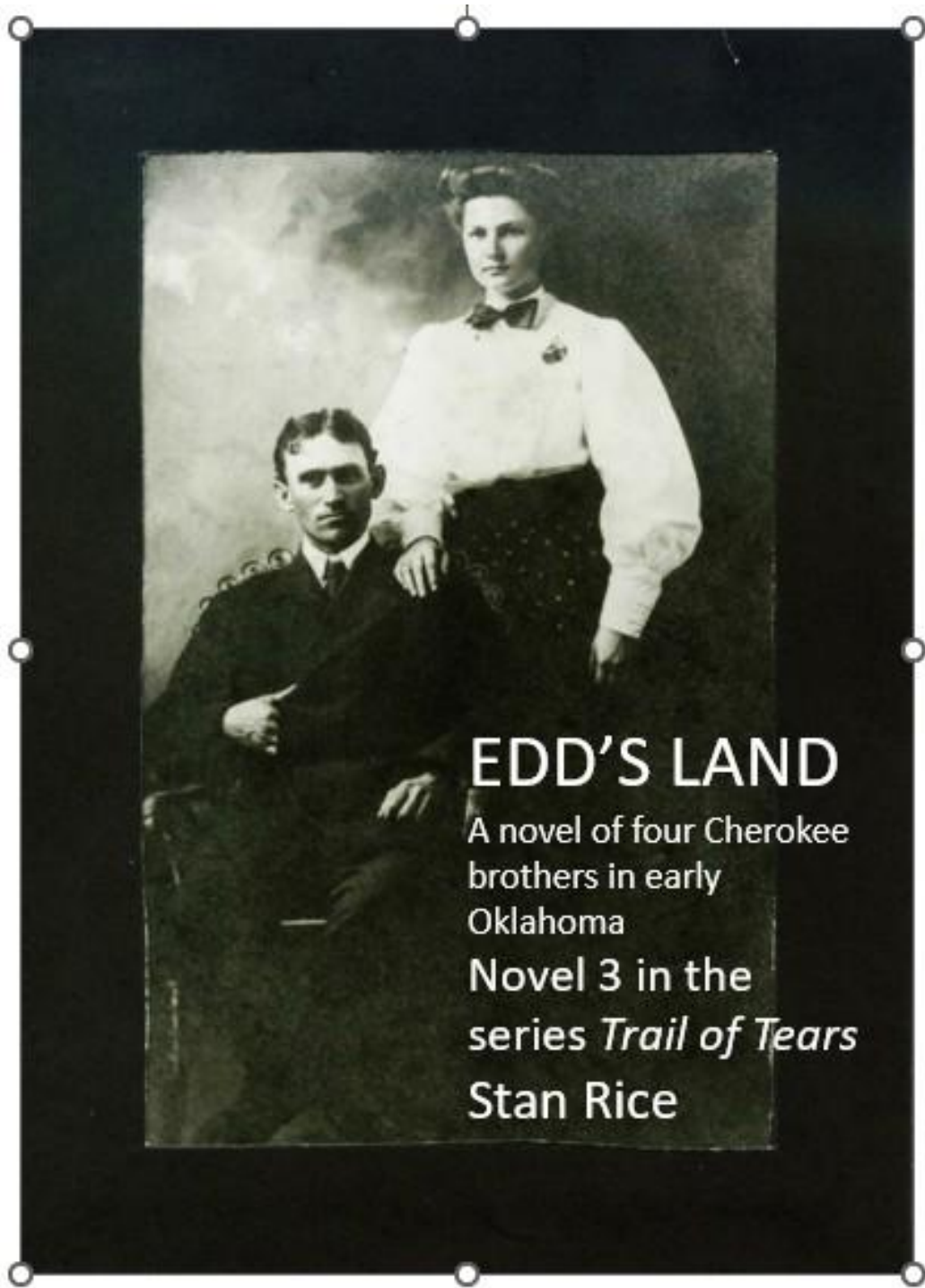




EDD'S LAND

A Novel of Four Cherokee Brothers in Early Oklahoma

Novel three of *Trail of Tears:*
Novels of Cherokee Identity

Stan Rice

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Cover image: Edd Hicks and Mary Carter about 1904.

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Summary of *Edd's Land*

Four mixed-blood Cherokee brothers, and the white swindler who steals their land and oil allotments, greet Oklahoma statehood in different ways. *Edd Hicks* (my grandfather) loses not just his land but his fiancée to Averd Hargrove, a Claremore banker. Edd remains confident and upright, and brings order to his farmland and family. *Frank Hicks* learns confidence as he plots his dramatic revenge against Hargrove. *Lon Hicks* leaves his past behind in pursuit of a failed Hollywood career. *William Hicks* is ill with tuberculosis when he meets the great Oklahoma socialist crusader Kate Barnard. Frank, to the disapproval of his racist family and friends, falls in love and moves in with Bert Hicks, a black woman descended from slaves owned by Frank's ancestors. Frank nearly gives up on his plan to scalp Hargrove until he sees Hargrove leading a lynch mob against Bert's brother. The net effect of the vast wealth of the former Cherokee Nation is that Edd's daughter Nina (my Mom) finally gets enough money back from the United States government to buy a new pair of shoes.

The twentieth-century theft of Native lands is one of the least known episodes of the American experience. Compared to a voluminous fiction literature about slavery and the black experience, us Natives get dismissed as inhabitants of flyover country and our stories shoehorned into genre westerns or into the academic Native Studies literature.

And it is an ongoing struggle. While the shooting of unarmed blacks by white police has captured national attention. Native American struggles continue to be ignored. More Native Americans, per capita, are shot and killed by police than blacks. According to an eyewitness account by a fellow academic whom I met at a Native American conference, federal contractors had military equipment left over from the Gulf War ready to use against the Standing Rock protestors in 2016, just as the government used Vietnam War helicopters against the Pine Ridge protestors in 1973. We are a conquered people.

Summary of the series *Trail of Tears*

The last Cherokee warrior woman Nanyehi (Nancy Ward) seeks peace between her Cherokee people and white Americans in the eighteenth century. Her sacrificial quest amazed, puzzled, and sometimes angered both her own people (especially her warrior cousin Dragging Canoe) and the whites. To Nanyehi, the path to peace was always and never clear. To her uncle the tribal peace chief, she was the leader called by the white wolf to bring peace to the Cherokees. To her people, she was a war hero. To her warrior cousin she was a prostitute of white men. To the whites, such as trader Bryan Ward whom she marries, Nancy was a squaw who astonished them with her wisdom and power. To Thomas Jefferson, she helped to inspire democracy. To her refugee descendants like me, her compromises proved futile. The story arc is completed when Nancy Ward decides to not betray Dragging Canoe to the American authorities.

Elizabeth's Exile is about Nancy's great granddaughter and the true story of her experiences on the Trail of Tears, in which the American government forced almost the whole tribe to leave their Appalachian homeland and relocate to what is now Oklahoma. Survival on the trail, and afterwards, as America experienced a civil war, was not easy or guaranteed. *Edd's Land* tells how white swindlers stole Cherokee land even after Oklahoma statehood, as told through the eyes of Edd Hicks, my grandfather.

The true story of Cherokee history needs to be told from the inside, and I am the one to do it. Compared to novels about the slave experience, the continuing oppression of Native Americans remains largely untold. Native American presence in fiction is far less than that of other minorities in the United States. Most of the fiction depicts drunk Indians passed out in a ditch on the rez in flyover country, which is a racist image. For me, telling the stories of the Cherokee experience is a mission. I think it is time for an own-voices novel about the Cherokee experience—*my* family's Cherokee experience. This is the third novel of that experience, starting with *Nancy's War* and *Elizabeth's Exile*.

Part one: Edd Hicks

Chapter 1

“So, Edd,” Will Rogers said to me the last time I saw him in 1899, “What do you think about all of this allotment stuff?” We were sitting on the banks of Spencer Creek at Winganon. Clem Rogers’s land was on one side, my father’s land on the other. Winganon wasn’t even a town. It had a school, which doubled as a church, and that was about all. As usual, Will had his lasso with him. He could lasso almost anything. He caught a dead tree limb, and then a slow-flying heron. But he couldn’t get the hummingbird that was drinking from the trumpet vine flower with its long beak.

“Isn’t much we can do about it,” I told him. I could never match Will in physical dexterity. While he lassoed, I couldn’t do anything but throw rocks in the creek. I couldn’t even skip them across the water. “It’s going to happen. We need to make the best of it, sure enough. It’s the only way us Indians are going to be able to keep the land that is currently Indian Territory, but won’t be for much longer.” Oklahoma statehood was inevitable. The Curtis Act of 1895 mandated allotment of tribal land to individuals, but no federal agents had yet arrived.

“Well, it’ll all be taken care of by the time I get back,” said Will. He was headed off to Argentina to rope cattle.

A new century was coming, and we were creating a new land. It was our chance to create a new life for our tribe, leaving behind the strife and confusion of the last century. All possibilities were open, and we could write a big new story upon the pages of this land. Some other Cherokees were angry that our tribal lands would be divided up. But as I saw it, we Cherokees, along with members of the other Civilized Tribes, had just recently become citizens of the United States of America—decades later than the freed slaves became citizens—and we might as well get as much good out of it as we can.

“Another decision we are gonna have to make,” said Will, “is whether we are white or Cherokee. We’re both. Edd, you’re about the same degree of Indian as I am. What will we be after statehood?”

“The new century,” I said, “will be the century of the white man. If I call myself an Indian, the white overlords might decide I can’t manage my own allotment for myself. Some of them already said as much. But if I call myself a white man, they’ll let me keep my land and all that it produces.”

“Which includes?” prompted Will. His hands were nervous; he was looking around for something more to rope.

“You know as well as I do. Oil.”

“They won’t let your family or mine have any of the land with oil or coal on it. Down in Choctaw country, they even rerouted a train track to go right through coal fields, so that the train companies could claim all the coal.” Will showed uncharacteristic irritation.

“Oil’s different,” I said. “The white geologists know where the coal is. Oil’s not quite so easy to find. You either find a lot of it, and it spurts out, or you find none. It’s not quite a random thing, though. The geologists study the rock layers and can make guesses about where the oil is. But not very good guesses. Before they find most of the oil, they will have already allotted the land to us.”

“Don’t be so ignorant, Edd.” Will was really irritated now. “Imagine me calling you ignorant, but that’s the way it is. As soon as an Indian finds oil on an allotment, the whites will find a way to get it.

“I take it, then,” continued Will, “that when the agents come around you are going to declare yourself a white man.”

“It would not be a lie, Will. What will you do?”

