



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

March 6, 2023

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

In the desert of Southern California, which is a country unto itself – not just a vast and particular geography, but a unique culture composed of characters that have evolved in parallel to the world of normal human beings, a phenomenon similar to what has occurred in the Galapagos Islands, where there are birds with their heads on backwards, turtles who speak French, dogs who eat celery – the Southern California desert is like that, only with people – and in this place, there is a mountain called Mont Tolk.

“What are you going to do with your end of the money?” Jeremy said.

“What money?” I said.

“The money we get from selling the world’s largest frickin’ opal,” Jeremy said.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” I said.

California is more than beautiful women with armpit hair and farmstead cheese. There are fourteen, fourteen thousand foot peaks in our state. But Mount Tolk is not one of them. It is a modest 11,312 feet tall and its form lacks the drama of our more famous peaks. Mount Shasta, say, which rises out of the alfalfa fields of the surrounding countryside with the grace of Fuji and the foreboding countenance of a Himalayan. Or Whitney, which, at 14,505 feet, is the highest point in the Lower Forty-Eight and has flanks faceted with salmon-colored granite. No, from the outside, Mount Tolk is but a humble thing. Like certain parts of Jeremy’s anatomy, it’s small and looks even smaller than it is – not so much a mountain as a barely-discernible rise that begins just west of Barstow and culminates in an abandoned gas station on the side of a two-lane chip seal highway seventy miles north of Palm Springs.

“Stop talking about the geography,” Jeremy said. “The geography is not the point.”

What sets Mount Tolk apart, according to Jeremy, is the fact that its insides are composed entirely of opal.

“Not just opals,” Jeremy said, “black opals.”

“Black opals.”

“It’s like a geode,” Jeremy said. “Have you explained to them about geodes? Have you told them about The Mother of God? Have you told them about Double Eagle Steve?”

I have always wanted to blast across the desert in a Cadillac. One of those old ragtop cigars. But we were in a Mazda, of course.

“You’re going to love Double Eagle Steve,” Jeremy said. “Talk about characters. ‘Get out of the gem business,’ I told him. ‘Sell the rights to your life story and retire.’ The man’s got a million-dollar personality. You’ll see.”

“Stop selling me,” I said. “And stop chip cheating.”

“You can’t cheat at food,” Jeremy said.

“The hell you can’t,” I said.

“Watch,” Jeremy said, closing his eyes, reaching into the bag of chips and coming out with a beautiful, fully intact Dorito. I watched him put it in his mouth and chew, still with his eyes closed.

“Blessed,” he said.

The car drifted off the road and we tailed out through the sand doing eighty-five with Jeremy slaloming the



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

wheel back and forth and Dorito crumbs floating before our eyes until he brought it under control and got us back on the asphalt.

“Some people just have too many gifts to make use of in one lifetime,” Jeremy said.

“Double Steve is like the Bo Jackson of the Southeastern California Upper Elevation Semi-Precious Mineral Exploration, Research, and Commerce branch of the California Recreational Mining Association’s forty-third chapter. He’s got it all: hair, personality, a nose for opals.”

“Now we’re calling him Double Steve?” I said. “How about me? I’d like you to call me Double Jake from now on.”

Jeremy looked over at me and curled his lip.

“I hardly think the shoe fits,” he said.

We saw the gas station up ahead. It was alone and it was gutted – the pump spouts long-since torn out and made off with in the name of senseless vandalism, the windows of the little store broken, loops of wire gaping from the overhang, trash everywhere. The evidence of recent and barbaric human inhabitation. It wasn’t the first time I had come upon such a scene in such a place. My first thought is that abandonment is the perfect evidence of folly: what fool would bet his fortune on a place like this? But when I see the graffiti, the makeshift barbecues and half-burned mattresses that invariably radiate from modern ruins – signs that we are somehow more attracted to places like this when they are dead than when they are alive – it seems to me that we humans are called to embrace oblivion by the intrinsic nature of our species, drawn to the void, innately inspired as much to unravel the fabric of civilization as we are to adorn it with some further petty embroidery pointing to the lie of our individual importance.

Just past the gas station we turned right and rumbled out what may have once been a road.

“ . . . which, as it turns out,” Jeremy was saying, “is a whole mountain made of opal. Like a geode. Not everyone knows about geodes. We’re basically talking about a piece of Australia in the desert of Southern California. Without the Australians, of course. In addition . . .”

