

No More, Ever

“I have carried a heavy load on my back ever since I was a boy. I learned then that we were but few, while the white men were many, and that we could not hold our own with them. We were like deer. They were like grizzly bears.”

—Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, speech at Lincoln Hall in Washington D.C. (1879)

Harold and Joe pulled into the parking lot at the battlefield just before 9:30 in a GMC pickup whose various sections—hood, driver’s side door, roof—were painted in shades of black and primer gray. Except for the tailgate, which was yellow. A gun rack was visible in the back window. Ours were the only two vehicles in the lot, but Harold pulled up and lurched to a halt just about 18 inches away from us, pointed in the opposite direction. As he squeezed out he kept one hand mashed down on his hat while the wind grasped at it.

He grinned as I brought my window down. “Mornin,’ Mr. Ross!” he said. “Kinda breezy today!” He had to raise his voice; the wind seemed to swat the words away from his mouth.

“It’s just ‘Ross,’ ” I said.

“Eh?”

“Never mind. Where are your horses?”

He shook his head. “Turns out Nelson has his herd out movin’ cows this weekend. Now why the heck would he be doin’ that this time of year?”

“That would be hard for me to say. What about the cast? When are they coming?”

Harold switched hands on his hat. It was a blue flat-brimmed hat, with a yellow crossed-swords insignia at the front. The rest of his ensemble was also blue: denim jacket, denim pants.

“What, now?”

“Where is the reenactment cast? The cavalry? The Indians?”

“Oh.” He gave a dismissive wave of his free hand. “They couldn’t come, neither. We really don’t need ‘em. Joe there’ll give the speech, and I’m the general.” He bent slightly to peer inside the cab. “Miss Thao said she was just interested in the surrender, anyhow, for her news story. Right?” Harold’s cheeks were growing redder by the second. “And Dane can get his pictures.”

“Seriously?” Thao said. “You’re going to reenact the entire Battle of the Bear Paw with just you and Joe? On foot?”

“Yeah, but Joe’s gonna do the speech. He practiced almost all night. He’s still practicin’ now.” Harold pointed at the GMC, and we obligingly looked that way. Joe was facing downward. He wore a broad red headband, which contrasted starkly with his black hair. His lips were moving. “We can do it right here,” Harold added. “Makes it more authentic, anyhow. You all were right. Makes no sense to do it somewhere else.”

“Fine. Shall we get going?”

“You bet! Let’s get the show on the road!” He scanned the area. “Good thing nobody else is here. We can do it right over by the rock.” He pointed to a large stone at the end of the parking lot. “Same exact spot as where it really happened. You folks gather up over there. Joe and me’ll

get ready.” He pulled the cap down almost to his eyebrows, hopped to Joe’s side of the pickup and tapped on the window.

“This is going to be even worse than I thought it,” Duane said. “I wouldn’t give them any forty dollars.”

“What can you do?” Thao said. “Nelson is moving the cows.”

We got out of the cab and into the wind. Thao was blown a half-step sideways. She put her head down. “My...god!”

“We’ll be right over!” Harold called out. He tapped again at the window.

We pulled up our jackets tightly and walked the 20 yards to the stone. Affixed to it was a bas-relief tableau depicting the moment of surrender: Joseph facing a bearded Miles, his hand raised. The iconic proclamation floated over their heads: *From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever*. Next to the monument, mounted on a post, there was a wooden box with pamphlets inside. Thao pulled one out, and shoved it into her jacket pocket.

Other than the gravel parking lot, a flapping flag on a tall flagpole, and the monument, there wasn’t much to distinguish the battlefield area from the surrounding rangeland. Whoever had raised the flag was not around now. The terrain consisted of gentle grassy slopes that descended here and there into gullies and draws. A narrow trail formed a rough oval that corresponded with the boundaries of the battlefield. An enclosed picnic shelter stood about a hundred feet from us. None of the slopes rose into anything that would qualify as a hill. In fact, the sightlines were such that the modest Bears Paw Mountains were clearly visible in the distance.

Thao produced an elastic band and pulled her hair, which had been whipping wildly across her face, into a ponytail. Her cheeks were also growing red. She cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, “Can you please hurry?”