“Wherever I go, Argentina or somewheres else, bein’ Cherokee is a novelty. Those gauchos down there, when they ask me who I am, I’ll tell ’em I’m the Cherokee Kid.”

Chapter 2

And that is exactly what happened. Will became The Cherokee Kid, a famous performer up in New York. And I stayed home, acting like a civilized Cherokee but ready to turn white at the drop of a hat.

There was no way I could make my Cherokee ancestry disappear. Nor did I wish it to disappear. When the United States government forced the Cherokee tribe to migrate to what is now Indian Territory—on what we now call the Trail of Tears—it was a time of mourning and suffering. My father Andrew, God rest his soul, told me the stories he heard from my grandfather Usquuh-ne and my great-grandmother Elizabeth, about how the Cherokees who remained in the East in 1838 were rounded up like cattle, penned like cattle, then driven like cattle to Indian Territory. This was caused by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, proposed and vigorously put into action by President Andrew Jackson.

This is all true. But how much of our suffering was caused by our own stubbornness, our unwillingness to capitalize on the opportunities given to us by President Jackson? The Hicks family, and other Cherokee families, had migrated to the west long before 1838 and established profitable farms and businesses. It was only the resisters who waited until they were forced to migrate with just the clothes on their backs. When they arrived, they found the best land already taken. My full-blood Cherokee grandfather's parents were among the resisters. They died on the Trail, and the Hicks family (distant relatives) adopted my grandfather and changed his name from Usquuh-ne to Lewis Hicks. Not surprisingly, the adoptive parents raised Lewis to regard Andrew Jackson as a forward-thinking man.

My great-grandmother Elizabeth, who came to Indian Territory on the Trail, was a descendant of Nancy Ward, the famous and last warrior woman of the Cherokees. Elizabeth was seven-eighths white, and could have passed for white. Some white folks, they were surprised to see other white people walking on the Trail with the Cherokees. But a lot of Cherokees on the Trail, even Chief John Ross, looked completely white. Elizabeth could have avoided the Trail of Tears. But she took her children, including my fifteen-sixteenths white grandmother Minerva, with her. Lewis and Minerva met on the Trail, and they got married. They named one of their two children, my father, Andrew Jackson Hicks. They named their boy after the president who had taken away the homeland that the Cherokees had occupied from time immemorial.

I have both Cherokee and white ancestors, and I have chosen to identify mainly with the white ones. When the Dawes Commission agents came around to Winganon in 1904 to take a census for the allotment, in fulfillment of the Curtis Act, they wanted to know how much Indian blood we had in us. I am about one-quarter Cherokee. But the agents wrote down whatever we told them. My brothers Frank and Lon wrote down that they were one-quarter, and my sister Serena that she was five-eighths. Of course, since we all have the same mother and father, these numbers cannot both be true. I told the agent that I was one-sixteenth—just enough to secure my

right in the allotment, but not enough for any white man to control what I did with it. God forgive me for lying, but it was for the greater good.

And for me, personally, the future looked bright. My brothers and I ran a general store in Chelsea, northeast of Claremore, not far from the corner where Indian Territory meets Kansas and Missouri. Soon, with people looking to spend their new oil money, we can become prosperous.

Even more than this, I planned to marry the most beautiful and wonderful woman you could ever hope to see. Mary was the daughter of the Carter family, mixed-blood Cherokees who lived on land not far from my father's. Unlike my family, the Carters have pretty much forgotten their Cherokee roots, except when it comes to that land allotment of theirs. As we grew up, Mary and I just assumed that someday we would be husband and wife. I never even proposed to her; we just found ourselves, one day, talking about living on my allotment, raising crops and livestock and kids.

I had my feet firmly planted in both Cherokee and white worlds. Mary knew it, and it was, I think, part of what sealed her heart to mine. She saw me at a Cherokee stickball game one Saturday afternoon when she and her brothers wandered over to the ball grounds near Winganon. The Carters knew us, but did not know any other Cherokees, and they wanted to find out what other Cherokees do when they get together to socialize. Some of the ball players wore buckskin breeches, but I wore the pants and shirt of a white man, and even a little ribbon tie. Despite looking entirely white, I was the real Cherokee, and the stickball champion. I still remember Mary's smile as she watched me scoop up the little ball, which was just a rock tied in leather, with the two long-handled cane spoons, and launch it overhand into the air, where it struck the wooden fish on top of the pole. She and her brothers were about to go home, before the game was over, and I hit the fish again. She heard all the other Cherokees, even the full-bloods, cheering me as the champion.

I could read and write in English as well as anyone. I think Mary was impressed, and that is why she got me, for my twenty-fifth birthday, a copy of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. It was a novel about a knight back in the days when everybody talked fancy. Scott was the novelist who used so many big words that only people like me could understand him, and then only by keeping a dictionary nearby. She was also impressed when I took a pen and, with penmanship better than any of her nearly illiterate brothers, wrote the date on the frontispiece: *Apr. 17, 1904*. I doubt that her brothers even knew what a frontispiece was. But I could also read and write Cherokee, using the syllabary invented by Sequoyah eighty years earlier. Mary and I spent one pleasant evening spelling out Cherokee words in the intricate and mysteriously beautiful script. I was her safe and civilized bridge into a vanishing tribal world. A flame of admiration glowed in her dark eyes. Her dark hair was fixed so beautifully under her bonnet, and I could smell the rose water on her skin. There was nothing I valued or could value more than her love.

Chapter 3

One day in 1906 Mary came into our store in Chelsea.

"*Osiyo*, Eddie!" she exclaimed, greeting me in Cherokee. "I just saw your name on a poster!"

I acted like it was the most natural thing in the world for my name to be on a poster. "Yes," I said. "I am campaigning to be the representative from the Cooweescoowee district to the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention." Cooweescoowee was Chief John Ross's Cherokee name. Ross was the chief who tried unsuccessfully to prevent the Indian Removal from the east after 1830. The commissioner of Indian Territory wanted to have the broad outlines of a constitution in place by the time Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory became the state of Oklahoma.

"Well, I'll swan," she said. This is what we Okies say instead of "I swear," which, of course, the Bible forbids us to do. "My own Eddie, helpin' to create the new state."

"Surprised?" I asked.

She stopped still and pinned me with her dark eyes. She pushed a stray lock of hair back under her bonnet. I imagined that I could see the artery in her neck throbbing, and her heart beating under the fine cotton of her blouse. "No," she said. "It stands to reason, don't it?"

And it did. I helped establish the local school. I knew all about farming, but also about how to run a business. What more did a man need to lead Oklahoma into the new century?

My brother Frank, who seemed to always have a scowl on his face even when he was happy, looked up from putting boxes of cornstarch on one of the shelves. My brother Lon was sitting on a cane chair in the corner, with a perpetual smirk on his face. I smiled confidently at the world.

Then I said to Mary, "Behold your store, Mrs. Hicks!" For she would be my bride in just a few weeks. I did not mention, but she already knew, that we just rented the space. "Now, can I help you find something from your store?"

"No," said Mary. "I just come in here to tell you I saw your name on a poster."

"Tell your brothers to vote for me," I said.

Mary looked at me a little sadly. There was no use hiding the fact that her brothers did not like me very much. But this was a new century. There wasn't much they could do about our engagement. At least I knew they would not campaign against me; they were too lazy to do anything that required that much work. And I think Mary knew it. I was her ticket away from a shiftless family.

That is, *I* was her ticket. As for my family, not so much. Everyone around here knew that my father died of pneumonia after he was out in the rain looking for gold. What a fool's errand, everyone said. Dad believed that my grandfather, Lewis, had a cache of gold hidden in a cave along the Verdigris River. Only he knew where it was, legend had it. It was supposed to be at a bend in the river and you have to drop down into the cave by a rope hanging from a big

sycamore tree. One time, somebody outside the family found it, or so they claimed. They came back at night to steal the gold, and along came the ghost of my grandfather on his white horse. The interloper got away as quickly as his old mare could take him. Everyone knows this is just a story, but my father believed it. If it hadn't been for me and my brothers taking care of the farm, the crops might have failed a couple of years as my father went looking for the gold. He died only last year.

And some people around here, not as many, knew about my grandmother, Minerva. After she married Lewis in 1850 and had two children, she became in a family way again. She finally admitted that the father was another man, and Lewis divorced her. She married Israel J. Ward, the child's father, three months after the child, William Whitfield Ward, was born. Back in the old Cherokee days, a century and a half ago, this might not have been such a major event; a woman could choose a new husband whenever she liked. But ever since we started building churches and acting white, this was an embarrassment. Minerva was married three more times. Then she died. She crammed six marriages into her forty years. I can only hope that she will be forgotten. I will do what I can to erase the memory. None of my descendants will know about her perfidy, unless they take the trouble to check up on court records and birth certificates. When, one time, someone mentioned the family of Israel Ward, I said, "They're no kin of mine." God forgive me for lying, but it was for the greater good. Besides, it all depends on how you define "kin." I was trying to leave behind not only the chaotic worlds of my grandmother and my father, but the whole chaotic history of the Cherokees. I keep alive the good traditions—our songs, our language, our love of stickball—but I hope that the bad part will vanish like mist in the sunrise of statehood.

"You need a ride back home?" I asked Mary. My little buggy and its obedient horse Samuel stood outside in back of the store. The autumn day was cold and windy, but I kept the seat covered with a blanket so that it would always be clean and dry, a worthy vehicle for my beloved's delicate dress.

"No," she answered. "John's waitin' outside." John was one of her brothers.

"You're coming over Sunday after church, aren't you?" I asked her. She often did, so I hardly need have asked, but just hearing her say yes would feed my hungry heart for a couple more days. My mother enjoyed Mary's visits almost as much as I did. We had an outstanding invitation to her whole family, though none of the others had ever visited.

"If I have anything to say about it," she said solemnly.

Something in her tone of voice made me hesitate for just a moment, but it was only later that I understood what it meant.

She turned to the door, but looked back at me. She had been practicing just a few Cherokee words and phrases, none of which her father had taught her. Her dress, underneath the bustle, reached down to the floor, where the lace remained white even as it came perilously close to the grime of the earth. "Donny daygo hooey," she said. *Till we meet again*. She knew how to thank me—*wado*—as well as how to greet me.

I smiled grandly. "*Donadagohuh-i*," I said. "Close enough. And as for you, my beloved, the memory of your smile will be my food and drink until we meet again, soon." I used my fanciest pronunciation.

"Oh, you're a regular Sir Walter Scott with them words," she smiled as she left the store.

"It ain't her store yet," Frank muttered when she left.

