

# Dead Pawn

*by J. Mark Sloan*

David Mills paused for a moment outside the Dean's office before knocking. His third year of medical school had left him tired and jittery, unable to sleep at night but unable to stay awake for anything else. Once inside, he told her that he needed to take time off. Dr. Lang stared at him intently through her glasses, looking for signs of tears. Appearing relieved when she found none, she gave him her blessing and a maternal squeeze on the arm as she walked him to the door. She directed him towards a set of file cabinets in the corner of her office lobby.

He thumbed through the files in one of these cabinets, marked "off-site opportunities," and called the only place that offered free room and board to visiting students. The lady who answered the phone made him spell his name three times, and then told him he could start next week. Next door, a chain-smoking financial aid officer handed him a form for a student loan. He carefully wrote in block letters below the words *Disburse To*:

DAVID MILLS  
C/O GENERAL DELIVERY  
GALLUP, NM 87301

David stopped by the primary care clinic on the way out of the hospital. He walked purposefully past the nursing station into the medication room, where he stuffed three months of Prozac samples into his backpack. He took two of the green and gray capsules as he drove away from the hospital.

David's girlfriend since college, Robin, had just dumped him. Two years ago he had slept with a friend of hers after a Halloween party. For David, the memory of that night was closeted and forgotten, along with his Zorro costume. The friend, in an apparently uncontrollable burst of sincerity, recently confessed to Robin in a letter. Robin called David, cried into the phone for several hours, and

told him she never wanted to hear from him again. She called back immediately and cried some more, but hung up again without saying a word. That evening, she telephoned his friends, parents and landlord to tell them what he had done. His mom promptly emailed him a note outlining the virtues of fidelity. David was labile and heartbroken; he felt shame blur his world like a cataract.

His roommate, Randy, quit his job at the Cracker Barrel and was moving to Tulsa to learn landscaping. They seized the chance to leave. David and Randy dragged their belongings out to the front yard, blasted music from *Oklahoma!* into the street and sold everything that wouldn't fit into their cars. A box they discovered in the basement containing someone's wisdom teeth sold for two dollars. The lady that bought them said that if they did contain wisdom, it was a bargain. Randy traded his computer with a grad student for a guitar and sixty dollars of marijuana.

They drove in caravan. At Randy's insistence, they stopped by Memphis on their way to Tulsa. That night, they listened to the blues blare up and down the bars of Beale Street and alternated drinking beers and smoking joints. The music saturated the town, every verse confirming that love was not meant to last. Each song ended with a

man broke and alone but never angry; the next song always began before things went wrong. David tried parsing the music differently, so that the songs would begin sad, pause in the middle and end happy. He took a long swig of beer as the song ended, as seemed fitting for a man in dumpsville listening to music at a bar in Memphis. Randy jarred him out of his thoughts with a friendly but intoxicated slap on the back. David shrunk into the stool as Randy announced to the now quiet bar:

“This man is in need of a girlfriend. Any takers? Come on girls, buy low and sell high.”

Randy stood up, settled their tab and walked outside. The warm humid air did nothing to sober David; he did not object as Randy hailed a cab and asked the driver to take them to the nearest strip club.

The club was crowded with unappealing men and attractive, pouting women trying to please them. While Randy went off with two truckers to get high, David fiddled with the label on his beer. He tried to avoid eye contact with the lingerie-clad women slinking by his table. A girl in her early twenties with shoulder length brown hair and a black dress paused as she past. When David looked up, she sat down in the booth and wriggled up to him. She leaned in close and placed her hand on his thigh.

“What’s your name, honey? I’m Crystal.”

“My name is Albert,” David lied.

“Would you mind if I sit here for a while, Albert? My feet hurt in these shoes.”

“Someone should design a line of sexy sneakers.” David said, instantly regretting how stupid he sounded.

“Where are you from, Mr. Funny?”

David tried his best to appear mysterious and composed while the stripper made small talk. She misinterpreted his reticence for boredom and lowered her top slightly to expose her breasts; she put her hand through his hair and began intentionally fumbling with his zipper.

“Let’s go to the back room so I can dance for you.”

“I don’t know, I have a friend who will be looking for me,” David hedged.

“They allow a lot of contact here,” she purred.

David simultaneously felt the irresistible tug of a woman’s attention and a sudden claustrophobia. He abruptly got out of the booth, pulled a few dollars from his pocket and thrust them towards her. She pulled her dress straps back over her shoulders, looking hurt.

“What’s the matter with you?” Crystal asked.

David wondered whether to blame the beer, the Prozac, the weed, his conscience or the dried semen stain on the booth.

