

William Eastlake has published a number of fine stories in various "quality" and "little" magazines. The following, reprinted from The Kenyon Review, concerns a Zia Indian, who said: "I know I speak too much of Beethoven but Beethoven, my friends, is a universe." It also concerns the Zia's Navajo girl friend, who represented a different sort of universe. . . .

WHAT NICE HANDS HELD

by William Eastlake

THE ZIA INDIAN WAS GREAT on advice. He said of our Legion Club that it was a retreat. He said we wanted to live in the past, and that no one can live in the past, even an Indian. Especially an Indian. "We are not so much building our own Legion as we are compounding an already impossible cultural dichotomy."

"It's a place to play poker," Chee Bill Toledo said.

"No," the Zia still held. "We build our own Legion Club out here because we choose to ignore a de facto situation vis a vis the Whites and we don't want to face being Indians."

"Maybe you don't want to be an Indian," Chee Bill Toledo said. "I don't mind."

"I'm no damn Indian," Cass Goodner said.

"I mean we are all Indians out here," the Zia said. "In the way I mean."

Philosophy. We have a great deal of time for philosophy out here. Or let's say we talk a lot. It's a long time between branding and the fences are good and so, even before the Legion, we had time for talk and plans.

Once Chee Bill Toledo had a plan to hold up the bank on horseback, hide in the hills where the old whisky still still was on the Largo Country, impossible to reach.

"It's a retreat," the Zia said. "Like our Legion. Everything you guys think of is a retreat. Holding up banks is conforming to a regressive pattern if I ever heard one."

"And you can get shot too," Chee Bill Toledo said.

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The Zia, Tom Tobeck, had been to school, Utah Agricultural. He still had the Utah Aggie sign on his T shirt and he usually wore a half tolerant and half unbelieving, small smile and a large cigar and talked a great deal about everything but agriculture which bored him.

It was Chee Bill Toledo's idea to start the Legion Club but it was Tom Tobeck's idea to keep all the Indians out.

"You are an Indian yourself," Cass said.

"Yes, but Indians tend to be dull."

"Would you join this?"

"Out here it's all there is to join," Tom Tobeck said.

So we started the Legion Club between Johnson's and the Torreon trading posts. We were refused a charter from an outfit that calls itself The American Legion because some of our members had not been in the Army. To have eliminated the members who had not been in the Army would have been sad and to change the name of the club, as Tom Tobeck said, would be only to substitute some outlandish Indian name.

"And letting other people run our lives," Chee Bill Toledo said.

The Legion was built on the property of a man named Three Ears of an Elk, a Navajo, a Navajo who did not believe in Progress but didn't know what was happening. The Zia believed in Progress.

Our mud hut was a start—adobe mixed with straw. Tom Tobeck directed the operation because Zias built of mud—Navajos, no. Navajos built of chinked cedar posts, igloo-shaped. The Legion was an innovation, a cube in a round country. You felt a long way from home.

An institution like the Legion gives men leisure which, as the Zia said, is the beginning of all civilizations. One of the first civilized ideas was to raid the surrounding country using the Legion as a base of operations, but this idea never got off the ground. Although I distrust people with accurate memories I think the second idea was to drink a lot. This must have fallen through because of lack of money. Afraid Of His Own Horses wanted us to grow surplus crops and collect from the government. I don't know what happened to this idea but we did acquire a breeding herd of sheep which, I suppose again, is a basis for civilization but, as Chee Bill Toledo said recently, "Remember, we et them all up." There were other more practical ideas that fell of their own practicality, and gradually there was a vacuum into which the Zia, Tom Tobeck, stepped. Fell.

Our Zia, Tom Tobeck, met the Navajo girl, Nice Hands, at a sing at Star Lake which is between Tinian and White Horse, and he brought her back to the clubhouse

and she never left. It was like Tom Tobeck to break the Indian rules and marry a Navajo but we were surprised all the same. Surprised he'd take up with a primitive, uncivilized girl who knew nothing of exploding populations, even if she was pretty. All the women Tom Tobeck had talked about since he got back from college had been white dudes, aspen painters, the kind of white women who are attracted to another culture, to Indians, especially if the Indian is handsome and talks of exploding populations and dwindling natural resources. It never occurred to any of us that Nice Hands might be what the Zia would call a surrogate or what Chee Bill Toledo, after Hollywood, would call a stand-in until some dude white woman got rid of her husband or whatever waiting dudes do.

