



Backroads

by Aimée Cree Dunn
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At twenty-five years of age, Jacques was the best mechanic east of the Porcupine Mountains and west of the Soo in the backwaters known as Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He was thought of as the best looking, too. The good looks came from his mother. The mechanical skills came from his penchant for old vehicles. The older, the better. And if the tailgate was held on by baling wire or if the muffler had fallen off long ago, Jacques loved it all the more.

He still drove the first old red Ford he'd bought. "Red Wolf" his sister Elise had christened it when he drove it home. The truck never was able to live up to its name though. For one thing, it went from zero to ten in sixty seconds. For another, it had a habit of stalling at the most inconvenient times. But he couldn't afford anything better even if he'd wanted it, which he didn't, feeling somehow satisfied with the lumbering beast.

That is until the day came, as normal as any, when he was pulled over by the cops. Even then he didn't actually blame the truck, although in his heart of hearts and from the depths of his pocketbook he wondered how the situation would have turned out had he had a slightly swifter mode of transportation.

That early June morning, he rushed a comb through his longish hair and threw on some jeans and a t-shirt. After a longing

look at his moccasins he settled on his sneakers with the hole in the right toe. Moccasins were for the woods; sneakers for the concrete floor at the garage. Grabbing some moose jerky, he pushed open the screen door, careful not to let it slam too hard, and got into his red Ford to rumble the ten miles into work.

He drove calmly, even whistling a bit. The dirt road led from his forest abode, a hunting camp he'd converted quite pleasantly into a home, past the trailer his mom and sister lived in and onto the main road, an entirely straight and graveled thoroughfare on which most vehicles roared along at speeds faster than they should. Not that there were all that many to begin with, even when you counted the four-wheelers and occasional hay balers.

There were crows, though. A whole tribe of crows. Today they were settled in some old elms, the latest gossip flying among them. From the cedar swamp, dark deer eyes met Jacques's glance. And from the boughs of a black spruce a blue jay raucously announced the passage of his old pick-up. Although Jacques looked hard for them in the woods, even briefly glancing in the hay fields, there were no wolves this morning. They'd been scarce of late.

The sudden noise of a cop's siren almost made him jerk the wheel. His rearview mirror having broken off long ago, his sideview showed him a state patrol car, lights flashing.

Jacques pulled the hulking old Ford over to a stop as smoothly as if he did this sort of thing every day, which he didn't. He'd never been stopped by a cop before. Game warden, yes, at the end of this last winter as a matter of fact, and that time he had been on foot. Moccasined feet to be exact.

The officer, young and tall, with a muscular leanness that meant business, took his time walking up to the truck, swaggering a bit. He was a stranger, which might explain the current situation.

The local cops knew Jacques. Come to think of it, the game warden had been a stranger, too, with a slight accent. East coast, maybe.

“Son.” The word sounded silly considering he couldn’t be that much older than Jacques. “You’re driving without plates.” The cop hooked a finger in his belt loop, next to the gun holster, and stood at an angle some ways away.

Jacques looked at him out of the corner of his eye but didn’t say anything.

“You got a license and registration?” His words were spoken in the slight twanging drawl of some downstaters.

Jacques dug for his wallet in his back jeans pocket wondering all the while if he’d been stopped by a troll, ill-mannered creatures usually spawned in the civilized areas south of the Bridge. Flipping through the well-worn truck ads from various magazines that he’d torn out and stuck in the wallet’s cardholders, he found his license.

“And registration,” the officer repeated.

“Don’t have any.”

“That why you don’t have a plate on the back?”

“Yessir.”

“It’s required by state and federal law that you register your vehicle. You do know that.” It was a statement not a question.

“Yes . . . sir.”

“Well, then.” The cop paused and scratched his smoothly angular chin. It was a calculated move. “I need to see your insurance.”

“Haven’t got any of that either.”

“It’s required by state law – ”

“Can’t afford it,” Jacques interrupted.

There was silence. Then the cop cleared his throat.

“If you can’t afford insurance, son, you shouldn’t be driving the vehicle.”

