

PART I

Night, near the eastern edge of the walled, sloping grounds of the estate, within these walls, perhaps a quarter-mile from the house itself, at the small stand of trees, under a moonless sky, listening, he stands, absolutely silent.

Beneath his boots, the ground is moist. A cold wind tells him that winter yields but grudgingly to spring in upstate New York. He reaches out and touches the dark line of a slender branch to his right, gently. He feels the buds of the fresh year's green, dreaming of summer beneath his wide, dark hand.

He wears a blue velveteen shirt hanging out over his jeans, a wide concha belt securing it at his waist. A heavy squash blossom necklace—a very old one—hangs down upon his breast. High about his neck is a slender strand of turquoise *heiche*. He has a silver bracelet on his left wrist, studded with random chunks of turquoise and coral. The buttons of his shirt are hammered dimes from the early twentieth century. His long hair is bound with a strip of red cloth.

Tall, out of place, out of time, he listens for that which may or may not become audible: indication of the strange struggle at the dark house. No matter how the encounter goes, he, William Blackhorse Singer, will be the loser. But this is his own thing to bear, from a force he set into motion long ago, a *chindi* which has dogged his heels across the years.

He hears a brief noise from the direction of the house, followed immediately by a loud crashing. This does not end it, however. The sounds continue. From somewhere out over the walls, a coyote howls.

He almost laughs. A dog, certainly. Though it sounds more like the other, to which he has again become accustomed. None of them around here, of course.

William Blackhorse Singer. He has other names, but the remembering machines know him by this one. It was by this one that they summoned him.

The sounds cease abruptly, and after a short while begin again. He estimates that it must be near midnight in this part of the world. He looks to the skies, but Christ's blood does not stream in the firmament. Only Ini, the bird of thunder among the southwestern stars, ready with his lightning, clouds and rain, extending his headplume to tickle the nose of Sas, the bear, telling him it is time to bring new life to the earth, there by the Milky Way.

Silence. Sudden, and stretching pulsebeat by pulse-beat to fill his world. Is it over? Is it really over?

Again, short barks followed by the howling. Once he had known many things to do, still knew some of them. All are closed to him now, but for the waiting.

No. There is yet a thing with which to fill it.

Softly, but with growing force, he begins the song.

First man was not exactly jumping with joy over the dark underworld in which he was created. He shared it with eight other humans, and the ants and the beetles and later the locusts whom they encountered as they explored, and Coyote—the First Angry One, He-who-was-formed-in-the-water, Scrawny Wanderer. Everyone multiplied; and the dragonflies, the wasps and the bat people later joined them; and Spider Man and Spider Woman. The place grew crowded and was full of bugs. Strife ensued.

“Let's get out of here,” a number of them suggested.

First Man, who was wise and powerful, fetched his treasures of White Shell, Turquoise, Abalone, Jet and the Red-White Stone.

He placed the White Shell in the east and breathed upon it. Up from it rose a white tower of cloud. He placed the Turquoise to the south and breathed upon it. From it there rose a blue cloud tower. To the west he set the Abalone, and when he had breathed upon it a yellow cloud tower rose up in that place. To the north he set the Jet, and touched by his breath it sent up a black tower of cloud. The white and the yellow grew, met overhead and crossed, as did the blue and the black. These became the Night and the Day.

Then he placed the Red-White Stone at the center and breathed upon it. From it there rose a many-colored tower.

The tower to the east was called Folding Dawn; that to the south was called Folding Blue Sky; to the west, Folding Twilight; that to the north, Folding Darkness. One by one, Coyote visited each of them, changing his color to match their own. For this reason, he is known as Child of the Dawn, as Child of the Blue Sky, Child of the Twilight and Child of Darkness, along with all his other names. At each of these places, his power was increased.

While the towers of the four cardinal points were holy, giving birth to the prayer rites, the central one bore all pains, evils and diseases. And it was this tower up which First Man and Coyote led the People, bringing them into the second world; and, of course, along with them, the evils.

There they explored and they met with others, and First Man fought with many, defeating them all and taking their songs of power.

But this also was a place of suffering, of misery, a thing Coyote discovered as he went to and fro in the world and up and down it. And so to First Man he took the pleas that they depart.

