

EYE OF THE CHINOOK

SERIALIZED

A NOVEL

(c) Homer Kizer

Chapter Ten

In his cell-sized room, Jones sets the bottle of whiskey on top of the scabbed-together bookshelves. Maybe he'll have a drink later. Right now, he hurts too much to do anything but sleep. His mind, well, what wrong? Something certainly is. His head feels like an empty oil barrel, his thoughts sloshing around like the little bit of fuel that can't be pumped out. He has no strength, no energy. He seems removed from himself, like he's not home, like he's outside looking at the house where he used to live, the locks having been changed and the front yard going to seed, the flower beds filled with weeds. He wants something that refuses to identify itself. Something simple like fried eggs. But he isn't hungry. At least he doesn't think he is. But whatever is wrong seems as overwhelming as North Sea fog, having rolled in on the tide change, his thoughts ebbing away, and he has to fight to stay awake.

He sees three leatherbound photo albums, and the two half-inch high folders holding what he has written about whatever. His thoughts. Maybe that's where they are, surgically removed from his head and left to dry out on paper as a restorer might dry the leaves of a flood-damaged book. In those folders are how he expressed himself before his memories were washed away. And as he sits on the edge of the cot, despite his overwhelming urge to sleep, he pulls one of the albums towards him.

The photos are old. Stiffly posed family gatherings. Kids in front. Grandparents centered. The cars in the backgrounds are from the '30s and '40s. The newest car he sees is a 1954 Ford. And he wonders how he knows the make and year.

His thoughts continue to slosh around in his head. They feel like mixed oil and water, feels like if he quits thinking they will separate and he won't have enough of either to pour out of the barrel.

The people seem to be family members. Most of them appear enough alike for him to conclude that they are siblings and cousins. His cousins. He finds a picture of himself, or so it seems as he pairs names written on the album page before the photo to the faces in the picture. Yes, the picture is of him when he was maybe seven. A slingshot in a bib overall pocket. His hand open to show a bird he apparently killed with the slingshot. He looks like a little hellion. And he wishes he could remember standing there with that sparrow.

As he studies the picture, he can almost remember being there; can almost remember how to use a sling, a slingshot; can't really remember killing sparrows. He did kill quite a few of some kind of birds, but what were they? Not sparrows. Of that he's certain. And the oily mix of fuel and water is too slippery for him to hold onto as he pushes his urge to sleep aside for another minute or two.

There he is at a picnic table with a mountain of spaghetti in front of him when he was still seven or eight. He could really pack away the food if he ate all of what was on that plate. And he worries a little about the echo of a thought sloshing around that sounds like he grew

up hungry. How could he be hungry if he had so much food available? Was the spaghetti a one-time affair? Is that why he took so much? And why can't he remember being himself?

Page after page, he discovers himself, what he was like, where he lived, who is older, younger, a cousin. At times, he can't hold back the tears, from frustration mostly, as he fights off sleep. He should be able to remember his dad, mom, an older brother Harry. But they aren't quite there in his memory. Almost are there. Every time he returns to a photo, he remembers more about it.

The second album shows him getting married. A honeymoon in Hawaii. Then their first house in Spenard. Erika born at home on the Peninsula. He closes his eyes and holds his hands over them. Empty hands. No memories try to escape. They're just not there for him to recall. Still, when he starts through the album again, he remembers more than he did the first time. By the time he has gone through the album five times, he remembers vaguely his honeymoon. But he can't remember why his sister-in-law lived with them, why they divorced, why he hasn't remarried, why he sold the house at Ninilchik. He can't remember so much more than he does recall, but at least he recalls a little of himself.

Yawning, sleep becoming nearly impossible to resist, he opens the third album, which is all hunting pictures. Mostly of deer. Some with very large racks. Elk maybe. And between being extremely sleepy and wanting to remember still more of his childhood, he finds he hasn't as much interest in these photos as he thought he would have.

He stands. Wondering where a bathroom is, he hobbles a step or two towards the doorway. But walking hurts too much, and he's too sleepy to stay standing so he returns to looking at the first album, more of which he remembers than when he initially looked at the pictures.

Who is Grandpa Johnson? He doesn't find any information on how he is related to this man with a rocket in his backyard, but he wants to know him more than he wants to know any of his other relatives, even his brother Harry. And barely able to focus his eyes, he sits staring at the rocket, a solid fuel missile seven, maybe eight feet tall. He sort of knows that the rocket's engine isn't placed right to handle the harmonics of the fuel burn. He suspects the rocket blew up shortly after lift off if not before.

Why do I know that? A memory that hasn't yet percolated to the surface. Perhaps.

