

A close-up photograph of a person's hands, wearing a dark sweater with a white cuff, holding a glowing, spherical object. The object is emitting a bright, ethereal light and a plume of white smoke or steam that rises into the dark background. The overall mood is mysterious and magical.

COUREURS
DE BOIS

A Novel

BRUCE
MACDONALD

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For a kind of purple orchid

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

*The first person who, having fenced a plot of ground,
took it into his head to say this is mine
and found people simple enough to believe him,
was the true founder of civil society.*

— JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

*Money-lust has always existed, but not in the history
of the world was it ever a craze, a madness,
until your time and mine. This lust has rotted these nations;
it has made them hard, sordid, ungentle, dishonest, oppressive.*

— MARK TWAIN, MARCH 14, 1905, MARK TWAIN'S LETTERS

PART ONE

SPRING

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE



DREAM

IN COBB'S DREAM THE sky was black and there was no hope that light would come through. It was not night and it was not day. It was some place between the two.

He was in the exercise yard by himself. There were no other inmates and no guards on the ground or in the towers. He did not know how long he had been in the yard and he did not know how long it would be before somebody came for him. On the ground lay a pair of wire cutters. His first thought was that it might be a trick. He knew the white man could be tricky. If he even picked up the wire cutters he could be charged with attempting to escape. He turned from the cutters and walked away to the far end of the exercise yard. He walked all the way around the square enclosure. He was back beside the wire cutters. He looked both ways and behind him, then quickly bent down and picked up the wire cutters and put them into the back of his pants. He walked the yard, along the fence again, and again he saw nobody.

One side of the enclosure bordered the highway and the other three bordered the woods. He went to the side, where the fence was closest to the woods. He looked around again and still saw no one. He removed the wire cutters and quickly began to cut the mesh

fence. His hands tightened and loosened again and again, each cut bringing him closer to freedom. He began to perspire. When the last of the links was cut he pushed through the mesh and stepped outside the prison. He hardly believed it. Where is everybody? he wondered. Then, as if in answer to his question, the red lights in the towers went on and an alarm sounded. Oh shit, he thought, there's no turning back now. There was nothing in the Criminal Code called "half-assed prison break," only prison break. He had to run. There was no way to avoid the charge. The deed was done. The fence was cut. He was not thinking. He was dreaming.

He should have remembered that there were degrees in sentencing. If he had dropped the cutters, stayed inside the yard, placed his hands behind his head and dropped to his knees, the guards might have looked the other way, but he was not thinking clearly, and he was not aware of his reality as dream and dream only, and so he ran.

He ran like a caribou on the ice fields, chased by a pack of wolves, but he would not give himself up to this pack. He was not a sacrifice to the Creator. It was a sacrifice to the bureaucracy of the white man and his queen. His heart pounded in his chest. His breath lapsed on him. He broke out in a heavy sweat. The cold of the place, the cold of the woods, was more pronounced on his moist skin. For a while he heard nothing. Then he heard the dogs. They were going to hunt him like an animal. His only chance was to get to water, to jump into swift water, dissolve his scent, and float down current with his head just peeking out for air, but there was no water to be found. He could not see any, hear any, or smell any. He started to panic when he heard the dogs close behind him. The guards were on horses. The guards were keeping pace with the dogs. If the dogs caught him, the guards would catch him. He begged for water. He ran down an embankment. He found none. He began to despair. Despair had not visited him for some time.

There was a dog right on him, nipping at his heels, and then he saw a horse turn around in a grove in front of him, a rider atop it.

He stopped dead and then felt a hard object hit him in the back of the head. He dropped to his knees, clasped his head. He was bleeding. He looked up and there were four riders around him. They looked down at him, and he stayed on his knees. He kept his hands behind his head — the position — and waited for the handcuffs to be snapped onto his wrists. When they didn't come, he looked up to see one of the guards stringing a noose over a thick tree branch. A terrible fear choked him but he remembered that they couldn't hang him. It is against the queen's law. Two guards forced him onto his feet and one put the noose around his neck. A rider pulled him up into the air. His hands weren't tied, so he was able to get his fingers into the rope. But there was no way he was going to be able to pull the rope from his neck. The rope was tied to a tree. He heard a whistle and the dogs disappeared with the riders back up the embankment. They were going to leave him there to die slowly. He urinated in his pants. He could barely pull any breath into his lungs and he realized it was only a matter of time. Being a fighter, he would grapple with the rope until he was dead. A horrible death.

