

## The Piercer

By M. Krockmalnik Grabois

I looked up from the *Floridian* to see my eldest at the gate, home from practice. He was the Chippahitchka H. S. Indians' star running back, the only Native-American on the squad. I was still dismayed at how thoroughly Carlotta's Yurok genes had dominated. My father was frequently absent and sometimes abusive, but at least we'd resembled each other.

The football hero pulled off his sweaty t-shirt one-handed, then sagged. Coach Dunkel had never had a player who worked so hard. His muscled torso was mottled with bruises new and old, which made Carlotta wince. They were the battle scars of a brave, but the Yurok were sedate coastal dwellers, fishermen, berry pickers, not Apaches.

I lowered the paper. "How's the Piercer?"

"Dad, really, cut it out."

The Florida Panhandle, part of the Deep South, favored nicknames, and so did professional sports, so I'd been trying to hang a moniker on him. All he needed was to find a small chink in the armor of the defensive line and he'd pierce it. "Piercer" had both zing and menace.

"I've already got a name. I don't need another. I like the one I've got." It was Zane. Carlotta had named him after the author of *Riders of the Purple Sage*, her favorite when she was a pig-tailed girl devouring stories of the Wild West. She'd kept those books, their pages brown, covers tattered, and they sat on shelves in Zane's room. He'd inherited his mom's love of westerns, and gone further. Instead of watching TV, he read literature. His English teachers worshipped him as much as Coach Dunkel did. He wrote poetry, when he wasn't exhausted from football—the best part of him, according to Carlotta.

I sighed. "Alright. Fine. Zane. How was practice?"

He stared at me, and at the same time beyond, as if he were already an adult, and had left both me and football deep in his past. Then he ratcheted into the present. "Winners never quit, Dad," his tone was sardonic, "and quitters never win."

"Very true."

"Dad, I've got an idea. Since you've got such a penchant for nicknames, why don't we give *you* one? *You* can be 'the Piercer.' After all, in your new job, you pierce people's souls."

I'd recently left my job teaching Psychology at a junior college to work at the state hospital, a move Carlotta had opposed. As if it were a criminal enterprise, she didn't want me implicated. However, I'd felt like I'd been slowly dying. How many times could one recite a discipline's basic tenets? In my classes I'd started emphasizing small points from the text—man came from monkey, homosexuals weren't sick—just to get a rise out of my narrow-minded students.

"Souls? Psychologists don't recognize 'souls.' We deal with observable behavior."

Zane gave me a scornful look. "Soul's the deepest part of us, Dad..."

“But what is it? Where is it?”

“It’s everywhere. It’s the distillation of human experience. Without soul we’re nothing, just machines.”

“Well, if my patients have souls, I’m not piercing them.”

He shifted position, his abs flexed, and I was impressed all over again by his muscularity. In contrast I felt diminished. He could crush me with little effort. And now he had staked out the realm of the spiritual.

“I’ve got to take a shower.” He turned and pulled open the screen door, whose metal cylinder screeched.

In my new job I was also on a team—Treatment Team—and we were getting our butts kicked. Our patients—chronic schizophrenics—adamantly refused to get well. We filled them with strong medicines, ran them through countless therapies, gave them all kinds of rules to follow, we even talked to them, but our copious 'Progress Notes' indicated little. We suffered from low morale, like last season's Indians. We needed someone like Zane to take the ball and blast into open field. I wondered: *could I be that star?*

The Treatment Team members sat around the conference table. "We've got a real problem with Walter Mac Henry," said the ward supervisor, Miss Cruikshank, a middle-aged black woman, face heavily rouged. "Walter Mac Henry is pissing into the heater in the day room, and not only does the ward staff have to clean it up, it stinks to high heaven."

Walter Mac Henry was pockmarked, “high yellow” in color. He had once been a barber, claimed to have been a prizefighter (he reminded me of Floyd Paterson, who lost to Sonny Liston, who lost to Cassius Clay, who became Muhammad Ali, who lost to Parkinson’s) and had a habit of wearing his oversize shirts pulled up over his head like an Arab headdress.

Walter Mac Henry’s chart was at the top of a stack of them, in gray metal covers. Miss Cruikshank drummed on it with the eraser of a Black Warrior pencil in a way that made me think that she had played snare drum in her high school marching band. She was tall and sinewy. She’d probably played basketball too.

