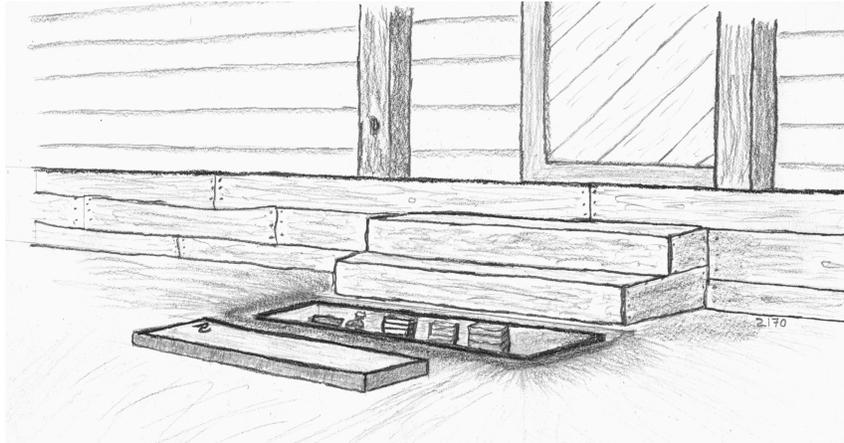


Back at the Cabin



[Still There?]

It has been two weeks since Austin was released from the hospital. His doctors have removed all elevation restrictions except aerobic sports, and he can now enjoy normal daily activities as long as he stops when he gets winded. So he and Sam have arranged to meet with Wac ih a' at the cabin.

It is a beautiful winter day, December 16th, 2017. The sky is clear and bright blue, with about two feet of snow blanketing the cabin site. The forest is alive with the sounds of birds arguing, miniature creeks babbling from the snow melt, chainsaws in the distance harvesting lumber, and the sound of an approaching UTV. Wac ih a' steps out onto the front porch and watches as the UTV arrives. Sam and Austin leave the UTV and put their helmets on the seats before approaching the cabin.

Wac ih a' meets them at the base of the stairs. Shaking Wac ih a's hand, Sam says, "Wac ih a', it's good to see you again." Then, he steps aside to present Austin. "Do you remember Austin?" Austin shakes Wac ih a's hand.

"Of course I do. White Squirrel, isn't it?" asks Wac ih a'. Austin nods to affirm. Wac ih a' tells him, "Long ago, there was an Austin here also called White Squirrel. I was not aware it was so common. It is good to see you well."

"Thank you, Wac ih a' for your kind words, but it'll be a couple of months before I'm well," Austin informs him, "I'm getting better every day. I got my name and nickname from the one you mentioned. He was my great, great, great Uncle."

Austin is still grieving the loss of his family. He and Sam spoke of possibly visiting the grave site, but Austin feels he is not entirely up to it yet. Setting the stage for a future visit, Sam asks, "If it's not an imposition, Austin would like to visit his relative's graves when he finally gets doctor clearance to hike at elevation. Would that be possible?"

“Of course! We’d be glad to have him visit whenever he wants,” replies Wac ih a’. “Let’s get you inside. Don’t want to prolong the recovery.” As they are walking toward the cabin, Wac ih a’ asks, “What brings you up? Bill, CJ, and Tylor collected your stuff the day after you went to the hospital.”

“A couple of things,” states Sam. “If it’s not inconvenient, a cup of your fine coffee is one of them.”

“My pleasure,” says Wac ih a’ taking the compliment in stride.

Sam and Austin kick off their boots, and the three enter the cabin. They are greeted at the door by a beautiful lady about Wac ih a’s age and an equally beautiful girl about twelve. Their features suggest they have Native American ancestry.

Wac ih a’ broadly smiles as he introduces his family. “Sam, White Squirrel, I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Savanna, and my granddaughter, Page. Page is just up visiting for the weekend while her dad is in Sacramento for a conference. They fly back to Belize tomorrow evening.”

Sam politely shakes her hand. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Savanna. Wac ih a’ mentioned you many times before I, um, well – left for a few days. As you probably heard, we didn’t have much time to talk when I returned to the cabin. It was likely my least polite visit ever.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Sam,” says Savanna with a slight chuckle as she shakes Sam’s hand.