Jacques wanted to ask how he would make enough money to live if he didn’t drive the vehicle but figured it’d be best if he didn’t say anything.

“Well, now, tell you what.” The officer began writing on a pad. “This time you get a warning. Next time, it’ll be a fine.” He

peered at Jacques. “The fines are big, you know. Can’t have everyone driving around uninsured and unregistered.”

“Yep,” Jacques said.

“You could end up in jail. If you don’t pay the fine.” He handed Jacques a pink slip. “Next time that is.”

“Yeah.” Jacques’s fingers were numb from clenching the steering wheel.

“Well, you have a nice day.” The officer touched his hat and left.

“Yeah, you too,” Jacques muttered and folded the pink slip. It’d match well with the one from the game warden. That slip was yellow and had a black x sliced neatly through the box for a two-hundred and fifty dollar fine. It was nice the things came in such cheery colors.

In fact, the encounter with the warden had run pretty much the same as this run-in with the state cop.

It had come during the coldest part of the winter past, and the slowest part of the year as far as work at the garage was concerned. Brad did what he could, but if work wasn’t coming in he couldn’t afford to pay Jacques. And Jacques’s mom had just been laid off from her waitressing job for the same reason – no customers that time of year. The cupboards at his own place were bare except for a nearly depleted jar of peanut butter as well as some oatmeal, raisins and saltine crackers. And Jacques’s mom didn’t have much more in their pantry. Jacques’s sister had even gone to school a couple times with nothing more than homemade bread and dried blueberries for breakfast and the same for lunch.

The ice-crusting snow of that February morning had given Jacques easy passage as he walked into the spruce woods, his rifle, unloaded, in the crook of his arm. Near the woods’ edge, he knelt down at the foot of a mammoth white pine, sprinkling a tobacco offering to the deer, the forest and the Great Mystery. He was just about to rise to his feet when a heavy hand clapped him on his shoulder. It wasn’t friendly.

“Got a license?” a gruff male voice asked behind him.

Jacques stood. “To pray?” Turning around, he knew full well what he’d see.

“To kill,” the state warden said firmly. “You’re out of season.”

“What makes you think I’m out to kill anything?”

The warden’s eyes narrowed. “I’m on to you, Jacques Maurice. These local boys may give you a break, but I come from a place called civilization. In that place, we got laws, laws everyone follows. No exceptions.”

Jacques’s pulse sped up. “Indeed,” he said, face a calm mask as, assuming he’d be told to leave, he bent to pick up his gun.

The warden took a step back, hand hovering near his holster.

Jacques swallowed. He hadn’t meant that as an intimidating action.

“You know you need a license to hunt.”

“I know.”

The warden shifted his weight. Without a dead animal in the vicinity, it was difficult to do anything about Jacques. “Well,” the warden said, “it looks like you and I’ll be sharing this woods today.” His blue eyes, like the ice shards off a frozen lake, tried to pierce through Jacques.

“If you say so.” Jacques’s gaze didn’t waver.

The warden returned his stare for a moment, then turned and walked away, his shoulders squared and tight.

Watching the warden leave, Jacques sat down, leaning against the pine, and reached in his coat pocket for his peanut butter and cracker sandwiches. “Well,” he said, and took his first bite.

He had waited a while, watching the sun climb the sky. A couple hours into the morning, he heard a truck start followed by the sound of the motor fading away. It had to have been the warden. Jacques relaxed, smiled, and stood up.

He didn’t return to his truck until late afternoon, when it was nearly dark. With him, Jacques brought the carcass of a buck.

The warden was waiting for him at the end of the two-track, his truck lost in the darkening shadows. When the warden started his flashing lights, Jacques tried to stop, but his brakes weren’t so good and he slid off the road, heading into a field. For a moment he was tempted to gun it and see how far the old truck would take him.

It wouldn’t have been far, considering its old tires and quirky maladies. Besides, the warden had already jumped out of the truck, holding a pistol on his quarry.

Jacques sighed at the warden’s melodramatics. Jostling the door handle to get it to work, he slid out of his truck, hands in the air.

