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Road Warrior

Scott Bear Don't Walk

“Weren’t you the Indian Rhodes Scholar?” she said, as I shivered in her doorway holding my pizza delivery bag, wearing my “Red Pies Over Montana” polyester shirt and ball cap. She handed me 20 dollars for driving a Sausage Lover’s Special through the snow-drifted streets of the reservation border town of Missoula—for a one-dollar tip.

A month before, I had been sitting next to a well-known British novelist at a Rhodes House dinner in Oxford, which involved multiple courses and sparkling conversation over after-dinner sherry. I had been wearing a jacket and tie, not a tux, but near. The writer asked, “Aren’t you the red-Indian Rhodes Scholar?”

They say the Rhodes is one of the few things a person can do at 20 years of age that will be mentioned at 40, that and joining the Marines—but I didn’t go to Parris Island. I went to Oxford, England.

During my fifth year at the University of Montana, a familiar-looking woman, whose face I couldn’t quite place, passed as I walked across campus. Coming closer, I recognized her as a former classmate who had trounced me in every subject in grade school, the smartest person in class, my main competition. *Becky—Rebecca* (some names have been changed for this story), I called out, asking her what she was doing in Missoula. She said that she had come back from Harvard for the local Rhodes Scholarship interview. I had no idea what the words “Rhodes Scholar” meant. A year later, I would be chosen.

I am from an American Indian tribe—the Crow—located in Montana. I say it this way, “located in Montana” because we predate the founding of the state. We predate the founding of the United States, though this is where we find ourselves. My parents went to college at the local university. They came of age in the 1960s during the Civil Rights movement and the Great

Society. Coming from two separate Indian reservations, my parents were the first in their families to go to college, and, until I went 25 years later, the last. They went from poor to professional. They went from reservation schools and Catholic boarding schools, which sought to kill the Indian to save the student, to become active in the American Indian Civil Rights movement. My parents' generation (though not my parents) founded the "Red Power" movement, occupied Alcatraz Island and Wounded Knee. My father was one of the earliest lawyers in the Crow Tribe, and he still works for his people. My mother was active in American Indian women's rights, and still works in Indian health care. They made the big leap for me. I went to college only because they did.

Is there such a thing as a traditional Rhodes Scholar? Until the 1970s, a Rhodes Scholar was male. Was he also white? In December of 1992, when I called my mother from a high-rise in Seattle to tell her that I had had been chosen by the Rhodes committee, her first words were, "How many women were picked?" She identifies as a second-wave feminist. I grew up in a house where *Ms.* magazine and *Our Bodies Ourselves* sat on the coffee table—we learned that "a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle." We learned that a woman could do anything—Mother told my sister that she could be a senator—but I wondered what an Indian could boy be? In my Rhodes Scholar class of 1993 there were few minorities, but about an even split gender-wise. I told my mother about half were women. "Good," she said. My peers seemed to come from two or three certain universities on the East Coast, men and women. Though not Harvard or Yale, my state university had secretly been sending Rhodes, too. The University of Montana was then rated 4th in the country for public schools for sending Rhodes Scholars, a surprise to me, being so close to the poverty and limited opportunity of Indian Country.

My former grade school classmate mentioned the Rhodes, but I found out what it was when a teaching assistant, Betsy, showed up to class one day dressed up. She usually favored the ripped jeans and Guatemalan sweater look of the early 1990s, so I asked her why she was so dressed up. She said she had an interview for the Rhodes. When she was chosen it was just as another Rhodes, Bill Clinton, was running for president. I finally figured out what the Rhodes was—a prestigious ladder to the world of success. Betsy had come from Chicago to Montana for graduate school; Clinton had come from a little town in Arkansas named Hope. Both went to England. Just before she was snatched up by the world of success, Betsy suggested that I apply.

In one sense, my preparation for the Rhodes was thorough. The Rhodes advisor at my school, Margaret, a sixty-something Philosophy professor, from the East Coast, had a track record of grooming successful applicants. We talked in her book-lined office as she tried to envision me as Rhodes material. She asked if I kept up with the news. She grilled me about current events in her verbally aggressive style: the trade deficit with Japan, human rights in China, Hamas. We discussed Clinton's performance in the latest presidential debates. I don't believe I had ever met someone so upfront, almost brusque, but sure of herself, or sure-seeming—pushy. I had a little idea of what I was talking about, these things of the world, and the rest, I bluffed. As I was leaving her office after our first conversation, Margaret said, "I hope you want the Rhodes, because you're going get it." Even as she said it something didn't register—I had never been chosen for anything. Unremarkable in grades, athletics, student activities, I applied simply because I was told I had a chance.