Sam looks at Wac ih a’. He is hoping he didn’t tell her only the bad stuff. Wac ih a’ cocks his head toward his wife. In the silent world of ‘man talk,’ that gesture represented Wac ih a’ confessing that no critical information was redacted. Still, some embarrassing parts may have been changed slightly to protect a fellow man’s pride. In other words, he told her everything except some embarrassing details. Sam is not elated, but, as a married man himself, he fully understands.

Finally, Sam speaks to Page. “I hope you are enjoying your stay.”

<Spanish> “Si.” </Spanish> Then Page remembers she should be speaking English. “Sorry,” She releases a nervous giggle. “Yes. Yes, I am, thank you.”

Following Sam’s lead, Austin politely takes Savanna’s hand. “A pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Austin catches Savanna’s soft, grand-motherly eyes as she replies, “It’s nice to see you, Austin. Glad you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you.” Austin can feel the kindness in her words.

Austin is a little shy whenever he speaks to a beautiful girl around his age. Falling Leaf doesn’t count. She was like a sister to him. Believing it to be Page’s preferred language, he speaks to her in Spanish. <Spanish> “Buenos días, Señorita Page.” </Spanish> [Trans: Good day, Miss Page].

Page smiles at Austin’s shyness. She thinks he’s cute. <Spanish> “Buenos días, Ardilla blanca. ¿Te sientes bien?” </Spanish> [Trans: Good day, White Squirrel. You feel good (fine)].

Austin extends his hand. <Spanish> “Si. Si, Señorita Page.” </Spanish> [Trans: Yes. Yes, Miss Page.] Page takes his hand, looks him in the eye, then slightly squeezes his hand before letting it go. Austin blushes. All three adults caught the flirting but pretended not to notice.

Sam learned about Austin’s language skills during his recovery over the past couple of weeks. Austin can converse in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Miwok. He also knows a few phrases in Irish, German, and Russian. However, many of those phrases were learned at worksites and contain profanities, so he refuses to use them.

Wac ih a’ ushers the group inside. “Let me get something hot for our weary travelers.”

[Collecting a Few Things]

Bringing five cups to the table where Austin, Page, Savanna, and Sam are seated, Wac ih a' carefully balances the hot beverages. He announces the contents as he distributes the cups. "Cocoa." Placing cups in front of Austin and Page. "Coffee." Placing cups in front of Savanna and Sam. "And coffee." He places a cup on the table in front of himself and sits down.

"First," Sam starts, "The boys and I thank you very much for your hospitality and assistance. I'm not sure what we would've done without you. Also, I apologize for our unexplained disappearance."

"No need to explain. Helping the Creightons and their kin is what I'm here for," Wac ih a' replies. "I'm happy I could help."

In a polite and respectful tone, Austin asks, "Wac ih a', do you know about the mine entrance?"

Referencing the one through the pantry and the entrance via the cave on the other side of the mountain, Wac ih a' makes it known that he is quite familiar with the mine. "Both of them, yes. We had the one on the other side of the mountain gated nearly thirty years ago when the boobytraps were disabled. I also have a very old map of the hazards. Is there a problem?"

"No," Sam tells him. "We're trying to find some important documents to help with the title claim for Creighton Valley. We only have a week before our next court appearance. Austin seems to think he knows where the original property deeds were hidden. Victoria Creighton was going to have them sent to her after she got to Ohio because she figured it was too dangerous to carry 'em with her. The documents never made it to Ohio. She must have forgotten where she hid them. Do you mind if he takes a look in the mine?" Sam then stares at Austin to make his point. "He knows to be very careful."

"No, of course not," answers Wac ih a'. "I am just the caretaker. Everything, except my personal stuff, belongs to the Creightons and their heirs. You are welcome to look wherever you'd like."

Austin is eager to see if they are still where he placed them: "If I may be excused, it should only take a minute or two."

Wac ih a' looks at Sam approvingly. Considering their earlier flirting, Wac ih a' further encourages Austin and Page's friendship. "Page, why don't you go with him? You know the mine well."

"Go ahead. Please be careful," Sam cautions.

As he pulls the chair back for Page, Austin looks at Sam with a 'Really! I know more about this mine than anyone alive', look.

Sam understands the look and begins to respond, "I know. But, please..."