The Zia's point was difficult. At the beginning I suspect he had none. That is, I think his meeting with the Navajo girl, Nice Hands, was accidental. I believe his phrase, "The partnership in brotherhood of all Indians," was coined after the fact. But it had always been a fact that a Navajo can't marry a Zia. Can't, as a matter of fact, have anything to do with one. Of course at a Navajo yebechai, what we call a sweetie sweetie, you may see a Zia or a Santa Ana or even a Jemez sitting there, coy, but that's about it, that's about all. I don't know about the rest of the

reservation but it's true in the Checkerboard. An Apache is different. I've seen Apaches dance at sweetie sweeties and more, but then the Apaches and the Navajos were once the same tribe, speak almost the same language. A Zia is a Pueblo Indian, like a Santa Ana and a Jemez and a Taos and you can't get much lower, you can't get much closer to a white man than that, the Navajo holds.

At first we thought of Nice Hands as an intrusion, then she began to think of us as an intrusion, then things began to level out and we took each other for granted until we began to notice her more—her sand painting, her excellent coffee, her eyes, her nice hands. She would sit there maybe making a rug for Tom Tobeck in back of the loom, her sharp and sculptured face etched in back of the woof and warp as though the face were a pattern her shuttle would soon weave.

We got in the habit of getting out and leaving Nice Hands and the Zia alone. Navajos all grow up in one small hogan room. They are accustomed to their parents' love making as children. Love to a Navajo is not a long series of forbidden revelations, shocks, as it is to Whites. It is a natural, pleasant, and beautiful thing to them. Nevertheless, the rest of us were in the habit of leaving and sitting outside at their Legion home.

"God is a unicorn. The only

problem is exploding populations and dwindling resources. I know I speak too much of Beethoven but Beethoven, my friends, is a universe." I don't know whether the Zia got this kind of talk at Utah Aggie but don't forget he had been to Salt Lake and Denver too. Then Tom Tobeck was off on something else before you got what he had just said. The dwindling resources thing was kind of a half answer to Cass's statement that the Zia was in real trouble with the Navajos by taking up with Nice Hands.

"No. Exploding populations and dwindling resources. That's the trouble, remember. And neglected geniuses. Remember that."

The Navajos knew that the Zia had been to college and in their heads it excused a lot. The Navajos are a gentle race, and tolerant, but they can become suddenly vicious. In the depths of the reservation, law and order is on their own terms and even here in the Checkerboard, death can be violent.

"The way I see this," Cass said a couple of weeks after Nice Hands took over. We were sitting in the Clubhouse, the one high window gave a fairy light. Nice Hands was working at the loom. The floor was never finished and a foxy dust always rose and settled gently on all of us and on the pieces of furniture: a loom, a bar, seven empty tomato juice crates, a wine press and a diamond neck-

lace. The wine press never worked and was shattered. I don't know where it came from. The diamond necklace was glass and was a present from the Zia to Nice Hands and it hung on the wall for all to see.

"Yes, the way I see it," Cass said, "the Navajos will burn our clubhouse down or worse. After all, Nice Hands' father is a leader."

Being a leader in the Checkerboard gave the Navajo absolutely no authority but enormous prestige. A leader had a great deal of face to save.

"What do you think?" Cass was directing his question at Nice Hands. "What do you think the old man will do?"

Nice Hands did not speak English too well and did not seem to understand it too well unless the Zia, Tom Tobeck, was speaking. Now she just seemed to concentrate on the loom more and the shuttle went a little faster and there was that kind of primitive, embarrassed, half-smile on her face that a Navajo will frequently give a White, as though the white man always spoke in obscenities.

"Nothing," the Zia, Tom Tobeck, said. "It's a civilized country. Nothing. He can do nothing."

"If he does something, what do we do?" Cass asked.

Chee Bill Toledo was sitting casually on a tomato crate and he said, "We send her home."

Actually the Zia and Nice Hands were using the club as a home so Chee Bill Toledo's point was lost even on me. Marriage? Marriage rites the Indians find embarrassing, funny, and, I guess, needlessly expensive. The only thing they understand is that it's a matriarchy so the women own everything. She puts his saddle outside when she's finished with the man, and the mother-in-law, as with the distant Esquimos, is never permitted to show her face or be seen.

Outside of that Utah Aggie shirt and the omnipresent cigar, I don't think the Zia owned anything. Yes, he had a Tex Tan saddle that was always with him. He took it even to Utah Aggie. He used anybody's horse and, with the mounted Zia and his cigar on top, the horse became the horse that smokes. The saddle, I think, was the Zia's touchstone for reality—what he was. After all, although genius is neglected and art may be a universe and populations explode all over the place as natural resources melt before our eyes—can you ride them, use them as a pillow? Can you say, There rides the smoking Zia on his art? Dwindling natural resources? No, a man to be a man must have a saddle on which to sit.

The Zia sat on it now and ignored Chee Bill Toledo. He withdrew the cigar politely and spoke to Nice Hands.

