tepees... One evening, her father and I drank and lamented the passing of a good notion. As I left I thought fortune may favour bravery. I supposed that if I just kissed her, touched her... perhaps latent feelings could be invigorated.” He grimaced at the memory and rubbed his jaw. “He kindly relieved me of several teeth that night, the “other” I mentioned earlier. Some hero he is too if you ask me, sucker-punching a drunken man.”

“How old was she?” I asked, certain that Hula could not be many years older than myself.

“Twelve I think, eleven perhaps.”

I said nothing. The Jack I knew would never have attempted to seduce a girl so young. He sensed my distaste and attempted to justify himself.

“I didn’t try to fuck her, if that’s what you’re thinking. I could wait for that much. But the daughter of the Chieftain... that would be a hell of a bride among these people.”

“By your own admission, you forced yourself on an eleven year old girl.”

“Oneness Ben... Sexuality is energy: an uncontrollable part of being. No one can control who they love, merely how. I was never a rapist Ben, always a decent man.”

I decided against the bitter retorts about actions and words. Jack’s punishments for those crimes were to live daily under Hula’s hatred and humiliation, and that seemed adequate enough.

I told him then of the rumours back home. That he is a man of near-folk hero status. I told him of the great victories he is alleged to have won, the beautiful women he is believed to have tamed and bedded, and of his supposed veneration among these people. He smiled at that, a flicker of that old capricious lustre that I used to love.

“Well, that is something” he said softly.

For the first time in our conversation I heard a tinge of pride enter his voice, as if content that in some reality he is better than in truth. I pitied him then, the “Spirit Bear”, and his sad delusions. I felt it perfectly possible that he cannot help but destroy himself. That everything from his instant bonds with children, his inability to commit to women, a family or even society at large, are all facets of a flawed personality symptomatic of a kind of irresponsibility that finally bought him to this end.

I asked him if he would return with me.

“Are you saying I should?” He asked, instantly affronted.

“They call you the “Stinking Drunken White Man”” I countered, in what I hoped was a blithe and dismissive manner.

“They call me the “Spirit Bear”. It is a great honour to be called such by the Indians, for it relates to a very special animal. The Spirit Bear is real, a white bear sired inexplicably from coloured parentage. The Indians link their existence to great spiritualism, to beautiful and mysteries that transcend rational explanation. They worship them Ben” he insisted. I conceded I knew nothing of their language and did not know the truth of either claim, but I do know between Jack and Father Calvert, who gained most from lies.

“You do stink though, and you are drunk... I am not implying this is not your home Uncle. I am suggesting however that these people do not love you. That if you could not supply them with whiskey they would have outcast you long ago.”

There was surprise in his smile, as if he had not anticipated that I would have been informed as to his true function in this society, but mostly I saw rueful sadness.

“Maybe they would. Maybe they will one day. Maybe on that day I will come and find you. But I have friends and allies here Ben. Do not concern yourself.”

Jack pulled himself slowly to his feet then. He offered the hospitality of the encampment for as long as I would like, reiterating Hula’s stipulation that residents contribute to earn their welcome. I declined politely and instead suggested that we would depart the instant Dupont and Steenwijck returned from their hunt.

Following his departure I remained inside to record this entry.

The events of this journey have soured my expectations of life and sated my thirst for the truth. It will be some time before I will record another.

*Note:*

*I found this journal in my Grandfather's attic while de-cluttering. It belonged to the younger brother of my ancestor William Carson (great, great, great, great Grandfather) whose name is referenced multiple times throughout. The story interested me sufficiently to investigate the fate of its author, Benjamin Carson, as I have never encountered any of his descendants in my entire lifetime.*

*I requested information from the city archives in Topeka and learned that unfortunately Benjamin Carson did not survive the year. It would seem he returned safely enough from this venture, only to be shot dead in the streets of Topeka, in an incident reported August 12th 1878. His assailant was not listed, but records also showed a Mr. Lee Adams was tried and hung for murder just one week later.*

*J.K.*