Austin interrupts so Sam doesn't have to finish his sentence. "Okay. I'll --" He looks at Page, who is now standing beside him. He quickly changes his response to, "We'll be extra careful."

"Thank you," Says Sam. "Oh, and maybe bring back a pick."

Out of habit, Austin frequently uses the term he first learned to address Sam, replying, “Aye, Captain.”

Austin and Page leave for the mine. As they walk, Page asks about the title, <Spanish> “Capitán?” </Spanish>.

Austin nods. <Spanish> “Es una larga historia . . .”</Spanish> [Trans: It’s a long story. . .]

Back at the table, Wac ih a’ carefully inquires about CPS issues. “Are there no problems at the hospital? I was concerned when you left that there might be some hard questions to answer.”

“The doctors did have a few questions about how he got his injuries,” Sam admits. “But it all got straightened out. I’m glad they looked into it. That tells me they’re doing their jobs.”

Wac ih a’ tells Sam, “I thought that might happen. I’m glad it didn’t get too complicated.”

Sam’s relief was apparent. “Yeah, me too.”

“How is the battle over the title going?” inquires Savanna.

“The original soil samples they took,” Sam explains, “came back with old PCBs as expected. Once again, I’m sure,” he nods at Wac Ih a’, “Thanks to you, they also came back with high levels of fresh urine.” Savanna looks at Wac ih a’, surprised and questioningly. Sam adds, “That prompted a re-sample.”

Looking at Savanna, reassuring her, Wac ih a’ shakes his head, “It wasn’t mine.”

“The new samples,” continues Sam, “Taken by another company, came back completely negative. State Environmental said sufficient DNA was in the first sample for a positive ID of the people responsible for the tainted samples. They’ll launch a full investigation. Don’t be surprised if state investigators stop by and ask a couple of questions.”

Savanna puts down her cup. “We’ll expect them. Maybe the failed pollution claim, entered by the bar-R-bar, will benefit the Creightons.”

“I think you’re right,” Sam reasons. The judge will be more skeptical of any other ‘evidence’ against our claim, especially from the bar-R-bar cattle company. Of course, I’ll keep you informed of any new developments. If Austin can recover the lost deeds, I’m sure the courts will find in the foundation’s favor. Some ‘missing’ documents, like the County Recorder’s page, have already resurfaced.”

Sam looks at Wac ih a’. “Changing topics: Do you remember a few weeks ago?” he gestures toward the front door. “When I first arrived, you said something about that first step?”

Thinking about it, Wac ih a’ shakes his head. “Not specifically; however, we’ve been passing down a saying about that old stone step for generations, so I likely told you too. When someone first visits, we always say, ‘Watch your step; that first one can be somethin’ special.’ It’s kind of a tradition.”

Sam grins. “That’s what I thought! When Austin gets back, you wouldn’t mind taking a closer look at that step with us, would you?”

“I’ve never given the step a second thought,” Wac ih a’ chuckles, “but now you’ve piqued my interest. I would enjoy a little exploring. Oh, I almost forgot.” He gets up, goes to a small table, gets an envelope, and hands it to Sam. “This was left in the front bedroom.” The envelope is addressed to Sam. “I did not know when you would be back here, so I was going to mail it to you. You saved me a stamp.” Sam opens the envelope and empties the contents into his hand. It is the pocket knife with the squirrel inlay.

Austin and Page make their way back from the mine. Carrying a small pick and a saddlebag, Austin announces, “Right where I –.” Austin was going to say, ‘Left them,’ but caught himself. “Um—guessed they might be.”

Savanna is surprised by the quick return. “That was fast!”

“He went right to it as if he had hidden it himself,” remarked Page.

Killing two birds with one stone, Sam checks up on Austin and quickly changes topics. “You’re not getting too tired, are you?”

“No, sir,” replies Austin. “I’m feeling fine.” He hands the saddlebags to Sam, who looks at him to see if he is covering for feeling weak.

Austin sees the look. “Really? I know better now.”

Due to Austin’s hospital stay and conversations in other public places, Sam and Austin have become reasonably comfortable with the terms ‘son’ and ‘dad’ for each other. Sam, to a greater degree than Austin, but Austin is beginning to like calling Sam his dad, especially to his friends.

Reaching out, Sam hands the knife to Austin. “Okay – Here, son. This is yours.”