Margaret began grooming me. I visited her office weekly. It was like the build-up scene in *Rocky* crossed with *My Fair Lady*. She told me what to wear—blue blazer, pinpoint Oxford shirt, fancy shoes—how to look the part. She helped me say what I wanted to say in my essay. Margaret had a reputation as a Rhodes-maker. Without Margaret, I would have never made it. In the 16 years since she retired, there have been no more from my school.

We prepared for the vetting, but we didn't prepare for life at Oxford. Could I go? Did I want to? It was assumed that if I could, I would. Oxford was a great place: everyone just knew that. Key information about what it was like was left to a few pictures in the catalogue. Margaret had sent many to Oxford, but hadn't been there herself. She assumed I would be glad to escape the rural poverty of a cultural backwater, finding refuge first in Oxford, then in the big city. We both assumed that greatness did not, could not, involve Missoula, Montana. I read *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and I desired worldly opportunity, but I also wanted to put Native America on the world's map.

What about the world I was leaving? My university was 15 minutes from my mother's reservation, 20 minutes from my grandmother's house. My father had gone to the same university for law school, and I went to the university preschool. I had never left home. I hadn't even been out of state. My tribe is ambivalent about its people going away. Going away can

make sense, economically, or to study, but in another sense, it doesn't make any. We were nomads and we traveled, but always within a known world of connections. Our world is known through stories. Sacred ancestors, from before humans existed, had lived in and around where Missoula is presently located. At the dawn of time, the sacred trickster, Coyote, killed a monster that was devouring everything in the next valley over. Coyote cut out the heart of the monster and threw it west. The heart of the monster is known by the tribe as the original source of all the mosquitoes in the world. This is what it means to be Indian: I could stand on campus in Missoula, slap a mosquito, and know that it had come from the dawn of time, when Coyote saved everything. Many Indians still live in their holy land, they've never left. Sometimes I would drive over to Idaho and view the heart of the monster, now a red monolith. Other Americans don't have this connection.

At Oxford I would lose touch with this. Other Indians had gone away before: to school, to the federal relocation program, where Indians were enticed to leave the reservation with promises of jobs and job training, so that the country might end its obligations to the tribes and the treaties. But everyone always came back. The story of going away and coming back developed from the very beginnings of the reservation era. The early American Indian novelist D'Arcy McNickle, a member of my mother's tribe, wrote *The Surrounded*, about a young man who goes away to a boarding school after selling his land. He comes back—Indians always came back. Coming back was a common thread to stories of leaving: reconnecting, plugging in, finding ground, finding home. I had some idea of these things when I applied for the Rhodes, but not enough to be able to articulate them. In my Rhodes application essay, I wrote about standing astride two worlds: the tribal and the global. What I didn't realize is that if I lost my footing on one, I would fall.

Because of our great poverty and great need, my tribe pinned so much hope on me. After I got the Rhodes, local newspapers and radio and television trumpeted the story. I was a local celebrity and a hit in Indian Country. Tribal newspapers proclaimed my cultural achievement. I spoke at reservation grade schools and high schools and Native American Studies Departments throughout the West. I was the graduation speaker at my father's former high school. On the stand, I was embraced by the tribal chairwoman and members of the tribal council who rarely got along well enough to appear anywhere together in public. I stood for the possibility of an Indian finding success in the larger world.

Many Indian people told me that they were proud of what I had done, seeing it as a cultural achievement, what Indians could do. I saw it that way too. When I was a kid I had wanted to be the first Indian on the moon, and with the Rhodes I had some idea of what it was like. At my university's powwow on campus, an old woman dressed in the traditional style with high-top moccasins, calico dress, wide leather belt, and hair scarf, recognized me out of a crowd, put her arms around me and started crying. She said that she told her teenage grandson about me, so that he could be proud to be Indian.

At that same powwow, in a special ceremony I was given the traditional Indian name "Outstanding War Bonnet." A war bonnet, or headdress, is worn by warriors who have amassed many great deeds, each signified by an eagle feather. My great deed was the Rhodes, and I was given a headdress covered in eagle feathers.

A local Indian health clinic made a poster; it shows a picture of me, alongside a very old picture of my great grandfather, the original Bear Don't Walk, my family's namesake. The poster lauds my scholarship, and says, "This is Today's Warrior: Drug and Alcohol Free." These posters were pasted on the doors and walls of local businesses. I would run into pictures of myself all over town.

A week before I left for England, I was on the reservation helping friends smoke giant Columbia River salmon. We did it on the grill of a junked 1964 Impala, suspended from a rusted swing set, placed over a large fire of larch wood. I went to find a bathroom inside a nearby trailer house and walked into the room of a teenage boy, but no one was there. On the wall, I saw a poster of Michael Jordan dunking a ball—alongside my poster. My tribe didn't have many modern heroes. We had old ones: chiefs, warriors, rebels who fought the coming of the white man. Now, people thought I was one, which really put the spin on my head, not because they thought I was a hero, but because we were so bereft of them.