As each word came from her mouth, the wind obliterated it. Harold put his free hand up to his ear. She made a beckoning gesture. He held up a finger, indicating, presumably, one minute, although it potentially could mean one hour, or any other unit in his unique space/time continuum. But no, he soon hustled over to the driver's side of the pickup, crawled into the cab, and emerged hatless, carrying a gun. It appeared to be a shotgun.

"Now I see why he's glad nobody else is here," I said.

Joe emerged from the pickup. He wore a buckskin blouse that hung to mid-thigh, jeans, and a pair of moccasins. He had something in his hand—a piece of paper, which he was cramming into a breast pocket. Harold held out the shotgun to him. Joe accepted it and they started walking, Harold talking as they approached. Joe walked with a very slow, stately gait, the butt of the shotgun tucked under and behind his armpit, the barrel pointed downward. Harold would get two or three steps ahead of him, and have to wait for him to catch up. But when they got within about 10 yards of the monument, Harold stopped talking, and his pace also slowed. He pointed to their left; Joe headed that way, descending down a path into a draw. Soon all we could see of him was the fluttering black hair with the red headband. Then that was gone, too.

Harold approached us.

"So, what exactly—"

Harold held up his hand. He was glaring at the spot where Joe had disappeared.

"Oh—he's already in character," Duane said. "I'd better start making pictures."

Thao had her pad and pen out. She manipulated them in her gloved hands with some difficulty. Duane photographed Harold frowning, putting his hands behind his back, pacing back and forth. At one point he stopped and faced the spot in the draw. And back to pacing. A full minute passed before he stopped again.

“Come out of there, Joseph,” he yelled. “You are surrounded by the United States Calvary!”

There was no movement, other than the dry grass shuddering in the wind.

Harold cupped his hands to his mouth, as Thao had done. “Come out of there, Joseph!”

Nothing.

He walked a few steps forward. “Hey! Come on up now!”

Still nothing.

Harold walked on, nearly to the lip of the slope, stopped, and waved. Then he trotted back to us. He wheeled, wheezing, and pointed back toward the draw.

Slowly, Joe’s black hair and red headband became visible, followed gradually by the buckskin blouse, his jeans and moccasins. He was walking even more deliberately now. He held the shotgun cradled across his chest. He looked not at us, but off to the southwest. His face was grim; each step seemed slower than the last.

When he got within five paces, he stopped. Still, he did not look at us.

“You better give me that gun, Joseph,” Harold said.

Instead, Joe put the butt on the ground and held it by the top end of the barrel. Harold stepped forward, his hand reaching toward the gun. Joe raised his chin defiantly and shook his head.

“Oh,” Harold said.

Everyone was still but Duane, who was moving around, clicking off shots from different angles.

Harold licked his lips. “Well,” he said. “Do you have anything to say?”

Joe gave a slight shake of his head.

“You’re surrenderin,’” Harold said. “Right?”

Joe stared at him for a good eight or 10 seconds before he pulled out the paper. He unfolded it and held it with both hands in front of his face, letting the barrel of the shotgun balance against his hip, and began to hesitantly read.

“Tell Howard that I know...” He cleared his throat and started again, much more loudly this time. His deep voice cut into the wind. “Tell... Howard... that I know ...his heart.”

After completing the sentence he put one hand on his heart. The paper flapped smartly in the wind. He viewed it numbly, then took hold of it again with both hands.

“What he told me before ...I have in my heart.” This time he just glanced downward, in the general area of his heart. “I am tired of fighting.... Our chiefs are killed.... Looking Glass is dead. Tu-hoo-too... Tu-hil-hoo... Tu. Hul. Hil. Sote. Is Dead.” Pause. “He is dead,” he added somberly. “The old men are ALL dead.”

He spread his arms wide, in an “all” gesture; the snapping of the paper sounded like firecrackers. Harold started to something—“Oop”—just as the wind snatched the paper cleanly from Joe’s hand and shot it away, several feet off the ground, for a good fifty feet, until it dived to the earth and caught up against some scrub brush. Joe took one step in that direction, but before he could take another, the paper jerked upward as if it were pulled by a string, and flew off, toward Chinook, and probably by day’s end, somewhere in Canada.