Twenty minutes later he climbed back in, the deer confiscated, his rifle taken, and a yellow slip for poaching crumpled in his hand. Like he could afford the fine.

He never did pay it.

And he didn’t intend to start paying on it now.

It wouldn’t surprise him if they’d put out a warrant for his arrest by this time. Although, if they had, the state cop probably would have taken him in. Soon, though, he imagined. The state wouldn’t wait forever.

Jacques pulled into the small gravel parking lot outside the auto garage and parked his Ford under the old Mobile sign. Its red and rusted flying horse had lost most of its wings.

“Hey, Jack!” It was Brad.

Jacques smiled a little at the smell of motor oil and gasoline. “Gonna be slow today?”

“Looks to be. You bring your book?”

“Sure did. Robert Frost.”

“Again? Don’t you got that memorized yet?”

“I got some stuff down.” Jacques rolled his dark eyes to the sky assuming what he thought might pass for a dreamy look, the kind he imagined poets had. “Whose woods these are I think I know.”

“Yeah, whatever. Give me Alan Jackson. Or Shania Twain.” Brad winked. “Now there’s poetry for you.”

“The cops stopped me today.” The navy jumpsuit Jacques stepped into was a little short in the sleeves.

“Your plates, I bet.”

“Yep.”

“It always happens sooner or later. Didn’t I tell you? You gotta put old ones on like me, just dirty them up a bit so they can’t read ‘em.”

“I’d get the plates.” Jacques brushed a spider into a safe corner of the garage. “But I’m not wasting my money on no insurance. A hundred bucks a month? Some guy downstate isn’t getting rich off my hard earned dollars.”

Brad chuckled and shook his head over those people, more than ninety percent of the state’s population, who lived below the Mackinac Bridge. “Trolls,” he said using the local epithet.

“Yeah. You got a buck, they’ll find a way to get it.”

“We should of closed that bridge years ago.”

“Or seceded. They hardly remember we exist anyway.” There’d been talk about secession since before Jacques was born, particularly when the state government in Lansing, drafting a map of Michigan, had forgotten to include the Upper Peninsula. Quite a feat since the U.P. made up a third of the state’s landmass. It hadn’t gone over too well. But the troll government never had paid much attention to the U.P. anyway, except to try to site it for a nuclear waste dump or other such things.

A sleek black Buick pulled into the station.

“There’s one now,” Brad grumbled as he sauntered over to take care of the customer in the Buick. “Think it’s an invasion?”

Jacques was contemplating the day’s docket when another customer approached through the bright glare of the garage door. A booming bass voice resonated into the small space. “It’s for your junkyard, if you got one.”

Jacques shielded his eyes from the light as an old but robust man walked forward, pushing a motorcycle. A graying beard almost as long as his hair, black woven with silver, hung down to the middle of his plaid shirt.

“It’s a vintage Indian. I’ve had her for years but she needs too much work for me to bother with.” He peered at Jacques from under bushy eyebrows. “Will ya take her?”

In its original form, the bike would have been a classy black and silver affair but now rust clung in orange scabs to its listing headlamp and ran rampant on the wheel spokes. He examined the

engine. Oil stains indicated a sizeable leak. A hose was broken, there was no distributor cap and the electrodes on the battery were well oxidated.

Jacques ran his hands over the corroded silver letters spelling “Indian” on its side. “She’s a beauty,” he said softly.

“Yeah, she sure was.” Reaching in the backpocket of his well-patched and faded jeans, the man took out his wallet.

Jacques waved it aside. “Don’t worry about it. I should be paying you.”

“No need for that.” The man reached out to touch the bike. His hands lingered for a moment before he drew himself up and gave Jacques a long look. Satisfied, he said, “Best be goin’.” And walked back into the blinding light.

Jacques admired the bike for several minutes before he wheeled it outside and carefully parked it in the bed of his pick-up. The rusting Mobile sign with its virtually wingless pegasus squeaked in the breeze above him.

“You know,” Brad called out to him, “we oughta fix that old sign some day. I’ve always loved that horse.”

