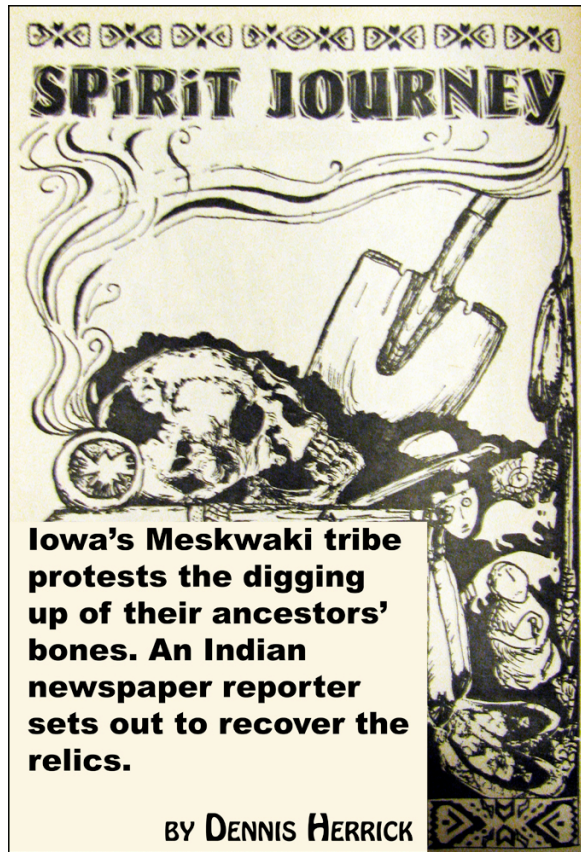


This short story was published in the 2006 issue of *Wapsipinicon Almanac*, a Midwestern literary magazine at <http://www.wapsialmanac.com>. The idea came from today's illicit trade in artifacts illegally dug up from Indian and public lands. Cover Illustration is by artist Laura Jean.



THEY STOOD by Pioneer Cemetery's stone wall with a gaping hole between the graves and faded limestone markers behind them—five young men from Iowa's Meskwaki Tribe dressed in traditional fringed buckskins and moccasins.

A group of angry citizens faced them.

I spotted them while driving down Elm Avenue on my Tuesday morning commute as a reporter at the *Union-Sun* newspaper. Five Meskwakis digging in a cemetery looked like news to me.

I swerved my dented pickup in behind several cars already parked along the street.

A sign leaning against the stone wall read:

*We are conducting an archaeological excavation of Pioneer Cemetery.*

*We'll sell these relics and bones to archaeologists. Then they can be displayed in an Indian museum honoring the white settlers.*

"Are you people insane?" a woman yelled above the shouts and the cacophony of car horns. "I've called the police!"

The Meskwakis were sifting pails of dirt through a screen, cheering each time the dirt gave up an antique of pioneer days. The blanket beside them had buttons, broken pieces of old dinner plates, bottles, and the rusted remnants of a muzzle-loading musket.

Bones were heaped on a second blanket.

I'm from the Yaqui Tribe in Arizona, so a chance to write a story on Meskwakis

seemed like a lucky coincidence. I grabbed my digital camera and spiral notebook in one hand and pulled out my cell phone with the other. It was about an hour before the mid-morning deadline at our afternoon daily.

I was in the right place at the right time, proving that no amount of hard work, skill, and planning can replace dumb luck.

I alerted the newsroom with a quick call to save space on Page One, then hurried toward the Meskwakis and the growing crowd confronting them.

I clicked five photographs before switching to video mode for about twenty seconds. I'm a writer, not a photographer, but at least the newspaper and its website and TV station were covered for visuals.

As I elbowed my way through a crowd of about twenty people, more cars and pickups fishtailed in a blaze of brake lights around my parked truck.

"What are you doing?" several motorists shouted.

"My great-grandparents are buried there!" a woman yelled.

A bearish, bearded man ran past me. The Meskwaki that he ran toward looked strong and fit. Bearded-man was heavy from twenty extra years of greasy hamburgers, weekend beer runs and armchair quarterbacking.