He heard the sound of a hideous bird, a crow, and he felt a vibration in the rope. There was a crow pecking at the rope. If he could hold out long enough the Creator might spare him. He dug his fingers in so tight that the skin ripped and tore, but, as the Creator wanted it, he was saved. The crow did its job, and he fell to the ground. He looked up to where the crow was perched on a branch.

Cobb woke suddenly. The dream was clear. He was no longer the idle spirit wanderer. He had been adopted by Crow. A mission had been given to him. The dream was a contract. How could he see it as anything else? All contracts come from dreams because all ideas are dreamed in the places between the seasons, behind the wind, on the dark side of the moon. It was a contract. He was wet between the legs. He had wet himself in the dream. Crow wanted to make sure he remembered the contract when he woke.



VISION

WILLIAM TOBE WAS TOLD he had an ulcer. He was twenty years old and he had an ulcer. The doctor said that it was a peptic ulcer and that it could be cured with antibiotics. Will was given a prescription, but he did not fill it. He had heard a lot of bad information about antibiotics. He had listened to a five-part series on CBC Radio One about bacteria and antibiotics. Experts speculated that a new antibiotic-resistant bacteria would sweep the planet. The point of the series, as Will digested it, was be wary of antibiotics because they have been overused.

Will was a precocious young man. He had skipped two grades and entered university at sixteen and would have a degree before the end of this twenty-first year. When he was first told about the ulcer, he thought for sure that he had placed an inordinate amount of stress on himself. He had pushed himself too hard. His body was just doing its job. Then the doctor told him that such notions were now seen as medical myths, and that a peptic ulcer was caused by a bacterial infection. This caused Will long hours of research on bacteria. There were good and bad bacteria in the body all the time. Bacteria was needed, and he thought this was fascinating.

While researching, he found material on Stanley Burroughs' master cleanse, and he decided that he would do it for eleven days. The instructions were to drink water with lemon, maple syrup and cayenne pepper for eleven days straight, as much as he wanted. The purpose was to shut down the internal food processing factory and clean out the pipes. It said on the Internet that someone on the fast would continue to defecate right up until the eleventh day. A laxative herbal tea was required every evening, and that was the only deviation allowed from the lemon drink. The Internet site said that some practitioners had sustained the fast for one hundred days, and some monks for the full forty days of Lent every year. There was also a mention that it might help with ulcers. Will decided to do the fast.

After going to the store for a few things, Will returned to his dormitory on the campus of the University of Ottawa. He had been there for nearly four years and lived alone. He was getting a degree in economics. His sister was a financial analyst and his father was an economist-lobbyist with a right-wing think tank in Ottawa. William was following in the Tobe family business, and money was a business with a great future. Where can it go? His father had asked him when he was sixteen and deciding what to study at university — where can money go? It was indeed a good question, and Will had recognized it as such when it was asked. He had insisted on living on campus, and not in the family home, which was within a thirty minute walk of the prime minister's residence. He returned home on Sunday evenings for dinner, where his laundry was still done for him.

There had been headaches the first day of the fast, and he almost quit, but the second day got better, and the third even better, and by the fourth day of the fast it was like he was floating on a cloud. He had tremendous energy, was sleeping only five hours a night, and there were more and more vivid and remembered dreams; it was like he was waking up in sleep every night after the fourth day of the fast. On the seventh night his mind was electric. Everything was

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so clear, so perfectly clear. It all made sense. He turned on the bedside lamp and squinted. Even with the light on, the dream world was grabbing him with all its force. There was tremendous well being and love. He grabbed a notebook off the dormitory night table and wrote it all down.

1. a stream
2. a bright light
3. a crow
4. a crucifix
5. a black bear
6. a stone
7. purple flowers.

He turned off the table lamp and put his head on his pillow. He had his last exam that morning. He was happy about this, and he knew the ulcer was gone. He knew what he was going to do when school was finished.



