

# Oklahoma Wild

Jake left his '36 pickup idling in the gravel roadway and went into his trailer house. The realization struck him, as he looked through his things, on shelves and in hiding places, that he had forgotten something he needed for his night out. *It isn't here.* He went back to the truck, checking the glove box and floorboard, but it was nowhere to be found. *My lucky red bandanna -* - *Where'd I leave it?* He had sewn his monogram on it himself when he was thirteen – **J.K.** – and had taken it with him every time he went out looking for fun since then. Now, over fifteen years later, it was hard to break the habit. *Calm down --* He turned the key back to 'off' and the truck engine rumbled to a stop. *I checked everywhere – I'll lay down and maybe it'll come to me* -- Jake dropped his black Stetson on the passenger seat, climbed into the back of the truck, and nestled his head into an old quilt he kept back there just in case.

The full moon shone brightly through a clear sky, brightly illuminating what he rightly called his place – there were no other people for miles around. The stars of the Orion constellation, the only ones he thought he could identify, felt as close as the dim fireflies that danced about his head and settled on the rusted-out tailgate. Blackjack oak and Indian paintbrush wildflowers stood out distinctly in the undistilled moonlight, showing their colors in shades of dark gray against the lighter weed-grass prairie. The smell of fall leaves beginning to decay permeated the cool night air. The stream behind the house trickled softly in a night filled with cricket-song and leaves rustling under the soft tread of nocturnal animals.

*You're always watchin' out for me, Orion -- I'd rather lay here and take in the stars than take my chances out at JD's Roadhouse -- no ray of light in that dead-end, god-forsaken town compares to you*

Sometimes he went to town if only to hear some human voices besides the pitiless jabber of the two country music stations he could receive on his alarm clock radio. Jake had felt more unsettled than usual during his last visit to the dark, hole-in-the-wall establishment, after a fair-looking blonde named Rita warmed up to him when he bought her a drink. Only when her ex-boyfriend showed up with a scowl on his face that could melt brass did his prescient instincts prove correct. Something had made him turn away from her, duck his head into the men's room and climb out the stall window in the same moment as bad news walked in the front door and demanded to know who she was with. He traversed the gravel parking lot in three seconds at a dead run and slammed into his steel short-bed, thanking his ability to smell trouble at a distance. Jake gunned the engine as the nose guard for the Yahola Wildcats 1985 2A high school state championship football team burst through the bar door, tire iron in hand, and rallied support with

his curses. Jake wrapped his lucky bandanna around the gear shifter as he churned up a mushroom cloud of gravel dust from the parking lot and laid a black half-inch of Goodyear rubber on the asphalt surface of the county road. A knobbed piece of steel clanged harmlessly on the roadway behind him as Jake's "junker" accelerated to 80 mph during the time it took him to inhale one deep oxygen-rich breath and expire.

*Maybe losing that bandanna's an omen -- Lose something dear, you've something to fear -- Grandma always said that -- But she believed in everything -- That ogre might have a gun next time -- She also used to say full moon above shows you something you love -- Rita's not my love, she ain't even worth the risk -- Jeez, the wind blew the door open -- bugs are getting in and the cats must be outside by now -- They'll do some exploring and come back soon -- unless they're ready to move on.*

Jake had been surprised to find two cats hiding under a lawn chair on his scrap-wood front porch a few months previously. The first, a yellow tabby coated in road filth and dirt, yowled inquisitively while the other proffered a freshly slain field mouse. He accepted Killer's offering graciously and formally invited Blackie and him into the trailer, then surreptitiously tossed the wet ball of fur behind the broken air conditioning unit. He guessed that they had been born half-wild and abandoned, much like him, and that they needed a place to stay for a while. Besides his one-bedroom single-wide trailer, there wasn't any place for them to go to or come from out there, so he let them stay on as his much-needed exterminators and companions.

Not unlike Blackie and Killer, he had few better things to do that night than exploring. He'd finished work on the abandoned stables just before dark, and losing his bandanna had tipped the balance of Jake's luck just far enough to make him reconsider trying to get past the tough competition to pick up Rita at JD's. That severed the one human connection he could have considered worthwhile. Fighting and sneaking around always did impress certain women, and he'd done his share, but he wasn't looking for her love as much as for what the subtle creases of her body made him imagine. The full moon above soaked the little ravines and hills around his place in a shimmering glow. Jake's connection to the land he lived on had strengthened the more he worked on it, and while taking in the artistry of the wind-murmuring silver forest, a sudden whim told him that his favorite place on the back lot might look different in the moonlight. After slamming the trailer door on its fragile hinges and wedging it shut with a piece of wood, he picked up a large flashlight from the front seat of his truck and put his hat back on. Hitching up his Wranglers, Jake went down the thin gravel road that fronted the trailer home.