"Get out of my way," bearded-man yelled at the Meskwaki. He launched a roundhouse swing, but he made the poor choice of taking on Iowa's Golden Gloves middleweight champion. The Meskwaki blocked the punch while rocking the man's chin with an overhand right. Bearded-man crumpled to the grass just as two police cruisers roared up to the chaos and four officers emerged running.

I angled straight for the Meskwaki boxer. With the cops hot on the scene, he wouldn't be around to interview much longer.

"I'm from the newspaper," I shouted. "What's your name?"

"Hiram Hawk of the Meskwaki Tribe at Tama," he said, eyeing the police running toward him. "We're protesting desecration of Indian graves—"

A cop lunged, spinning him around and pinning his arms behind him.

"—at the mounds outside our reservation last week."

Two other cops ran up to the other Meskwakis. A fourth started pushing back the

crowd, which by then numbered thirty, with more running up from the street. More police cars came racing from both directions.

I snapped more photos as the Meskwakis were handcuffed.

“Disperse this crowd and guard the scene,” police Sergeant Bill Puller growled at the nearest cops, as other police hustled the handcuffed Meskwakis toward their cruisers. One officer knelt beside bearded-man.

Five police cars with a Meskwaki in the back seat of each rolled out in a caravan, lights flashing, sirens wailing, and heading downtown.

After some quick interviews of bystanders, I opened my laptop and tapped out a story inside my pickup. I accessed a nearby house’s wireless connection and uploaded my story and the best three photographs to the newsroom right from Pioneer Cemetery. I made the deadline with five minutes to spare.

With my story filed, I went looking for a second-day angle at the Sun Hills police station. Police and civilians milled in the lobby, and Sergeant Puller scurried around until his manic pace carried him to me.

“Hi, Sarge,” I said. “I need to talk with you when you have time.”

“Later, Valencia. Your newspaper is the least of my concerns right now.”

I stepped aside and he veered away. I was patient. I couldn’t file anything else for today’s paper anyway.

A woman with long hair as black as obsidian and sun-warmed skin turned at the counter. My bachelor’s reflex is to always smile when attractive native women look at me. She smiled back. Then, astonishingly, she walked over to me.

“Are you from the *Union-Sun*?” she asked.

“Yes. I was out at the cemetery. Do you know anything about that?”

“I do. I’m Emily Redbird, and I’m a lawyer representing the Meskwakis.”

“I’m Eddie Valencia.” We shook hands. “You got here mighty fast,” I said.

“We’ve had this planned for a while, Mr. Valencia.”

“I’m starting to get that idea. Just call me Eddie by the way.”

“This is a Meskwaki protest. You should talk with the Meskwaki Tribal Council’s chairman.”

“I’ll do that. But what’s the protest about?”

“Talk to the chairman first, Eddie.”

Before she left, we swapped tribal identities. She was an Oglala Lakota. Her Sioux tribe and the Meskwaki were enemies in the 1800s, but she was on their side now.

\* \* \*

By the time I returned to the cemetery, a dozen city cops and a State Police detective named Joe Jilovec were on the scene keeping a few curious on-lookers at bay.

Sergeant Puller introduced me to Jilovec. Unlike the brawny Puller, Jilovec was a tall and lanky man in his forties. Black eyebrows as big as caterpillars crawled above his eyes.

“You wrote that story last week about the Indian mounds near here being dug up, didn’t you,” he asked. “What can you tell me about that?”

“Nothing more than what I wrote,” I said.

“I’m told the Meskwakis did this as a protest over desecration of the mounds. But the mounds are at least a thousand years old, so why are they so involved?”

“Some Meskwakis have volunteered as guardians of the mounds,” I said. “All of the ancients are our ancestors.”

Puller explained that I was an Indian, and Jilovec nodded. Jilovec looked at the open grave and then down at the blanket of heaped bones. “There were bones dug up also at the mounds, as I remember,” he mumbled.

Then Jilovec told me that the State Police had reopened investigation of the mounds desecration. Another good exclusive story for me.

\* \* \*

The patrolman escorted Emily Redbird to the cells, allowing me to tag along for a one-minute interview. I peered through the steel bars at Hiram Hawk. He was twenty-five years old, muscled and with a quick step, like the boxer he was. In his buckskins, he looked like he had stepped out of a history book.

