

Unbundled

by James Pagliasotti

Copyright © 2013 James Pagliasotti. All Rights Reserved.

"Here's what I don't understand," Goose was saying, doubtful, being the shrewd New York Jew. "The guy shows up out of nowhere, looks around and decides he wants to be a collector. Is that right?"

Poser was ignoring the intensity Goose tried to bring to the discussion. "Something like that," he answered, his manner offhand.

"In fact, he wants to buy a collection?"

"Right."

"So you tell him about the stuff in Oregon and right away he wants to buy it?"

"Right."

"So, here's what I don't understand. He wants to be a collector, but he doesn't know what he wants. He just wants a collection. Not blankets or beadwork or baskets or anything in particular. Just a collection, whatever it is?"

"Like what we've got here is what he said."

"But that's what I don't understand," the Goose said yet again. "He isn't buying a collection. He's buying an inventory. Am I right?"

"That's what he wants."

"Because he's going to open a gallery?"

"He has some space on the main drag in Cheyenne. Owns the building. His tenant left, folded, whatever. Said he came in here, looked around, decided: why not?"

"Probably thought: if we can do it, anybody can, huh?" the Goose said, putting him down, making it "we" when Poser's the one who talked to the guy.

"Probably thought he don't have to make a living off it like we do."

"Because he's like an attorney, right? You checked him out?"

"Yeah, I checked."

"And learned what?"

"Mostly does divorces. Lots of those in Cheyenne, I guess. Air Force and cowboys. Has an office on the second floor of this building. Big picture window on the first floor. Thinking about how good his stuff is gonna look, all the people passing by."

"So, like what? He's gonna run downstairs every time somebody wanders in, leave the blonde in the beehive sitting there with her legs crossed and the hanky in her hand, saying to herself: whatever happened to that lawyer I was just telling about the way Buck's been treating me, how much alimony I'm gonna need? While he's maybe downstairs selling pottery to some tourist?"

One random day at the gallery, Poser was approached by a stocky guy with short red hair and a strong sort of look about him. He was dressed like a gentleman cowboy, a crisp rayon shirt with pearl buttons, denim pants and regular boots, no hat and no sign of chew in his pockets.

He was very interested in the art on the walls and asked again and again, well, what's that? Yeah, well, and what's that? And he'd point again at another object and stare at it intently and listen carefully while it was described, and then move on to the next thing that caught his attention. And say, huh, well, tell me about that. What did they use it for? Pointing at it and looking back at Poser with his quick blue eyes. Then listening some more. This went on for a while and Poser was glad to oblige this guy because it happened that what he did right now was know this stuff and love it and like to tell anyone who asked about it a lot of what he knew.

But this guy was of a different order. Other people showed this kind of interest, but they were deferential. Not this guy.

My name's Bill Wilson, he said at one point and Poser shook his hand. Glad to meet 'cha. I really like this stuff, really do. I'd like to buy some of it.

Well, said Poser, that's why I'm here.

But, no, I mean I really want to buy a lot of it. Like a whole collection. Don't you have anything like that?

Do you mean you want to buy a collection of American Indian Art? Do you know what that would cost, a collection like this I mean?

How much? Wilson asked.

Well, you understand you couldn't buy this stuff here as a collection unless you bought the business. It's worth a lot, either way, but there's only one way you could get it and that's buy us out. The business, you understand? Sometimes a gallery like mine comes up for sale, but not any that I know of now. So, there're only a few big collections in private hands to be had and all of us in the business are looking at buying them ourselves, so that affects the price.

How much? he asked again.

For instance, there's a pretty good collection out in Oregon that's for sale, pretty damn good as a matter of fact, but quietly for sale. I can tell you Oregon because you couldn't find it for yourself if you tried. If you did, you'd spend more getting it done than you'd spend working with me and I know what I'm doing. We could buy it outright, you and me, and you'd have a good start on this kind of a collection. It won't come cheap.

How much?

\$300,000. Supposed to be worth \$6 or \$7 easy. Maybe we could get it for less.

Okay, well, I'd like to look at it.

They'd want to know right away whether you're serious. First thing they'll want to know is can you afford it? I need to be able to tell them before we could begin to talk.

Wilson smiled a small private smile and leaned in toward Poser intimately. You tell them I'm very serious about seeing what they've got and if I like it I'll buy it. Tell them that and tell them I damn sure can afford it. Let me know what they say.

He left a card with name and number and the fact that he was an attorney with an office in Cheyenne, which was found to be part of the story when Poser checked him out, but only a part. He also was the Attorney General of Wyoming, the native son of a very prominent family and owner of one of the largest collection of antique firearms in the country. Indications were that he can afford it.