"Of course, it'll still be yours too," I told my brother. "Leastways as long as Old Man Nestor keeps renewing our lease."

"And I don't trust them Carters. Sure wouldn't extend 'em no credit," said Frank. I went behind the counter to continue cutting meat. I was the one who extended credit to the Carters.

Skillful as I was, I would not talk and cut meat at the same time. If I was going to start a farm and raise Mary's children, I needed all of my fingers. When I finished a cut, I said, "That's what the storekeeps said about Dad. He always said he'd repay when he found Grampa's gold."

"And so, *we* had to repay," Frank sniffed.

"Don't be such a pessimist," I said, thinking again about our glorious future. "We're all set for a profitable future. Statehood will bring a lot of business in." Frank winced and looked away. "At the very least," I continued, "once the jurisdiction of the United States of America applies here, there won't be as much lawlessness." Indian Territory was infamous for thieves and robbers. We didn't worry as much as some shop owners; with three brothers at work, one was always within reach of a gun.

Lon shifted his tall slouchy body on the chair near the door and rubbed his chin. "You sure are promisin' a lot to that woman," he said to me. "*Behold your store, Mrs. Hicks*. And Mr. Hicks is goin' to Guthrie perty soon to that convention to lead us all into the future. Well, that's grand, really grand." He smiled that impish grin he always had, even back when he was a little boy. "You sure are goin' through a heap of work to get yourself a woman. There are, you know, easier ways."

I turned on him, not in fury but in indignation. "Lorenzo," I called him by the fancy and embarrassing name Dad gave him. "I'll thank you to not suggest that I approach Miss Carter in any way except what is most honorable."

"I kindly thought you would say that," smiled Lon. "You done put her up on a pedestal, Eddie. What if Frank here is right, and she's more like her brothers than you admit? They're all no-goods up to no good. What if..."

"Enough," I silenced him without rancor. "Say what you will about her brothers. But where do you think diamonds come from? They come from the same place coal comes from." I resumed work on the meat.

"Don't get all het up," said Lon. "I'm just sayin.' I got no reason to think anything other than you do about her." His grin looked like he had a particularly delicious lozenge, like one of the ones over on Aisle Two, in his mouth. I knew he had a girl. But he was pretty skillful—none of us could figure out who it might be or how he ever met up with her.

Right then, Frank dropped a glass bottle of ointment on the floor, and it broke open. Frank was pretty clumsy, no matter how hard he tried, and he always tried hard, to do things right. I walked over to investigate, but Lon got there before me. Lord, that man could move when there was something he wanted to move for. I saw that there was no great catastrophe. Certainly, we could not sell that bottle of ointment, but the glass appeared to break into a few large shards, easy to clean up, and we could salvage some of the ointment—it had the thickness of lotion—and give it to Mom.

“Sorry, sorry, I was trying, I was really trying, to be careful,” said Frank.

Before I had a chance to speak, Lon was smiling. “Ah, don’t worry, Brother Frank, don’t worry. Mistakes will happen. But...” He smiled even bigger and both Frank and I knew something very witty was about to come from his mouth. “But must you give them so much help?” Lon looked around the store, disappointed that no one except his two unlaughing brothers were there to hear his little joke.

“At least I was a-trying,” said Frank, angrily.

Lon didn’t ever like to argue, so he said, “I think it’s time for a little break. I’ll be back soon. You guys try not to burn the place down while I’m gone, you hear?”

After Lon walked out the door, Frank muttered, “I could scalp that man.”

“Now, don’t get upset,” I told him. “That’s just the way Lon is. He enjoys getting you upset, don’t you see? Don’t give him the satisfaction of seeing you get upset.”

Frank thought about this as he continued to crouch over the broken bottle. He looked at his own shirt and pants, and his worn-out shoes, as if he was criticizing himself, as if he were going to say, *What else but clumsiness would you expect from a man like me?* Instead, he looked at the little bit of ointment that was on the tips of his fingers. Then he started rubbing the ointment into his skin, slipping his hands past one another with the gracefulness of a woman.

“That’s better,” I told him.

“So, he’s taking a break, huh?” said Frank. “I was unaware that he ever did anything else.”

“Frank!” I said excitedly. “Hold that thought. You know, you’re a smart man, and you can think of things like that to say to Lon. Why should *he* get in all the good jokes?”

“Why, that’s rightly spoken,” said Frank, standing up and flashing his arch smile.

Later that day, one of the customers was a man from out of town who seemed to be taking an interest in the store. I’m not sure I liked this. At one point he asked me how many men worked in the store.

“About two-thirds of them,” I said, with utter seriousness. I looked over at Lon, loafing as always. Lon smiled a little bit as if he agreed with me.

The man looked at me in confusion. It took him a few seconds before he smiled. He picked up a little packet of buckwheat flour and brought it to the front.

Right then Frank knocked over a big flask of lamp oil with the handle of his broom.

“Dag nabbit!” he said, throwing his broom to the ground. “Why am I always so clumsy? That there’s the second time in one afternoon I done knocked something over!”

"Mistakes will happen..." Lon began.

Frank stalked over to him and pointed a finger right into Lon's totally imperturbable face. "I know what you're a-gonna say, and if'n you do, you ain't seen nothin'! You wait until you see the anger of which I am capable. I been puttin' up with your lip too long, too long, I tell you. At least I *try* to do some work around here..."

"You just finished telling me this earlier this afternoon," said Lon.

Then Frank turned on me. "I'm so clumsy. What woman would ever want me, anyways? Now you two, you cut great figures—like Mary says, Eddie, you're a regular Sir Walter Scott, so elegant—but me? Some woman'd have to take mercy on me to have me, I can tell you. Maybe I'm-a gonna just end up living with Mom..."

"Frank," I said calmly, "this outburst isn't helping any. All you got to do is to get the broom and the mop and clean up the mess. It's not like it's the Franco-Prussian War or something. You're a good worker, Frank," I continued. The visitor was getting uncomfortable, holding his little packet of buckwheat flour, but I had to finish this up. "To listen to you describe it, you'd think everything in the store would be lying around on the floor in a mess. One look around and anyone can see that, by and large, Frank Hicks does a good job." The visitor glanced around, then back down at his package. "Now," I said to the visitor, "that flour will be fifty cents."

The visitor saw me write it down in the ledger. We didn't have one of those new cash registers. He paid and left.

When Frank and I were alone—during another of Lon's breaks—I started laughing. "How'd you like that?" I asked Frank.

"Are you ribbin' me again?" he scowled.

"I never done ribbed you before, why would I start now? No, I meant my smart-aleck remark about how two-thirds of us work here."

"I think I can do that too," said Frank, laughing with me.

When Lon came back in and sat down in his chair, as always, Frank walked over to him.

"I'd like to compliment you on your work," Frank said to Lon.

Lon looked up in surprise and confusion. Then he said, "Why, thanks, I guess."

"Yes, I'd like to compliment you on your work," Frank looked contemplatively into the air and wound up again. He faced Lon. "When are you gonna start?"

An expressionless silence hovered between the two men. Then Lon smiled really big. He gave Frank a little punch on the shoulder. "Hey, Frankie! That was a good one. I didn't know you had it in you. Just when you think you got someone all figured out. Now, *that's* the way for a brother of Lonnie Hicks to talk!"

Lon had maneuvered the momentum of the joke into his own favor. But, for once, he did not demean Frank. Lon walked over to the corner and got a broom and started sweeping up some of the fragments Frank had not yet gotten.

As I rode my buggy back home at closing time, I was full of joy. The sky was gray, but the road was solid. The wind was cold but pure. The pastures and fields were flat and, though the soil was not good, three generations of the Hicks family had picked out the rocks and stacked them into circular columns at the corners, around which we strung barbed wire. And we had chopped and hacked back the trees and bushes. The result was all the more satisfying because the trees were very hard to remove, not only the post oaks that grew slowly and had hard wood, but the bois-d'arc trees, whose wood was almost too hard for the saw. I have built a lot of muscle from sawing bois-d'arc. You wear out a saw blade and have to re-sharpen it before you even get through one trunk. You have to tie a couple of branches to a team of mules and have them bend the trunk just so you can slide the saw back in. No use trying to chop it. Then the hard work began, of digging up the stump. You can tell which fields are the products of hard work. Other farmers—need I mention the Carters?—just left the bois-d'arc trees. No wonder the traditional Cherokees used bois-d'arc (which is French for *wood of the bow*) to make archery bows. Of course, we did not cut down or pull up bois-d'arc trees that were in more or less the right place to anchor a fence.

Chapter 4

Our church met in the same building as the school. Textbooks sat in a pile in the corner: a collection of Christian stories called *Chimney Corner Tales* by Caroline Stetson Allen and Published by Pilgrim Press. It had children's stories even I liked to read: "The Dapple-Gray Pony," "Johnny's New Ribbon," and "Jimmy's Twinkling Star." Some stories grew from old nursery rhymes like "When Polly Put the Kettle On." The book had a whole series of stories based on "A Cheerful Little Girl and Her Cheerful Little Doll." The school, with all grades in one big room, used the same chalkboard and the same hymnbooks as we used during our church meetings.

In church every Sunday, Mary was there with her brothers and parents. All of them except Mary pretty much sat or stood in silence. Mary sang quietly with a beautiful voice.

*How beautiful to walk in the steps of the Savior
Stepping in the light, stepping in the light...*

I had a good voice too, and wanted Mary to hear it, even though she was across the aisle. Not only could I carry the tune well, but I could read the shape-notes in the music. We used shape notes because we didn't have a piano or an organ. Some churches refuse to have pianos, claiming that the first century Christians had no instrumental music in their church services. But us, we just decided it wasn't worth the expense of hauling one in from Claremore over the dirt roads. We were second to none in doing what the Bible says, but who is to say whether the early churches had instruments or not? For the benefit of country churches without instruments, by choice or by necessity, somebody invented shape notes so that you could tell which pitch of the scale was which. Even if you couldn't tell an F from a C sharp, you could tell which was *do*, which was *re*, and which was *me*. The main pitch of the scale is a right-side up triangle, see. Then a half circle, then a diamond, then a triangle on its side. The last note in a scale is an upside-down triangle.

Once in a while, just loud enough for Mary to hear it, I launched into the tenor line, which harmonized just a little above the melody. I often fantasized that she smiled at me when I did this.

Meanwhile, my mother sat scrunched over mumbling the melody. Frank scowled, of course. Lon slouched on the pew and grinned. Sometimes there was a bass line solo, and that's when Lon's deep voice would really shine. The low voices took the melody, and the rest of us chanted an answer to it.