“Why did you do this?” I asked, as Emily handed him a fresh copy of the *Union-Sun*. “You started quite a commotion out there.”

“Good,” Hawk asserted. “Now the white people know how upset we feel when they

dig up our ancestors.”

“I understand that,” I said, “but you can’t go digging up cemeteries. That’s as wrong as digging into ancient mounds.”

“We weren’t digging in the cemetery,” he said. “We were on the street side of the wall. Cemetery workers dug that open grave for a funeral that’ll be this evening.”

I must have looked confused.

“We bought the pioneer items at an antique store,” he explained. “When they check, they’ll find the bones are from cows.”

Hawk turned to sit on his cell bunk and began reading Emily’s newspaper. The Meskwakis didn’t want out of jail until they’d made their point and maybe scored some TV interviews.

\* \* \*

When I returned to the newsroom that afternoon, bubbling with more information for a follow-up article, the city editor jumped out of her chair and greeted me.

“Great story, Eddie,” Joyce Whitman said, grabbing my hand for a congratulatory handshake in lieu of a pay raise. “We beat everybody.”

“Thanks.”

“Good initiative to have a wireless laptop with you,” Whitman said. She turned to some other reporters and said, “That’s a good idea for everyone to start doing.” Of course, she didn’t offer to have the newspaper buy a laptop for anyone.

\* \* \*

For the next two days, I wrote several articles, building sources and scoops that kept me ahead of even the big-city newspaper reporters and TV crews who started showing up.

The Meskwaki chairman returned my call the first day to say the men arrested were his “warriors.” He’d sent them to the cemetery to protest the recent looting of ancient burial mounds near Sun Hills.

“Eddie,” he said, warming to our shared heritage, “a good photo for your paper tomorrow might be of those mounds. You can still see the holes shoveled out of them.”

Good idea. I wished I’d thought of it myself.

I admired the Meskwaki. When other tribes, including my own Yaqui people, were

shunted off to reservations, a band of Meskwakis purchased eighty Iowa acres in 1857. That established a settlement protected by the state's laws on private ownership. Smart. Playing by the white man's rules. The Meskwakis had since expanded to seven thousand acres.

Now it appeared that—through staged events, news conferences and an activist lawyer—the modern Meskwaki were using the system as shrewdly as their forebears.

I wrote a story on Emily's Indian rights law firm. I used a fetching photograph of her, naturally. Our talk was short because she was so busy keeping her clients *in* jail.

"Why didn't you just put out a press release?" I asked her. "Why be so outrageous?"

"You don't get on Page One or lead the evening news with a press release, Eddie."

She was pretty savvy about the news, all right. I was feeling a bit manipulated, but it was too good a story to ignore.

As facts emerged that the Meskwakis only pretended to dig in the cemetery, public sentiment turned to favor the Meskwakis. Seven church leaders called a Thursday press conference to demand police security for the burial mounds.

Detective Jilovec and Sergeant Puller had suspected from day one that Pioneer Cemetery was a publicity stunt, especially when the Meskwakis refused bail. So, after the church leaders spoke, the police released the Meskwakis with all charges dropped and Puller and Jilovec called a news conference of their own.

The local and national media were both there in force. I was among the few ink-stained newspaper wretches. The room was jammed with cameras, lights, electrical cords and show-biz wannabes from at least five TV stations.

"As you know, we have intensified our investigation into finding the vandal or vandals who dug into the Indian burial mounds," Jilovec said, as if the new-found interest was his idea and not the Meskwakis'.

I smiled. The other reporters knew it all right, but only because they'd read my story in yesterday afternoon's paper.

In 1976 Iowa had become the first state to protect Indian remains. That law was violated, judging from the scattering of human bones found around holes dug out of the mounds. But the desecration had not been a State Police priority. Until now.

Iowa's law, and the establishment of four secret state cemeteries for native remains disinterred accidentally, resulted from a campaign by a Yankton Sioux woman, the late Maria Pearson of Ames. In 1971 an Iowa City road construction crew had uncovered a pioneer cemetery. Pearson mobilized the citizenry when she objected to the skeletons of a young Indian woman and her baby being shipped to the state archaeologist's office while the twenty-six skeletons of pioneers were reburied with honors in a cemetery.