Randy stayed in Memphis while David continued west. He drove into Gallup late on a blisteringly hot July afternoon. Gallup itself was more than 10 miles long but

never much more than a mile wide. The buildings kept close to route 66 like track marks along an addict’s vein. He cruised the length of the city, observing the proliferation of pawnshops, cheap motels and liquor stores. Drunks strewn about the sidewalks reminded him of worms drying in the sun after a sudden rain. Old men with braided hair sat on the concrete, slouching towards the earth as though gravity itself were stronger here.

David tried singing a few bars of the Nat King Cole song “Get your kicks on route 66” but gave up after realizing he knew none of the lyrics. His only other impressions of Route 66 were formed reading *The Grapes of Wrath* during high school. These bright images of movement, adventure and progress contrasted poorly with the stagnant reality of the road as it slashed through Gallup. I-40 had turned the route from something important into something obsolete; Gallup pretended not to notice. Even the postcards and collector spoons sold in the gas stations appeared faded and gloomy. After driving from one end of the city to the other, David did not see the hospital. Also missing were banks, grocery stores and playgrounds. There was a mammoth Walmart that sold the city everything it needed. He pulled into a pawnshop to ask for directions.

David pretended to browse the multitude of turquoise jewelry, kachina dolls and drums before asking for directions to the hospital. When he walked in, the white proprietor abruptly terminated his business, which involved haggling with a Navajo woman carrying a papoose. He approached David smiling like a rattlesnake. After some time on the reservation, David would learn that these pawn shops served as the banks and safe deposit boxes for the entire Navajo reservation. At the end of the month, when the money ran out, the Indians would come to town and pawn their jewelry, rugs and other relics. When the checks came at the beginning of the month, they would return and buy back what they pawned. They left with their ancestral treasures and talismans but had lost hundreds of dollars during the transaction. The cycle would repeat itself until the month they could not afford to buy their belongings back. It would then become “dead pawn” and be available for sale, at a greatly inflated price, to whoever could pay for it. Some of the most sacred relics used by the Navajo lay beneath glass as dead pawn in the shops of Gallup. These had been passed from generation to generation, but now only tourists could afford them. The owner guided David towards a different display case. “The best pawn is the dead pawn,” the owner told him, matter-of-factly.

The road to the hospital wound up a hill and ended at a large brick structure surrounded by the type of temporary sheds used at overpopulated elementary schools. David walked into the emergency room entrance to find a waiting

room filled with benches packed with elderly Navajo. It looked like a bus station. He picked his way through the benches and rapped on the window pane marked “triage.” When no one came, he opened the adjacent door and wandered through the halls for ten minutes before finding a nurse. She eyed him like a potential son-in-law as he introduced himself. David asked where he might find an administrator, and she pointed him towards one of the outlying buildings. He followed her instructions, and left with a key to his room and coupons for ninety colon-flogging meals in the hospital cafeteria.

His quarters were made of cinderblock; a lifeless one story building across the street from the hospital. It would have a sweeping view of the city if it had windows. David’s room was small and narrow, lit by a bare bulb and a porthole-like window in the door. The previous tenant had left a Britney Spears poster which he initially took down but put back when he saw how a tear across the top had had been meticulously repaired with scotch tape and colored pencil. The furniture consisted of a prison style bunk bed and a metal desk without a chair. A single cricket chirped loudly every night directly outside the door, obstinately eluding the impromptu hunting parties organized for its destruction.

The bathroom was shared with the matching room next door. That room belonged to a pharmacy student named Chuck, from Albuquerque. He was two years younger than David and had a wife expecting twins. Whenever she was visiting she spent the mornings in the bathroom vomiting from morning sickness. When she wasn’t there, Chuck’s room hosted a steady procession of female hospital staff and Gallup residents. One of these women once walked naked into David’s room by mistake after using the bathroom. Chuck told David one evening that New Mexico women would let you do anything you wanted to them in bed as long as you knew how to two-step.

During the evenings, David would read about reservation life in the Walmart café. His texts consisted of Tony Hillerman mystery novels and a children’s encyclopedia. He would return them to the correct place in the book aisle every night as he left. In the 1930s a series of forced relocations established the reservation as the current tract of land in the corner of New Mexico and Arizona. The Indian Health Services was created in a treaty twenty years later between the United States and the Navajo Nation. The government did a half-hearted job of setting up the IHS, further fueling the Indian’s ambivalence about the care they would receive at government hospitals. When they became sick, most Navajo would hire the services of a medicine man. The medicine man would charge a fee and perform a ceremony designed to cure the ailment. These

ceremonies could last several days and cost hundreds of dollars. When they were very ill and could not afford a medicine man, they would reluctantly find their way to the benches outside the emergency room. Very occasionally a medicine man would refer a patient. David once saw someone in the emergency room with fever and abdominal pain. The patient handed him a piece of paper provided by the medicine man. The piece of paper contained a childlike scrawl that read: *Appendix*.

