

The Helper

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A single candle burning on a dresser next to where Martha Beauvais sits cross-legged on the floor is the only light in the room. The late afternoon sun—bright on this early spring day in 1999—is blocked by paneled, folding doors that cover a wall of glass sliders, which provide access to a balcony. The candle glow tinges everything near to it with a golden hue, but its flame is not strong enough to chase the shadows in the corners of a room dense with the merged aromas of urine and sweat and spiced with a dash of vanilla from the burning candle.

Martha's grandmother has been shuffling around the spacious bedroom for half an hour chanting at random intervals in Lakota. It is not Martha's first language, but it has been part of her life for as far back as she can remember. As the grandmother had first instructed her when she was a little girl, Martha has been rapping on a hand drum, following the rhythm the old woman has been setting with a gourd Martha's great grandmother had dried and engraved with symbols, the import of which Martha had been able to comprehend before she had learned to read.

On their way to the bedroom, Martha and her grandmother had passed through an open living space filled with what Martha has assumed are authentic pieces of mid-century modern furniture. Martha has observed that the kitchen sparkles with white lacquered cabinets of probable Italian origin and has been impressed by an array of art on the walls that gives the entire apartment something of the feel of

MOMA, all of which had left Martha unprepared for what she found when she entered the candlelit bedroom: furnishings crafted from aged and distressed oak that evoke sprawling ranches, pintos lolling in a corral, and leather-skinned cowboys wearing ten-gallon hats; and with dimensions only slightly less than the dimensions of the wall on which it hangs, a carved and gilded frame surrounds an oil painting with the definition of a photograph that depicts a rolling landscape dotted with bison grazing on prairie short grass, a land which appears to roll for miles to the horizon beneath a blue sky filled with billowing, luminous, cumulus clouds.

Covered by a white silk sheet, an old man lies corpse-like on a king-sized bed. His head has settled into a feather pillow, his face is a death mask of sunken cheeks, closed eyes, and a mouth that is slightly open, from which a thin line of drool, shining in the candlelight, traces along his jaw and disappears into the pillow. Martha knows from the neighborhood, the building, the art on the walls, and from the apartment's unique furnishings that the man is wealthy, but she also knows the man is dying, something Charlotte, the old man's daughter, had declared on the phone to Martha the previous evening.

Charlotte's petite form is curled in the plush, red-brown, leather cushions of a large oak arm chair that is positioned in the darkest corner of the room. Her recently pedicured bare feet are tucked beneath her, and her large dark eyes are focused on Martha's grandmother, eyes accentuated by makeup Martha supposes someone else had applied that morning in the same salon where Charlotte's close-cropped hair had been dyed jet black. Martha thinks Charlotte's Botoxed upper lip looks like the victim of a strong left jab and surmises that Charlotte's apparent reluctance to smile is due to the unusual tautness of her skin, and not due to a contrary personality or worries about her father.

As had Martha's grandmother, Charlotte's father had been born on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. The old woman has explained to Charlotte and Martha that she and Charlotte's father had played together as children and that he is the grandson of Bad Wound, a revered Lakota warrior. When Martha was a little girl, she had humored her grandmother and pretended to be interested in her stories of warriors and their courage when defending the *Lakota Oyate* from the *Wasichu*, but much to her grandmother's disappointment, Martha had not recalled the name, Bad Wound, when her grandmother had explained to Charlotte the lineage between Bad Wound and Charlotte's father.

Given his Lakota roots, Charlotte's father's name—JR Walker—had seemed unusual to Martha, until her grandmother had said in passing that James R. Walker was the name of a doctor who had practiced on the Pine Ridge Reservation for eighteen years that bracketed the beginning of the Twentieth Century, a revelation that suggests to Martha much more than it clarifies.

When Martha and her grandmother had met Charlotte in the lobby of Walker's building, Charlotte had hurried them into the elevator quickly enough. Perhaps, Martha thinks, Charlotte is worried about being chastised by the Residents' Committee for not using the service elevator to shepherd an old woman in a housedress and sneakers to her father's apartment, an old woman accompanied by a tall companion sporting well-worn work boots, blue-jeans, an intimidating expression, and a long black braid that transected the Iron Workers Local 40 logo on the back of Martha's dark-gray leather jacket.

It is never Martha's intention to intimidate anyone, but she does tend to shyness that causes an inadvertent reticence in her expression, which Martha knows can be off-putting. She also knows the first impression she gives sometimes confounds people as to her gender because she stands a bit more than five

feet ten inches tall in her bare feet, possesses broad shoulders, carries herself with a ramrod straight posture, and has prominent cheek bones and intense black eyes, which she has inherited from her grandmother and her Mohawk grandfather. A person who is more observant than most people might note that these masculine features are countered by the slight flare of Martha's hips, the possibility of breasts restrained beneath her jacket, and a feline grace that characterizes her every movement.

There had been a time when Martha had exploited her toned and well-proportioned body, her sensuous mouth and flashing eyes, and her long, luxuriant hair to lure men, men who had, in every instance, proven to be transitory and damaging. Annoyance plays in Martha's eyes as that conclusion enters her mind unannounced, but a subtle emphasis on a phrase in her grandmother's chant coupled with a quick glance in Martha's direction causes Martha to refocus on the drumbeat.