As for any relics taken from the mounds, Detective Jilovec explained: "Criminals are trafficking in Indian grave goods because of their value. With sales over the Internet now, ancient burials everywhere are in danger of being looted."

Despite Jilovec's investigation, most reporters figured the story was over once the Meskwakis were released. So they abandoned Sun Hills as fast as they had invaded it. I was also wondering what was left of the story, when Emily Redbird knocked on my apartment door. I invited her in, and we exchanged pleasantries while I recovered from the shock of having a beautiful woman come unbidden to my door. That had never happened before.

"Do you have any tea, Eddie?" she asked after settling on my couch.

"Sure. I'll get some water boiling." I rushed into the kitchen, annoyed that I hadn't offered anything before she asked. I settled on Earl Grey decaffeinated without asking her. *A man needs to be decisive if he's going to impress the ladies*, I told myself. I found the last clean cup in the cupboard for her. I rinsed out a cup on the counter for myself and poured tea into both cups.

We took our first sips, and she said, "I understand you know a jeweler named Jay Hartemun."

"Yes. In fact, I'm going over to his place tomorrow night with some guys for our monthly poker game."

"What do you know about him?"

"Well, not a lot. He's a jeweler, and he scratches his left ear whenever he has a terrific poker hand. Why?"

She sipped again. "I just came from the hairdresser's. The woman trimming my hair, Karen, told me that you and Mr. Hartemun are friends."

I flinched. I'd dated Karen twice, but I didn't feel like telling that to Emily.

"I hadn't realized I was the talk of the town with hairdressers."

"Well, you're not, actually." Her mouth curved in a nice smile. "Does Mr. Hartemun collect Indian artifacts?"

"I don't know. He has a beaded Apache war club and a few arrowheads. They're displayed with a photograph of Geronimo on a game room credenza."

"That's all?"

"I guess so. I've never noticed any others."

"You've been through the whole house, have you?"

"Uh, no. Just the game room with the poker table."

"Could you look around Mr. Hartemun's house tomorrow night at your poker party? You might see something that would justify a search warrant."

I frowned. "I'm not going to spy on my friends," I declared, still feeling used by the staged cemetery protest. I didn't want to offend her, however, so I smiled when I said it. "What's going on?"

"I told your hairdresser friend that I was the lawyer for the Meskwakis who were protesting the desecration of Indian burial mounds. She told me that you're a friend of Mr. Hartemun. She said he's been known to dig into burial mounds to collect Indian artifacts."

I should have known. If you want to find out what's going on around town, ask a barber or hairdresser, not the cops or news reporters.

\* \* \*

I didn't believe Jay Hartemun was violating native graves. Besides, I was a reporter whose job was to get information from police, not be an informant. I'd keep following the story though. To Detective Jilovec, whoever dug into the mounds was a vandal. But to me as a Yaqui, that person was a grave robber.

Most tribes believe there is another journey after death—the spirit journey. Disinterring bones disrupts the spirit journey, dooming the spirit to aimless wandering. I said Yaqui prayers each night that any missing bones would be returned to Mother Earth on Native land so the spirit journey could continue.



Five of us showed up at Jay's house for poker. Jay was exercise-trim, balding, middle-aged and rich. He wore a mock turtleneck sweater and slacks, which made him a fashion statement compared with the rest of us in jeans and themed t-shirts.

I drank more than my usual two beers that night, but I still wasn't as loaded as the rest of them. With the six of us laughing, yelling, spilling, smoking, and cussing, the merriment continued for hours.

At two in the morning, one player's younger brother arrived to drive the other four players home.

After they left, I staggered at the door like W.C. Fields.

"You all right, Eddie?" Jay slurred, his eyes half-shut. "Lucky ya need to walk just a few blocks."

"Mind if I have a cup of that coffee before I go? Might save me from stumbling over a sidewalk crack."

"Sure," he said. "Help yourself."

Like just about everyone else, Jay had asked about my tribe's history as soon as he learned I was Yaqui. I had told him about a Yaqui photograph, and as I poured my coffee I told him I had brought it.