TWELVE THOUSAND

COBB HATED THE DOWNTOWN. He hated the little busybodies with a sense of mission. He hated the suits, the skirts, the haircuts, the hair colours, the ties, the sidewalk conversations. He walked into one of the large, shiny buildings, one of the big cocks they put into their world, a large erection to remind them they weren't supposed to think about fucking everything that moved, weren't supposed to think about jamming their throbbing hard cocks into every moist wet place that moaned and begged. Cobb hadn't forgotten to fuck everything that moved. It was a part of his mission. There was sperm in his body. That sperm was part of his overall consciousness, part of his overall person. In fact, Cobb had thought about almost nothing else since he'd been released from prison. He went up the elevator to the twenty-second floor, into the office of Alexander Campbell, QC, which he knew to mean Queen's Counsel. What a bullshit expression, he thought for the half second it took him to open, almost unhinge, the large wood door. What the fuck had the queen done for him? What the hell did he care for some German bloodline living in the lap of luxury on the island of the Britons? They were no better than the French, the Jesuits, the Dutch, or any

of the other bastards who had wandered the world in wooden boats, pushed by the wind — how could the Creator have given them wind — and pushed into the lives of others.

Catherine Campbell worked the reception. It was a family operation. She almost jumped out of her seat when she saw Cobb. Most people did. Cobb looked like he meant business. He was business.

“Randall Seymour,” he said.

“You have an appointment?”

“No, I just thought I’d drop in and say hello.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No.”

“You really just dropped in to say hello?”

“Yep.”

“Are you here to see Alexander or Craig?”

“Who is Craig?”

“He’s my brother. He passed the bar last year and he’s working for my father now.”

“I didn’t know the queen had so many Scots in her counsel.”

“Excuse me?”

“Did you fart?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why did you excuse yourself?”

“I’ll get my father.”

“That might be a good idea.”

She used the speaker phone, so as not to appear secretive or rude, Cobb suspected.

“Yes,” came the deep voice from the other end.

“There’s a Randall Seymour here to see you.”

“Send him in.”

She pointed down the hall and said, “Second door on your left.”

Cobb turned and strode down the hall and went into the second door on the left. Alexander was behind his desk. He smiled and stood when Cobb entered.

“How are you, Randall?”

“Not too bad.”

“Just out?”

“A while now, a short while.”

Alexander gestured for him to take a seat. He did and dropped into a large leather armchair, of which there were two in front of Alexander’s large oak desk.

“Why didn’t you come and see me right away?”

“I don’t know.”

“So what can I do for you?”

“I want to be a Freemason.”

“A Freemason?”

“A Freemason like you.”

“How can I help with that?”

“Let me hang out with you. Take me to all the secret places. Teach me the secret handshakes, and get me a seat on the Toronto Stock Exchange.”

“What?”

“They say the Campbells murdered the MacDonalds in their sleep, and that’s why your name is shit in Scotland.”

“Randall, is this a joke?”

“I don’t know. Do you feel like laughing?”

“Not really.”

“I guess it’s serious, then. If it wasn’t, we both might feel pretty fucking uncomfortable right now.”

Alexander hung the words in his mind for a second then burst out laughing.

“You’re insane, Randall.”

“I don’t know what’s funnier, that comment in and of itself, or the fact that you’re giving free advice.”

“Who is your parole officer?”

“I don’t know. Some guy named Paddy in Parkdale.”

“You haven’t checked in yet?”

“Nope.”

“You could land back in prison for that.”

“It costs them a lot of money to keep me in there.”

“It’s all about the money then?”

“Isn’t it?”

“And justice.”

“Justice? What the fuck is that?”

“Right and wrong.”

“Some tribes built longhouses and planted maize. Some raided the ones that planted maize because they hadn’t made their own contract with the earth. You’re just working for the tribe that raids, except you don’t do it shooting arrows from underneath a galloping horse. You do it with math, accountants, actuaries, the illusion of authority.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Nothing, I guess. Anyhow, I came by to say hello, see how you’re doing and say, ‘No hard feelings.’”

“No hard feelings?”

“You know, the over billing?”

“Over billing?”

“I did the math in jail and I figure you took me for about twelve grand.”

“Randall, if that’s why you came here I think I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Okay. I’ll come by your house on Saturday and we can finish our conversation then.”

“My house?”

“Yes. Forest Hill Road, Forest Hill. I can come by the house.”