Life's evening sun (Life's evening sun)
Is sinking low (Is sinking low)
A few more days (A few more days)
And I must go (And I must go).

Lon was about the only man who could reach all the way down to the *sol* underneath the bass clef, *and I must go*. I winced a little bit when he sometimes jazzed it up a little, like a vaudevillian minstrel singer. But what could I say; it was the only thing about church that he enjoyed, and it kept him coming. I thought that maybe someday he would hear something in the sermon that would speak to his heart and bring him to the Lord.

Once in a while we sang something in a minor key, and that's when Frank sat up and his eyes widened. I think he really believed those sad-sounding songs were beautiful. I even saw tears in his eyes one time.

I will arise and go to Jesus
He will enfold me in His arms
In the arms of my dear Savior
Oh, there are ten thousand charms.

Without the slightest doubt, my favorite part of church, even more than the mysterious beauty of the Lord's Supper, even more than Brother Lynch's thoughtful sermons, was when we sang a song with an alto solo in it. In these songs, the melody was pitched lower, and the whole congregation let the womenfolk take the lead. Women never got to take the lead on anything else—the Bible wouldn't permit it—so we let them shine on these solos. And they were really good melodies, as good as anything you'd hear on one of those gramophones in the Edison store in Claremore.

He'll pilot me from day to day
When blinded eyes can't see the way
Let come what may on life's dark sea
My blessed Lord will pilot me.

Of course, Janice Baker's voice was the loudest on these lines, but I could distinctly hear Mary's voice, less powerful but very smooth. (As smooth as fine whiskey, Lon once said; I asked him how he knew, and he just smiled.) She did not have to fantasize that I beamed a smile at her at those times.

"One of these days," Mom said after church to Earl Carter, Mary's father, "you're going to have to come over to dinner with us, too."

"Well," he said, "we have a little work to do down to the place."

“What’s this about workin’ on the Lord’s Day?” Mom demanded. I would not have dared to speak so directly to him, at least until after he was my father-in-law.

“Well,” said Earl with a little grin, “it’s not really work, so much. Just fix up that hole in the barn wall, ‘s all. Not like it’s a dusk-to-dawn kind of work. Not like we get paid for it or nothin.’ As you well know, there ain’t a day we all don’t do some kinda work out here. The cows make sure of that.”

Mom said only, “Well, invitation’s open.”

Earl shuffled his feet and looked down. “Actually, Mrs. Hicks, I ain’t so sure that Mary can keep comin’ over so often.”

My heart sank when I heard this, though I told myself there was no good reason for it. An engagement is an engagement, even if it gets interrupted a Sunday or two.

I stepped in. “True, Mr. Carter. But today’s sort of special. Mom here was going to tell Mary all about what she remembers from the War Between the States.”

Mary came over to us and smiled. “We learned all about the War back in school,” she said. School was almost as far into her past as mine, almost a decade. “But what could be better than hearing it from someone who was there?” Then she looked at me. “Of course, I’ll be over.”

“And I’ll bring her back plenty before sunset,” I promised Mr. Carter, who said nothing in response.

We finished noon dinner. Lon sat back in his chair, cleaning his big teeth with a little pick. Frank excused himself and went back to his room. We all lived with Mom as we saved up for going out on our own, except my older sister Serena, who was married, and younger brother William, who was off to boarding school learning that fancy handwriting. What with the whole family of us, we had pretty much finished off the chicken and mashed potatoes. The apple dumplings for dessert wouldn’t last long. The chicken meat was fresh. Mom wrung the chicken’s neck and bled it that very morning. The dogs ate the guts. “I was a pretty young girl during the War, so I don’t remember much,” continued Mom. Serena and her husband John were visiting; Serena was banging the dishes in the kitchen. “And it was in Tennessee.” Mom was not Cherokee, so her family had not been forced to leave Tennessee on the Trail. “What I most remember is when my older brother James was out in the field one day. And these officers rode up on their horses and drafted him.”

“Just like that?” asked Mary.

“Just like that,” said Mom. “They knew that if they let him come back to home, we’d-a locked the door and got out the guns.”

“You mean, you weren’t eager for James to go off and be a hero for the Confederacy?”

“What are you talkin’ about, Miss? Us country farm families, don’t matter which side we was on, just wanted to plant our crops and make a living. Pure and simple. We didn’t really care which government we was under.” She wiped her face with a handkerchief. “All that fightin’ about slavery. Well, we didn’t own no slaves, let me tell you. We was too poor. Would we have, if we were rich? We never bothered asking ourselves such a question. Wasn’t us who had slaves, but the big plantation owners, for whose interests that war seems to have been fit. Actually,

wasn't my ancestors had slaves, it was my husband's Cherokee ancestors. Well, if you go back far enough, maybe back to Nancy Ward." She folded the handkerchief and stuck it in a pocket. "No, them big plantation owners didn't care two licks about us poor farmers. To them, we was just a source of cannon fodder."

Mary shuddered. "Those must have been awful times." She seemed to be reacting to the story as if she could imagine herself right in it. "Your family, they'd-a got out the guns."

"Yes," Mom said. "And that wasn't the worst of it. I was too young to understand this, but one day some soldiers come through, and the next day my sister Genevieve stayed in her room and wouldn't come out. I heard her crying. Only much later did I find out what happened."

"What she's trying to say is..." Lon paused.

"One of the Confederate soldiers had his way with her," said Mom.

"Two of them," Lon corrected her. "And that's where Uncle Sylvester come from."

"Hush, Lon," said Mom. "You don't know that for a fact."

"And things were pretty bad right here in Indian Territory," Mom continued. "Eddie, your Dad was pretty young then too, but Grampa fought on the Union side. A lot of Cherokees were on the rebel side, but Grampa was a real Union hero."

"The loyalists in Indian Territory suffered a lot," Mom continued. "The Confederates would come along to the houses that somebody told them weren't Confederate, and they would take whatever they wanted—bees, hawks, corn, tools—and whatever they didn't want, they would destroy. One woman had to watch all of her feather mattresses cut open with knives and the feathers scattered. For no reason other than to cause terror. Many Cherokees left with nothing and became refugees, that is, if they could find someplace to go. That General Stand Watie, himself a Cherokee, was the worst. He burnt Chief John Ross's house. Of course, Ross was rich, and he had time to pack two wagons with his stuff and leave the Territory. He didn't suffer like the rest of them."

"I'm glad you all got through that," said Mary.

"Well, *we* did," said Mom. "But the Five Tribes lost the whole western half of Indian Territory as the price of most of the leaders having backed up the losing side." That was where Oklahoma Territory came from. "The United States conveniently forgot that a lot of Cherokees were loyal to the Union, leastways as much as circumstances permitted."

It was mid-afternoon. At a pause in the conversation, I said to Mary, "I best be getting you back home. Might be enough time for me to help your Dad cut some wood."

Mary said goodbye to Mom, who had by now gone back to sewing on a quilt. The quilt had repeated, stylized bluebirds made from scraps of an old dress. I did not need to remind Mary that the quilt was for our bed someday soon.

Chapter 5

"It's pretty cold," I said, as I look Mary home in the buggy. "At this rate, it's going to be a pretty cold winter."

"I reckon we'll get through it," Mary answered.

"With that quilt Mom's sewing, I reckon so."

As my little buggy carried us down the road, Mary said, "Eddie, pull over."

I looked at her. I don't believe she ever said this to me before. We had always chatted with one another perfectly well as the buggy bumped along. Now she had a serious look in her eyes. I guided Samuel over toward the side of the road. There were no other horses or buggies, and no houses within sight.

"Eddie, I have to talk to you about something."

"I'm all ears," I said, without thinking. I hoped I had not drawn attention to a part of me that was bigger than it is in some people. But Mary didn't notice.

"Dad wants me to marry Averd Hargrove."

The bottom fell out of my stomach right then. Averd Hargrove was the rich brat son of the owner of the Fidelity Fiduciary Bank in Claremore. But I did not let it show. I was ready to impose the straight lines of reason on what just happened, just like I had imposed the straight lines of plow and fence on the landscape and the straight lines of Gospel truth on the chaotic history of my family.

"He does, does he?" I said. "And do you want to marry him?"

"No, of course not," she said, looking even more pensive.

"Well, all righty, then," I said. This was starting to sound like a story line from one of those cheap novels published in Chicago or New York. Time to put an end to that old story line right now. "You are twenty-five years old. You will marry whomsoever you wish."

"I wish it was that easy," she said.

"Now, don't go worrying about a dowry or something," I said. "What's the worst your father could do? He could, I suppose, disinherit you, but you don't have a thing to worry about, with me. Anyway, what's your Pa got against me?"

"Oh, it's not you."

I knew she was talking about my brothers and my father, and maybe my grandmother too. "Oh," I said, "but it *is* me. You are marrying *me*, not my family."

"I wish it was that easy," she repeated.

I drove Mary into Claremore in my buggy only a couple of months earlier so she could attend the ball sponsored by the veterans of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Union side. It was ostensibly to honor the veterans of the War Between the States, Confederates too, but everyone knew it was a collective coming-out party for all the young women. I had considered myself very lucky that Mary and I were already engaged before the ball. I saw her meet Averd Hargrove and talk with him. They both looked at me, but only Mary smiled. I was not surprised

that Hargrove kept boldly pouring his blandishments upon her even after she said she was engaged. The Hargroves think they own everything. They almost do, but not quite.

I said to Mary, "Actually, darling, it *is* that easy. I mean, how are they going to stop us? At gunpoint? The frontier days are over. No more Jesse James antics anymore."

"What I am trying to tell you, Eddie, is this." Mary looked down into her lap and appeared almost nauseated. "They're not going to let us get married, and that's that."

"I don't suppose the Hargroves's money has anything to do with it?" I immediately regretted saying this, but the Hargrove fortune—and all the power associated with it—was impossible to ignore.

I was relieved to hear Mary answer, "Not to my way of thinking."

"Well, they can't stop us," I repeated.

"But they can make us change our plans a little," said Mary.

I thought about this. The entire history of the Cherokee tribe, and of Indian Territory, was a story of people changing their plans in order to accomplish what they had originally intended. It was the story of using the rocks pulled out of the field to make a fence corner, and of using bois-d'arc trees as fence anchors, instead of tossing them aside. "Change our plans? In what way?"

"Eddie, we need to get married right now. It's our only chance. If I go back in my house, they won't let me out again, leastways not to see you. Sort of like your Mom's brother and the Confederate officers." Mary did not look into my eyes.

"You mean, we have to elope?" The chaos associated with that word really bothered me, but now that I spoke it, and looked at my beloved, the word took on an air of adventure.