The folders holding his writing ought to ignite from spontaneous combustion, so hot are his letters to editors up to three years ago. But he doesn't remember writing any of the letters, nor the four essays published by various newspapers and magazines. He doesn't even remember knowing the data he cites in the *Times* article; doesn't remember fishing Paxton Lake, nor catching a lake trout longer than his legs.

What happened in 1976 that caused him to quit writing? He's too sleepy to remember, but as best he can determine, he quit protesting a month before the presidential election... the Committee on which he now unknowingly serves was organized then. He bets that's why he quit. It became time for action, time to quit attracting attention, time to go underground. And all of that fire for action has been lost. If he has zeal for anything, it's for recovering his memory, recovering himself, but his urge to set everything aside and sleep is even stronger.

For a fisherman, he writes reasonably well. At least, he can spell, and he knows where commas should go some of the time.

Most of the books on the shelves are ones he doesn't recall reading. Several Bible commentaries. Evidently he knows the Scriptures, but that is knowledge presently lost to him. And he picks up a well-worn Bible and begins reading in Matthew, where it opens by itself. Nothing seems familiar so he continues scanning pages, stopping here and there to

read a passage in detail. He's trying to jog his memory while trying to stay awake, but nothing seems to be working. It's like he's never seen Romans before, or James. And he can't really make sense of what he reads.

"You gonna preach Sunday?" Lars asks.

He jumps back a foot. The words jolt him awake, defibrillating his thoughts as if they were wind-driven scud.

Dropping the Bible, he loses his place. He hadn't heard his friend enter the room.

"Well, you up to it? The crew's looking forward to haring you. I think it'd be what you need."

"I don't think my brain is ready for that much activity."

"Sure it is. Will be good for you. The spirit of God produces a sound mind. That's what you need right now, a healing of your mind." Lars sits in the chair. "Zoe got hold of the Outside shrink who was starting to treat you. Seems he was willing to go down to Kenai to look for you.... You wanta talk with him, see if he can help you?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Tell you what, I'll have Zoe talk with him. If she thinks he can help, we'll get him up here. Otherwise, we'll let him think you're on the Kenai." Lars looks at the unopened bottle of *Wild Turkey*. "You haven't changed, have you? Still don't drink. Just sit next to temptation, resisting the flesh? That it?"

"I don't know. Didn't have a desire to open it if that's what you mean."

"Doctors have me off everything. That damn ulcer. It isn't getting any better." Lars crosses his legs, his left leg on top of his right knee. "Maybe I'll see if some of the men want it."

"Ahh, leave it. It's not hurting anything there. I'm trying to remember what the picture reminds me of. It isn't coming to me, but it seems like it wants to, like I can almost say it without really remembering it."

"That's why you need to preach Sunday. There won't be many of us here, and we could put on a tape, but I think the inspiration of God will bring things to mind that right now are buried too deep for you to retrieve. Think it'll do you all sorts of good." Lars stands. "Tell you what, why don't you take a Scripture, say First Thessalonians 5:23, review it again, and bring the men a message. Doesn't have to be a long one. And you have everything you need there," he points to the bookshelves, "to do a study."

"I suppose." He doesn't feel any compunction to preach or to study, but evidently a part of him is deeply religious, a part that has been lost.

"Good. Now, get some sleep. We're gonna shut the generator down in," Lars checks his watch, "seven minutes."

Seven minutes don't seem to have passed before the lights go out. The building suddenly becomes very quiet. A vole gnawing a grass seed would have been heard throughout the hangar.

The thought of preaching is terrifying enough that he lies on his cot and stares into the near-total darkness, his few thoughts recoiling away from the idea of expounding a text. They huddle, instead, around the idea that he knows more of who he is. Not really. He's still a stranger to himself. Still Les Jones. Fisherman. Alaskan patriot. Wouldbe writer. Lay preacher. Still hiding out from the Federal government. Still reconstructing self from his observations of himself. Still missing the fire he read in his letters.

How is he to get out of the trap of not knowing who he is? He'd open that bottle and get drunk, except he doesn't drink. The urge is there. The behavior hasn't been. For religious

reasons? Or is he an alcoholic who knows he can't handle liquor? He assumes he might well be; he has to assume that. That means no accepting drinks regardless. No exceptions.

Perhaps his character has always been a little weak. Why else would he be religious?

But his writing contradicts the juxtaposition of religion and character deficiency.

Maybe getting washed up on that beach actually strengthened who he is, let the person hiding behind his fiery prose emerge from the cocoon of tradition and taboo. Or maybe (he doesn't feel any fire within him except for recovering his memory) the waves extinguished the writer, leaving him desirous of neither liberty nor faith. Either way, he will have to deal with his former self and with others' expectations of him. Still have to deal—

He can't hold his thought. Has to get some sleep . . .

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