“You know where I live?”

“Don’t you?”

“Randall, I have to caution you, this sounds like a threat.”

“What part?”

“All of it.”

“Wanting to talk to my lawyer who charged me forty-eight grand for a two-week trial is threatening?”

“I meant your tone.”

“This is the same tone I always speak with.”

“What do you want?”

“I already told you, twelve grand.”

“You can’t have it.”

“It’s just a question of you giving it or me taking it. It’s your decision, Alexander.”

“I don’t have that kind of cash handy. My car is insured, and my bank card won’t give more than a thousand dollars in a single transaction. How would you take it?”

“All right, you got me. There’s no way I can get twelve grand off you. So what I figured is I will skip the money system and take what the twelve grand meant to me and exact that price on you.”

“And what is twelve grand worth to you?”

“I’ll go to your house in the dead of night, when your fat ass is in bed, and I’ll take your dog, then I’ll kill your dog, then I’ll eat your dog, or I’ll stuff him and mail him back to you.”

“I’m going to call the police now, Randall.”

“Okay.”

Randall sat there as still as stone and stared into the hazel eyes of his lawyer. Alexander picked up the phone. He dialed nine, one, one and waited for the operator to announce her presence on the other end of the line. His breathing was laboured and he started to sweat at the brow. He glanced up from the phone and Randall was still staring right into his eyes, no blinking, no readable emotion. Alexander Campbell, QC, was a man who had learned how to read people. Blank people frightened him. He hung up the phone.

“Fuck, Randall, this is insane. I’m your lawyer.”

“Twelve grand.”

“When?”

“Three days, this bank account.”

Randall pushed a piece of paper across Alexander’s desk. It had a transit number and a bank account on it.

“Put it all in here. If it’s not there in three days you’ll never see me again and you’ll never know how or when or who or what, or any of the other questions that make charges stick.”

“Okay.”

Randall stood and left the office. Alexander inhaled suddenly and deeply. Apparently, for several moments during the latter part of Randall’s visit, Alexander had forgotten how to breathe. His brow was hot and moist, and he felt a bead of sweat run down his temple. Alexander Campbell, QC, had one dominant, unspoken thought in his consciousness: That dog-eater scares the shit out of me.

Going down, the elevator was quick, and Cobb hit the street with the powerful and purposeful stride of a mountain cat. Alexander Campbell, QC, was his first finished chore as a free man. Cobb got into a beat-up old Ford 150 and started the drive back to the Gladstone Hotel. There was a cover on the pickup and it was loaded with cigarettes. It was a little over week since Cobb was let out of Warkworth Institution. There had been no car to pick him up. He had left Warkworth with only one half-full duffel bag that he had carried over his shoulder.

The day he had been released he had walked under an ash- and smoke-coloured sky, knowing that it could rain, but not worrying. His boots were good. His denim jacket was a little less than the weather called for, but he could get his mind off that. The time in prison had done him well. He was well-fed and larger than he was when he went in. He had put on nearly twenty pounds and taken three inches off his waist. Prison was better than Jenny Craig for Cobb. His crime didn’t warrant Warkworth. He should have been at some camp somewhere, weaving baskets under a tree, and buttering homemade muffins brought by Mennonite volunteers, but they wanted to teach him a lesson. They wanted him to remember his experience. His arrest sheet was too full for their liking. Cobb was a drain on their finances, and, if they truly were a compassionate society, Cobb must have become such a sad sight for them that they just had to put him away for a while, not look at him

anymore, either that or risk breaking their hearts. It was a great gamble, this compassionate society.

Conspiracy to defraud the Canadian government was the charge. Alexander Campbell, QC, had not prepared Cobb's defense. Cobb probably could have defended himself better. The queen fought dirty. It was like fighting a bear without a hatchet. A cheap, dirty, loaded fight, as far as Cobb was concerned. Her strategy was purely economic. The queen knew the value of an embargo. With absolute control there was no need to go to war. The queen went after assets, froze bank accounts, and put liens on property. All the resources required to fight the queen were taken away before the fight even began. It cost three hundred dollars an hour for Alexander Campbell, QC. Cobb had learned that the hard way. Law wasn't like any other trade in the white man's world. They kept law invisible. It was like a spirit world they consulted. They put on robes and spoke in a ritualized language. They gestured with meaning, seeming to summon unseen spirits into the brightly lit rooms with high ceilings. Alexander Campbell, QC, made a treaty with the queen. Cobb had to do two years and a day because he had no more money for Alexander Campbell, QC. Cobb learned there is little difference between money and justice in the Dominion of Canada.