Jake's place was the company office on Site O, a forlorn, abandoned oil well site in Muskogee County, Oklahoma. Nearly forty miles from even the smallest town, the rent was free and natural

gas for heating and cooking came right from the ground; one of the unexpected benefits of this piece of country real estate. The summer had brought unbearable heat, though, after the air conditioning unit gave out and he had no spare cash to fix it. Jake wasn't sure he'd stay through the winter, because he had already completed the work he'd been hired to do there, and the Coleman generator was running at minimal capacity, limiting him to only the most basic electrical needs. He didn't complain to the landlord because he lived there by permission of the oil company owner. Unless a drastic upswing in the price of oil made it profitable to drill another well on the 40-acre plot, Jake could live there as long as he continued to make improvements on the land. Sometimes he could make out a faraway line of smoke from a chimney or trash barrel, the only sign of any human activity other than his own. The motion of the sun, habits of the wild animals, and natural cycles of the woods were all that filled his mind in a place where he could live with few regrets but loneliness.

Walking further down the dusty gravel road that led to the back part of the site; he crossed a steel bridge that spanned a small stream. He waded up a glossy grocery receipt from his pocket, tossed it into the water and watched it bob down the slight hill with the flow of the current, then sink, waterlogged, out of sight. Now it was replaced in his field of vision by the wavering, gray – white moon.

*A white circle on the dark water – it's on the bottom now.*

Some would call Jake a loner or an ascetic, but his existence was as rich as he could then handle. After tough years spent untangling his life's twisted roots of unhappy marriage, homelessness, and addiction, he returned to the defense of solitude gratefully. Before coming to this place, the insane rush of whiskey, bills, and angry bosses had spiraled his devastated senses to the furthest limits of despair; and any change would have had to be overwhelming and redemptive to restore his wrung-out and discarded rag of a soul. Then a high-school friend looked Jake up one day; he had heard about the divorce and wanted to help. He knew the foreman of a failed oil venture who was looking for cheap labor to renovate and maintain residence at a place not far away. All of Site O was considered 'oil waste land' by the county commission, though only a relatively small percentage of its ground was contaminated by sludge and debris. As such, it was unmarketable, but it only needed to be cleaned up and have a resident for six months to re-zone the land and sell it. Jake could have a convenient convalescent situation as its caretaker without the expense of psychological treatment and the company would be closer to recovering from bankruptcy and worse. He would not make an exorbitant wage, but he had money for the essentials and a lump sum up front to fix up his truck so it could haul better. Knowing that he could keep anything he found appealed to Jake's sense of curiosity, especially after he heard about the story of the site.

As Jake focused on the ripples of the water, the luminescent moon became the foreman's round, sweaty face in a tight dark denim collar...

“So you're Jeremiah Knight, huh? Wilkins speaks highly of you.”

“It's Jake, sir, and I've known Brad for a long time.”

“You should know it's not just the cleanup that's kept us from preparing the land for sale. No one in the company wanted to go back there, because of all the good times we spent there, celebrating the first big hits. Then to have it all crumble around us. All those sweet memories turned sour and the time a few of us went back there with our wives, even then we couldn't break the silence and the pain we have felt there ever since the fire...” He paused in the telling.

“Is this going to bother you, Jake, out there alone and all?”

“No, I can keep it out of my mind. I'll do the job well enough.”

“All right then. Whenever I think about Site O, I go back to the final days of the 70's oil boom, the failure of wells #1 and #2, and the tragedy... that stopped our last hopes of recovery with well #3. Three good men died when that derrick collapsed on them...” The foreman choked on the words.

“And when the firestorm started, the draft of the blaze was so strong that it sucked five others into its center. My little girl was visiting, riding horses on the front trails with friends. She was standing right next to me, and the next minute, everything exploded like a million artillery cannons, with a flash that made me blind for two months and heat... Oh God, the heat... and if I hadn't been holding that horse's bridle when he bolted away... It should have been me. She had her whole life ahead of her.” He put down his shaking pen and a tear flowed down his cheek.