And so I went to England, and it was in Oxford that I crashed and burned. No story is pre-determined. To this day I search for the signs of what happened, the warnings. I've mentioned that while the Rhodes was important and lauded, I had no real idea of what it involved. I was also very far away from a world that made sense to me. This is all true. But there is something

more. Another person with these same factors might have gone to Oxford and thrived. When I got there, I felt the alienation of a place unlike any other I had experienced. My fellow Rhodes had gone to the better schools in America and found in Oxford something familiar: soaring architecture, manners, a belief in a pursuit of excellence. For some, even the tutorial system was similar. I was a fish out of water, or a buffalo out of the tall grass plains, or an American Indian away from his tribe. A sense of displacement reared up. It wasn't just the crowded stone passages of the medieval city. Nor was it the lack of mountains and truly wild wildlife, though I felt these things. Something was wrong with my orientation, the direction I was facing. Whether from Brazil, South Africa, Singapore, or Palo Alto, students came to Oxford to tap into something old (but not old in the sense of the stories of my tribe), and yet of this moment. Everyone there was trying to get ahead, everyone was concerned about making it, it didn't matter if you were from Seoul or New South Wales, you wanted to plug into the global culture, via the cultural landmarks of English-speaking society. England had been a great power, and had left its mark everywhere. All of these former colonies, and some former enemies, felt a desire to measure up to the Oxfordian model of civilization. Wasn't this why Cecil Rhodes endowed his scholarship?

It was here, along the river Cherwell, in the wood-paneled rooms, at high table, among white china and crystal glassware that I fell out of place, out of time. Perhaps I didn't have enough concern for career and success. If I had stayed long enough, I could have become a convert. Things are not so different on my reservation, we want success. In the whole world, success—measured in terms of resume, salary, material goods—has become our common denominator, and perhaps Cecil Rhodes rightly celebrates the English, but to the nomad in me, all this makes no sense. It is the opposite of sense.

Rhodes Scholars will sometimes talk about the relationships they made at Oxford, but it's a matter of perspective. An Indian elder once told me that nomadic tribes had figured out a way to live so that they only had to spend about twenty hours a week "making a living." The rest of the time was spent really living: socializing, telling stories, singing songs through long winter nights. In Western culture, we haven't figured out how to spend less than forty hours at a desk. In this world, in Oxford's world, relationships aren't as important as getting ahead.

Asking these kinds of questions, I floundered. My meetings with my tutors were a study in acute, almost laughable anxiety and misunderstanding. The Don would say, *Mr. Bear Don't Walk, for next week please read these twenty books, and write an essay on the topic "The French Revolution: What and Why."* I would rush out to find these books. Searching the picked over libraries of my college (Merton) then the History Faculty library, then those of other colleges, I came up with two or three books from the "secondary" class. In a bind, I would consult various and sundry lesser books and come back to my professor in a week, with a handwritten tome entitled "The French Revolution What and Why." As I read aloud, the Don would indicate his displeasure by lighting a cigarette at the nearest possible opportunity. If I could read a few paragraphs before he lit up, my essay was considered decent. Once, and only once, did the Don wait until the end of my essay, only after giving remarks did he remember the cigarette. This was my lone triumph.

Perhaps my mistake was studying for a second BA in history. Classmates who continued on to higher degrees, in their area of study, seemed to enjoy their time better. I had no classes, just the occasional voluntary lecture. There was no hand-holding, and despite the tutorial system of one-on-one teaching, very little attention was paid to me. I had gone from a student of promise at my home to just another face in the crowd. I had been coddled in my old university. As a philosophy student interested in ideas, I had written papers about things like Romanticism, where the professor lectured, interacted with the students, and then expected original thought. Oxford had no such illusions about original thought. As an experiment at Oxford, I presented the paper I wrote on Romanticism from my first university, and got my Don smoking immediately. He didn't like my presumption to present original ideas. He wanted me to simply restate what the sources he had assigned said. This I did not do very well. After my first term of little feedback from my Don, I bought, on my trip home, a couple of large university textbooks of European and world history. I used these and their bibliographies much more than the list of texts from the Don that I couldn't find. I won't justify this, I was drowning, my head was barely above water.

Depression reared up, then. The gray rooms and sidewalks and bare trees of winter were becoming too much. The sun seemed to show its face only a few hours during the late fall and winter months. After the winter break, the sun went away completely. An avid runner, I tried to cope by working out. Something was coming on the edges of my eyesight. It felt like my vision

and my mind were going gray. To head it off, I ran daily along the crowded city streets, and tree-lined paths, and the muddy trails of the river. Oxford is a scenic place, with the boats and high-tension power lines—but nothing compared to my home.

