

Clifford Cardinal
Age 23

Ride

Leonard Redbird stumbled out of the warm speak-easy and into downtown at 3 am on January 17. His head pulled his body after him. The forty-three year old occasionally homeless Ojibway let his weight rest on a news stand while he rummaged through his coat pockets. His hands moved slowly, as if he were under water. A bottle of scope mouthwash emerged from the pocket. Leonard shakily uncapped the bottle and drank one long careful swallow. There were twenty-three blocks between where he stood and his apartment in the east end. The wind screamed in his face. An unforgiving wind screamed through the prairie city. The temperature was twenty degrees below zero. His camouflaged coat was thinly insulated and missing the hood that would have zipped to the nape. He'd bought the coat second hand when he sold his leather jacket and needed something to keep him warm in the fall. It was winter now, and the nylon shell offered the protection of a blanket made of newspaper, harm reduction.

The drink warmed Leonard's stomach. It offered protection from the unknown, like headlights peering into the darkness, reaching the end of their breadth and falling away. It'll be fine for now. He screwed the white cap back onto the bottle and put it back in his pocket, zipping the pocket shut. Leonard set off from the news stand but only took a few steps before a stiff wind knocked him off balance. He shifted his weight to compensate but his disjointed efforts only sent him careening downwards head first into a public bike rack. He didn't realize he was falling until after his head struck the round wheel mount and came to rest on the side of the curb. He'd used his right arm to harshly break the fall. Leonard laughed hysterically, then hoisted himself into a sitting position on a concrete city plant box. He felt his head to survey the damage. His hand was numb.

There was a trickle of blood coming down from his hair line where his head had rung of the steel bar. His forehead had already begun to swell and there was a high pitched ringing in his ears. He knew from experience that his forehead wouldn't bleed

that bad, probably just swell up. Now the back of the head, or even the side, that's another story. If he'd hit the back of his head, then he would really have something to laugh about. He took another drink from his coat pocket to steady himself before standing up and walking farther downtown. Despite the cold, the searing pain in his head, despite loneliness, Leonard Redbird was happy.

Leonard arrived in the after-hours club just before the bars closed. He'd spent years in places like this, searching for forgetfulness. He'd never felt comfortable in restaurants or coffee houses, or even at a dinner table; but something about the cold demeanor of the bikers selling booze at the front table always set him at ease. The rules were clear. Social faux pas was punished harshly. The clientele either had money and were respectful to fellow patrons or did their after hours drinking at home. This is usually what Leonard did. But tonight was different. Tonight Leonard celebrated the memories he'd fought so hard to forget. He sat alone for hours holding a conversation with the surrounding tables and sometimes with just himself.

-Two goddamnyears, he yelled at a table of four. He sat falling off the edge of his chair. Leonard's words were close together and difficult to understand. The table looked at each other to see who would speak to the intruder. A tall Indian with short hair and broad shoulders was happy to take him up.

-Two goddamn years fer what? The man raised the volume of his voice to match Leonard's.

-Two goddamn years it took to go through all the paperwork and all the [REDACTED] with the lawyers.

-Fer what?

-My settlement! Bein' sent to residential school.

Leonard Redbird spent six years in a residential school in the seventies. The horrors of his experience influenced in some way every decision he'd ever made in his entire life. Now the government was going to pay for him to forget.

-And then it's gonna take 'em two years before they have to pay a goddamn cent! But they're gonna pay it. I don't care if they have to sell every church in Canada.

-You won some money, did ye?

-Government and church gotta pay me a hundred twenty-five grand.

The man couldn't believe this.

-Really? Somebody's actually gettin paid fer dat?

-Not somebody. Me!

-It's about time.

-First think I'm gonna do with the money is take my 'ol lady out. She deserves it.

-I guess drinks are on you then, the broad shouldered man said to the laughter of his table.

-Then I'm gonna get my boy some new hockey skates. I never played hockey. He should get to play hockey.