After a few moments, the old woman stops chanting, and in response, Martha stops drumming. She watches her grandmother's eyes roll up under her eyelids as her uplifted head shakes and her body stiffens. Martha ascertains that Charlotte is alarmed by what is happening, but Martha's only concern—one she has long held—is whether her grandmother is truly in a trance or if what Martha sees is an act intended to validate her grandmother's fee in front of a paying customer. Martha remembers having once asked her grandmother if what Martha had observed was real, and the memory of her grandmother's laughter in response comes back to Martha in the silence of the candlelit room.

The old woman's dark irises roll downward and her eyes narrow. She seems to be gazing at something in the room that only she can see, or more accurately, Martha thinks, she appears to be watching something beyond the room. Slowly, her grandmother's arms rise to shoulder height, and she begins

to glide about the room, her movements no longer that of an old Lakota woman as her arms wave slowly up and down, her dance that of a large bird in graceful flight. Without thinking, Martha begins to thump the drum in time to the measured beat of her grandmother's flapping arms: a strong beat on each down stroke, a soft rap with each up stroke.

The grandmother's voice rises to a shrill chant that sends chills through Martha, and Charlotte lets out a tremulous "oh" as they watch the old woman shuffle back and forth around the bed without pausing the measured flapping of her arms. The old man appears oblivious to what is happening, the form of his withered body betrayed by the silk sheet shimmering in the candle glow. Without overture, Martha's grandmother rips the sheet off Walker's bed and exposes his naked, wasted frame. From the corner of her eye, Martha sees Charlotte flinch and turn her eyes away, but Martha keeps drumming until her grandmother climbs onto the bed, hikes up her dress and straddles the old man with her knees beside his protruding hipbones. The old woman leans forward, cups her hands on his chest, blows between them, waits a few seconds, and then repeats the act. She sits back, and after a few seconds more, Walker begins to stir his head ever so slightly from side to side.

There is some difficulty getting off the old man, but the grandmother manages it. Kneeling beside him on the bed, she notices Charlotte staring at her and beckons for the daughter to join her. There is a moment of hesitation before Charlotte goes to the bed and helps prop up her father with pillows when the old woman indicates by gesture that she should. Martha's grandmother straddles the old man again, and Martha wonders what Charlotte is thinking about the intimate position her grandmother has assumed above her naked father. The grandmother cups her hands on the old man's forehead, says something in Lakota that Martha cannot decipher, and again blows between her cupped hands. When she leans back,

Walker's eyes open wide. The old woman kneels beside him again, and he looks at her, not with fear or worry, but with amazement firing his dark eyes. He slowly turns his head and surveys the room until he sees his daughter, who shivers and hugs her arms tightly across her breasts.

The old man opens his mouth to say something, but for a moment, it appears he is unable to speak. A kind of resolve stirs in his eyes, and he begins to smile with the innocence of a child. His voice rasps but does not falter when he says, "I was flying with eagles."

Charlotte backs away from the bed, clasps one hand to her mouth, the other to her heart, and stares at her father.

"Why is it so dark in here?" Walker asks his daughter. "Let me see the sun."

Charlotte hurries to a switch on the wall to the left of the folding doors and flips it. Slowly and with only the slightest whisper of Teflon bearings on a metal track, the doors open to a view of a bright orange and near blinding half circle of the sun as it slips slowly behind the New Jersey horizon. After the candlelight of the darkened room, the natural light pains Martha's eyes.

"Help me," Walker says as he begins to slowly slide himself toward the edge of the bed.

Martha goes to the old man, helps him to his feet, and guides him through the golden light that is streaming into the room. Having her arm around an emaciated and naked old man seems no more surreal to Martha than anything else that has occurred this afternoon, but she knows the moment is intense for all of them. The grandmother joins Walker and Martha at the sliders with Walker's robe, which she slips around his shoulders. Martha pushes open the slider, and as fresh air rushes into the room, the old man steps onto a balcony that overlooks Central Park and the Upper West Side beyond. The old woman smiles at Charlotte and motions for her to join

them. Charlotte goes to her father and takes his hand, and when she does, the old man smiles at her and says, “It feels like prairie spring.”

As they look toward New Jersey and the setting sun, the hot, sour atmosphere of confinement is replaced with cool, dry air from which Martha draws a deep breath. She rubs the chill from her arms and wonders how it is that the old man seems oblivious to the brisk breeze that is rustling new, yellow-green leaves on the trees in Central Park, which are hiding paths and park buildings that had been visible through bare branches only a few days before.

Rising far above the treetops stand the buildings facing Central Park West, the windows of which are barely visible in their jagged, shadowed silhouettes, windows behind which, Martha knows, live many, many, very wealthy people. Despite her years in the city—fifteen as an iron worker and seven before that as a student and then lost child in the publishing world—Martha remains impressed by the number of people who are willing to pay exorbitant fees for the right to be crammed into spaces smaller than the modest Connecticut home in which she lives with her grandmother.

Walker interrupts Martha’s thoughts with a laugh, a joyous laugh like one from a boy whose just-caught frog has slipped from his grasp. He smiles broadly at his companions on the balcony and declares again that he has been flying with eagles. Martha has the fleeting notion that, standing at the edge of the balcony, Walker might try to rejoin those eagles, but the notion passes when the old man, after a celebratory attempt to shake loose the balcony railing, begins to laugh again, and after a beat of mutual surprise, the women laugh along with him.

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