Poser called out to Oregon and spoke to the whacko who owned the stuff, some small town guy with a large collection of pre-reservation and early reservation material that came mostly from California, the Basin, Plateau and Plains areas, with a few very valuable Tlingit and other Northwest Coast pieces that were instant cash.

It's probably worth a million, the fellow said with a lilt in his voice and probably a prance in his stance, as well. But we can talk.

Poser arranged to see it. He and the Goose drove out to Lakeview in his 1961 Cadillac sedan, which he had acquired when he appraised an estate in Colorado Springs and after two days of poring over the stuff and assigning a value to all of it, and thinking about all the work it was going to be to type it up on his very clean stationery for the insurance company and the courts, the client said, oh, there's one more thing and, while they headed toward the garage where it was housed, asked him what his fee was going to be, and Poser was about to tell him it was \$1200 when he saw the Caddy up on blocks, its thick white paint gleaming, the blue on blue leather trimmed velour upholstery without a scuff or a wrinkle, the big white wall tires sitting in a stack nearby with not a sign of wear and the odometer when he looked inside reading 200 miles, all original.

I'd take this car for my fee he said and the client fell all over himself in agreeing to the arrangement, being a guy who preferred not to part with cash when he had his druthers. So it was that Poser returned in a few days with his friend Bobby and the Goose, who dropped them off, the appraisal in hand, together with 10 gallons of gas, oil, transmission fluid, and a brand new battery, which they put in the Caddy and cranked her up. She fired up instantly and away they went in his brand new car. When they reached that

stretch of the Interstate where it leaves Castle Rock, spreads out into four lanes and heads up the hill toward Denver, he punched it to the floor and it hesitated for a moment before it roared to life, throwing both of them back against the plump bench seat and leaping up the hill like a rocket being launched. Damn, said Bobby with a smile, 12 years old and it's never been in passing gear before! Off they went at a pretty clip to Boulder.

And so it was that he and Goose were riding through the west on their way to bumfuck Oregon in the big white Caddy with a lot on their minds and more than a little concern. They were concerned about getting this appraisal done, needed to make sure they did it right so that if Wilson actually bought it they would make some badly needed money from the deal but make it knowing that they'd done right by their client. There was that. Then there was their concern about how much to charge him and how much of what they sold him they could move for him quickly so that he could get a chunk of his money right back and take the selling of the rest of it at an easier pace. And they were concerned too about dealing with this whack job of a collector who had run off every other buyer who'd approached him over the past couple of years. Even if Wilson really does want to buy it, there's no assurance this guy really wants to sell. Could be he's just a queen holding court in his little home town with nothing better to do, liking it when people come around trying to curry his favor. Like every other prospect at this stage of the transaction, they were concerned about whether it was real or whether perhaps they were wasting their time chasing after ghosts.

But mostly right now they were concerned with the size of the gas tank in the Caddy and the distance they had to cover between Winnemucca and Lakeview, where the collection awaited, and whether in fact they could make it on one tank of gas. The road between them when they reached it after filling up in Winnemucca and asking about it with the locals who said yes indeed it was the route to Lakeview and was passable last time they heard was in fact marked No Maintenance Proceed at Your Own Risk and for the next 190 miles except for the pavement beneath their wheels there was not a building or a sign or a post or a fence or any other indication of civilization. Just a strip of road through the wild land climbing up from the desert.

This beauty of a car weighed 5800 pounds, had steel an inch thick comprising its body, which was covered in chrome, and a 358-cubic-inch engine with a four-barrel carb that squeezed out maybe 14 miles to the gallon and the tank held 16 gallons, which should be just barely enough. They'd make Lakeview on fumes if they were lucky.

They were sitting very lightly, more so as the drive progressed and the extent of the emptiness they were passing through was manifest, sitting lightly as though they didn't want to weigh down the car, make its passage any more difficult, consume any more gas than was absolutely necessary to get there.

"This is the weirdest place I've ever been in my life," said the Goose. "You think anybody lives around here anywhere?"

"When we hit the halfway point, the road bends to the left at a place called Denio Junction. There must be something there."

"Like a town, you mean."

"Doubt it. More like a store or a camp or something. It's marked on the map with a name, but none of those little dots they use to indicate a town. More like just a name."

"Like the Painted Desert or something? I was asking about people."

"There was a piece in the paper a while back mentioned Denio Junction."

"Yeah? What'd it say?"

"Said there'd been a couple of people, some guy and a chick, camping out near here. They were murdered."