But the table of four had gone back to their conversation, leaving Leonard alone again. The group wasn't interested, and those who might've been thought he was lying.

A red bandana covered his long straggly hair. The holes in his jeans were open sores for the wind. His survival training given him by his uncle as a child was now more of a hazy ironic dream peaking through the fog of years of alcohol, solvent and recently intravenous methamphetamine abuse. Not that you can use methamphetamines

responsibly he'd often say while still lucid enough to carry the glowing charm and warmth his sense of humour provided him in his youth. As much from tonight's indulgence as from the last thirty years, Leonard was having trouble negotiating the sidewalk, maintaining the focus necessary to remember where he was. Now that he was on his way home, on his way down, the thoughts came dripping through.

Image by distorted mental image, Leonard was infuriated by his inability to control his own thoughts. They plagued him in succession. Only after one image had fully formed could he begin to push it back down.

The priest's hands.

Push.

His grown son.

Push.

The disease.

Push.

The woman he'd burned in a fire.

Push.

But her face wouldn't leave his consciousness. Wouldn't be pushed. He bent over against the side of a cinder block wall with his head in his hands, pleading with his mind to let go of him. Still her face wouldn't leave. Wouldn't take her eyes off him at a moment when he wanted nothing more than for everyone to just stop looking at him.

CRACK!

Leonard stood up violently and punched the brick wall with every ounce of force he could muster. The crack, was the sound of the bones in his hand. The pain subsided with the first jittery waves of shock leaving Leonard again bent over this time grinning and saying:

-I guess you showed 'em again.

His hand began to throb. The deep ache felt less like pain than fear growing malignant inside the body. The fear spread through his knees and his chest. He began to shake. He was already cold, but now his body worked harder and harder to keep itself warm *and* preserve itself against the fight for a badly shattered hand.

Leonard looked down at his hand; confronted the fear directly. His hand was bloody and swelling. The ringing in his head diminished in the face of this new great endangerment. Then, like a symphony in progression, the ringing returned, and so too did the image of his late wife.

He paused, covering his face with his hands. He looked through his fingers at a bureau someone had left on the side of the street, resting against a chain link fence. A piece of paper fastened with scotch tape read 'free,' in a child's hand writing. Leonard walked up to the bureau and kicked it. The cheap assembleable furniture slammed against the fence and rebounded back at Leonard. He took a step back but the top still caught his knees sending Leonard falling to the ground with the bureau on top of him. Leonard used his broken hand to break his fall and yelped in pain. He got up from underneath the fallen furniture. He kicked and stomped on the bureau until the cardboard ply separated from the laminated shelves. When the shelf bottoms were snapped off from the metal hinges carelessly screwed into institutions never meant to support them, he picked one up and broke it over a tree before flinging the remains into a parking lot.

The parking lot separated from the sidewalk by a steel guard rail. He sat on the edge of the rail. He was still a long way from home; but, time for a rest, he thought.

After taking a drink of the mouthwash, his eyes grew heavy. He sat on the sidewalk with his back against the guard rail. Within minutes, Leonard slumped over onto the ground and fell into a submissive sleep.

The night moved on without him. He'd barely fallen asleep when he was awakened harshly by the loud digital blip of a police cruiser. He could feel his knees begin to tremble. The opening of a door, the accompanying radio static. An emptiness in the pit of his stomach moved up into his throat, choking his airway. Heavy boots landed on the concrete. He had a moment to look down at the concrete and wish that this wasn't happening. When he looked up his gaze was met by a flashlight directly in the eyes.

-Hey Geronimo, does this look like the reservation? The voice of the light was loud and amicable. He may as well have been asking Leonard if he'd seen the hockey game.

-You know you can't sleep anywhere you want? He used his boot to prod Leonard into full consciousness. The voice held the flashlight in Leonard's eyes as Leonard struggled to his feet. His knees were weak. He staggered, trying to gain his balance.

-Woah, settle down, settle down.

-I...I'm a little loaded. Leonard felt as though he were watching a grainy video of himself from years ago. -I must've stopped for a rest, he slurred.