The judge handed down the sentence. Indians went to prison like the queen's people went to university. It was a rite of passage. A lot of Indians had to look at shadows on dark walls for years of their lives, exploring the cave of the white man's bureaucracy by the light of their spirits only. Cobb had cousins in prisons all over Ontario and Quebec, from both his mother's Ojibwa band north of Peterborough and his father's Mohawk band near Cornwall.

Cobb used his time well. He studied the white man's sacred books and learned how they looked into the invisible world of law for the spirit of judgment. It was from this Great Spirit that they took much of their counsel as a people.

The charge had many sides and many forms. There were boxes and boxes of notes from RCMP officers, a lot of surveillance, and

many statements from informants, with whom Cobb had bartered tobacco, a commodity the queen said she controlled. The earlier you make treaty with the queen the better the terms, Cobb had learned. The queen showed mercy for cooperation.

Income tax evasion was a sham. Income tax itself was a sham. The government had only mandated it during the war, brought to bolster the coffers and support the war, a white man's war in the white man's tribal motherland, Europe. It had nothing to do with Indians, and the Income Tax Act had nothing to do with Cobb. It came a few years after the Bank Act, and not many people made the connection. It was subtle. Taxes were the result of banking, the government banking, the interest on their debt. That was the key — their debt. There were a lot of people in prison who could see this clearly, which made Cobb wonder if prison wasn't some kind of deeper education, a place where the truth could be told because there were no more illusions. Fluorescent light all the time equals the end of illusions. It becomes harder and harder to lie to yourself when you're living under fluorescent lights.

Bartering was an old language for the First Peoples. In jail, Cobb realized that economics was in his blood. Trade surpluses and trade deficits, productivity indexes, gross domestic product, currency valuation — it was all just barter. The white man's spirit of judgment had many words. This spirit of judgment consumed words, and it was never sated. It was a demanding spirit. It had no limit on its growth. The more it ate, the bigger it got. The further it spread.

It was true that Cobb had sold cigarettes tax-free, but tobacco had always been the commodity of the North American Indian. The white man stole it from the Indian and made billions of dollars on luxury taxes and other excess taxation they said was to curb the health-care spending in a socialized medical system, spending caused by smoking-related ailments, but it was a sham. It was the bankers, Cobb had learned, who had sent him to prison. The money the Canadian government said he defrauded was really money belonging to the banks. The government was just collecting

for them. It was a system of control. The whole modern world was a system of enslavement.

The Creator had put mischief in the world because people were supposed to learn from mischief. Fear was the language of the Creator for people who had forgotten how to live. The money was worthless, a token of barter, a measure of alleged wealth, a confidence game. The white man had commodified it as well. Its true value could not be measured, and because money was the measure of all other things, except the compassion they alleged in their society, the white man could not accurately measure the grains or hides needed for the seasons. It was sometimes too little or it was sometimes too much. Excess food in one village rotted while another village starved. They called them upturns or downturns, bulls and bears, but to Cobb it was just smoke and mirrors, a guess at best, a sham. The white man's whole life was a sham, and it revealed to Cobb the depths of the white man's corruption. The white man would sell his own sons and daughters into servitude.

Cobb knew that the white man was no longer a thing that could be seen. The white man had liberated himself from the pigmentation of his skin, from his sex, his hair, his age, and his place. The white man was an idea, like money, a commodity, the most prosperous human exchange. People from all over the world came to Canada to live like the white man. The white man could appear in a thirty-year-old Guatemalan bank teller. She didn't even know she was a white man. Most people who are possessed never know they're possessed. That is the power of spirits, and Cobb knew this before he went to prison.

The white man's system was not to be reviled. It was to be understood. Cobb had realized that only in understanding it completely could it be beaten, and so he had set his mind to the complete understanding of the white man's system, and he soon saw that the chink in the armour was fear. The white man could not really live in the world, as the world demanded people live in the world, in subservience to the Great Spirit, accepting the coming and going of

prosperity, security, life itself. The white man had made contract against the Great Spirit. Contempt was the white man's prayer. If I must die, then fuck you, the white man said to the Great Spirit. Lazarus was the hope of their fear, as was Jesus Christ.

