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HOW ROBERT WHITEKILLER GOT A NEW NAME AND FOUND HIS OWN GRAVE

Robert J. Conley

He stopped his new GMC pickup right there in the middle of the bridge. There wasn't any other traffic visible anyway, and there was an old Indian man sitting on the bridge rail, his feet dangling off over the water below, and his whole appearance projecting a kind of hang-dog look.

"Hello there," Robert said.

The old man glanced over his shoulder.

"Hello," he said. He squinted at the stranger in the new pickup. "You an Indian?" he asked.

"Yes sir," Robert said.

"You ain't from around here," said the old man.

"I'm Cherokee," said Robert, "from Oklahoma."

"Cherokee?" the old man said. "You look like a real Indian."

"I'm a full-blood Cherokee," Robert said. "And I think I'm real. I feel real."

"Well, I'll be," the old man said. "The only people ever told me they were Cherokees were white people. I didn't know there were any real Cherokees left."

"Well, you're talking to one," Robert said, and he shut off the engine of the pickup and stepped out onto the road. "You're way out here in the middle of nowhere all by yourself," he said. "You got a car somewhere?"

"No."

"Is someone coming to pick you up?"

"No."

"Well, can I give you a ride somewhere?"

"No," the old man said. "I'm just sitting here thinking about jumping off this bridge."

"Oh, hey," Robert said. "What you want to do that for?" He swung first one leg, then the other over the rail and sat down beside the old man. "You don't want to kill yourself, do you?"

“Don’t see why not,” the old man said. “I got no money. Got nothing to eat. No family left, so no one cares a damn about me any more. All I do is sit around getting older and wait to die.”

“Well, I care,” Robert said. “Come on. Let’s go get something to eat.”

The old man shrugged but made no move.

“My name’s Robert Whitekiller,” Robert said.

“Whitekiller?” said the old man, and he grinned. “That’s a good name, alright. Whitekiller. I like that. I’m Roman White Horse,” and he gave emphasis to the second syllable of his first name, giving it a French sounding pronunciation. “I’m a full-blood Lakota. The white men call us ‘Sioux.’” He held out a small right hand, and Robert took it in his.

“Hell, I’m glad to know you, Roman,” he said. “Come on. I’ve got some cold beer in the pickup.”

“Well, that sounds pretty good,” Roman said. “Okay.”

They walked over to the pickup and got in. Roman rubbed the dashboard and the back of the seat. “This is a real nice truck,” he said. Robert reached into a cooler behind the seat and pulled out two cans, dripping from the melting ice in which they had been immersed. He handed one to Roman, and they pulled the tabs. Each man took a long swig of cold beer.

“Ahh,” Roman sighed. “That’s good. It’s been too damn long.”

“Well, there’s plenty where that come from,” Robert said. “You know a good place to eat around here?”

“I know the best place,” Roman said. “It’s also about the only place.”

Robert laughed.

“Well then,” he said, “it’ll do. Tell me where to go.”

Roman gave Robert directions to a small place just on the outside of the reservation. Signs on the outside of the building advertised gas, groceries, cold beer and barbeque, ready to eat. “They make hamburgers, too,” Roman said. “Pretty good ones.” A number of cars and pickups were parked around the building in the gravel parking lot. Robert thought that was usually a good sign, but then, if this was the only place around, it might not mean much this time.

“It’s off the reservation,” Roman said, “so he can sell beer. You can’t sell beer on the reservation, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Robert said.

“Oh,” said Roman. “Well, I didn’t know if a Cherokee would know that.”

“I heard about it,” Robert said. “I get around some.”

“A white man owns this place,” Roman said, “but I guess that’s okay. White men own everything nowadays anyway.”

They dropped their empty beer cans into a paper bag Robert produced from behind the seat of the pickup. Then got out and walked toward the long, low building, the gravel of the parking lot crunching beneath their footsteps. A jukebox inside was playing a country song, and they could hear it even before they opened the door to go in. Inside, the place was dark. Even so, Robert could tell that it was busy, doing a brisk business, mostly in cold beer. All of the customers were Indian. Most of them were men. The white man behind the bar looked up as Robert and Roman approached.

“Hello, Roman,” he said. “Long time no see. Who you got there?”

“This is my friend, Robert Whitekiller,” Roman said in a loud voice. Everyone in the place got quiet in order to listen to what the old man would say about this stranger he had brought into their midst. “He’s a real Cherokee from Oklahoma. Full-blood. We came for something to eat.”

“What’ll you have?” the white man asked.

“Hamburgers,” Roman said.

“But first let’s get everyone in here a beer,” Robert said. Shouts of approval rose up from the crowd, and they shoved against each other to belly up to the bar. Robert and Roman sat down at stools there at the bar just before the crowd hit it. When the beers had all been passed around and Robert had paid for them, the white man called out to someone in the kitchen to start a couple of hamburgers. A young man who had already obviously had several beers wobbled over to the stool next to Robert and dropped down heavily on it. He leaned toward Robert, a friendly drunken smile on his face.

“Hey,” he said. “Thanks for the beer. What’d he say your name was?”

“Whitekiller,” Robert said.

“Damn,” said the young man. “That’s a hell of a good name. Really. Did you earn it or what?”

“I’ll just have to let you wonder about that,” Robert said, and the young man laughed, weaving around and nearly falling off the stool.

“Yeah,” he said. “That is a kind of personal question. You don’t even know me. Hell, for all you know, I might work for the FBI.”

“Well,” Robert said, “you do have that look about you.”