"Sounds like a novel, don't it?" She smiled briefly.

"Well," I said, "that works fine in novels, but in the real world it's, as you say, not so easy. For one thing, it costs money. I've been saving up, but I don't have enough money now."

"It'll be cheaper than a real wedding?" She looked up at me. "And just as legal."

"I have the assets but not the cash," I pointed out.

"There's the money from the store," she said.

I became a little huffy, something I told myself I'd never do with Mary. "That's not my money. It's Lon's and Frank's too. And Mom's. She invested in the store."

"You'll pay it back," said Mary. "And they know you will. It's just sittin' there for when you need it, for when I need it, which is now. Besides, Eddie, we don't need that much. Just enough for the justice of the peace..."

"And for our wedding portrait, remember?"

"Of course. We just happen, Eddie, to be wearing our go-to-meetin' clothes. And it's not like we're going to Saint Louis or something for our honeymoon. Maybe just take the waters at Claremore or something." Claremore had famous mineral water springs. People came from as far away as St. Louis to sit in this water, which smelled like brimstone. "I mean, you talk like we're dropping everything and going off to the Yukon or something."

I had read about men using their entire savings to book a passage up to northern Canada, thinking that it would be a grand adventure to get on a dogsled and mush over the ice and pull out a shovel and dig and find nuggets of gold. They were crushed when they found out that the rivers were too swollen to cross in the springtime, and that you couldn't take very much with you on a dogsled, and that most gold claims were worthless. Mary had a point; compared to the gold rushers, our elopement would be pretty tame.

So, we turned the buggy around and went back to Mom's. When we clattered up the drive and went in the front door, we were met by the surprised looks of Lon, Frank, and Mom. Serena had gone back home with her husband. Lon guessed what I had come back for, and he sucked on that lozenge of humor.

"Circumstances bein'," I said. "Mary and I have decided we should go ahead and get married right now."

Mom said nothing as she left the hallway, letting the rest of us just stand there. When she came back, she held the folded blanket and the leather pouch with the money in it. We didn't dare leave it at the store, of course. "The decoration's not done yet, but the hem is, so it won't fray, and it'll be plenty warm." She handed the blanket to Mary and the money to me.

"I'll put the money back..." I said.

"We know," said Frank. "So, what are we going to tell the Carters?"

"You, my brother, are going to ride over and tell them that Mary has taken ill and prefers to spend the night with us," I told Frank. God forgive me for lying, but it was for the greater good. Frank turned to leave.

"I don't suppose you brought any of your stuff," Mom said to Mary.

"Not clothes," she answered. "I just brought my diary and a little packet of photos."

"No Bible?" quipped Lon.

"I figured there'd be plenty of Bibles over here," Mary threw back at him.

"Well," said Mom. "You can freshen up here before you leave."

"No time for that," I said. "Daylight's running out." It looked like it would be a clear night, with moonlight, so we could ride on into Claremore after passing through Chelsea.

"I just need to visit out back, and then I can go," said Mary, who walked down the hall.

"Leastways I'll get her an extra coat," said Mom, turning toward the stairs.

Lon and I were left alone. He smiled. "Well, I'm impressed, brother," he said, punching me lightly on the shoulder. "I didn't think you had it in you. Inside that sanctimonious person there is a real tiger cat. Now that's more like the brother of Lonnie Hicks!" I wasn't sure I wanted to hear that. "Just when you think you know someone, even your own brother, along comes a surprise."

"She isn't in a family way, if that's what you think," I told my brother.

When Mary came back, with small swift steps, she met Mom coming down from upstairs. "I'll have Edd's room ready for the two of you," she said.

"I'm not thinking that far ahead yet," said Mary.

I led Mary out to the buggy. That blanket I always kept in it, and kept clean, came in mighty handy now, as the weather was turning cold and clouds were scudding in. My plans to travel at night were being jeopardized. Mary huddled underneath the blanket. We had stowed Mom's blanket in back. But if it got colder, we were going to need both of them.

Soon we were heading downhill toward Chelsea. I had my hand on the brake lever just in case I got us going too fast for, however much I considered myself under control, I knew my excited state of mind might make me get sloppy in handling the horse and buggy.

"Well," I said, "you might as well say, *Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge, and your people shall be my people*, as Ruth said to Naomi in the Bible. Welcome to the Hicks tribe, you who have only a few more hours to be Miss Carter."

"Eddie, please. I don't want to talk. I just want to get this over with."

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"I know of nothing, but I suspect everything. I won't be able to rest until I am Mrs. Eddie Hicks."

I smiled as big as the world. Too bad there was no parade to see our happiness. "I feel like Ivanhoe, riding along with his lady," I said.

"You're a regular Sir Walter Scott, Eddie. But I don't want to talk right now."

No one was in the street at Chelsea as I drove through. I noticed a light on at Bryan Moynihan's house. He had a photography studio in Claremore, and ran part of his business out of his house in Chelsea.

"Why are we pulling over, Eddie?" asked Mary.

"No better time than this," I said. "Moynihan's to home, and we might as well get our picture made right now."

"Eddie, I feel like a mess," said Mary.

"Won't show up in the picture." I stopped the buggy and walked quickly up to Moynihan's door. He answered, I explained the situation, and he invited us in. I went back to the buggy to unwrap Mary from the blanket and hold her hand as we walked into Moynihan's living room, which he quickly converted into a studio. He showed Mary to a spare bedroom where she could comb her hair and rearrange her bonnet.

Soon Moynihan was fixing up the pole for the lycopodium flash powder pan. He told Mary to sit in the chair, and for me to stand behind her. But Mary didn't want to sit. I was about to ask why, then I realized that quibbling over such matters was not a good way to start a marriage. I sat down, and Mary stood behind me.

Moynihan focused his lens on the metal handle of the chair as it reflected the flashing candle light. "I'm stopping down so that I can get a greater depth of field," he said as he bit a cigarette holder and puffed. "Now, you-all get yourselves the way you want to be pictured," he said, checking inside the camera shroud. "I got it. You-all ready?"

I smiled as big as an emperor. I had the pearl of great price right behind me. My hair was slicked over like that of a St. Louis man, and I slipped my left hand into my shirt like I thought I was Napoleon Bonaparte. Moynihan opened the shutter, pulled the lever that launched flash

powder into the air, then touched his cigarette to it. The light was brief and blinding. Then he closed the shutter.

Mary and I started to leave. I was going to pay Bryan, but he said, "Your credit's good with me, Eddie. I was looking for'ard to making your picture at the wedding..."

"You might yet, if we have a reception," I said. "But, we need to hurry. Believe me, I have been nothing but honorable toward Miss Carter..."

Mary spoke up. "He is the most honorable man you will ever know, Mr. Moynihan. We just don't have time to explain things right now."

"She hasn't even explained it to me," I said as we left.

I have always considered it my holy duty to love my neighbor as myself. But now I realized that a lifetime of showing respect and love to my neighbors could pay off when you most need it. Jesus said to not just be good to your family, or good to your friends, or good when other people can see you being good. You've got to be good right through. I stored up treasures in Heaven by being good, and now I was reaping some convenience here on Earth as well, by having a good reputation. Even if it is in some very small way, like getting credit from Moynihan.

Mary and I got back into the buggy and we started off down the road to Claremore. The clouds were thick and it was hard to see the road. But Samuel can see the road and pulled the buggy without the need of any guidance from my imperfect eyes. *For we walk by faith, not by sight*, the Good Book says. I would have quoted it to Mary but I could tell she was even less in the mood for talk than she was a few minutes before. Samuel was trotting along by faith. Animals have simple faith; human intelligence is a hindrance to faith, as often as not. As if he knew what I wanted, Samuel kept trotting even when I let the reins down and slid down in the seat.

Mary threw the blanket over me and slipped her warm body against mine. I could almost feel her heartbeat. I could almost feel everything else too. I had never been this close to her. I could smell the rose water in her hair. She grabbed my right hand and drew it around her shoulder. She leaned her head against my neck.

"Mary, we...we aren't married yet," I stammered.

"Be as chaste as you like, Eddie, but you have to keep me warm." She shivered. "And you have to keep me brave."

I continued looking straight ahead, as if it was my responsibility to watch the road. But, of course, that was now Samuel's job. Those newfangled cars could crash, but not Samuel. Samuel could drive me home if I was drunk, which of course I will never be.

Except when drunk with love. Drunk with love: that reminded me of phrases from a Bible book you don't hear in church very much. The Song of Songs, which I had not dared to look at very much, even though it was part of Scripture. Bro. Lynch said it was an allegory about the love between Christ and the church. He didn't sound very convinced, nor was I. There was something in this book about laying hold of clusters of dates, about the woman's navel being a bowl of wine, and about feeding among the lilies. I could almost smell the erotic scent of the

words. I planned to read them to Mary when we made holy love. I would defend her as Christ does his disciples, and caress her as the Holy Spirit does us. We have no secrets from the Spirit, just as, very soon, Mary and I would have no secrets from one another. We would behold one another just as Adam and Eve did, back when the whole Earth was their bedchamber.

I had not even allowed myself to think about her body. And why should I? I would only deify her, and expect her to be as perfect as a Roman statue. What if she had some slight imperfection? If I beheld her nakedness for the first time after a long series of fantasies, I might find fault in her. But as it is, I could not imagine the slightest disappointment.

I turned away from the road and toward Mary. She turned her face toward mine. We kissed on the lips, and she slid her tongue inside my mouth just briefly and just a tiny bit. I shivered with excitement. I felt like a rodeo rider, not on her, but on the wild animal of my own emotions. They were the wildest and strongest things I ever had to control, and I was riding them with consummate skill. And is it such a difficult thing? A few hours from now and we would be man and wife, and could rejoice in the fullness of our love. We would knock on the door of the little hotel in Claremore, not the big one but the one back with the mineral baths, get the proprietor up, and get two rooms for the rest of tonight. Then we would ride back to the room Mom prepared for us. For one afternoon of my life I would not need to work. We buried ourselves in the blanket and breathed one breath.

Of course, I couldn't keep myself from looking at the road now and again. I saw, off to the side of the road, what appeared to be a white dog loping along. It would run ahead of the buggy, stop, and look back as we passed. Its fur glistened in the moonlight that was not there. I thought briefly of the family legend of the white wolf. When I looked again, it was gone.

What was that in the road ahead? Men on horseback with lanterns. When I glanced at them from under the covers, so did Mary. I felt her muscles suddenly tense, and they did not relax even when I caressed her shoulders and her arms.