“Uh-oh,” Harold said. He started to add something, but Joe interrupted him.

“Now the young men make the decisions!” he said. “It’s cold. We don’t have nothing to eat. Where is everybody?” He looked around. Harold looked around, too. “Probably out there freezing! I don’t know where my kids are, neither!” His face had taken on almost a ferocious expression. “Do you?”

Harold shook his head, no.

“Hear me my chiefs! I’m sick of this! Where the sun now stands, I will fight no more.
EVER.”

He picked up the shotgun and abruptly extended it away from his chest. Harold took it.
“Thanks, Joseph,” he said loudly. “That was a fine speech.”

Without a word, Joe started walking back toward the GMC.

“Gol-dang,” Harold said. “He memorized the whole thing word-for-word! How ‘bout that?”

“Yes. Impressive,” Thao said.

“ ‘From where the sun now stands.’ How ‘bout that?”

“Yes,” Thao repeated. “So—the program is over?”

“Pretty much....” Harold surveyed the empty lot. “Nobody’s around. I guess we could shoot off the shotgun a time or two....”

“Please, no, thank you.” She pulled an envelope from the same jacket pocket where she’d put the map, and offered it to him. He took it, started to open it, changed his mind and crammed it in the pocket of his jacket.

Duane had switched to a longer lens. He was still photographing Joe—or more accurately, Joe’s back.

“You maybe want a picture of me with the gun?” Harold asked. He held it up to his chest.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Oh.”

Joe finally reached the pickup. Instead of getting in, he walked beyond a few paces. Facing the southwest, he paused, arms folded, motionless. He took off the headband, turned around and got in the pickup.

“OK,” Harold said. “Guess we’ll hit the road. Hope you enjoyed our show.”

“Yes, very much,” Thao said.

Harold shook hands all around. “Real pleasure,” he said. “Real pleasure.” Then he scurried back to the pickup. When he crawled into the cab, he did not take the time to put the shotgun back in the gun rack. The pickup pulled out immediately, tires spinning on the gravel.

Duane replaced the long lens on his camera. He ambled off, taking photos along the trail. Thao wrote a few more notes in her notebook. She pointed toward where Joe had been staring. “Canada?”

“No. You’re turned around. That’s the southwest, more or less where they came from.”

“The Wallowa?”

“What?”

“The Wallowa.” She pronounced it WALL-oh-wuh.

“It’s Wal-LAU-wa. Let’s get out of the wind.”

We made our way to the picnic shelter. Barn swallows darted here and there. The shelter was walled on three sides, with protection against the west wind. Thao leaned against a picnic tabletop. “Whew! What a relief. I’ve never ever felt wind like that.”

One wall held a map of the battlefield. She pointed to its southwest corner. “So this is the direction they came from. Howard, too.” She pointed back toward the coulee where Joe had disappeared. “And the Nez Perce were there.”

“Right. But Howard was always hopelessly behind them.”

“So it was Miles who surprised them. And he came from there?” She pointed to the southeast.

“Right.”

“And he had 500 soldiers.”

“He did? Plus there were Indians with them, too. Crow.”

“Yeah, I read that, too. I don’t get that. Why were there Indians helping to chase the Indians? The Nez Perce had hoped to join up with the Crows, but instead the Crows helped the soldiers.”

“It’s like I said before. Tribes are inclined to take care of themselves, and fight other tribes. They decide on who’s their worst enemy at a given time, then ally themselves with anybody else to fight them. Crow scouts supported the 7th Cavalry against the Sioux and Cheyenne at the Little Bighorn, too. Some of them got killed right next to the soldiers. And Miles had Cheyenne scouts with him at the Bear Paw. The Indians switched allegiances from year to year. The fact that they were all ‘Indians’ didn’t make them part of one homogeneous group. Some of these tribes hated each other as much as the Hutus hate the Tutsis.”

Thao pointed to the top of the map. “If only they’d gone a little farther. Just 40 more miles to Canada. How disappointing. But they must have been exhausted, coming all that way.”