"Don't tell me that shit! It's not funny. We're out here in the middle of nowhere and you're telling me the only other two people probably ever been here got killed? By what, a bear or something?"

"Murdered, not killed."

"By who?"

"Whom."

"Whom! Who the fuck murdered them?"

"Said the cops looked around for a long time. Found some tracks and other evidence right away, but they had to look a long time before they found this guy. Some kind of a hermit. Lived in a hole in the ground out in the desert."

"Bullshit. He lived in a hole in the ground? Are you serious?"

"That's what it said."

"Why'd he kill them?"

"Said they were trespassing."

"What, on his desert? What are we doing then?"

"He's locked up."

"Yeah, but you wonder: are there anymore like him out there?"

It was quiet then. The stillness was deafening. Just the quiet whoosh of the tires passing through this alien land and no other sight or sound.

“Bullshit,” the Goose said again, sounding wishful but he didn’t say anymore, just sank a little deeper in his seat and stared at the emptiness out the window, thinking no doubt he was a long way from Brooklyn.

It was getting deep into dusk and the road they were driving was passing ever deeper into a landscape of sterile beauty, not a tree or a bush but only scrub brush here and there to be seen. Denio Junction had come and gone, a trailer and a tiny building of some sort, looking lived in but not especially welcoming. Very mean looking dog on a chain but no other sign of humanity about.

A long pool of lava beds stretched out in all directions before them and big cracks appeared every so often in the surface of the land to either side of them, as though there might come a place very soon where the road was swallowed up and them with it, but they pushed on. What else to do?

The needle on the gas gauge dipped toward empty, the road continued to unfurl, the darkness came over them, and their thoughts for a long time rested in a crevice of wonder where they thought about how far they could make it on foot in this place if they had to and both of them after thinking about it privately concluded that they wouldn’t make it very far at all and in fact would be likely to expire in this desolate place where they’d never be found. Except maybe by some hermit who was inclined to kill them.

About the time they came to accept that as a possibility, there was a faint glow on the horizon growing closer and as the warning light indicated they were nearly out of gas, they rolled into Lakeview, got a room, and made a call to the man they were seeking.

Oh do come right on out he said you can take a quick look at my collection and we can take a good look at you. He was a queen all right and a sour one, too it seemed. Introduced a couple of local characters and then the county sheriff who did indeed have a hard look at them and they were just tired enough to show him back a fair amount of attitude, asking can they be certain if they buy this collection that his county is a safe place to transport such valuable goods? Don’t you worry, he replied, we’ll keep a close eye on you. You can be sure of it.

Well then, any other questions? their host asked. Poser cocked an eye at him, snuggled up a little closer just for the sake of the impression it would make on these faggots, cleared his throat, and said, yeah where’s the lake?

The lake? They all looked at each other and then back at him. Lakeview he said. I’d like to view it.

Turns out the nearest lake is 50 miles away and one of the boyfriends offered that the name of the town was a sly reference to prehistoric Lake Bonneville, the remains of which they’d driven through in crossing the

Great Salt Desert and which maybe could have been seen from here in long ago times. If you were a dinosaur, he said. Ha ha.

"Bullshit," the Goose said, and somebody laughed but not for long.

They took a quick look at some of the loot the fellow had laid out for them, arranged to come back first thing tomorrow to appraise the entire collection, said a very friendly good night to the sheriff, went back to their room, and smoked a very large joint before falling deeply asleep.

This collector planned to discuss each item with them individually, and the first thing they did that next morning was firmly dissuade him of that notion. They took the pieces from him as fast as he could produce them, looked at each of them quickly, calculating its worth and adding up each of them as they came along, how many and how much, and when they hit their stride they were handling and handing off for packing maybe a half dozen a minute to look at each one of them and pass them on. The two of them were in a rhythm, cooking, and the faggot was freaking out, certain that they were dissing his stuff, failing to appreciate the rarities that they were handling, and on and on. But they were on top of it! They had it down, and it's a good thing too, because it wasn't far into the day before the guy stopped freaking and instead subtly began to ferret away piece by piece in some other place stuff they had just appraised and counted toward a total. He was trying to steal it back before he'd even sold it. Get paid for it and keep it.

They called him on it time after time and believed when all was said and done they'd got back every piece they were shown, but who knows? With that sort of hassle and the sheer volume to be handled they worked through the day and finally got it done.

Here's the deal, Poser told the collector, who by now was a little frazzled but still trying to keep it together. We're going to go back to our room, talk to our guy, give some thought to what we can pay you, shower, clean up, have a drink, and then we can make you an offer before dinner or after, whichever you'd prefer.