"What are all these guys doing in our house?"

Well, then, let him fight his own battles. However, on second thought, it was our clubhouse, and then too it was our war. Most of the cowboys and Indians (for that is what we all were) had not been in either of the Great Wars so our Legion was not going to back away from this one. I had been in the last one but I was curious. Chee Bill Toledo, I guess, had had the most interesting war experience. He had been bumming around California when the war broke, he tried to enlist but was rejected as not being right in the head—not integrable they called it. He tried to get a job in a Western movie as an Indian but was rejected as not looking the part. They finally gave him a part as the typical soldier, at a place called Republic Pictures in Studio City. It was a war picture. I guess, at the Legion, we had heard every detail of his war experiences a million times.

"We're not pulling back," Chee Bill Toledo said. He always talked in military jargon.

I watched Nice Hands. She had a great deal of poise, native dignity, the kind of poise that comes from doing anything you're about exceptionally well. She had an Asian tilt to her eyes. There has not been much new blood in the Navajos since their Asiatic days. A Zia cross would not change the children much but I guess the

Navajos have their strange reasons for wanting to stay pure. Nice Hands stopped the shuttle and looked back at the Zia.

"Her father can do nothing," Tom Tobeck repeated. "Nothing."

It would have been dramatic if the shots had been fired then, exactly then, like in a movie at the mission. But it was about five minutes later when there was the bang, bang, bang, until seven shots, exactly what a lever action Winchester will hold, were emptied off at the Clubhouse.

Everyone froze until all the shots were over and then went quietly and innocently outside in time to see a distant and unrecognizable figure get into a blue pick-up and slowly drive off. If the person had swung up on a horse and galloped off it would have been better, much better. Now the killer's timing was off by five minutes and he, she or it didn't use a horse, but the bullets were real. The Zia dug one out of the adobe and tossed it on the ground.

"A thirty-thirty."

Everybody began to wonder now what Nice Hands held. What she believed. What she would do about this. Love is an enormous word like Beauty and Truth, Duty, Patriotism and Honor. In the wrong mouth they can mean absolutely nothing. Sacrifice too has become overworked and meaningless. Sacrifice for Love is quite a pair and we didn't expect the Zia

to use them but he did. Outside the Legion he got them in somehow. But we still didn't know what Nice Hands held.

Inside again the Zia glanced at the work on the loom and said, "Art is a universe," and lit a cigar. I swear that outside he said something about sacrifice for love, but then all of us at the Legion were being shot at too.

"I wish to die with you," Nice Hands said.

How would the Zia take this? Could he rise to the occasion of death? How great a word was his Love? We knew he would "Sacrifice for Love," but was it a love that passeth all understanding of a thirty-thirty caliber Winchester? The Zia tapped his cigar on the saddle, looked at the wine press as though seeing it for the first time and then looked back to Nice Hands.

"We are a speck in the universe and all temporal relationships are ephemeral."

I don't know why none of us at the time were able to translate this into: "The Zia is looking out for number one—himself." And that when he said, "Sacrifice for Love," he was talking about someone else's sacrifice. It just shows how we wrongly take the meaning of a platitude for granted. But then, none of us had been to Utah Aggie.

The Zia got up then, slung the saddle over his shoulder below the

cigar and above the T shirt sign.

"You stay here, I'll get that bastard's scalp," he said and went out the door. In a few seconds he was back, kissed Nice Hands on the forehead, examined her work and then disappeared.

Disappeared where? Nice Hands, after a few quiet minutes at the loom, got up and tied a leather lariat string from one wall of the hogan to the other, about six feet up. The Navajos believe that as long as the leather rope remains tight above, their loved ones are safe. Cass suspected that the rope would remain tight if the weather remained dry. We kept our mouths shut on all those things. I was suspect enough already by writing, despite the fact that I ran cattle. Cass had traded enough horses to keep his mouth shut. Nice Hands went back to her loom. The rope remained tight.

After a short while we went outside and left Nice Hands alone with her rope to watch. We smoked a cigarette and looked around but we couldn't see the Zia anyplace. He must have lugged his saddle somewhere in search of a horse to look for the assassin. But the Zia wasn't around.

"Let's track him," the son of Three Ears of an Elk said.

You don't have to be an Indian to track a man. Anyone who has run cattle on a big place can. It's

the only way you have of locating them. A man carrying the weight of a saddle is easy to track even if he tries to fool you.