Out of a cardboard box I pulled a framed, gold-toned glass print. It was of a Yaqui deer dancer from a century ago, clad in buckskin leaning on sticks in his hands and wearing a set of antlers on his head.

"Oh, man, it's beautiful," Jay said, bracing himself against the counter after almost losing his balance.

"I'm from the Pascua Yaqui Reservation near Tucson," I explained. "The elders asked me to take this to an expert at the University of Iowa. They think this might be an original Edward Curtis print from the early 1900s."

Jay looked at me, then at the photograph, then back at me.

"This is an autographed orotone print," he said. "Is it a reproduction?"

"Don't think so."

"It's worth a lot of money if it's an original," Jay said. "I know a guy who'd pay at least seven grand." He admired it as if it had come from a museum, while I worried he

might drop it. “You know, I’m very interested in Indian art.”

“I figured you must be interested,” I said. “You know, with that beaded ceremonial club over there and the arrowheads.”

“You a collector?” he asked.

“I have a few antiques of my Yaqui ancestors.”

Actually, they were just heirlooms from earlier generations like any family might have.

Jay stared at me, perhaps thinking a drunk man shouldn’t be able to pronounce “antiques.” I was surprised myself. Then he brightened the way people do when they think they’ve met someone with the same passion.

“If you’re a collector, I’ve got more Indian artifacts in my den,” he said, letting me in on a secret he didn’t tell just anyone. “Wanna see them?”

“I need to get home,” I replied.

“Come on,” he urged. He returned the Curtis and then led me across his living room. He was unsteady as he walked. Geronimo glared at me as we passed his photo and the Apache club. *Forgive me, great one*, I thought, following Jay down a hall. Geronimo was a hero to all Native people. He would have hated having even his image locked like a prisoner inside a white man’s house.

We walked into a dark room. Jay flicked on a light and led me to a table. On it were four clay pots, several arrowheads, a pile of pierced shell beads, a copper blade, clay pipe bowls with carved lines, and stone effigies shaped and polished into small animals. I could see grains of dirt under some pieces.

“Look at this!” he said. His eyes shone from an intoxication of enthusiasm. He handed me a five-inch clay figure of a kneeling woman holding a bird.

“Incredible,” I said. “Where did you get it?”

He didn’t answer. Instead he began chattering about the ancient wonders arrayed before us.

“The last person to touch this before me was an Indian several centuries ago,” he said, holding up a pot with a painted design. “If it wasn’t for me, Eddie, these treasures would be lost forever.” Jay wasn’t slurring his speech as much when he picked up objects. He

winked. “Of course, I sell the best ones for thousands of dollars every year.”

His voice turned into background noise. I wasn’t listening. My peripheral vision sensed a white object. Without turning my head, I glanced to the side and saw it—a skull on a bookshelf, staring at me from dark sockets.

“Look at this pot,” Jay exclaimed. “At least a thousand years old. Can you imagine its value to a museum? Twenty grand, at least.”

Jay continued talking and showing me objects. I tried to act interested, but I was chilled by the skull’s sightless stare. *You couldn’t resist, could you Jay? Stealing the burial artifacts wasn’t enough for you, was it?* I felt nauseous.

“Come back when we’re both sober,” he said with a laugh. “I love this stuff, but you don’t look so hot right now.” He swept his arm around the room. Decorated buckskin shirts, bows, tomahawks, old photographs, and shadow boxes of beaded moccasins and arrowheads covered all four walls.

“Let’s go,” he said, guiding me to the door with a hand on my back. “You look like you’re gonna hurl, and I don’t want that in here.”

I glanced back. The skull screamed silently at me.

\* \* \*

When Emily returned my call in mid-morning, I told her that her suspicions about Jay might have been correct.

“Thanks, Eddie. I’ll take it from here,” she said. “I’ll call Detective Jilovec.”

“It’s probably nothing,” I said, suffering a twinge of doubt.

It bothered me that I had ended up doing just what Emily had wanted. But once I saw the skull and table of artifacts, what choice did I have? As a reporter I’m supposed to remain neutral, but it seemed like everything was conspiring to drag me into the story.

Detective Joe Jilovec obtained a search warrant. But when he and two State Police troopers arrived at Jay’s house, the table of artifacts and skull were nowhere to be found. Jay produced “letters of provenance” proving that everything left in the room had been purchased from stores, shows, and collectors.