Well, I'd prefer it during dinner. You two absolutely must dine here tonight. God, wherever else in this town would you eat? No, be here for drinks at 6:30 and dinner at 7:00. Then we can discuss it. Will that work for you? Lovely, see you then.

And they left, out through the arched wooden door and into the last little bit of the sunlight. Neither of them said a word until after they'd climbed in the Caddy, driven back to their room and past it to the bar down the road, ordered up a couple of stiff drinks, Goose's a Scotch and Poser's a vodka martini, and after the drinks were served and they'd settled deep into the

back of the cushiony naugahyde booth and belted back half their drinks, not until then did they say a thing. But then they had plenty to say.

"I see \$600K value," he said to the Goose, "what about you?"

"Yeah, six and change I'd say. Most of it's all right, some's very good and some of it's fucking incredible! Just incredible."

"Yeah, I can turn those slave knives in a heartbeat for \$50K and there's plenty of other stuff there we can move without a lot of heartburn, make some very good money doing it. There's stuff there we could sell all day long in the store and other stuff as good as anything we have right now. Be worth it just to have it on the walls."

"So, you're saying that we can take our end in cash or product, either way, and make out like we need to? That what the Poser thinks?"

"I'd rather have the cash 'cause we need it that bad and it's quicker. But if we took 15% of the stuff off the top, the best stuff there, took it at his cost and took the time to move it, then of course I'd rather do it that way 'cause we'd make two or three times as much and he wouldn't know the difference. But then that's not the way we do things, is it, tempting as it seems. Let's be straight shooters. Forget it!"

"I just hope we're not wasting our time," said the Goose. "We can't afford it. Nobody else has gotten him to agree to a price. Why do we think we will?"

Poser said, "It's like the time I was living in Raton and my Great Aunt Annie got it into her head one day to have me weed the back yard. Mostly she and Uncle Frank treated me good. But for some reason she sent me out to weed the yard one day and it was a big yard, rural you know even though it was right in town, maybe half an acre, and I buckled down, worked my ass off for fifteen or twenty minutes and when I looked up I'd barely put a dent in it. You know? There was nothing but weeds as far as I could see and I just said the hell with it. Told Annie that was the best I could do, and she let it be but never really treated me the same way again, at least that was the way I felt about it. I've kept on thinking about it ever since, how I could have made the effort and ended up with a better outcome for me and for my Aunt. It didn't seem possible at the time to make all of the steps that were needed to get it done. But I wish I had tried, you know?"

"That's kinda how I feel about this. I don't know where Bill Wilson came from and I don't know if this old queer is going to sell us his stuff, but I want to find out. And until I find out otherwise, I'm betting that he will."

He went off to a pay phone to call Wilson and told him the deal. "It's worth an easy \$600K, maybe \$750K if you take your time selling it. We'll offer him \$250,000 cash, subject to your final approval when you see it.

That's not a problem 'cause you'll love it. It's great stuff. You owe us another \$25,000 in cash, plus the right to sell \$100,000 worth of it and split the profit with you. That's our fee. We'll make another \$25K and you'll get back more than a quarter of what you laid out within 60 days. Does that work for you?"

"Let me make sure I've got this right," Wilson said. "I'm paying \$275,000 total, \$25K to you and \$250K to him. When you say cash, I take it a cashier's check? Right? Okay. Then you're gonna sell \$100K of it in 60 days. I get \$75K and you get \$25K. Is that right?"

"Exactly right."

"So what is it you're gonna sell so fast? The best stuff?"

"We're going to sell a few of the very high end items, things we have customers for that you'd be hard pressed to move for anywhere near what we can get for them. You'll make more this way than if you sold them yourself and it gets us the commission we deserve without having to soak you for all cash. If you'd rather keep all the stuff and pay us \$50K in cash, that'd be okay, too."

"Go ahead and make him the offer. We'll do it your way. It makes sense to me. Are you pretty sure he'll take it?"

"I hope so. I'll sure be pissed if he doesn't but there's no way to know 'til we try. He's a weird guy but I think it's gonna work out."

"Well, if you have to go a little higher, do it. Don't let it get away over a few more dollars. Call me the minute you know, no matter what time. I can be there tomorrow afternoon with the check."

"You got a plane?"

"Friend'll fly me over. You can line up a truck to rent and I'll drive back with you. Your partner can drive your car back, huh?"

"Okay, I'll let you know. If he says no, I may need an attorney 'cause I just might kill the son of a bitch."

"I'm sure we can find you one if need be. Let's hope we won't."

"Oh, there's one more thing. There's a piece you're going to let me keep until I can arrange the right thing to do with it. It's something we can't sell."