“Yeah.” Jacques shut the truck’s tailgate and made sure the baling wire was pulled tight. “Maybe I’ll find us some paint.”

That afternoon, Jacques drove home down the rutted roads through spruce and maple forests, keeping an eye out for cops. Strange cops. The ones he didn’t know. They could be lurking anywhere.

All he saw, though, were deer. Those he knew well like he knew the local porcupines, the bear, the chickadees. And the wolves.

Jacques had seen plenty of wolves over the years. Sometimes one, sometimes two or even five silver blurs disappearing into the forest. One of their trails ran just back behind his mom’s trailer and out across an open field. It met up with the gravel road he took to work. When he had grown older and was hunting to put food on the table, Jacques started leaving fresh meat near their trail. Just last week, he’d left them some venison.

As Jacques pulled into his mom's long drive, he thought he saw a state patrol car a ways behind him, but he couldn't be sure.

His sister claimed his attention as she scrambled through the pine woods, running alongside the drive to beat him to the trailer. Elise did this almost every time she knew he was coming over, and almost every time, Jacques slowed down just enough for her to win the race but not enough for her to feel it was too easy. She was a good runner in her own right, though. Her first year of high school was still months away but already the track coaches were urging her to join.

"Beat me again," he said as he got out of the truck, slamming the door hard to make sure it stayed shut.

Elise grinned. "Like you didn't let me."

"Oh, I don't know. You're pretty fast. You got twigs in your hair, though." He pulled on her dark brown braids.

She bit back a retort and blinked in surprise as Jacques carefully unloaded the motorcycle. Dusting off the seat, he sat on it, caressing its gears and handlebars.

"This here's an Indian bike," he told Elise who stood quietly watching him.

"Like us?"

The question took him by surprise, pleasantly so. He grinned. "Yep."

She folded her arms, tilting her chin in the air. "Dad was white," she countered.

"Yeah. We're Metis. Like Mom. Remember Louis Riel?"

Elise nodded. "Mixed-bloods. Wasn't he the one who got hung for stopping those surveyors?"

"Something like that." Elise had the gist of it anyway. Smiling down at her, Jacques prompted her, "'My people will sleep for one hundred years...'"

Her eyes darkened to near black. "But then we will awake."

It was the old Riel saying their Mom had often quoted when they were growing up. Being mixed-blood hadn't been easy, particularly in schools dominated by teachers who'd as soon put a brown-skinned kid in Special Ed as look at them.

They both studied the bike.

After a thoughtful silence, Elise asked, "Can I drive it?"

"Are you kidding? Even if you knew how, it needs a whole lot of work. Besides, you don't drive a bike like you do a truck."

"Fine. Whatever." She tossed a braid over her shoulder. "Did you memorize the poem today?"

Jacques grinned at her. "Yes, Miss Elise, I did. Better than you as usual, I'm sure."

"Let's hear it."

Pausing first, again for the effect he imagined it gave, Jacques launched into a nearly accurate version of Frost's "The Road Not Taken."

"Not bad," was her comment when he'd finished. "Only it's not 'And that makes all the difference,' it's 'And that *has made* all the difference.'"

"Whatever," he said, "At least I took the road less traveled by."

"No, I did." She smiled. "You went up the drive."

Early August saw the old bike up and running, its paint job restored to the shiny silver and black it had been in its previous life. It had become sort of an area project – a neighboring farmer dropping in to see how things were coming along just happened to have an extra can of paint in his truck. Brad had accumulated a significant amount of junk vehicles in his time as a mechanic and offered free use of the parts. As the repairs neared completion, Jacques made a special point of polishing up the cursive metallic letters that spelled out "Indian" on the side. He'd painted the outlines of a wolf's head in silver just beside it.

The first day he took the bike out was one of those perfect summer days. He'd driven it to work in the coolness of a misty morning, but by the end of the workday the heat was on. Jacques put the last of the tires on another beater car, changed his sneakers for his moccasins and walked to his bike.

Brad called after him, "Coming over tonight?"

"For what?"

"What do you think? I got a six-pack already in the fridge."

"Nah."

“C’mon.” Brad stopped to find the keys to his truck.