Even if he tries to fool you. This did not really sink in to any of us until we saw that the Zia had used four or five deceptions to throw us off his trail. First he took out over a ridge of hard Lewis shale and it took us a while to find where he came off, then he walked all the way through the Ojo del Espiritu Santo Grant, keeping to the middle of the shallow Rio San Jose. He crossed the Puerco below the Grant where he mingled with some fresh horse tracks but he didn't catch a horse and four of those six horses were catchable. Now the Zia topped out over the Portales Mesa. He must have been moving fast because when we topped out we could not pick him out on the Valle Plata Valley floor below. But we knew now from his direction that he was headed for the main highway, the blacktop, so we stepped up the pace. Now all of us were suspicious and curious. It was not Nice Hands' father who had fired those shots. He would have gone towards the reservation. It looked as though Tom Tobeck was going to join whoever had shot at us and it looked as though he knew who it was. What friend of his had fired those shots at the Legion and why? Had it been at once a signal and an excuse for the Zia to fly?

When you get to the top of the red Chinle formation that is the true southern end of the Rockies, Route 422 flows beneath you, a narrow black river making its way through Indian country down into Texas and other improbable places until it empties somewhere into the Gulf of Mexico. Up here you have an endless airship view of the white man's dirty trail to the sea, and right below us on the asphalt was the blue pickup waiting for the Zia.

"Wait a minute," Cass said. "It's a woman."

I don't know why we had all expected, taking it for granted, that it was a man that fired those shots from that pickup.

"A woman. An Anglo woman," Chee Bill Toledo said.

How were we going to explain this to Nice Hands? I think that's what went through all of our minds. How would we let her down with a gentle lie?

The dark river of road, Route 422, is visible from the Portales Mesa all the way almost to the Sandia Peaks. We watched the Anglo woman greet the Zia with a kiss, then the Zia started to throw the saddle in the back of the pickup, seemed to change his mind and tossed it in a near deep arroyo instead. His saddle, his symbol, his last link with the Indians. Then they got into the pickup and drove off rapidly and desperately, burning rubber as criminals,

adolescents, police and lovers will.

I said that from here you could see the Sandia Peaks. You could certainly see with ease all the way down to the San Ysidro Motel where the blue pickup stopped and the Anglo woman and the Zia got out and went in and must have closed the door and here it was only high noon.

"They couldn't wait," Cass said. "Couldn't wait to get to New York City, Socorro or wherever out of Indian Country. They couldn't even wait till it got dark, didn't even eat or have a drink."

"Or marry up."

And then too there was Nice Hands. Nice Hands waiting and watching, watching that rope. Watching that rope in the manner and custom of the ancients who believed that as long as the leather thong remained taut, did not go suddenly slack, their loved one was safe. Safe from everything, and this certainly meant—and with apocryphal proof—wolves and bear and, if the rite went back far enough into their dark past, the saber toothed tiger and other strange beasts, including man. But was the reckoning of the rope ever with women? Anglo women?

We found out. Not that it was. No man could ever claim that. The rope, the leather rope found around the neck of the Zia, still taut above the T shirt, might suddenly have gone slack in the hogan minutes, maybe only seconds,

after the motel door slammed. The door closed and in the first fumbling seconds of their lover lust, those first anguished, taut seconds, the rope went slack in the hogan. No one claimed that, mentioned it. A rope slack, a lover lost.

However, it was that same leather hogan rope around the Zia's throat. And how did Nice Hands know or get there within those few hours? She got there maybe by tracking the same way we got there. But the police called it suicide as police will when they figure any other verdict is more trouble than it is worth. When you don't have a jail. The WPA adobe jail dissolved in '45. Then, he was an Indian anyway. Finally then, in death, an Indian, despite the T shirt, neglect of genius, exploding populations, dwindling natural resources and the universe of art. An Indian.

The Legion finally dissolved. Remember it too was built of adobe. We all went our separate ways. A strange note—Chee Bill Toledo married Nice Hands and they live now deep in the reservation. The Legion will never know whether ancient symbols work, whether the rope went slack and Nice Hands knew, or whether Chee Bill Toledo ran back to the

hogan and then Nice Hands knew. But one thing we are very certain of. We were always puzzled at the Legion and in awe and wonderment at what lay behind the inscrutable Navajo face of Nice Hands. What design? What omen? What harbinger to what prologue coming on? What did she think in back of this? Believe? What did Nice Hands hold? We know now. Nice Hands finally held a rope.

They buried the Zia at the adobe Legion and Chee Bill Toledo said something good at the bier about neglected genius, the universe of art, exploding populations and dwindling natural resources but he couldn't resist working in his own war experiences which had nothing to do with the dead Zia, and once during the services he did look hard at the wavering Nice Hands and say, "We can't pull back now," which, although military jargon, did seem to buck her up. Then she picked up something from her lap and Chee Bill Toledo went suddenly quiet as he watched the rope that Nice Hands held.

Along with our adobe Legion and the jail, the Zia's tombstone has since dissolved. Everything was made of mud.