"Why not? What is it?"

"Medicine bags. Called the Buffalo Bundles. Big mojo, very important artifact of the Blackfeet Tribe. Three branches of the tribe, each of them had a keeper of a Bundle. This is one of them."

"What's it worth?"

"It's literally priceless. And it literally can't be sold. It wouldn't be kosher. I'll look into it, see what's the right thing to do. Chances are we'll

donate it, hopefully to the tribe. Save you some taxes. But, it's my call. Agreed?"

"Only medicine I take is for my allergies. Do what you have to do."

And that was that. Over dinner, they talked about the collection and Indian Art in general, waiting until the dessert was cleared and coffee served before they made the offer.

"\$250,000! Are you kidding? You're kidding. I know you are. I wouldn't sell it for less than half a million. My god, darling, it's worth twice that much."

"Actually, my friend, it's worth barely \$600,000 retail if you sold it one piece at a time over the next ten years. You might get six for it then, and frankly it could be none of us will live long enough to see that eventuality anyhow."

The queen, and he was after all an old queen, was sputtering, working himself up, but Poser cut him off. "Here's something else to consider. You're quickly running low on anybody to sell this stuff to, know what I mean? You've screwed around with just about everybody who's come out here to look at it, run off just about all the guys who've got the kind of cash I'm talking about, and your reputation has gotten around. We might be the last guys who'll be willing to make you an offer. Maybe you better think about whether or not you really want to sell 'cause if you do, you just got as good an offer as you're going to get."

"Dale, honey, calm down now," his dinner companion was telling him, "please don't get yourself so upset." But Dale was plenty upset and Poser knew enough to bring discussions to an end for tonight.

"We'll be leaving in the morning. If you change your mind before then, give us a call. Otherwise, we'll just thank you for the dinner and take our collector elsewhere."

He and the Goose left quickly and said not a word to each other all the way back to the motel. When they got there, a message was waiting.

"I'll give you 48 hours to get me a cashier's check in hand and get the stuff out of my sight. I hope you feel good about yourself."

They looked at each other and decided that yes they did feel very good indeed.

It was nearly midnight in Wyoming when they reached Wilson to give him the news. "No shit!" he said. "Yeehaw!" He actually said that, too. "I'll be at the Lakeview airport by two tomorrow afternoon, checks in hand, one for him and one for you. Line up a truck and we'll start loading it up as soon as we can get together with him. Damn, Poser, I'm really pleased!"

"You'll be happy when you see the stuff. It should work out good for both of us."

"Oh, I just know it will. Don't doubt it for a minute. See ya at the airport."

And that again was that.

Early the day after Wilson arrived and Goose had departed, they were packed up and on the road. Driving the big Ryder truck back to Wyoming with Bill was a trip, so to speak. The guy was really a wild man. They traveled the same road in reverse that he and Goose had taken but with a much more animated response from Wilson.

"Damn, look at them antelope, everywhere you look...This is beautiful country, I like it wild... Hey, let's pull over here and see just who in the hell lives at Denio Junction...that dog won't hurt us none, will you, boy...nobody home, I guess, too bad, I would have liked to meet him...sure has himself a mouthy hound" and on like that for most of the trip, and when they got to Winnemucca, Wilson insisted they stop for a little blackjack at one of the casinos.

"We've got a load of art in the back you just paid a lot of money for and you're gonna trust it to a padlock while we play cards? You've got to be crazy, man."

"Aw, it'll be all right. We'll just play a few hands."

Poser said he'd stay with the truck, but Bill wouldn't hear of it. "Come on, you can't pass through Nevada without trying your luck," so they finally found a place where they could back up flush against a brick wall, making it harder if not impossible for someone to get into the bed, "although that doesn't mean it can't be hotwired and driven away," Poser pointed out.

"You worry too much," said Wilson and off they went.

They played for an hour or more. Wilson won a grand, while Poser, who was so anxious he could hardly sit still, lost a couple of hundred before he dropped out and waited nervously by the door. He couldn't see the truck from there but only the driveway where it would have to exit if somebody stole it, and for whatever good that would do him, it was better than looking at aces and eights. Of course it didn't matter. The truck was untouched when they got back to it.

"Damn, I like to gamble," said Wilson as they pulled away and, in fact, he wanted to stop again in Elko when they pulled over for gas, but Poser told him to forget it. They drove straight on through the night and all the next day to Cheyenne, some 900 miles in all, taking turns at the wheel while the other dozed. And while they both were awake they carried on a palaver of the sort that doing a deal of this magnitude can often bring about, one

that grew increasingly intimate the more tired they became, so that by the time they reached Bill's home on the night of the following day, they both had revealed more about themselves than either had likely intended.