Spurred by the coming grayness, I visited the college nurse. She listened and gave sympathy. With her, and not with my Dons, I could talk freely. She recommended I see the counseling service of the university. I gathered that depression was a common problem, a given discontent of the place. I read that Oxford had the highest rate of suicide of any school in the UK. I read about medications available in America to treat depression. The news stories in Britain about Prozac, which had just become available, were skeptical. Foul moods and black dog depressions were considered a right, and those bloody Americans were trying to medicate away their feelings.

During my summer home with family and tribe, when the sun was in the sky, I felt better. But during my second year at Oxford, as the summer light waned, I felt a more serious depression coming. It felt like a hole in my skull where darkness was escaping. Waking up in my small bed in my small room, I thought, “Oh shit, I’m still here.” I wanted Prozac; I got group therapy. In a room, around twenty Oxford students spoke of their problems. One had just tried suicide with pills, another had been found tying a rope to a light fixture, another had gauze bandages on her wrists, another with dark circles under his eyes barely spoke. Depressed as I was, I was still fighting. And I wasn’t going to get better around students who were worse off than I was. It terrified me to think of the quiet rooms of Oxford full of students who alternated between having the usual “essay crisis” and suicidal thoughts. I wasn’t there yet, but group therapy wasn’t enough and the hole in my head seemed to be expanding, the grayness in my vision growing.

I finally went to the doctor and asked after other kinds of treatment, for medication. They could give old-type antidepressants with a long list of side-effects and negative interactions with common foods. The other possibility, if I were serious, was hospitalization and shock therapy. A child of the 1970s, I had seen the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, based on the book by Ken Kesey. In the movie, the Indian, Chief Bromden, played by Will Sampson, must smother his fellow mental hospital patient, who had been lobotomized, then throw a sink through a window

to escape. In a way, that's what I did, without smothering the lobotomized fellow patient part—there were too many.

Talking with fellow Rhodes Scholars, I found similar feelings of despair and dislocation. People felt like they were treading water at Oxford, some talked of leaving. After speaking with my counselors, my support group peers, the school nurse, and the student advisor at the Rhodes Trust, after a year and a half, I decided to leave. It was apparent that while depression and feelings of displacement and alienation were common, very few people left. This game was for keeps. It was also clear that while there were many resources available to a Rhodes Scholar, real help with the one thing that was keeping me from staying, namely depression, was not available. It was simple and not so simple. Depression touched everything.

Before I left, I met a fellow Montanan who went to my high school thirty years before me. He was not Indian and he took to England, marrying an English woman and having English children. When I told him that I was planning on leaving Oxford and the Rhodes, he said that he continually made plans to take a trip to the Bighorn Mountains on my reservation. First he planned this trip with his kids. Now that they were grown, he made plans by himself. He said that there wasn't a day that he doesn't dig into the bottom drawer of his desk and pull out the topographical maps. Maybe more than anyone else in England, he understood, and he told to leave while I still could.

The day before I packed up my suitcase and boarded the bus to the airport, I visited the Pitt River Museum. Located about a mile from my dorm, it's an old-fashioned anthropological collection of spears and masks and other tribal ephemera collected from all over the world. In a dark corner, I stumbled upon a display case. In it, a large American Indian war bonnet, covered with many eagle feathers, stood atop a black velvet wigmaker's stand. The headdress' headband was beaded with distinct colors, the powder blue and dusty pink of my tribe. Every piece that made the headdress had been gathered in the tribal world of the person who made it—I had seen war bonnets made. Though the maker was unknown to me, the world it was made in was familiar. I knew the same rivers, along which the bald eagle, who gave his long feathers and down, hunted for fish. Ermines, white in winter, were hung down the sides of the headdress, framing the face of the wearer. I knew these weasel-like animals hunted in rock piles and stumps along river

bottoms of the Yellowstone and Bighorn Rivers. Deerskin was used to make the headdress cap. Sinew held it all together. My tribal name is Outstanding War Bonnet. The plaque identified the owner of this war bonnet, a great chief of my tribe, a man named Plenty Coups. He had given his war regalia to an anthropologist who placed it in the museum. The sight of it cut through layers of darkness. I wanted to touch those feathers behind the glass, and feel the way a single feather comes together like a zipper when you run your fingers along its edge. I wanted to feel the ermine soft against my face. I wanted to take in the smoky smell of things that had once been alive, walking and flying along the riverbanks of home. I wanted to feel the subtle weight of the headdress as I hoisted it and put it on—it feels like wearing an eagle on your head. But I didn't dare, the display case glass was too thick. In England, people don't wear such things. I saw the war bonnet as a sign, I had earned a great honor for my people, and now I could come home.