Jeremy prattled on about Double Steve and Mount Tolk and The Mother of God. Being friends with somebody doesn’t mean you have to like them.

You couldn’t tell if the road was taking us higher or lower. Also, it occurred to me, elevation is calculated as a point’s distance from the center of the Earth and whose dumb idea was that? What makes the center of the Earth so important?

“ . . . like a character straight out of the movie Blood Opal,” Jeremy was saying. “Different accent, of course. But don’t let his teeth fool you. I’ve seen the man with his shirt off and he makes old Leonardo DaCrapio look like a flying squirrel.”

The road took a slow curve and pointed at a gap between two hills. No, it was a cave.

“Thar she blows!” Jeremy said and ate a Dorito.

It was like one of those movies where they keep cutting to a shot of a guy galloping toward the camera and



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

he never gets any closer until suddenly he's pushing through the saloon doors. That cave was extremely distant and all of a sudden there we were, in it, parking the Mazda and getting out and shaking hands with Double Steve.

Steve was a tall and sinewy man of indeterminate age with one big blue eye and one small blue eye. I have to admit I felt a certain energy when I clasped his hand. It's not hard for me to feel a little inferior in the whole life force department in the presence of certain people. But it could have just been the setting: for all that we were in the desert, it was cold and damp there and the air carried a smell of wet stones and moss. We were in the mouth of the cave and, behind Steve, were what I guess you would call the cave's "depths." A sort of nothingness. More than black. I have read – or imagined, at least – that there is a phenomenon called a terrestrial black hole – and it occurred to me that this might be one. A place from which nothing that enters ever returns, not even light. With that in mind, I wondered if I was, technically speaking, inside the cave or outside. Was it too late to change my mind? When was the last time I had spoken to my mother?

"Name's Steve Allan Borneo," Steve said, "but people call me Double Eagle Steve or Double Eagle or just plain old Double Steve."

I told him my name (Jake Hawkes) saying it as slowly as possible to make it seem longer. I don't have a middle name and wanted to make one up but I can't perform under that kind of pressure.

"My man Jeremy here tells me you boys are in the market for opal," Steve said.

"I'd describe us as more opal-curious," I said.

"Already playing poker, huh?" Steve said. "I like you."

He made as if to goose me in the ribs and I jumped back.

"Not just any opal," Jeremy said. "We're here for The Mother of God."

Steve squinted his big eye and spat.

"You ever heard the expression 'ambition is the road to ruin'?" he said.

"I thought that was whiskey," Jeremy said.

"If you want to talk bad about whiskey you can leave right now," Steve said.

"I'm just repeating what I heard," Jeremy said.

"I can show you The Mother," Steve said. "But it's not for sale. I don't even touch it myself. Hell, I don't even let myself look at it but once or twice a month."

"Fine," Jeremy said. "We'll just look at The Mother of God and then buy some other, much less desirable stuff and get out of your hair."

"Alright then," Steve said

Steve bent down and picked up a lantern and we watched him light it. Seeing how easy it is for guys like Steve to do things like light lanterns makes me feel like a loser. When he had the thing adjusted to his liking, he turned and walked into the darkness and we followed.

"Listen," Jeremy said, "when he shows us The Mother I need you to distract him."

"Distract him from what?" I said.



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

“Me. Duh,” Jeremy said. “When he’s not looking, I’m gonna hit him with this.”

I think he took something out of his pocket and showed it to me but it was too dark to tell.

“Bingo,” I said.

If you’ve never followed a creepy old guy with long hair holding a lantern into the nether reaches of a vast and terrifying cave, put it on your list. The lantern light was weak and flickery and yellow and the walls and ceiling of the cave were so distant that only a few of the rays of light emanating from the lantern were able to complete their journey to the cave’s extremities and there only fleetingly illuminated the otherworldly beauty of its black gem walls. It glittered everywhere and faintly. Like the lights of a million ships far out on the sea on a moonless night, maybe, or new asphalt on mushrooms.

“Alright,” Steve said, coming to a stop, and dampening the lantern. We had reached one of the caves walls. I might most closely compare its form to coral: not so much a wall as an undulating series of fins and lobes, the whole of it studded with the fire of opals pushing through the rock.

“What I’m about to show you, few men have ever seen.”

“We’re ready,” Jeremy said, “Lay it on us.”