I would not learn about the failed search until later. That evening, walking home under the streetlights with a bag of groceries, I kept thinking of that skull and artifacts. I

had to face the possibility that even though Jay had a Yaqui for a friend he still was willing to rob Native American graves.

Carrying the paper grocery bag in front of me, I was a few yards from my apartment building. That's when a milk carton in the bag exploded like cold blood in my face.

I fell backward and down to the sidewalk as a concussion of noise struck me. A gunshot! I heaved what was left of the bag and its contents into the air and leaped to my feet. I sprinted between two houses as an angry bee buzzed past me with another gunshot. *Go, legs, go!* I turned behind the house on my right, my back prickling with the expectation of a bullet as I ran.

\* \* \*

Saturday night's shooting left me feeling like I was being stalked by a bounty hunter. I jumped at every noise. Several police officers had responded to my call. I also called Emily, and it was reassuring that she seemed concerned. That's when she told me about the failed search of Jay's house.

I locked myself inside my apartment. A newspaper buddy delivered several bouquets Sunday morning after I explained that Yaqui consider flowers to be powers against evil. I reimbursed him with a check but advised him not to cash it until payday.

Now I was part of the story that I had been covering. City Editor Whitman said she'd write the shooting story, not me. It was almost noon Sunday. Whitman had just interviewed me on the phone about my close call, when Jilovec and Puller arrived.

I checked the door's peephole first—a new habit I had acquired—and let him in.

"It's easy to explain," Jilovec said after I expressed surprise that the police hadn't found a table of artifacts or a skull. "Once Hartemun sobered up a little, he realized he shouldn't have shown you his artifact collection. He had about nine hours before we arrived to move everything and clean up. Now it's just your word against his."

I groaned. "I should have called the police first instead of Emily," I said.

"That's right," Sergeant Puller snapped.

I changed the subject. "Jay knew it was me who reported him to the police," I said. "So he tried to kill me last night."

"It wasn't him," Jilovec said. "He was in Des Moines when the shots were fired. But

a witness said the second shot was fired at you from a late model black pickup.”

“Then he hired someone else to do it.”

“That’s what we need to prove,” Jilovec said.

Sergeant Puller invited me to sit in one of my own chairs. “The State and Sun Hills police are cooperating on this investigation,” he said. “I need to ask more questions about the shooting inside the city, while Detective Jilovec has more questions about Jay Hartemun and the mounds.”

As they pulled chairs toward me, Jilovec’s eyes swept around my apartment. “Man, you sure have a lot of flowers in here.”

\* \* \*

Emily called me later. “I’ve been having a private detective check out Jay Hartemun,” she said.

*At least she didn’t think I should be doing that, too,* I thought. “What did he find out?” I asked.

“It’s a she. Anyway, she says Mr. Hartemun collects and sells Indian artifacts, and that a lot of people think he deals in religious items, eagle feathers, and ancient burial goods banned by NAGPRA.”

“You mean the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act,” I said, hoping she was impressed that I knew.

“Yes. The museums and reputable dealers won’t buy anything from him.”

“So who does he sell to?”

“He’s active in the major Indian artifacts markets in Santa Fe, New York, and London. But most of the time he sells over the Internet.”

“Is this common?”

“According to Interpol,” she said, “trafficking in stolen art and antiques is the fourth largest illegal activity in the world.”

The secret life of Jay Hartemun, small-town jeweler, hard-drinking poker player, and illegal artifacts dealer, was coming into focus.

I owned a .38-caliber pistol, and since returning home Saturday night I kept it in my bed stand. I had been an infantryman in Desert Storm. I could be more lethal than I

looked. At least, I would be as soon as I could get out and buy some bullets.

\* \* \*

Monday morning, I ventured into the mystifying world of women at Karen's hair salon. Karen was working on a teenage girl in the chair closest to the door.

"Hi, Karen," I said, choking on the perm fumes.

"Omigod. Hi, stranger. You want your hair dyed green?"

"Uh, no. But I'd like to talk to you for a minute. When you're finished with her, of course. No rush."