“Yeah. To have Miles’ cavalry suddenly descend on them, catch them by surprise. Take their horses. Really, without the horses, they had no chance. And then it started to snow, and the wind was blowing, of course. And it was a wet snow. I don’t know if you’ve ever been wet and cold like that. I mean, wet through and through, every piece of cloth, your hair, your eyelids, your shoes and your feet. Out here, if it’s just cold—and even if it’s just cold and the wind is blowing—people can usually find a way to deal with it, because the air is dry. I mean, it’s

miserable, but you can deal with it. But if you are wet on top of that—you can't. At some point, you just can't convince your body to keep trying. So here you are, exhausted and freezing, and a bunch of men are trying to kill you, and your lifelong friends and your brothers and the women and children you're responsible for are dying all around you. It's hard to imagine how hopeless they must have felt. All he could do was give up."

"But the Army tricked him, didn't they," Thao said. "They shipped his tribe off to Kansas and Oklahoma, even though Joseph thought they had a deal to go back to the ...Wallowa. They had to live in this terrible swampland and they were overcome by disease. More of them died in Oklahoma than all the battles they had."

"Really? I didn't know that. I'm supposed to be the local expert here, but you seem to know about as much as I do. But yes, the Army tricked them. Because they had to be taught a lesson."

"My point is, maybe he shouldn't have given up."

"And what...let them kill every member of the band who was too young or old or slow to run off? Miles had the 7th Cavalry with him, with its proud record of slaughtering Indians of any age and sex. No, sometimes you just have to admit you are defeated."

"He must have been devastated."

"More like relieved, I would think."

"Maybe a little. But mostly, I bet he was really sad. If only he could have known that he'd end up being this revered figure."

"Revered. That's the white person's version. Or, in your case—not to put too fine a racial line on it—the yellow white person's version."

“Ross, most people don’t really refer to Asians as ‘yellow’ anymore. Maybe you haven’t heard....”

“OK. The point is, it’s the western—or in your case, the eastern-western—fixation on narrative redemption. The fact is, the true story of the plains Indians is one without redemption. That’s why no one wants to hear it.”

She tapped the notebook that peeked outside her breast pocket. “Oh, my readers will want to hear it, all right. They’re not going to be able to resist the Yellow-White Eastern-Western redemptive version.” She pulled out the pamphlet and unfolded it. It was the same map and diagram that was on the wall. “So let’s get going. A little breeze isn’t going to stop us. Let’s go see—” She peered closely at it—“markers A-Z or whatever.”

We went first to the ravine from which Joe had appeared. Duane was there now, at the bottom, which was somewhat protected. We came onto a marker, where visitors had deposited items around it—whole cigarettes, some dimes and quarters, a beaded bracelet.

Thao read aloud from the description of the marker in her pamphlet. *Ollokot fell here*. “Do you think this is really that spot?”

“Oh, who knows. I’m sure everything here is just a best guess. But at least there were eyewitnesses on both sides—as opposed to, say, the Little Bighorn—so they probably were able to put together a pretty good idea of what happened where. You’d think they would be at least close on where Joseph came out. Miles and Howard were both there, and Wood, of course, taking notes while Joseph spoke, and undoubtedly embellishing it in his head at the same time.”

We walked the path around the site, moving slowly and stiffly. Thao stopped at each marker and read the description aloud. *This rock ...Looking Glass was shot...he stood hoping ... to their aid*. About half of what she read was audible. The wind swallowed the rest.

Maybe 40 minutes later we were back at the surrender spot. Thao ran her gloved fingers over the tableau. It was pocked with dings and dents; its coppery symmetry undoubtedly made for prime target practice. The artwork depicted Joseph—a single feather sticking out of his head, one hand balancing a rifle with its butt on the ground, as Joe had done—standing before Miles and reaching skyward.

“From where the sun now stands,” Thao read. “See, he’s pointing to the sun.”

“I don’t think so. He’s just pointing to his destination. ‘Ready to go there!’”

“Ross, stop it.” She placed her index finger against Joseph’s raised hand. “No,” she said firmly. “The sun.”