The psychiatrist, Dr. Solomon, dressed in golf clothes, was a New York Jew. (What was he doing in a small town in the Deep South? I was there because drastic cuts in property taxes had frozen employment in California, and we’d exiled ourselves to where I found a job.) He watched Cruikshank drum on the chart with what appeared to be infinite patience, as if there were nothing else he needed to do, though he was in charge of the treatment of a hundred and twenty chronic schizophrenics.

The social worker was a chain smoker, worse than any patient. All day long he pressed his face into the nearest wall, lighting up from the recessed safety coils. Matches were verboten, even for staff. But he couldn’t smoke in Treatment Team because Miss Cruikshank wouldn’t allow it, so he sat and cracked his knuckles until the nurse put her hand over his to stop him.

As if that were a signal, the eyes of the Treatment Team members swiveled toward me. As the psychologist, I was expected to modify inappropriate behavior. What was I going to do about Walter Mac Henry? I nodded sagely, without the hint of a solution in mind.

Then the workday was over. I pulled open the door of my AMC Hornet and slipped onto the vinyl seat. I was aware of patients watching enviously through the metal mesh covering the windows as we employees started our engines. Our cars looked like hard candy sparkling in the sun.

I mentally reviewed the patients with whom I had worked that day, whose problems had become my own. When we lived on the Rancheria I labored outside a sawmill, pulling green lumber off a conveyer and stacking it. The mill itself was a box I never entered. All of its mechanisms remained hidden. Each of my patients was a sawmill buzzing with concealed tumult.

At dinner that night, Carlotta examined Zane across the table. He looked, not like a football star, but like a bookish boy who'd been bullied and was contemplating how he might avoid trouble the next day. With a fearful quarterback and dead-handed receivers, the other schools' coaches didn't worry about our passing game. They knew the plan—give the ball to Zane. Each game I wondered which university scout might be high in the bleachers, observing.

Carlotta turned to study me. The cleft in her chin, a barometer of her mood, looked inflamed.

"Anything interesting at work?"

"Dad's the Piercer," Zane said. "He pierces souls on a daily basis."

"He's gets right into the heart of the heart," said his brother, Keskee, a year younger, with no interest whatsoever in sports. *Keskee* was a Yurok word that meant *down to the river*.

"I ran into Dr. Nikman today," Carlotta said. "He says hello."

As simple as her statement was, it felt like another dig. Nikman had been my department chair. He'd suffered a stroke, so I could always hear him coming, dragging his bad leg behind him. Slide thump, slide thump—it gave me plenty of time to put on the pretense that I was doing college work. In fact, I spent much of my office time writing a novel about a woman who had been transplanted to a foreign land—the Deep South—where she was estranged from everything she had ever loved. The novel wasn't about Carlotta, but she was its model. She'd unselfishly released her hold on the Rancheria and her Yurok roots so that I could pursue my career.

Nikman accused me of self-aggrandizement and warned me that most people were average, including myself. However, in our semi-annual evaluation sessions, after he had observed me in the classroom, he had a weasel's sharp teeth, tearing me apart for anything not exemplary. *You pause a bit too long before beginning the next thought*, he might say, contorting his face around his unlit pipe and looking down his nose through his reading glasses. *It breaks up the flow*.

Quitting academia felt like rebirth. It was as if I had joined Zane's world, a gridiron of fresh challenges. I wondered how I might get Walter Mac Henry to stop pissing into the heater.

That night, in bed, Carlotta shifted from side to side, then lay flat on her back and asked, "Meyer, do you think Zane's doing drugs?"

I always froze at the mention of drugs, as if I were still in peril of my father finding my stash. "Carlotta, you know it's a bad idea to talk about problems in bed. It contributes to insomnia. Bed should be reserved for sleep and sex."

"Then let's get up."

"Oh, Jeez." I'd just gotten comfortable. "Why would you think that?"

"I hear that a lot of the players are dopers. And lately Zane doesn't seem himself."

"He's just tired," I said. "Dunkel's working him hard. I mean, he's carrying the whole damn team."

"You're proud of that, aren't you?"

I reflected a moment. "Yes. I am."

"Meyer, a team is not one person. *There's no 'I' in Team, remember?*" I hated it when she turned my words around and threw them back at me. "Too much pressure on one point, and it breaks."

I wondered if she were thinking about her father, who'd been a logger. The trunk of a huge Douglas fir had split in an unexpected way, and crushed him.

"Every other day there's a story about a kid getting 'roid rage,'" she said. "And LSD's making a comeback."