Chapter 6

That was the night, on the road into Claremore, when everything fell apart. I discovered, on that night and in the following years, that the Lord never tries us with challenges that are beyond our capability.

The events of that night left my emotions battered and senseless. In the following days and weeks, I ran the store with a deadness of spirit that dampened everyone who came in, but they all knew what had happened and they were inspired by my perseverance—and many of them told me so, Bro. Lynch not the least of them. Bro. Lynch even asked me to teach a Sunday school class about how to keep going in the face of adversity; but some things just cannot be put into words. The Spirit of the Lord did not wholly compensate for my withered emotions (nor is He supposed to). He was a salve that deadened the pain. And He always provided a path of wisdom before me; not always of celebration, but always of eventual success.

It was a time of testing. Testing, like a goldsmith's testing of the quality of an ore. The heat makes the gold emerge, first in tiny flecks, then in visible runnels of beauty. Or, the trials that God sends are like the flame of a candle; the golden and pure light requires the pain of the flame. I had a couple of conversations with Lon about this. He said I had just suffered bad luck, that there was no God sending any trials to strengthen me. I could choose to be strengthened by the random tribulations of life, but at the same time our tribulations wear us down until, in the end, there is not much left of us except a dried-up corpse. I maintained my professions of faith, partly because I needed to. And, along the way, I received some unspeakable joys as well.

Our family experienced a lot of tragedy, from my sister Amelia's death in childbirth to the deaths, within days of one another, of my twin brother and sister Alvie and Annie. By the time I was courting Mary and working in the store with my brothers, I had regained all the optimism of my youth. I felt that I was even stronger, like glowing steel hardened in water, as a result of the suffering I had witnessed.

And, as it turned out, I was going to need the strength.

That night on the road to Claremore, Mary's brothers stopped our buggy. At first, I thought about making Samuel plow right through them, but Mary told me her brothers would, in fact, use their guns. This made no sense to me. They would not kill Mary, and Mary would be subpoenaed to testify against them at the trial for my murder, should it come to that. But Mary understood some things that I did not.

"You're comin' to home with us," said John, his face flashing occasionally into view as the wind shook his torch flame.

"What you are doing is illegal and immoral, and you will move aside," I proclaimed.

"We don't take no orders from you, redskin," he answered. Nobody had ever called me that before. I had heard the term applied to Dad, whose skin was just a little darker than mine, but never to me or my siblings. Especially from someone who was also a redskin.

"They are not my orders. They are the law of the land," I replied with what I hoped sounded like perfect calmness.

"Now, we don't need no unnecessary trouble here," said Raymond, the younger and more reasonable brother. "Law of the land? No law of no land can let you take our sister to town."

"She accompanies me of her own free will," I announced.

"Well, we're gonna have to hear it from her," said Raymond. "And we all know things can happen that aren't pleasant, things like your buggy havin' a wreck and your body getting' kindly mashed up. We're not stupid enough to murder you..."

"Not that we wouldn't like to, redskin," said John.

"No need for that, John," said Raymond. "We all know Mr. Hicks here is more valuable to us alive than dead. So long as our sister here isn't Mrs. Hicks.

"Now Mr. Hicks, let me outline your options here," continued Raymond. "You ain't gonna get to Claremore with our sister, or any other ways, tonight. Option one. Mary comes with us, and you turn around and go home, both of you-all in-tact and healthy. Option two. Mary comes with us, and you have an accident in the ditch, in which case, Mary comes home unharmed, and you eventually recuperate back to home. And the choice is Mary's. Does she want you to get injured? Somethin' tells me that her answer is no. It would be so easy for a buggy to slip off'n the road, at night..."

"specially if it was being driven by someone who had a little too much to drink," said John. He rode his horse up to the buggy, pulled a flask out of his pocket, and tossed a little liquor into my face. I guess it was gin; it smelled like cedar trees.

I pulled Mary closer to me, our faces right up next to one another. But she started pushing away from me, ever so slightly. I let go of her. Soon there was a counterpane of sadness wadded up between us.

"Eddie, I have to go with them. Eddie, don't you believe in the future? You always said so."

I could hardly speak. "Of course," I said.

"We can't get married tomorrow. But tomorrow is not the whole future."

I allowed that was true. Mary slipped out of the buggy, leaving the blankets behind, taking only her little purse with her diary and photos in it. I had a brief vision of leaping out and fighting the brothers, a regular Ivanhoe, but I believed I had to trust Mary and the future and God.

Lon was still awake when I got back. Of course, he could smell the gin. "Well, brother, you got the piss of Satan on you, and that's a fact." He grinned real big.

"Leave me alone, Lorenzo," I said. I did not speak to him again that night, but he heard me go into Mom's room and tell her what happened. Frank didn't find out until I surprised him at breakfast the next morning.

The week of store work was hardly out before I heard the announcement, delivered carefully to me by my friend Joel Whittenburg. Joel and I liked to kid around a lot together. I always used to say, regarding Joel, "We're just friends, pure and simple. I'm pure and he's

simple.” When he brought me the news, he put a little dusting of humor on it, just enough to calm me but not enough to rub salt in my wounds. Mary Carter was engaged to Averd Hargrove. I smiled grimly. The story isn’t over until it’s over, I told myself. But, of course, it was. I need hardly mention that the Carters never showed up at church again.

“Like I was sayin’,” said Lon, who had started to do more work at the store. “Lots of pretty young women out there. You might even meet one of them out to Guthrie.”

I had, without celebration, been elected to the Constitutional Convention in November 1906. I was one of fifty-five delegates from Indian Territory. The fact that so many of my neighbors respected me made little difference to my sad soul. The elder Mr. Hargrove was also one of the delegates. In addition to the fifty-five delegates from Indian Territory, there were fifty-five from Oklahoma Territory. And two from Osage country. That makes a hundred and twelve. Ninety-nine of us were Democrats. We called ourselves, in Bible language, the ninety-and-nine.

Before statehood, it didn’t matter which party you were in. I chose the Democrats because the Republican Party just looked out for the interests of the big oil, land, and railroad speculators. There were a few Republicans who really cared about the little man, the common man, not the least of which was President Teddy Roosevelt. But he didn’t get much support from his party in this. And when it came right down to making decisions, Teddy showed himself to be just as big-money as the other Republicans. Twelve of the delegates were Republicans, which included Hargrove. They called themselves, in Bible language, the Twelve Apostles. And there was one Renegade.

“The love of Christ is sufficient unto me,” I quoted the Apostle Paul in response to Lon.

“Oh, no it ain’t,” said Lon. “Maybe spiritual-wise, but everybody watch out for old Eddie here. He’s going to get a corn-fed Mama and start a family, maybe raise a few acres of corn and potatoes and beans on that land of his, leastways the part of it that isn’t covered with oil.”

I have to admit I took some comfort in that. But the comfort didn’t last long. A week later, Lonnie had vanished, along with almost all the money in the store. I was to find out later that he’d gone west for some high living, as he called it. A girl named Jennybelle came around the store looking for him. She was really shocked when I told her that Lon had vanished. Apparently, she was not part of the baggage he took with him. We never saw her again, not even when, a few months later, Lon came back empty-handed. We just accepted Lon back into the family without saying anything, though he was no longer welcome to work at the store and he knew that we wanted him to find his own little room to rent in town. It wasn’t long before he vanished again.

Chapter 7

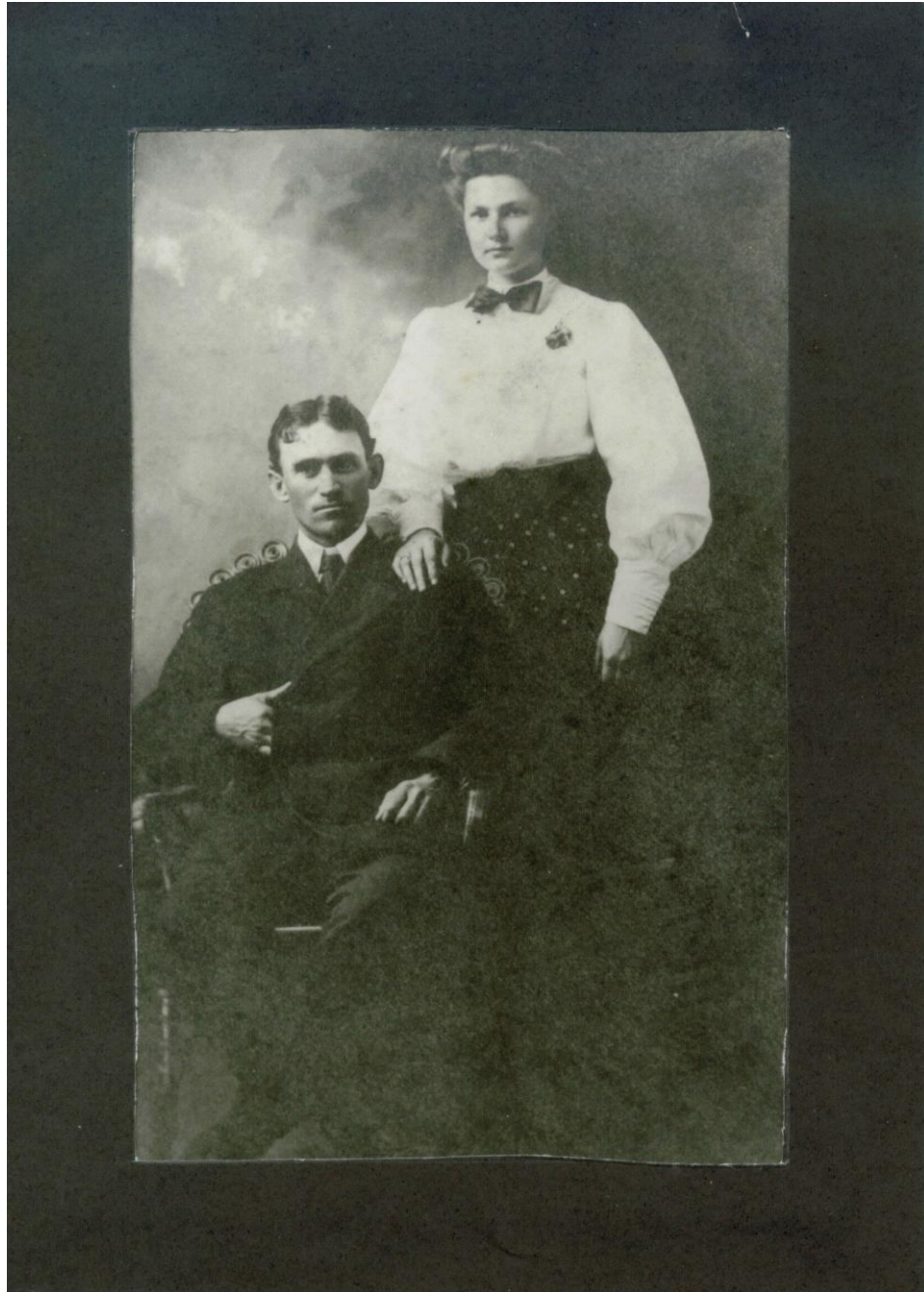
It was only a few months to statehood when the Commission met. I realized when I got to Guthrie I had never been so far from home. The Commission chairman put me on the Education Committee.