David tried working different jobs in the hospital. His first day, he went to the inpatient medicine wards in a tie and his short white coat. The doctors were all white and working in *locum tenens*, meaning that the government hired them on a month by month basis. They would work until they made enough money to pay their student loans for the year, then leave. The hospital was as unlike Dr. Lang’s medical center as anything David could imagine. Whenever a Navajo dies in their Hogan, the house must be permanently abandoned, rendering the dwelling useless to future generations. For this reason, elderly Navajo and their families go to great lengths to make sure they do not die at home. Entire hospital wards were filled with people who had decided that it was time to die. Patients would pull out their IVs and cheek their antibiotics. The doctors would get frustrated and tell them that if they did not want to get better than they should go home. When they refused, the doctors would often go home early themselves, muttering aloud about why they bother.

David felt that this proximity to death was bad for his worsening depression. He got permission to switch to the obstetrics ward, but only stayed for a few days. Compared to the women he helped deliver in medical school, Navajo women could push out a baby in a matter of minutes. Everyone present at the birth always looked very solemn, as though they were about to forge another treaty. The new mothers seldom spent the night in the hospital. David then moved to the primary care clinics, where he tried to thwart a steady stream of health problems caused by the triple ravages of poverty, alcohol and negligence. A program was underway in these clinics to better integrate western medicine with traditional Navajo culture. Practitioners were encouraged to co-opt the Navajo phrase “Walk in Beauty”. This was taken from a Navajo prayer, and implied to be in harmony with ones environs. The effort resulted in a waiting room filled with brochures that had titles like *Walk in Beauty with Constipation*.

Later he moved to the Emergency room. Betty, the woman who worked as the ER x-ray technician, doubled as the phone switchboard operator. She would ultimately threaten to tell Chuck’s wife about his cheating after eavesdropping on a call she transferred to his room. She

gave David an orientation of the ER, which consisted mostly of a discourse on the decrepitude of Navajo men.

“Show me a Navajo man who isn’t a drunk and I will marry him on the spot,” she claimed.

Indeed, David saw accident after accident; the ambulances brought in a steady procession of intoxicated men pulled from mangled pickup trucks. Betty explained to David that no alcohol is sold on the reservation, so the Indians would come into town, pick up liquor and drive home, drinking a six pack every sixty miles. In the rest of the country, drunks had to pass an *ad hoc* sobriety test by walking from the bar to the car, opening the door and inserting the keys in the ignition. On the reservation, this low hurdle was circumvented by drinking to excess only after being securely positioned behind the wheel.

David learned that he could tell the day of the month by the types of drugs hanging from the IV poles in the emergency room. Morphine was the drug of choice at the beginning of the month, taking away the pain of a shattered pelvis or a chest drain. Drunk driving accidents were most common on days 1-10, sponsored by the arrival of government welfare checks. At the end of the month, the morphine was replaced by librium as the beds contained people hallucinating from alcohol withdrawal or temporarily blind from methanol poisoning. If the blind ones insisted on leaving, the staff would give them cheap whiskey on the way out to prevent further injury. David wondered if there was a way to infuse money continuously into their pockets like the drugs dripped into their veins, thereby avoiding the peaks of excess and troughs of withdrawal.

Tom was one of three social workers who worked for the hospital. Every morning for ten years, he drove to different parts of the reservation, visiting the shut-ins. His patients were almost all elderly and blind from years of uncontrolled diabetes. They had no electricity or modern heating system. They lived dozens of miles away from their neighbors. Their hogans had no phone, mail delivery or transportation; weeks went by without visitors. Tom’s clientele did not seem burdened by the knowledge that even a broken hip may be fatal without help, but it troubled Tom a great deal. He worked tirelessly, well past his expected retirement. When Tom arrived at a person’s hogan, he would take their blood pressure and check their blood sugar. He made sure they had enough to eat, and kept them company for a while before moving on.

One morning Tom’s wife took him into the emergency room, stating firmly that he had finally lost his mind. Tom looked around the room with wide eyes, coughed twice and threw up on the floor. An x-ray showed that he had a fluid collecting in his lung, causing confusion from a

lack of oxygen. A test showed that the fluid was from tuberculosis, and David was given Tom’s job.