"I can't see Zane taking LSD. He's too driven."

"You're the one driving him."

I couldn't get to sleep for hours.

The next morning I looked at my To-Do list, and went through the door to Ward B to find Walter Mac Henry. Ward A, where I did most of my work, was a busy place, with 28 beds and a big day room full of men smoking, cursing, hallucinating, watching TV, or doing whatever bizarre thing they had an urge to do. Ward B, by contrast, was a ghost town. It housed only half the number of men, and they were passionless specters, haunting corners, sleeping in the toilet stalls.

Their day room was also half the size of Ward A's, and always had its lights switched off, so it was lit solely by the weak light which filtered through the grimy windows.

I found Walter Mac Henry alone, his shirt pulled up around his head. Carlotta's baseless suspicions the night before had left me irritated, but I shelved my feelings to focus on the task at hand.

"Walter Mac Henry!" I called out, as if I were his buddy, and sat down in the chair next to his. "I've come to talk to you about something important."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Walter Mac, do you see that heater over there?"

"What heater?"

"That heater there, under the window."

He didn't look like he understood, so I walked over, raised my foot, and banged it against the vented, gray sheet metal. "This heater here," I said.

Walter Mac Henry shifted in his chair. "Oh, that's a heater."

"What did you think it was?" Maybe he thought it was an unusually shaped toilet.

"I didn't think it was anything," said Walter Mac Henry, scratching his belly.

"Well, listen, Walter, can I be honest with you?" I retook my seat. His body odor met me, an acrid wall, and I wondered when he'd last bathed. I was responsible for the program that facilitated and monitored the performance of ADL's, Activities of Daily Living.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, the ward staff are telling me that you're urinating into the heater."

"I'm what?"

"Urinating, man. Pissing."

"Nah, man. I ain't pissin' into the heater. I piss out the window."

"Out the window?" I looked at the metal mesh and the sealed glass behind. "Why would you do that? I mean, why not use the bathroom?"

He looked at me as if I were ignorant. "I piss out the window so that it will hit the ground and rise up to make clouds. So the ladies in wards Charlie and Delta can look up at the sky and know what's in my mind."

I took a moment to let that sink in. "Wait a minute, Walter. You're telling me that the women on the second floor will see the clouds your piss makes and know what you're thinking?"

"Thas' right."

"Well, Walter Mac Henry, you've got a big problem." I walked back to the heater. "Come over here."

Walter Mac Henry reluctantly unwound his legs from beneath him and slowly walked over. "Look," I said. "When you piss here it doesn't go through the window. That's solid glass, and that's concrete block. Your piss doesn't hit the ground, and it doesn't turn into clouds."

"It don't?"

"No. All it does is hit the wall and goes right down into this heater and onto the floor."

"They're not seein' my thoughts in the clouds?"

"No, Walter. No way. And I'll tell you, the ward staff is mad. You know Miss Cruikshank? Well, she's really mad. Because when you piss there it stinks to high heaven and the ward staff have to mop it up."

"It stinks..."

"Yeah, it's disgusting."

"...to high heaven."

"Look, Walter, would you make me a promise? Would you please not piss against the wall anymore? Come with me for a minute." I led him into the bathroom and showed him a urinal.

I went back to my office satisfied. I'd found the chink in Walter Mac Henry's defensive line. I'd found daylight.

Driving home, I looked forward to sharing my success. Zane, however, refused to come out of his room for dinner, casting a pall on the family mood.

"There's something wrong with that dude," said Keskee.

I passed him a large bowl made from a redwood burl. "Eat some salad," I said. The boys were often on each other's case. "He's just tired. The season's starting to wear on him." The Indians had lost their last two games, and after laying off a week, would face one of the region's best, Xavier High.

Keskee wouldn't quit. "Yeah. His muscles got muscles and his tired got tired."

"You know, Meyer," said Carlotta, "a boy was not made to be a battering ram."

"He's not a battering ram." (But I did think of him as kind of a ram, horns down, charging.) "He's a football player, and he's learning important life lessons. He's..."

"You say 'football player' as if you were saying 'neurosurgeon.'"

"A successful athlete has a better chance of *becoming* a neurosurgeon."

"A better chance of *needing* a neurosurgeon," said Keskee.

"Do you think playing video games is a better use of one's time?"

"A video game player has a better chance of becoming a computer programmer. The whole world's going digital, old man."

"He's not even enjoying it," Carlotta cut in. "In the beginning it was fun, but it hasn't been..."