I sat down and shuffled through magazines on the adjacent table. The models on the covers were dressed scantily, which was nice, but the titles of the articles raved on about how to please your man. *No, thanks*. I stared at posters on the wall.

Karen came over and sat in the chair beside me.

"Hi. Whatcha got?"

"Remember that lawyer who was in here a few days ago? The one working with the Meskwakis?"

"You bet. Is she your girlfriend?"

"What? No. I've been working with her on the Meskwaki story. And you gave us another angle to think about."

"Really. What's that?"

"Jay Hartemun. You told her that he digs Indian artifacts out of burial mounds."

"Your buddy."

"Not anymore. He tried to kill me."

Karen's blue eyes blinked. "Omigod, he did? How? Are you kidding?"

"You can read all about it in today's *Union-Sun*," I said. "You'll find a story that someone took two shots at me outside my apartment last night."

Her glossy lips parted. "Omigod," she repeated. "I wonder if we've got the paper here."

"Never mind right now," I said. "I'm sure it was Jay, or I should say someone hired by Jay, because I saw—"

“Why would he want to kill you?”

“—some burial items in his house Friday night that I’m quite certain he’d dug out of mounds. That’s the exact desecration the Meskwakis were protesting at Pioneer Cemetery last week.”

She enunciated each word this time, saying, “Oh...my...god.”

“So, Karen, who told you that Jay digs artifacts out of mounds?”

“His wife. She used to get her hair done here every coupla weeks.”

“Where could I find her?”

She bit her lip. “You can’t, Eddie. She’s dead.”

“What? I figured he was divorced.”

“No, she was killed by a hit-and-run driver in Des Moines last year. The police never learned who did it.”

Had his wife threatened to turn him in, just like I had? I resolved to be more careful jay-walking.

I phoned city editor Joyce Whitman after I returned to my apartment, asking her to have someone check out the late Mrs. Hartemun. Whitman called me back to say the wife had been killed by someone driving a late model black pickup truck. *Just like the one my shooter had been driving*, I thought.

“I’ll have someone else write this angle,” she said. “You’re too close to it.”

“Wait a minute,” I protested.

She hung up.

\* \* \*

Remembering what Jilovec and Emily had said about antiquities and the Internet, I started searching the Web with my laptop as soon as I got back to my apartment.

I found a site for a national campaign against defilement of Indian burial sites. A photograph of some activists included Hiram Hawk, my Meskwaki Golden Gloves champion.

“Thanks for your stories,” Hawk said when I reached him by phone. “People are paying attention to our concerns now.”

“I was just doing my job, covering the news.”

Hawk chuckled as he recalled how upset everyone got when the Meskwakis pretended to dig up pioneer graves.

“White people have been digging up our ancestors’ graves since Columbus,” he said. “The bones of hundreds of thousands of our ancestors are still in museum vaults. Skeletons of two hundred Pawnees were displayed as a tourist attraction in Kansas as late as 1989.”

Quoting a Santa Fe attorney, Hawk added, “Why single out the Indians? Why not dig up everybody’s ancestors?”

*I could have used that quote in my story about Pioneer Cemetery last week, I thought.* I decided I’d put it in my next story, if Whitman would ever let me write one.

Hawk confirmed that Internet sites sell native artifacts, but he said many were restricted with passwords.

“I’d sure like to see some,” I said.

“No problem,” he replied. “We’ve got several of the passwords.”

It was Tuesday morning before I found the figurine of the kneeling woman with a bird. Its photo was posted on a site for Indian art, open to me thanks to one of Hawk’s passwords. The price: ten thousand dollars. This time I called Sergeant Puller and Detective Jilovec *before* I called Emily Redbird.

Jilovec appeared in my locked door’s peephole again the next morning.

“We traced the Web posting to a felon named Taggart from Des Moines,” he said. “We learned he was renting a motel room a bit outside town. We just found him an hour ago. He was dead, shot in the head. We also found his own pistol under his mattress. I think ballistic tests will prove it fired the bullet we dug out of a house—one of the bullets that missed you.”

Jilovec said Taggart owned a late model black pickup, and its license plate matched a partial number reported from Mrs. Hartemun’s hit-and-run. I was impressed he already knew about her.