He takes the knife and examines it. Austin is thrilled to receive the knife that he thought was lost forever. “Thanks, Dad. I wondered where it was.” He turns to Page and shows her the knife with the squirrel inlay. <Spanish> “Ardilla blanca.” </Spanish> [Trans. White Squirrel]

Taking the documents out of the bag, Sam looks them over. He checks the back of the papers; there is a dark brown thumbprint and a heavy smear. Also, a handwritten note says, ‘Time’s Up.’ Sam carefully puts the documents back into the saddle bag. “Hopefully, modern forensics will wrap this up quickly.” He hands the saddle bag back to Austin. “Why don’t you secure those on the UTV while Wac ih a’ and I get started on the step?”

Austin hands him the pick, and Page hands Wac ih a’ a pry bar. “Yes, sir.” He and Page head to the UTV.

Sam suggests, “Let’s see what’s so special about that step.”

Savanna, Wac ih a', and Sam get up from the table and cross to the door. Sam and Wac ih a' go out the door, and Savanna steps up to the window to watch from inside, where it is warm.

[Something Special, Indeed]

Sam has dug around the top of the step, removing the snow and a few inches of dirt. The rock now seems to be a carved lid. Wac ih a' and Sam carefully pry and lift the lid off the stone box it covers. The four of them, Sam, Austin, Wac ih a', and Page, peer into the stone box. Inside is a jar containing a worn book and a note. The rest of the box is filled with gold coins and gold bars.

"Wow! I would say this step is something *very special*," exclaims Sam.

Austin eagerly adds, "This is much more than he left in the mine." After saying that, he realizes he made a mistake. Sam realizes it, too. Without correction, they both let it drop as if it was never spoken—the excitement of the discovery aided in glossing over the slip.

Page excitedly, "It's a treasure chest!"

Barely keeping a lid on his astonishment, Wac ih a' remarks, "Very impressive."

Sam looks at Austin, then at the jar, and then gives Austin a nod. Austin reaches in and takes the jar, opens it, and removes the book and note. With trepidation, Austin carefully unfolds the note. While Austin looks at the note, he can hear Ren's voice reading it slowly and distinctly.

Dearest Austin,

I knew you would eventually find this box. It is my life's work of prospecting. As you know, I didn't prospect for the money but for the challenge. I saved what I could over the years to keep a record of my achievements. You are the kindest-hearted person I have ever met, so there is no one I would rather give it to than you. Whatever its tally, it is now yours. Do with it as you please.

Your friend,

Ren.

PS. The little book contains what I recall of my adventures, both before and after we met. I thought you might like to read it every now and then.

The excitement causes Sam's patience to run out. "Well, what's it say?"

Paraphrasing, with glossy eyes, Austin reveals, "It is a note from the prospector who lived here a long time ago. Ren left this to— m . . . my umm — great-great-uncle. There might be more greats than that. I'm not sure."

Sam knows that the great-great-uncle Austin is referring to is himself. Also, looking at Austin, he knows there is more to the note that Austin is keeping to himself. Sensing that the mood may get somber if the topic is pressed much more, Sam tries to focus Austin on the gold. "Wow! He was a great prospector. What do you think we should do with all this?"

"I'm not sure. It looks like a lot," Austin confesses.

"We'd better just keep this quiet for a bit," Sam cautions. "It obviously belongs to your great-great-uncle's heirs, meaning you, but let's not complicate the land case unnecessarily."

Wac ih a' slowly shakes his head in wonderment. "What a step. It certainly was something special."

To get his attention, Austin tugs on Sam's coat. Sam turns so Austin can whisper in his ear.

Apologizing, Sam tells Wac ih a'. "Sorry about the whispering." He now speaks more formally: "Austin just reminded me about an earlier family discussion involving you and your family. We'd like you to know that you're welcome to stay if we win the case. No, actually, we hope you'll stay – for as long as you like."

"I will discuss it with Savanna," says Wac ih a'. "Thank you for the generous offer."

After hefting one of the gold bars, Austin hands it to Page so she can feel the weight, holding her hand from underneath in case it is too heavy. She allows her hand to rest in his for a moment, enjoying the friendly contact of her cute new acquaintance. Then, she smiles at Austin as she curls the bar like a dumbbell. Austin laughs at her antics.