The young man laughed again, lurched to his feet and sauntered back to the table where his companions waited for him. Then the white man brought out the hamburgers, and Robert and Roman ate. Robert couldn’t help noticing that the old man gobbled that burger like he hadn’t had anything to eat for days, and he wondered just how long it had been since Roman’s last meal. When they finished, he asked Roman if he could eat another one, and Roman opined as how he thought he probably could, so Robert ordered two more hamburgers, an order of French fries and a couple more beers. When they had eaten all that, they each had a slice of apple pie. Then they had two more beers. Finally, Roman got up to go to the men’s room, saying, “I’ve got to go bleed my lizard,” and Robert called the owner over to him. First he paid the bill, and then he gave the man a hefty tip.

“Listen,” he said, “I’m working with that pipeline crew over on the highway, you know?” The white man nodded. “Well, we’re going to be around here for quite a while. I’ll be back to see you at least once a week. In the meantime, I want you to give Mr. White Horse anything he wants any time he comes in here. I’ll take care of it when I come in. We got a deal?”

The white man wrinkled his brow in deep thought and scratched his head.

“How come?” he asked.

“I’m looking after him,” Robert said.

The white man shrugged. “Hell,” he said, “why not? You just might be telling me the truth, and besides, someone ought to be looking out for the old guy. Okay, I’ll take a chance. You got a deal.”

They shook hands on it, and when Roman came back to the bar, Robert said, “Listen, Roman, I got to be going along now. Tomorrow’s a workday, and I get up at 5:30, but I’ll run you home first. You got

any groceries at home?”

“No,” Roman said. “Got nothing at home.”

“Well, let’s stock up before we leave,” Robert said, and together they walked through the grocery store section and filled up a basket with bread, bologna, cheese, six-packs of beer, coffee, eggs, bacon, cans of peaches—anything that struck the fancy of either Robert or Roman. Robert paid the tab, and they headed for the door. “Hey, Whitekiller,” someone shouted. “Come back and see us again.” Robert glanced back over his shoulder. “I will,” he said.

At Roman’s house, which was only a short drive from the store, Robert shut off the engine. He helped Roman carry the four sacks of groceries into the three-room, clapboard house and put them on the kitchen counter.

“I’ll see you next week, Roman,” he said as he was on his way out the door. “Now, if you need anything between now and then, just go back over to the store and get it. Put it on my tab. I made a deal with that white man. He’ll let you have anything you want, and I’ll take care of it when I come around next week. Okay?”

Roman hesitated.

“Hey, buddy,” Robert said, “I don’t want you jumping off no bridge just because you’re hungry or because you got no friends or anything like that. Okay? Hey, you’re the only friend I’ve got in these parts. I just met you, and I don’t want to lose you. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Roman. “But you’re my family now, and that means we trade names now. From now on, I’m Robert Whitekiller, and you’re Roman White Horse.”

Robert cocked his head. “Well, all right,” he said. “Roman White Horse. All right. That’s a pretty good name.”

“Yeah,” Roman said. He grinned. “So’s mine.”

Driving back toward his motel room near the work site, Robert Whitekiller contemplated the strange ways of these northern Indians. It wasn’t just the trading of names he was thinking about. It was old Roman’s predicament. It didn’t hardly seem possible to Robert that the old man had no family left. A man his age must have had children. And even if they were all gone, they should have had their own

children, giving him grandchildren. Even if he had never married and never had children, it was likely that he had brothers and sisters. Most Indians have large families. He ought to have nieces and nephews anyway. If he did have any family, they sure as hell weren't worth a damn. It just didn't seem right for an old man like that to be living alone and totally neglected, but that certainly seemed to be the case with Roman White Horse, and even the white man back at the store seemed to confirm the old man's story. Ah, well, strange things happen in this world, and Robert in his time had seen stranger than this case of Roman White Horse.

He worked a full week, and when the weekend came around, he found that they were behind schedule and had to work through Saturday and Sunday to catch up. Then they put in another full week. When Friday evening finally came around, Robert headed his pickup back toward the little reservation house of Roman White Horse. No one looked out the front door when he pulled up in front of the house. He shut off the engine and got out. Still no one appeared. He walked up to the front door and knocked. There was no answer. He tried the door and found it unlocked. He opened it a crack and called into the dark house.

"Roman," he said. "You in there? Hey. Robert Whitekiller."

There was still no answer. The place seemed to be deserted. Robert went back to his pickup, got in and drove on over to the white man's store. It looked just the same as it had two weeks earlier. Cars and pickups were parked all around the gravel lot. He crunched his way through the parking lot, went inside, and saw a number of people there who remembered him from his last visit. They smiled and called out to him in greeting. There was no sign, though, of Roman White Horse. Robert walked over to the bar, and the white man came over to meet him.

"What do I owe you?" Robert asked.

"Nothing," the white man said. "Roman never came back for anything more. I guess the stuff you bought for him lasted him all right."

"Oh. Okay," Robert said. "Do you know where I could find him? I just came from his house. He's not there."

“Oh, yeah. I guess you wouldn’t have heard,” the white man said. “Old Roman died. Just a few days after you left here with him, I guess.”

Robert got directions to the cemetery and drove right over there. It wasn’t hard to locate the right grave. It still had a fresh dug look about it. He walked over and stepped around where he could read the inscription on the stone. It startled him at first. “Robert Whitekiller,” it read, and then it gave birth and death dates. He shook off a slight chill.

“Well,” he said, “it’s not really me in that grave. That’s Robert Whitekiller, and I’m Roman White Horse now.”