“In the emergency room, they told me that she died instantly. There was no trace of bodies after the wildcatters choked out the flames. We had a memorial service for the nine of them, but the gravestone in the cemetery is just for show. Whatever may be left of their ashes is either burned to the sides of that oil shaft or scattered to the wind. Now you see why I can't go back there? It's only been a few years, and we're still trying to rebuild the company and our lives. I can't go back to Site O. Some of us are calling the place 'Shiloh'. It's just too painful to return there.”

“Thank you for telling me. I won't disturb them or your memories.”

Trying to put the horrible story from his mind and with one of two front gate keys in hand, Jake had driven his old Ford south on Highway 64 away from the grinding hustle of the big city and

towards the country wilderness. The season was early spring, an ideal time for starting a new renovation project. He established himself in the company office by bringing in a bed and some shelving, and by cleaning out the clutter that had accumulated after 13 years of male-initiated housekeeping. On one wall of his 'place,' he displayed helicopter photographs of the office, the wells, the pond and stream, and the front trails. He had found them in a rusted metal toolbox shoved under a pile of stained white overalls, boots and burned gloves in his bedroom closet. Though the back lot beyond the oil derricks was in two of the aerial photos, the resolution was grainy and unclear. After cleaning up the explosion damage, this cartographic no-man's land was the next area to explore.

He soon learned to ignore human evidences of the ill-fated endeavor. He focused on the fire damage and oil sludge, a caretaker of the land, not of its memories. Oil had soaked into the ground surrounding the wells, and so he used a shovel and wheelbarrow, removing the dead black earth and exposing the vibrant red soil beneath. His landscape classes at the Vo-tech came in handy as he prepared and seeded the land to grow native grass again. Hauling away rusted bits of machinery and gobs of thick, black drilling waste from the well site, he erased the signs of human intervention off of the land and with it, from his own charred soul. He filled the ruts from heavy machinery traffic, coaxing the native grass to peek through. His nose could tell him when trucks went by, smelling the faintest intrusions of diesel exhaust from Rural route 803. As he cleaned the site, he became aware of a earthy murmuring voice whispering approval of his work, an unseen presence that pre-existed him, the oil company, and any others that had lived there. It became stronger with every truckload of twisted slag metal and congealed sludge he removed to the recycling and reprocessing facility in Tulsa. The re-flowering earth responded to the summer sun and the knobby, green veins of each oak leaf sped warm life like the fluttering of a scissortail hatchling to the tips of his calloused hands.

The intensely bright full moon shone from directly overhead, reflecting on the water's surface the leaves of the over-arching black walnut trees and the changing of season that brought out their scarlet color once masked by the verdant green of summer. It was the night of the Autumnal Equinox, when nature began its arduous task of shutting down for the winter, but the deep, animal whisper of the woods had reached an almost audible level. The decline of the forest and streambed marked an opposite resurgence in Jake's vitality, for he had a new endeavor to undertake, now that he had completed the clean up. Human voices had impressed themselves on his mind while he carried the remnants of well # 3 away. The echoes of entrepreneurial drawls and excited giggles gave way to an overwhelming sense of release. A place which had once held them captive now freed them to go to a paradise that they looked forward to as the wind relishes escaping through the needle-heavy pine hillside to the valley below. Now the voices were different; whisper-singers of ancient, Indian-drum chants called him 'gatherer,' saying it was

now possible for them to return to this place from which they had been driven. They called to him with promises, their voices flowing to him like the stream churning its way, winding down a slight decline through the glade of hackberry and willow trees overarching a small pond – Pan’s temple roof with a floor of liquid glass.

He came to a bend in the road and saw heavy shadows clinging to two towering monoliths of human enterprise. *Heartache and misery*. The twin oil pumps had tapped out in the late 70’s. The destroyed foundation of well # 3 had a cap covering it and the burned-out shaft below it. *How deep -- How far into the lives of these people did they drill -- nothing came of it but disaster*. The area around the derelict well tops was finally recovering from the heavy traffic of tanker trucks and the explosion that destroyed much of the drilling equipment. The scraggly weeds that had once grown in the scattered gravel and scorched, bare earth had given way to lush, native grasses. Still, this part of the site felt as if some powerful hand had, with a touch, driven the natural life away, and given an unnatural life to two monsters of concrete and steel, setting around them a ring of strange leafless trees. Sometimes he could still feel men and women walking here, could feel their hope to hear the gush of oil through the rumbling earth and to know the giddy pleasure of liquid wealth, but now they said nothing to him, the cavernous ground resounding with growls of appreciation that they were leaving.