-Must've! the voice laughed.

-I figured it'd be something like that. Can I see some ID please, sir?

Leonard shakily produced his wallet from his jeans pocket. His hands were dry and cold. His wallet was jam packed. Bits of paper spilled out over the top even before he opened it. Inside were receipts, phone numbers from ancient acquaintances he hadn't

seen in years or had only met once. Every type of paper a person could collect in a wallet except money. He grabbed the first plastic card he found, his health card with a red stripe down the middle and extended his arm towards the officer.

The voice moved instantly within two inches of Leonard's ear and screamed:

-PHOTO ID. SIR. The voice was cruel and shrill.

Leonard looked back down and hastily rifled through his wallet. His hands started to shake worse than before.

-Jesus Christ, buddy, the voice laughed out of frustration.

-You give these people every opportunity. The cop knocked the wallet out of Leonard's hands with the heavy metal flashlight.

-AWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW, Leonard screamed. The heavy flashlight battered the back of his broken hand. The wallet fell to the ground. The fear ran up his arm in a deafening throb. He cradled his right arm in his left. The voice bent over and picked the wallet up off the ground. He shined a light into Leonard's wallet and picked through the receipt paper that chronicled Leonard's life as if it were in some way infectious. The voice found an ID card and threw the remains of the wallet to his partner, leaning against the car silently. The partner looked through the wallet while the voice shined the light on the card he'd chosen.

-Status card. How'd we know, the voice asked the partner

-Ha Ha Ha, the partner laughed. His laugh was younger than the Voice's.

-Leonard Redbird, the voice read aloud.

-How much you have to drink tonight, Leonard Redbird? The voice brought Leonard by the arm to the hood of the cruiser where he searched him quickly.

Leonard honestly couldn't remember how much he'd drank that night. He remembered a two four of Molson Canadian, but that could have been yesterday.

-What do we have here? The voice took the mouthwash in Leonard's coat pocket.

-I thought you smelled minty.

-I thought he smelled like cat piss. The partner, eager to please the voice, often missed the subtleties of interrogation.

-Yeah, mouthwash and cat. The voice jerked his hand quickly out of Leonard's pocket.

-█████! What the █████ was that! The voice went back into Leonard's pocket and removed an uncapped syringe. He removed the heavy leather glove, shining the light on his hand. The needle in Leonard's pocket had pierced his left index finger. Blood smeared on his fingertips.

-█████ junkie ██████! The voice grabbed Leonard by the throat.

-It's not mine, Leonard gargled.

The voice held Leonard's face close to his and spat through clenched teeth:

-I'm gonna kill you Geronimo! He punched Leonard squarely in the teeth. The force of the blow sent Leonard back. His heel tripped on the curb, flailing him backwards onto the sidewalk. They were on him now. Kicking him savagely in his legs, his kidneys. Splintering his ribs with their heavy steel toed boots. Leonard writhed on the ground, trying in vain to cover his head. As he turned away from one blow he received another. He retreated instinctively to protect his groin, so exposed his back. The voice kicked him sharply in the spine. A twinge of pain shot down his right leg.

Leonard's sharp cries of pain reverberated through streets. Soon the officers tired, and dragged him onto the street. The partner turned him over face down on the cement

and handcuffed him. The two picked him up and stuff him into the back of the car before getting in themselves. The voice is horrified, and ferociously angry.

-I better not have gotten anything from you. Are you sick? Tell me, are you
■ sick?

Leonard had Hepatitis C. There was a long silence while he decided what he would say.

-No. I just got tested too.

-Yeah, what is they say about Indians and lying?

Leonard hoped the voice was infected by the syringe, though he wasn't sure he'd used it.

-You know what the worst part is, the voice began wistfully, He's gonna do one night in jail and then he's gonna walk. Coulda killed me but he's gonna be back spending his handout tomorrow.

-He'll probably get a fine.