"Fun isn't everything," I interrupted.

The next Treatment Team meeting I found myself, like Zane, something of a star. Walter Mac Henry had been complying with my request. In our unit, inhabited by revolving door patients for whom there was little hope, even a small success was remarkable and challenged the staff's ennui, like a great tackle-breaking run roused the fans.

To tell the truth, I had caught Walter Mac in one episode of backsliding, but after I had him mop up his mess, I staged a pep talk, a necessary reiteration of reality. Telepathic cumulus would not rise from his urine to enlighten the captive women of Unit 27.

My success with Walter Mac Henry led the Treatment Team members to recall the inappropriate toileting behaviors of a half-dozen other patients. It seemed I was meant to become a toileting specialist.

Xavier High. The X looked menacing on the players' uniforms, and even on the cheerleaders' breasts. At one point in the game, on my feet, screaming, I watched Zane—with a defender on his back and one with his arms wrapped around his waist—plow forward for eight yards before another Xavier tackle slammed into him. Zane couldn't go on like that. By the end of the first quarter he was exhausted.

On the sidelines, he did something he never had. He pulled off his helmet and slammed it into the bleacher wall. Coach Dunkel didn't care that he was Zane Gold, he wasn't going to tolerate that kind of behavior. He came over and told him so.

Zane's face flushed with fury as he screamed at his coach. Dunkel had no choice but to pull him from the game, which went down in history as the most lopsided score ever recorded in the state.

In bed that night, Carlotta asked, "Is this working, Meyer?"

"What *this* do you mean?"

"Everything. Living here, with whites on one side of the tracks and blacks on the other, and hate percolating under the surface. Working in the state hospital. *They put people from my family in the state hospital.*" Her voice was suddenly fierce, sounding no longer Yurok but fully Apache.

"Here?"

"Of course not here. In California."

"I didn't know that," I said, a little too quietly.

"*What?*"

"I said I was sorry."

"You want to know what their mental illness was?"

"What?"

"*Acting like Indians.*"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told you, but you didn't hear."

"I don't remember you ever saying anything."

"I told you in the way I could tell you."

I felt a surge of anger, but didn't want to challenge her. Truth be told, I was afraid of her. There'd been domestic abuse in her family, wives beating husbands, and in the dim and shadowy light Carlotta's face was a mask of pain and hate.

"I'm sorry I didn't understand."

“Did you *try* to understand? Can you see around your massive ego?”

I felt that I was back at the college, being berated by Nikman for my flaws.

“You’re filling your son with violence and subjecting him to pain every day.”

“You’re distorting things. He’s a scholar athlete...”

“*I’m* distorting things? Meyer, your life is one big distortion. Zane doesn’t even want to play football. He’s only doing it for you.”

“He’s building character.”

“Only a white man would think that.”

Carlotta had never played ‘the race card.’ I had always thought that our being married made us immune from it.

“I can’t continue this conversation.” I threw back the covers and threw one leg over the side of the bed, but Carlotta grabbed my arm and held me where I was. Her grip was strong. She hadn’t had any brothers and had spent her childhood chopping wood.

“Don’t walk away from me. I can’t live here anymore. There’s no *reason* for us to be here. You can get a job in California now. I want Zane to get a chance to live with his people before it’s too late.”

“I just started a new job here.”

“I don’t care. It’s evil. You shouldn’t be doing it. Your soul has fallen into a bad place. All you are is a prison guard.”

I tried to pull away but couldn’t. “You’re not being fair.”

“*I’m* not being fair?” She pushed me away. “After Homecoming, we’re leaving. We’re going home.” The Homecoming game was the following week. That wouldn’t even give me the chance to give two weeks’ notice. I didn’t want to talk anymore. I didn’t have to go along with her impulsive madness. I took my pillow and went to the guest room, but couldn’t sleep.

Homecoming, and the “Mighty” Indians’ opponent, Piersall High, was out for blood. Coach Dunkel was silent and abject. There was no further show of rage from Zane, but his performance was as lackluster as his teammates’. Even the cheerleaders, in their tangerine and gold uniforms, looked whipped.

At home Zane didn’t have anything to say about football— I couldn’t get a word from him. He was like a sports figure on TV, brushing past a phalanx of reporters with their invasive cameras and outstretched microphones. The possibility of a college football scholarship seemed remote.