Walking beyond the immediate area of the dilapidated oil pumps, Jake saw the small stand of white oak trees that ran along the Salt Creek on the north. It was always pleasant to walk along the creek, but tonight, only one thing on the compound captivated his interest. While wandering the area just one week previous, he had noticed some uneven growth in the grass by a rotted-out hickory tree. Not knowing why, Jake walked to the spot and discovered the reason for the anomaly: the remnants of an older trail. He followed the overgrown path to an old Indian site. *Can't be over a hundred years old -- these poles are still lashed together – A burial ground -- some lost, castoff tribe --* Rummaging through the weeds, eyes sharp, in exploration of the area, he had found some arrowheads, a tomahawk blade, and the mother lode: a painted buffalo skull. *If this is a grave site, the Indians will want it back -- No -- No one knows it's out here -- It was their fault they forgot about it in their lore -- It's my tribal ground, now*. He felt accepted as a part of the people that were forgotten here. *Another time, another life -- I could've been a Lash-pole Indian, too*. Jake believed he, as much as anyone, was entitled to take as many artifacts as he could find. He dedicated one corner of his ‘place’ to the Lash-pole tribe and started carrying an arrowhead in his pocket for good medicine.

Turning his steps towards the burial ground, Jake switched on his floodlight and made his way through the trees. The grass around the spot looked more trampled than usual, probably from his recent excursions. Placing the flashlight in the forked branch of a white oak, he looked around

for a place to start. A few poles remained standing, and, on a hunch, he pulled up the one closest to the center of the site. Something rattled inside. *Maybe there's an opening here --* The end that had been stuck in the dirt had a close-fitting stick plugging its bottom. Curious, Jake worked it out with his knife. Shaking the pole, Jake heard a faint click and as soon as he put his hand under the opening, out dropped a small Indian pipe and leather pouch with a drawstring. Elated, he dropped the pole and examined his find under the severe white moonlight streaming through the clearing in the tree branches.

About six inches long, the pipe had a small narrow bowl. *Not much room for a wad of tobacco --* He got a cocktail napkin out of his left shirt pocket and unfolded it on a fallen tree. Undoing the pouch's drawstring, Jake poured out some of its contents onto the paper, obscuring not the name, but the last five digits of a phone number. Two of the leaves he recognized, but the others he could not separate out and was at a loss to identify. *That's Mary Jane -- and that's tobacco -- what's this white powder -- this orange twiggy stuff -- Ha ha, I'll call it Rita's special blend -- These Indians knew how to take the edge off of a lonely night like this.*

Taking the pipe in his teeth, he filled the bowl with the blended, aromatic mixture. It felt coarse between his fingers yet slipped smoothly into the barrel of the pipe. Searching his pockets for matches, he realized that the light breeziness of the evening had turned quiet and still, but for a mumbling, breathy noise from beyond the stream to the west. *All the better to light this baby.* As the match flared up in his fingers, he tipped the bowl sideways into the flame. The warmth of the wood confirmed it was lit and the glow from the pipe's end was comforting. Puffing in a short breath, he was almost knocked off his feet by the pungent stimulant. *Good thing this stuff doesn't dry-rot.* He caught his wind, then gathered up the rest of the medicine man's weed into the leather pouch and discarded the soiled napkin. Laying back on one of the ridges surrounding the clearing, he stretched and nestled into the soft grass, staring into the moonlight, now a piercing spotlight on the stage of his silent soliloquy as the rumbling voices of the earth became the rhythmic, swaying, galloping motion of a wooly prairie-land battleship in a sea of waving stems of grass ticker tape parades and flowing champagne at the launching of a long-anticipated, liberating portent of change.

