

The Journey This Night

Rising from the darkness like a beacon stood a tall, faded statue of a Native American near the old town of Chandler, Oklahoma. His right hand was held high above his head bearing the palm slightly upward, but not so much upward as it appeared, many said, to be stretching outward.

A little below and beside this image stood another, almost identical in patience and stillness yet much smaller. At a glance one would have mistaken this motionless form to be as inanimate as its neighbor, the design of an artist, two Indians greeting each other in the hush of surrounding trees. But closer observation revealed that this smaller figure was not of the same substance as the one it imitated. The head of the larger held nothing but cement, hardened by the air which was presently giving breath to the boy who stood motionless, staring into the eyes of the statue he had come to call his friend.

Unsure of himself, he peered into the enclosing darkness which lay beyond the circle of light cast by a pallid moon. Unknown creatures at the outskirts of this circle on all sides laughed at him for standing so rigidly. "Everybody laughs at stuff when they don't understand nothing," he assured himself. But there was more to the noise than laughing; there were threats of danger as a watchful owl bawled an endless interrogation. Why had he come here? ~~It was night~~. People didn't belong here at night. But he intended to see the night through, no matter what danger he felt he might be in or how much he might question the usefulness of this night's excursion.

His arm began to tire, pointing up to the sky like his friend had done many years, but the thought of letting himself down renewed his strength, for this night had been in the back of his mind since the first time he came across the statue a few days after his arrival in Chandler. He stretched his arm higher. "For Mama," he said.

The night became wet and cold as clouds began to roll by, sporadically stopping the moonlight and felling plump raindrops on his cheeks. On a night like this not long ago by adult standards, a fire destroyed his grandparents' house where he and his mom had been living after his father left. Big drops of rain, fell separately unable to join together enough to create more than a sizzling disquiet as they landed on the embers of the old people's bedroom where they had been sleeping. ~~They hadn't woken up in time.~~

"It's my fault, Mama." He said as he braced his right arm with his left hand for support. One could not tell if his face were wet from rain or guilt which he carried a burden of for death of his grandparents. He blamed himself for the fire, ~~having~~ ^{he had} played with matches in the fireplace the day before. ~~He couldn't remember putting out the fire properly although the firemen found that the blaze had started in the laundry room.~~ ^{idea} ~~laundry room~~ ^{Kitchen}

From that day on, Leldon could not remember his mother being happy. Nothing he could do or say would change her composure nor cajole a hint that she was still capable of any emotion besides tedium. He often thought that if he could just be a little older, he could take care of her like his father was supposed to do. But he was too young to have a job, too young to do anything else, it seemed, to help. He spent much of his time after school at the Chandler library, vacantly thumbing through books, searching for something of interest.

He said in frustration, "I want to be old," as he lowered his stiff arm reluctantly. The night was getting on and his eyes and limbs ached for rest while his mind wandered

back to the books on Native American history he had found in the library a few weeks before. They were in poor condition apparently neglected by the library's clientele—mostly elderly ladies who took to books about cooking and gardening and younger children brought to the library by their parents in hopes that just seeing so many books would encourage them to read. Perhaps Leldon's interest in these tomes was aroused by their abandonment to a greater degree than the same books might have if they had been new.

When school let out at 3:30, he went to the library since there was nothing to do at home. In these books he learned that the Oklahoma Indians had lived there for thousands of years before the white man came to claim the land. He read the accounts of battles between Indians and settlers until the library closed at 6:00 and he was forced to wander home. He usually stopped for a snack at home and then walked to the monument where he looked at the statue and wondered about the "Trail of Tears" and the exodus of the natives. As the sun slowly died behind him, the comforting image of one of these natives always went peacefully into the night.

He couldn't imagine why his ancestors had wanted to kill these people. However, he felt a partial vindication in that his great grandfather was one fourth Cherokee. Somewhere along the line, his ancestors had merged with Indians! Perhaps it was this blood flowing through his veins that had brought him here tonight to perform this rite. "I am part Indian!" He encouraged himself aloud. "I am one of them as much as I am a white man." He looked around in embarrassment at the sound of his own voice. He laughed and tried to convince himself that no one could hear. Yet images of deranged murderers and escaped convicts plagued him until he was ready to shout for help and run for shelter away from this mad night he had brought upon himself.

At twelve o'clock ~~a.m.~~ it seemed as if the night would last forever, that the sun should be peeping over the horizon any minute to welcome him into his new life of adulthood. He had no watch with him. The boys who went through their ceremonies had worn no watches. They didn't even have the same concept of time that we have, and he was determined to do without knowing the time as well. Tonight he would suffer and be afraid. Tomorrow he would walk without fear, for he would be a man.

trial The Indians of this area long ago called this ritual "~~Jang da hui~~" which means coming of age. The boys would, on their thirteenth birthday, be taken into the wild and left alone to fend for themselves for one night. Preceding this ritual was the ceremony of the "Black Drink," as it was called by the white man because of the black liquid that was consumed. The natives called it the "White Drink" because of the spiritual cleansing it was supposed to bring about. Leldon improvised his own recipe of the "Black Drink" *based on an actual* which he found in one of the older volumes at the library. The root of a tree, wild flowers, cacti, water from a running stream, and naturally, blood.