David was supposed to see five people each day, excluding Saturday and Sunday. From his hospital bed, Tom wrote David a list of names and directions. He was given an old Ford Bronco with a cracked window. The white paint was badly damaged, and mud obscured the Indian Health Services logo, the staff of Aesculapius covered by a feather. David glanced at the clipboard and read the directions to the first name:

*Joe*

*Hwy 666 to 68 than South on rte 21*

*Pull off road at mile marker 10*

*Cross Arroyo upstream from burnt out bridge. Drive up hill towards dead trees. Hogan on other side of hill. No dog.*

David attempted to find the first hogan, getting lost for hours before finding the correct burnt out bridge and dead trees. When he finally came upon the hogan, Joe was sitting just outside the front door. He looked as though he had been staring at the horizon for all his life. His deteriorating vision seemed to be no great imposition on someone whose view during his sighted years didn’t change much. Inside, the wall displayed a Hooters calendar from 1988. On a shelf above his cot was a rodeo trophy. The man told David about how his son was hit riding his bike by a drunk Navajo politician. The man said his son was brain damaged and never came home from the hospital, and now lived in an institution in Los Angeles. He plucked a folded postcard from his pocket and handed it to David. The postcard had a picture of the Hollywood sign; it was postmarked two months ago. The man asked him to read the card aloud. It was written by his son’s social worker. David read slowly, his eyes skipping ahead to see if he could break the news contained in the card more gently than the author. It said that his son is now being fed through a tube in his stomach because of recurrent aspiration pneumonias. The man seemed to process the information for a few minutes, then got up from his chair and walked inside, closing the door behind him.

At 5:00 pm on the first day of the job, David was a two hour drive from Gallup and had seen only one person. He decided to try to see one more before he returned. The next hogan was easy to find, only a mile off the highway. He drove up to the little hut, kicking up a plume of dust from the Bronco. He got out of the truck and walked to the door, which was cracked open. David knocked gently and said hello. A grunt issued from inside the darkened room. David stepped inside; as his eyes adjusted, he saw a frail Navajo woman in a stained nightgown. She sat in a wheelchair constructed from a folding metal chair with

suitcase wheels on each leg. She looked expectantly at David and spoke in a rapid stream of Navajo that sounded angry. It occurred to David that she had no idea who he was, or what he was doing there. Because she was blind and spoke no English, he had no way to communicate with her.

After nearly a month on the reservation, David's Navajo was limited to the phrase for hello and the command "Take a deep breath". Of these two, he decided to go with hello. David drew his breath and said "Yataheh" as he reached out for her hand. She recoiled at the sound of his unfamiliar voice and with a lightning-quick extension of her legs, rolled across the room in her chair. She sat with her back to the wall and grabbed the flyswatter from her lap, brandishing it like a weapon. She was crying with fear. David weighed his options. He wanted badly to leave. Instead he walked to the corner opposite the woman and slumped to the dirt floor. He began to tell her, in English, about Robin. He told her about the vacation they took to France after they graduated from college. He told her how they rode bicycles through the Loire valley and made love every night in a different bed and breakfast. He asked the woman what she knew about heartache, but she didn't understand and therefore didn't answer. The woman gradually eased her guard and put the flyswatter down. Her blindness excused David from being self-conscious as he wiped away the tears welling up in his eyes. David sighed, then reached for his bag and took out the blood pressure cuff. He moved closer to the woman and placed the tightly rolled cuff on her lap. He inflated it quickly and then let the air out with a hiss, never before being thankful for its distinctive sound. She recognized the noise and laughed out loud. She held out her arm. David dutifully took her blood pressure and cradled her wrist to feel her pulse. He listened to her heart and lungs. Relieved to have the familiar choreography of the physical exam as a temporary reprieve, he looked at her mouth, ears, hands and legs. Next he checked her blood sugar; she did not flinch as the lancet pounced onto her finger. He frowned at the elevated number.

David grabbed his bag and began to fill insulin into syringes, drawing each carefully. He gave her a little extra insulin in each syringe than had been there previously. He opened her icebox and placed them side by side on the shelf. He grabbed her water jugs from near the bed and took them outside to fill at the faucet rising from the ground. After rummaging through her cabinets to make sure they contained enough food to last a week, he readied to leave. She rolled towards him and grabbed his arm, gesturing upwards. Initially he thought she might be telling him something about god, but she was instead pointing to a shot of light leaking through her roof. He got a hammer and nails out of the Bronco and pulled the truck along side the house house. He

found some wood in a pile and threw a few boards onto the roof. He climbed onto the roof of the truck and then hoisted himself on top of the hogan. Unsure of how to mend the hole, he covered it with a garbage bag and placed a layer of wood over it, driving down a few nails to secure it against the wind. He hoped he was making convincing fixing noises.

It was dark when he finally pulled onto the highway. Tumbleweeds bolted across his headlights like deer. A coyote snuffed at something on the pavement and ran off as the truck approached. The road was empty and David felt acutely lonesome. He rolled the windows down and tuned the radio, finding a throbbing native drum beat driving a traditional Navajo chant. David chanted along with the music, screaming it out at the top of his lungs. He lost track of time as the moon slowly rose over the brick red landscape. The chant praised the gods for the renewal of life. David wondered if he was getting the exact words right.