A different sort of peace filled Jake's mind. His past life seemed only the graveled ruts of a road he now left behind, arising and walking back to the trail home. As the tribal pipe gave off a slight line of smoke, still out of sight, the leviathan charged, towering tan horns and full-moon eyes bathing the beast in a aura of ethereal light. *Where'd all the stars go -- No clouds in the sky -- it's so dark all of a sudden --* The pipe smoke thickened out above him and became a mist that settled on the trail before him. Meandering towards the familiar road, Jake was startled by the sound of snapping branches, a throaty, lowing roar and sudden jerking of tree tops in the forest before

him. *Grizzly bear! Impossible!* -- He panicked, grabbed for his lucky bandanna and cut his hand on the arrowhead. He yelped in surprise, breaking into a dash across a field towards the safety of the stables. The rustling of the grass under his feet was muffled and drowned by the perpetual motion of tendons and muscles straining against the air and an earthquake of a thousand's thousand hooves crashing into the ground. Jake ran towards what he thought was a structure, but realized it had become too dark to tell for sure. The cacophony crescendoed to a terrible climax in his pounding ears and blood-flushed face as a snorting nose breathed just behind his head and a warm spray of spittle ran down the back of his neck. Jake's shoulder felt the follicles of a rough coat brush by as the wraith overtook and stood before him, blocking his path. *Oh, God – Save me from this – Ohhhh how did that wander here from the Refuge --*

The buffalo was far larger than any he had seen in the Wichita Mountains. Over ten feet tall at the hump, its shaggy, coarse mane exuded the smell of dust as its nostrils exhaled moist air that steamed in the sudden cold. The night was filled with the shrill cadences of mockingbirds, crackling vibrations of cicada abdomens against wood, screaming field mice, louder and more fervent than Jake had ever heard them. The buffalo rumbled something deep in the back of his throat, something resounding like a language of Nature, groaning, crackling and gurgling.

*[Jeremiah, Wata tsip ganah, Gatherer, you restored my land and brought back my spirit. Now you must find the scattered people and bring them here to walk again through these forests and fill the valleys with their laughter.]*

Wheeling owls in the sky cried. *[Are you... with us too?]*

The oak trees whispered. *[We wait here... have no fear]*

The stream murmured. *[Follow, follow.]*

Questions filled the Gatherer's mind with uncertainty. *Why me -- How did it find me --* He felt the living night reconcile his misgivings, immersed in the light of two full moons. New questions came from deep within him. *Who am I -- Where else have I to go -- Where are we going --*

He followed the giant bison's glowing, shaggy form west from the turn in the road. After a few minutes, he realized that they had come to the 8-foot barbed-wire boundary fence. He knew that where the living wind had come from, he could not go. Grasping from the bottom of his being, he addressed the great beast.

*[H..el..p, t...he f..fe..n..ce]-*

It turned at his attempt to make language, kneeled on its forelegs, and with a toss of its mountainous head, permitted Jake to climb aboard. Kneading his hands into the oily, matted hair, he pulled himself atop the neck ridge and straddled the bison, amazed at how easily he sat upon the swaying back of the corporeal spirit.

*[You know, Wata tsip ganah, where we go. Beyond the horizon is your tribe, your ancestors of the spirit, and we go to invite them back to their place.]*

The mist slowly dissipated and the darkness faded to gray as man and beast slowly passed through the fence, over stacked hay bales and into the night-time sky bathed in the glow of the Knight's protecting sword. The buffalo and rider crested the ridge past the last fence-pole and continued on through an ethereal mountain pass formed by boiling cumulo-nimbus clouds in the distance. -- *I know who I am, the Gatherer, and I know why I must find my people* --

At the trailer house, the cat Blackie yowled in distress from under the front porch

*[no, don't leave me]*

The dank, cool air that had descended on the compound blew away in a gust of dry wind that followed them until they were gone. The dark haze that had covered the heavens dissipated to let the full moon shine softly through. The night-sounds quieted to a few crickets playing their compositions.

Killer looked around in cattish amazement as the pupils of his yellow eyes contracted from the change of darkness to pale moonlight. *[Here you are.]* He hooked a furtive claw under the front porch step and pulled out the thing he had hidden there earlier to make his man friend stay close to home that night. He had foreseen Jake chased like a field mouse out of its dark hole, and his blood spilling on the ground, the bandanna clutched in his dead hand, never to move again. Blackie laid down close to Killer and began grooming her fur as he curled up in the old red rag, batting back and forth a knotted end with the initials "J.K." and the words "Born Free" crudely sewn in the corner.