Saturday, the night after Homecoming, I couldn’t stand to be at home with Carlotta. Hate emanated from her. As I had often done as a lonely teenager, I snuck out of the house and took myself to the movies. The feature was a sci-fi film about an alien who systematically kills earthlings. I took a seat against the back wall. I didn’t expect to see Zane and two of his teammates enter the theater, though there was no reason why they wouldn’t also seek escape at the show. They strutted, their shoulders powerful, as if they were ready to block their way to their seats if necessary, and sat down five rows forward. The previews had already started and they didn’t notice me.

Zane was holding a jumbo box of Ju-Ju-Bees. He opened it and began to throw some at the heads of the theatergoers a few rows in front of him, also high school students. They turned and glared but didn’t have the nerve to challenge him. “You haven’t pulled this shit since fourth grade,” one of his friends said.

The movie began, and the tension built quickly. The alien—a dreadlocked, black-hearted beast—was about to pounce when Zane rose, and stood motionless. His cushioned seat, released, bounced against its back.

The guy behind him said, "Hey, sit down."

Zane's voice broke the spell of the film. "I'm Zane Gold, fuck you!" It was as if the story had become real for him, and he was going to beat the monster, run right at it and knock it to the ground, as he had so many defenders on the gridiron. "I'm Zane Gold, fuck you!" A couple of ushers grabbed him, but he easily broke away. He ran up and down the aisles, chased by the ushers, the manager, the candy seller, and his friends, yelling his declaration over and over. I called out to him, but he didn't hear me. I hurried sideways down the row, colliding with people's legs, and when I made the aisle I stumbled and plunged down two rows. I grazed my head on the hard plastic arm of a seat, and sat dizzy on the stair as the chase continued.

"Stop!" I cried. "Zane!"

Finally the cops came. They saw a heavily muscled athlete, deranged, sweating and combative. They'd seen him under the lights of Indian Stadium and knew how tough he was. One of them fired a stun gun, but it malfunctioned. A melee erupted—*Fucking savage*, one cop grunted. It took six of them to subdue Zane. They were putting the cuffs on him when he broke loose. I entered the lobby as he plunged through a plate glass window and fell to the sidewalk.

Back from the hospital, Carlotta and I sat in our living room late into the night. A standing lamp spread dimness and exhaustion over the room like shellac. She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses, and we sat and drank as we had when we first met, minus the din and suppressed violence of Vance's Log Cabin, which was later condemned.

The results of Zane's tox screen would not appear for several weeks, but his friends insisted that, unlike some of the other guys on the team, he had not been doing drugs. Carlotta had been wrong about that, but there was no satisfaction in being right. I felt pressed into the couch cushions by the knowledge that his rage had been fueled by frustration alone.

I went into Zane's room and found a few of his poems on his desk. I brought them back and sat in the circle of light spread by the lamp.

"What's that?" Carlotta asked.

"Some of Zane's poetry."

It was a while before she broke the silence. "Are you happy with your new job, Meyer?"

I thought about it. "No."

"Our theory was that we would sacrifice our home for your work, and that would make you happy." I know she didn't mean our house on the *rancheria*, despite the work she'd put into it. She was a good carpenter and had made many improvements. She meant the ocean, the bluffs above the rocky coast, the wind through the redwoods, the scotch broom bright yellow in the fog. I knew she believed that Zane would not have run amok if he had been among the Yurok people on their ancestral land. Carlotta left the room. I tried to read Zane's poetry, but couldn't make any sense of it.

The next morning I drove from his hospital to my own. I stopped by the Ward B Day Room. As usual, Walter Mac Henry was alone, sitting in the dimness, his shirt pulled up over



his head. I sat down by him, but didn't say anything. It was quiet and peaceful. A state hospital was a much-maligned institution, but sometimes it made a good place to rest.

After a while Walter got up and walked to the heater. He unzipped his pants, took out his penis, and produced a good stream. I watched it splash against the wall directly under the window, then slide down into the heater, humming against the cold of the season, and onto the floor. At that moment, Miss Cruikshank, the Ward Supervisor, walked into the room. "Aren't you going to do anything?" she demanded.

Walter must have been drinking a lot of water—he was producing an enormous amount of urine.

Cruikshank's voice sank to a mosquito's whine. I said nothing. I watched thoughts scudder, puffy white, above the tall pines, across the Southern sky. I sensed the women on the floor below, in Wards C and D, join me in contemplation. For the first time there was a patient whom I felt I thoroughly understood. I understood him better than I did myself.

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