Jacques shook his head and stuffed his jacket into the fringed leather saddlebag he’d finished only a few nights before. The leather had come from a deer he’d eventually managed to sneak past the wardens last winter.

Pegasus hung above him, still creaking in the breeze but freshly painted up and ready to fly.

“Whatever, Jack,” Brad was saying. “A few beers ain’t gonna kill ya. ‘S matter of fact, I hear it’s good for ya.”

“Heck, man, there’s more to life than the bottom of a beer can.” Jacques grinned and gunned his bike.

He sped into the inviting straightness of the road. Listening intently to the sound of the engine, he poured on more speed, keeping it under the speed limit, then abruptly slowed, letting the bike coast. There was a little catch and a slight cough of exhaust on the downshift but it more or less purred as it should. The bike looked good, too, glinting in the sun whenever the canopy of trees that overhung the road gave way at brief moments to sunny fields.

Lost in the drive, he didn’t notice the vehicle gaining on him from behind. Only when he slowed for a sparrow that darted in front of him did Jacques catch the image of a state patrol car in his sideview mirror. His hands tightened on the bike. The cop was too far away to see that the bike didn’t have plates. Still, Jacques increased his speed to the limit, leaving the cop even further behind.

But he hadn’t escaped their notice.

The flash of red and blue lights suddenly erupted in the reflection of his sideview. He quickly checked his speed, but the needle hovered just under 55. And there was still no way they could see the bike lacked plates.

Then it hit him.

He wasn’t wearing a motorcycle helmet.

As the police siren burst into the air, Jacques thought of the hefty fine and the jail time the cop had said would come when he was next caught without insurance and registration. He wondered what the fine was for violating Michigan’s helmet law. And by now the state probably had a warrant out for his arrest since he’d refused to pay the fine from the warden.

Then he thought of the money his mom needed to fix her trailer roof, of the new brakes he’d soon have to buy for his bike, of his sister needing money to go to college – only four years away. Coming from a poor family and with dreams of a college education, she was going to need all the money saved that she could get. Then there was the nearly four-hundred dollars he had managed to put in his bank account since high school – more money than he had ever had at one single time in his life before. Likely summer taxes and winter food would eat a large chunk out of that, but there was a good possibility that, this year, for the first time, he just might be able to put back a little nest egg for what the future would demand.

In his mirror, the cop had drawn closer but was still a good distance away. Too far away to recognize him.

Jacques went down a small hill in the road. A hay field rolled to the forest along the back of his mother’s property. He narrowed his eyes, calculating. There weren’t any wolves visible on the edge of the field, but he hoped they were near all the same.

He was getting ready to join them.

The whir of the sirens behind, Jacques gripped the handles tight. With a roar of his engine and a small spurt of dust, he left the road. And hit the hay field with a bump that almost sent him over the handlebars. He’d struck an old furrow. Jacques wasted no time, however, and pumped the Indian bike for speed, flying over the hummocky field growing with three-foot tall grasses and chicory, his teeth rattling with the bumps. He drove for the woods, aiming for where the open meadow met up with the wolves’ trail.

Without warning, a large stump from the old logging era loomed up from the grasses directly in Jacques’ path. He braked and veered sharply to avoid it. The bike’s back-end started to slide, tilting the bike dangerously. Retaining minimal control, Jacques slid past the stump just as the back-end slammed into a small boulder that stood to one side.

For a second, Jacques thought he was going down. Simultaneously bracing himself to hit the ground, he swung his full body weight to counter the tilt of the bike. Within moments, he was vertical again.

He checked his mirror. Closer than he liked, the cop car was off the road and trying to make its way across the meadow. It swerved often, struggling with the tall grasses. Inside Jacques saw two officers.

Ahead the wolves' trail, just wide enough for his bike, wound into tree-lined shadows. Revving the motor, Jacques spurred the bike toward those towering maples and pines.

“ ‘The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.’ ” He grinned and plunged into the forest.

The trees crowded close around him. The cop car disappeared from view.

In the shadows, Jacques could almost swear, a silver blur ran with him.