The book had been specific on what kind of roots, flowers, and blood to use, but the Latin names of the plants proved undecipherable. He used the most convenient, combining the first ingredients in his mother's blender and when the mixture looked fluid enough, he ~~took~~ a needle to prick his index fingers, bravely squeezing a drop from each. His mother came into the kitchen as he poured the finished mixture into a tupperware cup. She seemed willing to believe that he was just playing, and he told her that a friend from school was having a party for him. It was after all, his thirteenth birthday, and he would

not be home that night. ^{Believe} Almost happy that he had found a friend, his mother agreed to something beyond her knowing approval.

An alibi thus secured and his "Black Drink" (^{had twice got} his was more dirt colored) in hand, he began his mile-long walk to the statue, the friend he had just told his mother about. It was here that he had planned to spend the night next to the statue erected at Indian Spring Council Ground for Indian Tribes. The inscription noted that this area had been the center of Indian hunting grounds. When he sat quietly, he felt that he could see their teepees and that he was sitting among them, among the whispering sage grass.

It would be dark soon, and he would be left alone like the young Indian boys he had read about. No weapons for defense, no blankets for security against the inevitable coolness of a late spring night, and no food or water to safeguard himself from hunger. Leldon was to make it through the night with nothing but courage. He finally made his way to the statue where he stood saying goodbye to the sun and doing his best to ingest the insipid "Black Drink."

Now, at twelve o'clock, he wished he hadn't actually swallowed so much of it and began to have other regrets as well. This was all crazy. ~~How could he have been so stupid?~~ The night was too long and the breeze was forever whipping at his chapped face and arms. His thin shirt offered little protection from the damp coolness of midnight, and his stomach began to turn with a nausea he had never known before. Gradually he began to feel dizzy until the sudden yelp of a far away coyote sent him into a stupor about his life. Bending over at the request of the pains in his stomach, Leldon began to vomit profusely and to realize why the Indians claimed that their "White-Drink" cleansed the soul.

Once the violence of these disgorges had died considerably, he felt an odd sensation come over him, like a cloud had descended upon him and a pervading sense of gloom kept him from any position other than contorted into a ball at the foot of the statue. He remembered an Indian legend. "In remote ages, a great fog came down upon the ancestors of the Indians, and for a long time they wandered about in darkness. When one chanced to touch another, the two held fast, and in this way groups were formed, which eventually grew into large bands. The animals also wandered about uttering various cries, so tame from terror that they, too, joined the groping bands of people. Finally, a wind came from the east and swept away the fog, thus leaving clans of men and animals."

"Maybe," he thought, "the same thing is happening now. Maybe there's others lost too." His mind was comforted by this thought and wondered what it would be like once the fog was lifted. He faded to sleep under a clearing sky.

He wasn't sure how long he had been sleeping when a peculiar sound not far away awoke him. His vision was limited to what the moon allowed. It was much brighter now and he could make out a dark, oddly moving figure within the distance of a stone's throw. But he couldn't tell if it was a person's dog or maybe a wolf looking for food. Its quick jerking motions lead him to believe that it was not the former as he had hoped, but at best, the creature was a rabid dog which had only once been docile.

Its strange howling noises evoked panic in Leldon as he jumped suddenly to his feet, shirking any cold or other pain he had thus far experienced. The beast inched closer as Leldon's heart began to beat like the pounding rhythm of a war dance hammered on ancient rawhide drums. He could hear nothing but his heart beating this methodical,

suspenseful cadence intertwined with the yelps of his encroaching enemy. His instincts told him to turn and run as fast as possible back to town and to the safety of home. He was a fool, he told himself, for coming out here unprepared; he should have known the dangers of being here unarmed. But that was the whole reason for being here, to test his bravery, to see if he were worthy to be called an adult.

He realized that the beast would overcome him if he turned to run. With no gun or even a stick to ward off any attack, the only thing he could do was elevate himself out of reach from the fiend. But where? The nearest tree was directly behind the emerging beast, and he knew there was no chance of making it to another. The only possibility was climbing the statue, a feat which he attempted twice before succeeding with the vicious beast snapping at his feet.

For the time being he was safe. But how long could he hold onto the statue with this creature keeping a doleful watch on the prey just out of reach? He shouted at the animal, and would have thrown rocks if he had any. His stomach resumed its complaining as he clung fearfully to the head and arms of the statue.

The animal lay down beneath him with a whimper, evidently patient enough to wait while Leldon struggled against the weariness of the night. He could not sleep for fear of falling to the ground and being devoured. He could not yell for help as he was too far from home. He could only wait.

The rest of the night passed slowly in this way as he cried on the shoulder of his friend. At times he felt he would lose his grip altogether, but the up-cast eyes of the animal below recharged his strength. He trembled with fear and regret for having attempted this night, wondering how much longer until sunrise. With what little strength he could summon, he climbed further up until he had wedged himself between the head and the statue's upheld arm. Then he removed his belt and wrapped it around his arm and the head of the statue to brace himself from falling in case sleep did perchance come.

Sleep did come and Leldon soon awoke with the morning sun shining brightly in his eyes. He had missed the sunrise, but the creature of the night, along with all of his fears, had vanished in the presence of daylight. The fog of the night had been lifted as the wind blew gently from the east.

He was terribly tired as he climbed down and headed home unsure of what changes would come after last night, but when he got home, his mother smiled and asked "How was your night?"

"Fine," he said, "but I'm really tired."

So Leldon crawled into bed and slept. And although he hadn't joined hands with anyone that night, he still felt he was part of a clan of people he had always known as adults.

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