I had expected to be a big wheel at these meetings. When I was making a point, I could talk pretty big, but the other fellows could talk bigger even when they had no point to make. They burned like the gas flares at the top of an oil derrick. The biggest talker was the Chair, Bill Murray, who had married into the Cherokee tribe. He went by Alfalfa Bill. He was practicing up for the big time, I could tell. The only thing bigger than his ego was his moustache. He must be at least half of the Oklahoma market for moustache wax.

In the Education Committee, I tried to make a few points about how our education system should be founded upon Christian morality. The Committee chairman said that the United States Constitution was a secular document, but we could of course do everything I called for, just without calling it Christian. This seemed dishonest to me, but another subject quickly came up and brushed it aside. Another point I made was that education should include the classics of literature and the refinements of culture. As for refinements, I was thinking of the astonishing calligraphy of my youngest brother William. I was sure that nobody in New York or Boston could write as beautifully as he. He learned it at Cherokee finishing school. But other committee members wanted to focus on industrial education, as they called it, preparing our young men to be leaders in the oil industry and our young women to be homemakers and stenographers. Our Cherokee schools had been criticized for focusing too much on the classics and refinements and not enough on the new economy. But when the committee established normal colleges across the state, in places like Tahlequah and Ada and Durant and Weatherford, to prepare teachers for our children, the committee members finally accepted my proposals for a classical education. The industrial education could be taken care of at a big technical college in Stillwater, we agreed.

It was a hot summer day and the big windows in the great hall were wide open as all of us crowded together for the official signing ceremony and for the group picture. I never did get a copy of that picture. Not that it matters much, since all of our faces were just little smudges. On the one I looked at, I couldn't even tell which one was me. I could tell which one was Hargrove because he was the fat one with an outlandish moustache. He must account for the other half of the moustache wax in Indian Territory. Alfalfa Bill was the thin man with the big moustache.

Before long I was back in the store as if nothing had happened. With a stroke of a pen, President Teddy Roosevelt created the state of Oklahoma in 1907. There was no more Indian Territory, and no more tribal governments, except for ceremonial purposes. The federal government took care of all the decisions with regard to tribal lands.



Edd Hicks and Mary Carter, about 1904.

Part two: Edd Hicks

Chapter 1

The day came in 1907 for me and my brothers to ride down to Muskogee to get our land allotments. It seemed pretty straightforward. We assumed Lon had lost his land allotment because he vanished, and that it would be divided up with the rest of the surviving siblings and their families: Serena and John; me; Frank; and William.

When Frank and I showed up at the Indian Agency building, it was a scene of confusion. The inside was crowded, and people spilled out onto the wooden sidewalk. There were whole families of full-bloods and half-breeds, with children running around. Some full-blood men sat in utter silence, obviously hating the whole process of allotment. I fully understood what they were feeling, the violation that was forced upon us by making the inheritance that we all held in common—the land—into individual property. But what can we do? We are American citizens, had been since 1901, and Americans own land, except for the ones that don't.

I did not fully understand what I saw inside. Dapper-dressed white men strode around with sheaves of papers. They would talk with some of the full-bloods and half-breeds, who would then put an X on one of the papers.

"Lawd," said Frank. "Those poor men who can't read or write. They put their X on a piece of paper, and don't even know for sure what it says. One white man reads it to them, and the other one witnesses their X. I'll bet," said Frank, scowling into my face, "that the whites are acting as intermediaries, and who knows, might be lying about how big the allotment is. White man probably tells them they're getting the full hundred and sixty, while on the paper it says forty. And they're probably just going to let the white land sharks rent the allotments out for them, the allotments that they *do* get."

Frank was right. We talked with one of the full-bloods, in Cherokee. He told us he wouldn't know what to do with the land once he got it, so he was happy to let the white man rent it out for him. I asked him for how much. He said, for a dollar an acre. I was nearly certain—but could not prove—that the land would in fact rent out for much more than that. And besides, maybe it said fifty cents instead of a dollar on the paper. And besides that, the full-blood said, the agents had to deduct out the money for the "improvements" they erected on the land—houses, wells, and such like—in order to attract renters. In the end the full-blood might get maybe twenty-five cents an acre, or maybe nothing.

Right then a very angry full-blood came in the door. He was shouting, and everyone started listening to him. He spoke in Cherokee. The Agency officials tried to shut him up, and eventually succeeded. The officials didn't understand Cherokee, or they would have shut him up sooner. The Muskogee Creek Indians who were there couldn't understand him either, since their language is different from ours. The full-blood told us he had just gotten back from a visit to his land allotment, where he had talked to a white renter who had no idea who actually owned the land. The renter was paying three dollars an acre which, for 160 acres, added up to a chunk of change. But the real estate agent was only giving him, the owner, a dollar an acre, three times

less than he was renting it for. And the so-called “improvements”! They consisted of a hastily-built shack and a hole in the ground that was supposed to be a well. First storm comes along, and the shack will fall over and the hole fill with mud. The white renter was building a stronger house and digging a decent well, by his own effort and at his own expense. And yet the real estate agent was charging him, the full-blood, an extra fifty cents an acre for those improvements. That meant that the agent was getting two-fifty an acre per year for the land, and the owner only 50 cents.

Everyone listened as a government agent—not the same as a real estate agent, I think—spoke quietly to him and showed him a piece of paper.

“Is that your X?” asked the agent.

“It is,” replied the full-blood, in English.

“Then the entire arrangement is exactly the one you approved,” said the agent.

The full-blood then said, “But the white man, he lied to me about the value of the land. He told me that I would be lucky to get a dollar an acre for it. He knew full well...”

The government agent replied, “This is the very thing that we provide guardians to protect you against—to protect you from getting swindled by white investors. Your chiefs have argued in our courts that you are the Five *Civilized* Tribes, that you have your own schools and are perfectly capable of making your own decisions about what to do with your land and making your own contracts. Now that you signed the papers there isn’t nothing we can do about it.”

The full-blood stalked out of the office.

Another full-blood Cherokee stood up and addressed the listening throng. He explained that the agents had assigned him a guardian, since he had been a minor at the time of the allotment. The guardian had power of attorney for him, and the contract that the guardian had gotten him to sign was even worse than what the previous man had signed for himself—he was getting only 25 cents an acre. And now, since the guardian still had the power of attorney, he was selling the land to a white land development corporation, at whatever price the guardian might choose. The guardian was keeping most of the profit from the sale, as he was legally entitled to do, and the full-blood was getting, you guessed it, 25 cents an acre.

Then a young half-breed Creek woman stood up. Her voice was very quiet as she spoke in English, but everyone knew to listen. She was an orphan who had just recently reached adulthood. She had lived in poverty, in a shack, with barely enough food to survive on, for both her and her adoptive parents, who were full-bloods. Come to find out that all during that time, while she grew up, the United States government, through the Indian Agency, had been allotting a hundred dollars a year, at American taxpayer expense, to provide for her food and shelter and education. Education! The closest thing she saw to a school was when she had to work cleaning out the privies at one of them. Where had that hundred dollars a year gone? To the white guardians, of course.

That was when the police came in and told everyone to be right peaceable. Eventually the commotion resumed, but it was the same chaos Frank and I had seen at the beginning, rather than the unified spirit of rage that had begun to develop.

I heard one half-breed Cherokee go up to a police officer and say, “This entire undertaking is an absolute and unequivocal travesty. Everything that the United States federal government is supposed to be doing for us—the very president that our ancestors addressed as Great White Father—is going into the coffers of so-called guardians and real estate agents. By mendacious prevarication, the white government has taken everything, while on paper pretending to give it back. If the white man has even the slightest shade of conscience, he must be able to feel the shame of such graft. There is no point in any of us Indians doing anything!”

He walked out the door. Using big words like that, he was a regular Sir Walter Scott, trained by our schools to speak elegantly to white overseers who had no appreciation of fairness, much less elegant speech. Mendacious? Prevarication? You might as well be speaking to a dog, for all the difference it made to these white government agents and land speculators.

Frank came up to me. “I been asking around,” he said. “Most of the Cherokees up north haven’t come at all. They already put their X’s on the papers and the agents are here doing whatever the hell they want, without their even knowing what it is. Gawd! And we thought Lonnie was a bad man.”

“I never thought that,” I said. “Well, he wasn’t too nice to that Jennybelle woman, as it turns out, but he just wants to have a good time, is all. But what I see here in this building, brother Frank, is calculated evil. But,” I brightened. “We don’t have to put X’s on things, no sirree. You and I can read and write, and we will know every jot and tittle of any contract we sign, by jiggers.”

Chapter 2

We had to wait in a long line at the land office. There were no chairs, so Frank and I squatted like bullfrogs. There was plenty to watch. In addition to that, we had brought a copy of *The Cherokee Advocate* with us. It was over a year old—the March 3, 1906 issue.

The leading headline was *Confidence game against Indians*. It was a report from right here in Muskogee, but it was not about us Cherokees. It was about the Creeks, or Muskogees. “Government agents in Territory investigating reports that Snake people are being bilked.”

The Snake Band of Creeks, the article said, were trying to stop the whole allotment process so that they could return to their traditional way of life.

“The shamelessness with which these people are alleged to have been duped and made to contribute to certain alleged attorneys in Washington is beginning to be a scandal that promises to attract Congressional attention,” I read in English from page one. Page two was all in Cherokee. I looked over at Frank. “I don’t think anything regarding us Indians will attract Congressional attention, unless it’s another Removal Act.”

I continued reading. “It seems incredible that such a thing could be possible, but there are lawyers in Washington...” It was written *Wash’ton*. “...who have bilked these ignorant Indians every year for the past ten years and kept them in penury practically all the time.”

“Not incredible to me,” said Frank.

“Apparently,” I said, looking over the article, “these lawyers were telling the Snake Band delegation in Washington that they have proposed legislation to give the Creeks all their old lands back, and all they need to finish the job is money. It also says that most of the Snake Band representatives could not speak English, so all the lawyers have to do is to hoodwink—that’s the word used here—the translator, and the others will believe it.”