Steve went around a fin of rock and then into a sort of cave within a cave. He crouched down and we followed suit, going through an opening maybe four feet high and then standing up on the other side. Steve brought the lantern light back up and we saw that we were standing in a room. On the ground before us lay a single black stone about the size of a motorcycle. It was an opal, all of it, naked, and full of astonishing multi-colored fire.

“Behold The Mother of God,” Steve said.

Something moved in the periphery of my vision. Steve cried out and fell to the floor. The lantern broke.

“Got him,” Jeremy said.

We stood there. I didn’t think it was possible to be darker than it had been out in the rest of the cave, but it was.

“What now?” I said.

“Now we drag this sucker out of here and live a life full of Champagne and sexual depravity,” Jeremy said.

“Double Steve?” I said.

“The Mother,” Jeremy said.

“Oh,” I said. “Right.”

I might as well fast-forward through this part: we couldn’t move that rock. I don’t know if it weighed a thousand pounds or a million. It might have been connected to the center of the Earth, for that matter. We grunted and strained and insulted each other for maybe an hour. Double Steve started to groan and then he woke up. We felt pretty sheepish by then about hitting him on the head and trying to steal The Mother of God and we told him so. Most people get mad when you knock them unconscious and try to rob them but Double Steve just wasn’t that sort of guy. He knew enough about avarice to not take it personally. With his help we found our way out of the cave and



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

then went over to this old trailer that he lives in and sat down and had a drink of pulque, which looks and tastes like sour milk and is apparently made from the fermented sap of maguey. It wasn't half bad.

After that, we said our goodbyes and got back in the Mazda and headed out. We stopped off in Barstow for a cheeseburger and one thing led to another and it ended up taking me the better part of a week to get home. My wife was sitting on the porch doing a crossword when I came walking up the drive. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, as they say. I was grateful to see her and thought I might even hazard taking a kiss at her cheek. But my wife knows my mind better than I know it myself.

"I left a hose and soap around the side of the house," she said. "Come back when I can't smell you."

She pointed and I went.

All of you receiving this shipment are receiving at least one bottle of our newly- released **2019 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet**. The 2019 Alexander Valley Estate Cabernet is always one hundred percent varietal and always a blend of fruit from all three of the vineyards we farm. We don't aim to make the same wine every year, we aim to make the best wine possible every year. And that means our Estate Cabernet changes from vintage to vintage. The through line is balanced. The 2019 shows loads of dark fruit both in the aroma and on the palate; I get black cherry and plum and blackberry. But this is not a ponderous, top-heavy wine. The acid is bright and the tannins are long and lean. Complex but very, very drinkable (now through 2030).

This will be the only shipment of our **2018 Pyramid Cabernet Sauvignon**. The Pyramid vineyard is a unique site at the crux of three appellations, where the steepness and exposure of the vineyard lead to wines that are dark and intense in every vintage. The challenge here is balance. The 2018 is a brooding, tightly wound beast. The signature aroma and flavor of Santa Rosa plum are immediately apparent in the 2018 Pyramid but so are other non-fruit elements: coffee, baking chocolate, a touch of fennel and coriander. Great acid for wine with so much extraction. It somehow manages to feel both dense and bright on the palate. It's a pleasure to drink the 2018 right now but it also feels like a bit of shame. It needs time to smooth out and open up. Drink 2024 through 2030.

It is hard for me to believe that we are already releasing our **2020 Alexander Valley Merlot**. But, on the other hand, it's hard for me to believe that it's 2023. The 2020 Merlot is a blueberry extravaganza! Violets, too! What a lovely, floral expression of the varietal. Our 2020 Merlot comes from the same few acres of vines we have been farming in the foothills of the Mayacamas Mountains since 1972. Too much American Merlot is made as poor man's Cabernet. Not this time. This wine aspires to balance delicacy and spice. Very drinkable now, but will improve with another few years of aging. Try not to guzzle.



THE HAWKES WINE CLUB

A LETTER TO THE SHAREHOLDERS

I am more and more pleased with our **2021 Home Vineyard Chardonnay**. This wine comes from the ranch on Chalk Hill Road and I think there may be more magic in this vineyard than in any other I have come across in my winemaking life. A lot of it is the soil – an ancient creek bed in the bow of volcanic ash. The 2021 is a surprisingly rich version of this typically lean wine. Citrus dominates the aroma and the flavor: Meyer lemon, mandarin, grapefruit. But there's definitely a tropical layer here, too. Is that guava or passionfruit? Wowzers.

Thank you for your support.

- Jake