-Yeah. Enjoy paying your two hundred fifty bucks, Geronimo. Think of all the
■ that money'd've bought you.

Leonard laughed. He knew as soon as the first breath escaped his lips that he'd made a mistake; but the image of the number came to his mind: One hundred twenty-five thousand dollars. His ribs twinged in pain, but the gesture was too great for Leonard to pass up. This time he could laugh at the hypocritical penance the courts would arbitrarily assign him. -Ha ha ha ha ha, He began to cough. Blood sputtered from his lips onto his chin and the mustache growing around the edges of his mouth. Still he laughed. A wide grin pierced through the darkness. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. Leonard pushed the laughter out of himself in hideous convulsions.

-Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! The high pitched syllables blurred into coughing, filling the cabin.

At first the voice is willing to laugh with Leonard.

-What's so funny, chief, the voice laughs.

The last traces of laughter breathed out of him. -That's all, two hundred fifty dollars? Sharp pains shot through his chest. His words were pained. -Two hundred fifty dollars don't mean ■■■ to me. Leonard's head jutted out of his jacket in the direction of the front seat in glibness.

-Is that right? Did you lose the keys to your Mercedes? The partner laughed along.

-No. Leonard spat blood onto the seat. He never considered himself smart, but didn't like to be patronised. -I got a settlement. A hundred twenty-five grand, he wheezed. -So give me your little fine. Book me. I don't care. It's all because of ■■■ like this anyway.

The voice's steady stream of speech fell silent. The car gently rolled through the deserted city streets. -A settlement, huh? From who?, the voice asked. The casual ease was gone from the tone of his voice. He asked with trepidatious incredulity.

-Residential school settlement. Heard of it?

The voice knew that a settlement had been reached but didn't know anybody had actually gotten any money. There was a long silence while the partner waited to see how the voice would react.

The voice laughed again. -Really...Congratulations. So I guess you're gonna have some money to spend.

- [REDACTED] A right.

A dark silence fills the car.

-Well, I think we'd better bring Mr. Redbird to central booking right away. So he can pay his fine and start spending his fortune. His words were cold withholding.

The eager cackle of the young partner was the last thing Leonard Redbird remembered hearing before he blacked out from pain.

He awoke during the drive. The streetlights of the city were gone and he looked into the darkness and anonymity of the endless snowy prairie. He tried to remember how long he'd been asleep. He'd expected to wake up at county lockup...Why was he looking into the fields? He knew he had to say something on his behalf but his chest felt heavy. He wanted to scream but couldn't breathe. Couldn't find the strength even to speak. He tried to sit up in the back of the cruiser, still handcuffed.

The voice heard him stir and lightly taped the breaks sending Leonard falling helplessly face first onto the floor, stuck. His badly broken wrist was swelling inside the handcuffs lacerating the flesh on his wrists. Trapped, partially upside down, unable to speak or move, and racked with pain, Leonard urinated himself. Urine soaked his jeans, warming him as he fell asleep.

The car drove along the flat deserted road irrevocably. Once the city lights could no longer be seen, they stopped. The voice stepped into the gelid night and walked to the rear passenger side. His breath fogged the window as he opened the door.

-Huh? Leonard stirred awake.

The voice grabbed him by his head and wrenched him violently out of the backseat, dragging him by his hair to the front of the car. He slammed Leonard face down on the snowy road and un-cuffed him.

Once Leonard was freed he used the elbow of his broken arm to push himself onto his side. Still the crushing weight sat on his chest. -What's... he could barely gasp. He held his sharply mutilated wrist in his other arm. -What's...

-What's that? Trying to say something, the voice asked.

Leonard had no idea where he was. -I...'I can't breath,' Leonard tried to say, but the words wouldn't leave his lips.

-Enjoy your walk, Mr. Redbird. The voice got back in the car and shut the door.

-Where...where? Leonard wheezed.

The car pulled around and drove back in the direction it came. Leonard watched the red tail lights drive away through the desolate highway. -Where are you going, he whispered. The red tail lights disappeared....