But there Cobb was, alive and well, and living in an apologetic culture that allowed Indians reserves, welfare, medical and dental care, processed food, and the right to hunt within the guidelines set out by the Ministry of Natural Resources. Cobb wanted to run in their woods, learn their ways, let the spirit of the white man into him, but only a little, as a kind of inoculation, a little bit of the disease to develop an immunity against it. He was afraid that he did not have the right to do what he wanted to do. The Mohawk and Ojibwa way was harmony with environment. If he attacked their environment, would that be a surrender to the spirit of the white man? Would it be the surrender of his free and true spirit? This he did not know, and it caused him hesitation. Cobb hated hesitation. All things move in a circle. All things come around to a level playing field sooner or later. The oppressed becomes the oppressor. The slave becomes the master, and then it all goes around again.

When he got out, Cobb had tried hitchhiking on the highway, but he knew it was unlikely that he would be picked up. At a solid 245 pounds, and with jailhouse tattoos on his neck, a long scar down his right cheek, his raven hair braided and resting like a long horse tail on his back, he looked every bit the Mohawk warrior that was his father's heritage. The road went on for over a kilometre before it bent and disappeared. It had snaked like that for the two hours he had walked it. He had kept his eyes on the gravel and maintained his steady shuffle through the grey day, occasionally looking into the thick wooded area beside the highway. It had occurred to him that he was just south of the 401, the highway that would take him to Peterborough and his mother's land and people, the Ojibwa reserve, a pristine model of modern Indian living with cable television, microwaves, pickup trucks and designer jeans.

The band was well managed, and that was largely due to Cobb's

grandfather, a converted Catholic who, at eighty-eight, had the mental acuity of a government auditor when it came to numbers, balancing books and allocating revenue for band expenses. The band policed themselves, and when the Ontario Provincial Police did come on their land it was only after getting the permission of Cobb's grandfather, who would meet the cruiser and escort the constables to the house they were looking for and the Ojibwa to be questioned. His grandfather would then act as de facto counsel for the Ojibwa, offering his advice on which questions the Ojibwa should answer and which he should decline. Cobb's grandfather had a grade-six education, but had been a lifelong learner. His grandfather never missed a visit with Cobb, every two weeks, despite the long drive to the prison.

Cobb had looked up at the sky, then down at his watch. He had turned off the side of the road and into the woods. The ground had been wet in parts. The green had been coming in, but winter was not yet forgotten. Every kind of tree he had grown up with was there. He had missed trees. Prison had a spiritual side if it had caused him to miss trees. He would never miss trees again. Cobb had marvelled at the innocence still in him at twenty-eight. There were moments when all of the sounds were heard as one sound, and it was to Cobb the voice of the Creator. He had missed the message of the trees — turn toward the light. He had stopped in the woods and observed the moment, recognizing it as sacred. Only the Creator could show him his true self. And the Creator had spoken to him then and there, in the beautiful birdsongs, the day pecking in on the dark forest floor through the loose network of branches, buds and leaves, and the marvellous sound all around him. All his thoughts and worries had slipped away. He'd started to walk through the brush again, not as a man, but as a tree, turned to the light, so completely itself that it required no reflection.

He'd had no food, no sleeping bag. He had walked. That night he'd slept in the middle of the woods, somewhere between Highway 401 and the Ojibwa reserve, and the next day he'd awakened with

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the sun and began to walk again. He had made a stop at his birth ground, said hello to his people, made some business arrangements, then driven his Ford to Toronto, set himself up with a room. After a few days, he'd gone to see Alexander Campbell, QC.

Cobb made his first sale, a carton of cigarettes, to the front desk clerk at the Gladstone Hotel. His whole room was taken up with boxes and boxes of cigarettes. He had to find a storage place. He filled up a black hockey bag with cartons of cigarettes and left the hotel to begin the door-to-door canvassing that would start his business from scratch. Before he left, he burned sweet grass. The room he was staying in was the same room where his mother had died twelve years past, when he was sixteen.