"Come in for something to eat," he said to Poser as they pulled into the long driveway leading to a very large house. "Then you can take the pickup back to Boulder and I'll fly down with one of the boys in a couple of days to drive it home."

It was 1974, hardly the age of enlightenment in relations between men and women, but Poser still was shocked by how rudely Wilson treated his wife. He greeted her without kiss or hug and barely introduced Poser before ordering her to "fry us up some chicken and potatoes while I show him my guns" and turned his back on her to lead the way down a broad staircase to the basement.

There was a large, elaborate entertainment center and through another door was what can only be called a very big vault with a combination lock, an alarm system and a thick steel door that swung open easily and soundlessly after it was disarmed. Inside was a stunning collection of guns, pistols and rifles of every sort in expensive mountings in floor cases and all along the walls, which enclosed an area the size of a tennis court.

"Most of these are antiques," Wilson told him. "They date clear back to the beginnings of firearms, although you wouldn't know it from the condition they're in. They look brand new, don't you think?" he said and looked at Poser for confirmation before beginning to describe them in detail, pointing out his favorites, their history, and how he'd acquired them.

It was a subject Poser knew nothing about and he was dead tired from the drive, but even so it was impressive and got his attention in spite of it all. The same attraction to beauty that drives a collector is obvious in any quality collection, and craftsmanship this fine is truly a thing of beauty, regardless of the object's intended purpose. Weapons aren't Poser's idea of art but he sees in them a terrible beauty nonetheless. It's clear that Wilson has closed this loop, completed this collection, and now is moving on. In the truck in his driveway is his next obsession, stuff that someday soon will be as familiar to him as these guns.

When they finally sat down to eat, the man surprised him again by cutting into the chicken, throwing down his knife, and yelling at his wife, "This isn't cooked through, damn it. Put it back on the stove and get it right." With that, he grabbed Poser's plate with one hand and his own with the other, shoving them at the woman and turning back to his guest to say, "Sorry about that. I can't abide a chicken that isn't cooked through."

When Poser finally got back on the road, driving Wilson's Ranger XLT with a nice camper shell in the back "in case you want to grab a nap on the way," he was catching a second wind. He was beat, yeah, but really feeling good. Just made \$25K and a clear shot at another \$25K in hand. Very badly needed, too.

Let's face it. The gallery was hanging by a thread, always had been since they opened it a couple of years ago with his modest collection and about \$20 grand in borrowed money. This definitely bumped up the ante, gave them just a bit of breathing space. Plus, it was another rung in their climb up the ladder, another success these two guys from nowhere could claim. Word gets around and the fact that they had pulled this off where a number of better known dealers had failed was good for their reputation.

When he crossed over I-80 on I-25, he fired up a big spliff and took several hits, soon to be sailing along in the friendly breeze that was carrying him down this road. It was a 125 miles to his home and he wanted to really relax for the next two hours or so, give himself a break after so many days of tension and stress, take some time to enjoy this success, which was badly needed and well deserved.

He was settling into this state of mind, a place where he could see the rightness of his pleasure, the moment of satisfaction in knowing that through his good efforts the wolf for another few months at least was kept from the door. He was realizing once again how much baggage he carried around just because he was trying to do things his way, rather than the way he'd been told all his life that things had to be done.

He could hear his father the day the old man realized that he at age 15 finally had left home for good, saying, "You're a fuck up, boy, you've made a big mistake. If you have any sense you'll turn around right now and get back where you belong. Nobody pays you to do what you want. They pay you to do the job. You better get your head on straight, because you're well on your way to being a bum. And nobody's going to give a damn when you come crying."e was realizing how much baggae he carried just because he was rt

Nobody did give a damn, he was thinking, although they watched with a certain grudging respect and more than a little resentment from their too predictable routines. He was out there on a limb and they didn't give a damn whether he flew or he fell. They only cared enough to watch and see what would happen to him in spite of it all, as though it instructed their own lives.

He was thinking these thoughts and feeling pretty good about himself, not smug exactly but at least relieved and on the edge of comfortable, when

the red lights began to flash in his rear view mirror. The state patrol was pulling him over and, um, oh yes, the cab of the truck was still full of smoke.

He took his time pulling over, simultaneously fired up a cigarette and rolled down both windows, letting the rush of air and the rapid exhalation of nicotine smoke do whatever it could do to cover for him as he finally came to a stop.

"Can I see your license and registration, please" said the cop from tight against the cab of the truck directly over Poser's left shoulder.