State Police also had verified that Jay knew the murdered man—my presumed hit-man. So Jay was a “person of interest” in the murder, and Jilovec wanted to talk to him



about his late wife, too. But Jay's house was deserted.

"I came to urge you to leave town for a while," he said. "For your own safety."

I didn't see it that way. It was okay with me if Jay had flown off to Latin America or Europe or wherever criminals fled these days. With the hit-man's death and Jay's disappearance, I felt a lot safer.

Emily called after Jilovec left. Somehow she had heard about Taggart's murder.

"Was the kneeling woman figure in the motel room?" she asked.

"No. Jilovec thinks Jay gave it to Taggart as payment for killing me, and that Jay took it back when the hit failed. Jilovec told me that Taggart also sold a valuable artifact on the Internet after Jay's wife was killed last year."

"Oh, no. I never thought it would end up this dangerous. I'm sorry, Eddie."

"What do you mean?"

"We needed to have a reporter at the cemetery," she said. "We knew you drove by there every morning at about nine o'clock. Did you think it was a coincidence that you got the story?"

I opted to be philosophical. Sometimes, I decided, the stories choose you.

\* \* \*

The skull from Jay's den still cried to me in my dreams. I agonized over how I could recover it to restore the ancestor's spirit journey. An e-mail late Thursday seemed like the answer. I recalled that the e-mail address for the Meskwaki chairman was meskwaki423c1@digeratimail.com. The e-mail read:

*Someone left a skull, some pots and several sacred objects outside our Tribal Center last night. Please come and see if they are the ones you saw in Jay Hartemun's house. Meet me at the Tribal Center at 7 tonight.*

Here was my chance to help the ancient one. I looked at my watch. I had enough time to drive to the Meskwaki Settlement at Tama. Jay must have dumped the skull and artifacts with the Meskwakis in his escape.

The Tribal Center was closed when I arrived. I looked in a window. The light was dim inside, but I could see the skull on a table. *I've come to rescue you ancient one.* The kneeling woman figure and other artifacts surrounded the skull.

The front door was unlocked. I pushed it open and went inside—too hastily as it turned out. It wasn't the tribal chairman waiting for me inside. I heard a noise behind me and turned to see Jay Hartemun locking the door. He had a black pistol with a silencer aimed inches from my chest.

"You ought to read e-mail addresses more carefully," he said. "The chairman's address is 423e1, not c1."

"You're crazy," I said. "The State Police already are looking for you because of the murder."

"Oh, you mean the late Mr. Taggart? At the motel? First he misses when he shoots at you, and then the moron puts the clay figure up for sale on the Internet. I had told him to wait a year. Mistakes like that could send me to prison. And besides, he was the one person who could testify against me. Not counting you, of course."

"Taggart ties you to your wife's death. You can't get away."

"Yeah, he did. At least he didn't bungle that job for me." He reached into his shirt pocket and fanned three passports at me. "But I'm sure I'll escape. I've also got an untraceable car."

Jay closed the curtains of a window to the right of the door. Then he stepped backward, keeping his gun aimed at me as he turned to close curtains on the window I had looked through.

He stiffened. I could hear car tires crunching the gravel in front of the building.

"I've gotten smarter, Jay," I said. "I always call the police *first* before I go anywhere these days."

Jay Hartemun lost his nerve. When Detective Jilovec hammered on the door, and two troopers materialized at windows pointing guns at him, Jay dropped his pistol and let them in. I had turned on my reporter's tape recorder before I'd entered the building, just as Jilovec had instructed me, so I'd recorded Exhibit One for Jay's trial.

I looked at the skull and my eyes burned. The ancient one was safe. Its spirit journey could resume.

A judge repatriated the skull to the Meskwakis. They laid it to rest again in their tribal cemetery where it would be safe in Mother Earth.

The Meskwakis allowed me to witness the reburial ceremony, and Whitman even let me write that story. Emily went with me.

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**From the author:**

I hope you enjoyed this story. If you have any questions or comments about it, you are welcome to contact me by going to my author's website at [dennisherrick.com](http://dennisherrick.com), where you will find my current email address, bio, and other writing projects. This short story is also available for 99 cents on amazon.com, smashwords.com, and other online retailers as an e-short story.

**Spirit Journey**

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