First Man made a white smoke and blew it to the east, then swallowed it again—and the same in every direction. This removed all the evils from the world and brought them back to the People from whence they had come. Then he laid Lightning, both jagged and straight, to the east, and Rainbow and Sunlight, but nothing occurred. He moved them to the south, the west and the north. The world trembled but brought forth no power to bear them upward. He made then a wand of Jet, Turquoise, Abalone and White Shell. Atop this, he set the Red-White Stone. It rose and bore them upward into the next world.

Here they met the many snakes, and Salt Man and Woman and Fire God. Nor should Spider Ant be forgotten. And light and darkness came up from the towers of the four colors, as in the other worlds.

But then First Man set a streak of yellow and another of red and yellow in the east, and these halted the movement of the white light.

And the People were afraid. Salt Man counseled them to explore in the east, but the streaks retreated as they advanced. Then they heard a voice summoning them to the south. There they found the old man

Dontso, called Messenger Fly, who told them what First Man had done. The yellow streak, he said, represented the emergence of the People; the other, vegetation and pollen, with the red part indicating all diseases.

Then Owl and Kit Fox and Wolf and Wildcat came, and with them Horned Rattlesnake, who offered First Man the shell he carried on his head—and promises of offerings of White Shell, Turquoise, Abalone and Jet in the future. First Man accepted the shell and its magic and removed the streaks from the sky.

The People then realized that First Man was evil. Coyote spied upon their counsels and reported to First Man that they knew he had stopped the light in the east to gain a treasure.

When later they confronted him with it, First Man replied, “Yes. It is true, grandchildren. Very true. I am evil. Yet I have employed my evil on your behalf. For these offerings shall benefit all of us. And I do know when to withhold my evil from those about me.”

And he proceeded to prove this thing by building the first medicine hogan, where he shared with them his knowledge of things good and evil.

He remembered the party the night before he had found the coyote. Garbed in the rented splendor of a shimmering synthetic-fibered foursquare and blackrib Pleat & Ruffle evegarb, he had tripped through to the mansion in Arlington. Notables past and present filled the sparkling, high-ceilinged rooms. He was decidedly Past, but he had gone anyway, to see a few old friends, to touch that other life again.

A middle-aged woman of professional charm greeted him, approached him, embraced him and spoke with him for half a minute in the enthusiastic voice of a newscaster, until a fresh arrival at his back produced a reflex pressure from her hand upon his arm, directing him to the side.

Grateful, he moved off; accepting a drink from a tray, glancing at faces, nodding to some, pausing to exchange a few words, working his way to a small room he recalled from previous visits.

He sighed when he entered. He liked the wood and iron, stone and rough plaster, books and quiet pictures, the single window with its uninterrupted view of the river, the fireplace burning softly.

"I knew you'd find me here," she said, from her chair near the hearth.

He smiled.

"So did I—in the only room built during a lapse in tastelessness."

He drew up a chair, seating himself near her but facing slightly past her toward the fire. Her heavy, lined face, the bright blue eyes beneath white hair, her short stocky figure, had not changed recently. In some ways she was the older, in others she was not. Time had played its favorite game—irony—with them both. He thought of the century-old

Fontenelle and Mme. Grimaud, almost as old as he. Yet there was a gulf here of a different sort.

"Will you go collecting again soon?" she asked him.

"They've all the beasties they need for a while. I'm retired."

"Do you like it?"

"As well as anything."

Her brows tightened in a small wince.

"I can never tell whether it's native fatalism, world-weariness or a pose with you."

"I can't either, anymore," he said.

"Perhaps you're suffering from leisure."

"That's about as exclusive as rain these days. I exist in a private culture."

"Really. It can't be as bad as all that," she said.

"Bad? Good and evil are always mixed up. It provides order."

"Nothing else?"

"It is easy to love what is present and desire what is absent."

She reached out and squeezed his hand.

"You crazy Indian. Do you exist when I'm not here?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I was a privileged traveler. Maybe I died and no one had the heart to tell me. How've you been, Margaret?"

After a time, she said, "Still living in an age of timidity, I suppose. And ideas."

He raised his drink and took a big swallow.

". . . Stale, flat and unprofitable," she said.

He raised the glass higher, holding it to the light, staring through it. "Not that bad," he stated. "They got the vermouth right this time." She chuckled. "Philosophy doesn't change people, does it?" she asked.