"Of course, officer," said Poser, keeping his movements easy and his hands in plain sight. "My license is right here," he said, handing it out the window. "This isn't my truck, it belongs to my friend, but I would bet the registration is in the glove box. Let me take a look."

And it was. He handed it over and sat quietly with both hands on the top of the steering wheel while the cop took a long look at the paperwork. Finally, he moved around to face Poser, looked him hard in the face and asked, "Just what exactly are you doing with Bill Wilson's truck?"

"Oh, do you know Bill? We just got back from a road trip together. I'm heading home. He's going to pick up the truck in a couple of days when he comes down to visit."

"And why should I believe that? How do I know this truck isn't stolen?"

"I just left his house a few minutes ago. You could call him. I'm sure he's still awake. Did you say you know Bill?"

"I know he's the attorney general. What I don't know is why some hippy is driving his truck."

"Well, sir, I'm not 'some hippy.' I'm the owner of an art gallery in Boulder, Colorado, and Bill is a customer of mine. We just bought a collection together for one helluva lot of money and drove it all the way back here straight through from the West Coast and I'm really tired and I want to get home. I'm driving Bill's truck 'cause he told me to take it and I've said you can call him to confirm it, so I don't know what else you want from me, unless it's to bust my balls."

The cop looked at him long and hard for a while, leaning in toward the window with his left arm resting on the roof of the cab, then he said, "In the first place you were speeding and in the second place you're driving a truck that doesn't belong to you. Oh, yeah, and the third thing is, marijuana's still illegal in this state, so I guess if I wanted to bust your balls, you've given me plenty of reason." Then he flipped the license and the registration into his lap. "Why don't you get your ass on home to Boulder." With that, he turned and walked away.

Poser carried the three boxes into his gallery and back to his office, where he carefully unpacked them. He lifted the baskets free first, setting each one aside after looking it over for any damage and feeling relieved to find none after having carted them a thousand miles by truck.

They were the most fragile of the material he brought with him, and even though you always feel you packed them carefully, the exit from Lakeview had been hurried, the process distracted by the need to inventory the collection repeatedly, making certain nothing had been quietly spirited away by the seller, who was unhappy, duplicitous, and less than gracious as they loaded the truck.

Three of these baskets were among the things he had not so innocently set aside and protested his ignorance when they reclaimed them. Crooked he was, but at least he had taste. This is very good material.

Most of the baskets in his collection were the typical Oregon-Northern California material from the Hupa, Yurok, Karok tribes, nice but common vessels woven from willow, pine root and maidenhair fern. Basketry of native peoples evolved over time from utilitarian purposes to more decorative uses and much of it eventually was made to sell. Those baskets he'd left with Bill Wilson were good gallery material. Attractive, relatively cheap, they were easy to sell.

These dozen, however, were Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, and a few Aleutian baskets, early, rare, very finely woven, and exquisite. Their value was correspondingly high.

The Northwest Coast tribes had highly structured communities among which were artisan societies, skilled makers of elaborately carved masks, bowls, spoons, knives, every manner of implement, and totem poles, lodges, ocean-going canoes, and beautifully woven robes, mats, hats, nets, and baskets into which were worked the designs emblematic of their respective clans and their very ritualistic way of life.

In pre-history these peoples enjoyed the same largess the environment bestows today. Fish, game, and other foodstuffs are plentiful, water is clean, pure, dependably replenished, the weather is temperate, living is easy. Then as now, survival was easily accomplished, abundance was to be had.

By the standards of indigenous peoples, the Northwest Coast tribes were rich, leisure was commonplace, their way of life accommodated elaborate rituals and complex artistic expression. They were successful warriors, too, often raiding lesser tribes for booty, children, and slaves. So prosperous did they become that potlatches, a kind of celebratory tribal give-away party, were hosted regularly as a demonstration of the giver's wealth. The most dramatic statement was made by large, sharp knives with

elaborated carved and painted handles, aptly called "slave killers," which were used to publicly execute one or more of the host's slaves, just because he could afford to.

Poser stared at the baskets for a long time, the spruce root warp and weft interwoven with dyed grasses that comprised the designs, some of them so tightly woven with a twined technique that they held water, some so seemingly fragile that it amazed him he could hold them in his hands a hundred years or more after they were made.

One of them, an Aleutian basket from the Attu, a tiny tribe of Inuit people inhabiting the westernmost of those islands that extend from Alaska to nearly the Siberian edge of Russia where that chain of inhospitable land separates the Gulf of Alaska and the Pacific from the Bering Sea, and where the baskets are made of sea grass roughly the thickness of human hair, which the basket makers in this faraway land gather when the weather is good and cure the grasses by a means used continuously since prehistory, and when the winter settles in, the days and nights are dark, the wind howls and the seas churn, in their little domiciles lit perhaps by whale oil they gather the grasses and separate them into individual strands which they clamp between their teeth firmly holding each in place, and, having moistened that strand at the end in her mouth, the basket weaver grasps the outer husk on each side between her gnarled thumb and first finger of both hands and strips it into three long pieces, of which she keeps only the middle third to weave with and discards the outer pieces.

Once, under a powerful molecular microscope in the museum at the University of Colorado just up the Hill, Poser was able to photograph one square inch of an Attu basket and enlarge that picture by 1000 times, and when he methodically counted and then, in disbelief, recounted the stiches that were shown, he was able to confirm that in that one square inch of weaving there were 5,600 of them.

Sitting in his office with just such a basket, one perhaps not quite that fine but very close and who really can say without a sophisticated microscope to assess it, he is as always simply stunned to have such a thing of beauty in his hands. Who were these people? Who are these people? What are they telling him?

Well, in fact, they're telling him and anyone else who pays attention what it was like to be them in that time when they were sovereign nations in the full flower of their evolution as a people, as peoples who once long ago migrated into this thawing, lush, unpopulated land, one wave succeeding another over tens of thousands of years and spreading to every corner of

the continent, where they displaced the previous occupants or were rebuffed by them and deflected to another path.

One thing is certain: over time, most all of these peoples who at one time were somewhat homogenous groups became widely distributed throughout the land.

So, when you encounter their art and artifacts, there is a lot to discover and a seemingly endless series of revelations to be had. You learn that cultural similarities are more attuned to the environment in which they live than the language stock from which they derive. That amity and enmity are shifting states of encounter based on need or aspiration. That war itself most often was a game of adventure where courage and bravery were tested, prowess demonstrated, booty garnered, and influence extended. Injury and death in battle in raids were rare, except when territory was at issue and whole clans or tribes fought to protect their home.

And you learn all this because their art makes you notice. There is a profound beauty in these things that can't be dismissed nor ignored, once it comes into your life. These people communicate and you begin to hear them.

Theirs is a way of life centered on ritual and much of what is spiritual to them is manifest in their art, in the ways they decorate their clothing, their implements, and themselves. But some of it is secret, too, for initiates only.

When the sacred buffalo bundles of the Picuni Blackfeet came into your life, you knew better than to open them. They are central to some of the most profound medicine of that proud and powerful tribe, whose three divisions, the Siksika, Kaigani, and Picuni, each had a keeper of that group's bundles and its medicine was powerful.

These people once inhabited the lands north of Lake Superior and west of Lake Winnipeg. They seem to have had no allies and fought other tribes in the region for the best hunting lands and the most accommodating places to camp, even though they too were mostly Algonquin peoples.

In very early historic times, when European cultures began to impact the lands of North America, the vast Cree tribes just to their east began to trade at Hudson Bay and James Bay, gathering such amazing new things to them as glass beads, metal pots, hatchets and knives of steel, and rifles. With these cap and ball muskets, these "thunder sticks," they "drove the Blackfeet like rabbits" away from the familiar Woodlands and far out onto the Great Plains.

Where 60 million buffalo provided them a new way of life. The Blackfeet traveled on foot, with camp dogs pulling small travois loaded with the basic gear of the people's life, their clothes, bundles, shelter, gourds and bladders

full of water, and dried foods wrapped in skins. Their weapons, knives, spears, bow and a quiver of arrows, they carried with them.

Hunting and slaying the buffalo on foot was difficult, but there were huge herds of them covering the plains as far as the eye could see and the people found ways to reap this harvest of their new lands. Herd animals can be stampeded. The Blackfeet learned to guide them toward cliffs, where dozens or even hundreds of them would plunge to their death. These piles of dead buffalo provided the essentials of life for the people.

Food, clothing, shelter, domestic implements, weapons and shields, all of this was embodied in the buffalo and given in their death to the Blackfeet. The animal was sacred. Big medicine grew from the relationship between the people and the creature that sustained them. The buffalo bundles were the place where the symbols of that medicine was contained. The keeper of the bundles carried with him a powerful responsibility, the means of spiritual communication with the most essential aspect of the people's life.

What were those symbols? Curiosity was persistent, temptation powerful, but you knew better. Only the initiated should know what was in the bundles. Only those so ordained could understand them. Custom said that no one else should open the bundles and you respected custom, did you not?

Yes, you did. And yet? And yet? This was something only a few people ever had seen in their entire history. The sacred buffalo bundles of the Blackfeet. And they were in your hands.