“How do they get away with it?” asked Frank. “The Creeks, they’re not stupid.”

I read the answer. “Such a thing could not be carried on if the Snakes were not so secretive about their affairs, but it is almost impossible for a person not a member of their oathbound clan to get any information whatever concerning their tribal financial affairs.

“And then here is an article about the Creek chief Porter giving a speech about how Washington treats the Creeks unfairly,” I said. “It was his last speech. The tribal government ended on March 4, the day after this paper was printed.”

“Any more uplifting news?” asked Frank.

“Half the page is taken up with a list of names of Cherokees who died prior to September 1, 1902, and who have to be removed from the rolls. Look at all these names. And all different ages, not just babies and old people but young adults too. Well, I guess we aren’t alone in our bereavement,” I said, referring to Amelia, Annie, and Alvie.

“We’d better check and make sure our names aren’t on there,” said Frank.

We had plenty of time to check the crammed, unalphabetized list. Almost all of the names sounded like regular American names like Eva Johnson and Luther Starr. There was also

an advertisement on the right-hand side that offered free allotment maps from the Cherokee Survey Company in Caney, Kansas. That's where we got ours, last year when we first read this paper. *Mention this paper*, the ad said.

I glanced at the railway ads and schedules on the back page. There was a long article on page three, about our dire Cherokee situation, but I didn't feel like reading it.

Chapter 3

When I saw that one of the men at the desks was free, I strode right up to him. I imagined that the man sprang to attention at the thought of another Cherokee victim. Or maybe, since I look white, he thought I was one of them.

"May I help you?" asked the young clerk. Right then a white man walked up behind him and slipped a check into his hand. After he thanked the man, and slipped the check into his vest pocket, the clerk turned back to me.

"Eddie Hicks, enrollment number 13,250," I said.

He seemed impressed that I knew my number. "That will save me a little time looking up your allotment," he said as he wrote down the number on a little slip of paper. "And you?" he asked Frank.

"Frank Hicks, enrollment number 12,928." The clerk wrote down this number as well.

"Also," I said, "we have to find out about the land that's supposed to be going to Serena Heape, number 13,348; Lonnie Hicks, 12,927; and William Hicks, 12,930. My father, Andrew J. Hicks, and sister Amelia Hicks, were also enrollees, numbers 12,926 and 12,929, but they have just recently passed away."

The clerk wrote down the names and numbers. He got up and walked over to a desk on which a large map was spread out and invited us over to look at it. Someone from the Indian Territory Map Company had put a lot of work into that map, with every allotment drawn carefully and every enrollee's name and number, and even in some cases the blood quantum, written in the second-best penmanship I ever saw, after that of my little brother William. The clerk scanned the map for Township 24 north Range 15 east. He quickly found adjacent parcels of land for my father, Amelia, and William, and pointed them out to us. They were barely a mile east of Talala, the little town named after the Cherokee word for woodpecker.

The clerk looked at another map, this one of Range 16 east, and found Lonnie's allotment, right on Spencer Creek. Frank had two small allotments, one of which adjoined Lon's. You had to look closely to see Serena's land; her name had been recorded as Surrener, since this is how we usually pronounced it, and the agent who took down the enrollment information just spelled out what he thought he had heard. "Spencer Creek," said Frank. "I can find my land, no trouble."

"Where's my land?" I asked.

The clerk had to go to the map of Range 17 east. Clear over at the east side was my parcel. My land was at least nine miles away from Lon's and Frank's, and a dozen away from Amelia's and William's. Our family lands were spread out a considerable distance. But we get what we get.

"Looky here," said Frank, pointing to a spot on the map. "There's Mary Carter's land."

"Well," I said to Frank, "we know where our lots are now; I guess we can go find them and start clearing them. As soon as we get the papers with the section numbers on them." I had a big grin and Frank's arch smile was pretty big too.

"It's not quite that simple," said the clerk. He walked over to one of many filing cabinets, and he removed envelopes for each member of our family and motioned us back to his desk. We sat in two wooden chairs opposite the clerk, upright against the straight backs. Frank's chair creaked and sagged.

"As for the woman you call Surrener," he said. He looked inside of Serena's envelope. "Well, it appears that her case has been assigned to the realty office in Cabin Creek. Enterprise Realty." I'll jump ahead here and say that Enterprise Realty had just closed up shop and left the state by the time John and Serena got up there.

"That's twenty, thirty miles away," said Frank.

"I would advise Mrs. Heape to get up there right away. Now, as for William," he continued. "Born 1891. A minor. You'll have to check at the courthouse to see who the guardian of his allotment is." I'll jump ahead here and say that the courthouse in Muskogee had no record of the guardianship ready to hand. They claimed to be so swamped with work that they had not even organized the files. We never did find out who the guardian was. Had Dad still been alive, it might have been him. Or not. Often the Indian Agents did not consider Cherokees to be competent guardians of their own children. I feared the worst for William's land, but knew at least that William, in school, was well fed and safe.

The school William was at was the same school Will Rogers and I had attended. Yes, that boarding school was good for us, even though I made much better use of the educational opportunities than Will. He was always getting in trouble. I loved him like a brother but told him he could go get in trouble somewhere else where his dad didn't have to pay so much money for him to get in trouble with. I guess he agreed, because he left. Trouble or no, and wherever he might be now, that boy has a good heart.

But some Cherokee and Muskogee minors have been the victim of what can only be called criminal treatment. There were three little Creek siblings, each of whom was the owner of an allotment that generated big oil revenues. They, and dozens of other Indian kids, had been assigned to an absentee guardian. Not only did the guardian keep all the oil revenues for himself, but the kids didn't even know they had any land. They were living in a hollow tree trunk in the forest, drinking from a creek, getting food handouts from nearby homesteads. To the credit of the white courts, this guardian got called in and scolded and stripped of his guardianship, though, as far as I had heard, he'd never done any jail time. Jail is for drunk Indians, not for white grafters. Years later, a few swindlers would go to jail, though most remained unpunished.

"Next?" prompted the clerk.

"Might as well get Lonnie out of the way," said Frank. "Get the bad news over with."

"Lonnie Hicks," said the clerk. "Is he here with you?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Do you have any written documentation that you are representing him?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, where is he?"

"We don't know, sir."

"Well, that is something of a problem. A guardian will manage Mr. Lonnie Hicks's property as he sees fit until such time as the actual man might show up. I see here," said the clerk, looking again into Lon's envelope, "that we sent a letter to Mr. Lonnie Hicks, but he never claimed it."

"Where did you send it?"

"General delivery, Muskogee Post Office."

"How would he ever have known to check for it there?" I demanded.

"It is the post office closest to this Agency," said the clerk. "Meanwhile, a guardian has taken charge of the land."

"I assume that that means he could sell it," I said. The restrictions against selling allotments (except for the homesteads of the full-bloods) had recently been lifted by the United States federal government.

"I wouldn't presume to speculate on what course of business the guardian might see fit," said the clerk. "Records will be kept."

"I'm sure," I answered.

The clerk looked up at me to see if I was being sarcastic. He probably thought I was. But all I was actually saying is that he was a clerk and clerks keep records.

"Now, as for you, Mr. Eddie Hicks. There seems to be a problem here."

"Problem?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"Yes. It seems that you have not been paying taxes on your allotment."

"Taxes? I was unaware that we owed any taxes on land allotments. Nothing was said about this at the Dawes Commission enrollments."

"That's a pity," said the clerk. "But we did send a letter to you, explaining that you owed taxes and stating the exact amount."

"Let me guess. You sent it to Muskogee, General Delivery."

The clerk pulled out an envelope and looked at it. "Indeed, Mr. Hicks, you are correct."

"Well, just give me that letter, and I'll see about paying the taxes as soon as possible," I said. "Being a good American citizen and all. Being that I was one of the members of the Constitutional Commission and all."

The clerk looked up, trying to not look impressed. "I'm afraid it's not quite that easy," he said, just as Mary had said to me years earlier. "You see, the law is that after a certain amount of time, failure to pay taxes results in forfeiture of the land."

"Well, now isn't that nice," I said. "You sold the land. I assume you got enough money from the sale that the tax could be paid, and the balance given to me."

"I'm afraid..."

"You're afraid it isn't so simple." Let me just jump ahead here and say I found out later that no taxes were to be charged on the allotments for twenty-one years. "Mr. Hicks," the clerk said tiredly. "The quid quo pro stimulates that a guardian be assigned in such cases of habeus corpus delecti. This was done and, once the sale was complete and after appropriate fees for the realtor were expropriated and duly assigned and entered into eleemosynary contortionhood, the balance actually came out negative."

"So, I owe you money for the land I am not going to get," I said.

"That appears to be the case, Mr. Hicks."

I had to smile at his little speech. That was the most elocutionary pile of manure I had ever heard. I could smell its sweet fragrance, just waiting for me to work it into the rich soil of the farm it looked like I was not going to have.

"You mean *stipulate*, not *stimulate*," I said. "Stimulate is something that prunes do in your gut. Oh, you're a regular Sir Walter Scott, you are. You're not talking to a dumb Indian here. I don't know what all those words mean, but I'm fairly certain that they don't mean anything that you want me to think they mean. Contortionhood, my hinder!" (This rhymed with reminder and referred to the derrière.) God forgive me for talking like this, but it is for the greater good. "Let me translate this from Lawyerese into English. You charged taxes on my land, added in fees, and came up with a number in excess of the tiny amount that you claim my land was worth."

"I am simply reporting..."

"I am an American citizen," I said. "And I am going to sue."

"You have every right to do so, should you so choose, but I must advise you that the lawyers around here are pretty busy with other cases. And the judges. There are so few of them, and they are up to their balls just in dealing with murder cases. They certainly won't have time to hear yours."

"Thanks for talking straight to me, for a change," I said. Most of us knew about how busy the judges were back in Territory days. Hanging Judge Isaac Parker had condemned nearly a hundred men, mostly Cherokees, to hang. His successors were still busy on the eve of statehood.

"Meanwhile," continued the clerk, "you no longer have a land allotment, Mr. Eddie Hicks. Should you at some time in the future work this matter out, our office would be happy to execute the arrangements decided upon by judicial authority."

"Say, what was that check for?"

"What check?" he asked.

"The one that man handed to you when we first walked up here."

"Well, Mr. Hicks, we clerks do get paid for our work."

"Well, let's finish this thing up," I said. "This here is my brother, Mr. Frank Hicks."

"Yes, I have his envelope right here," said the clerk. He opened it and read a memorandum. "Oh, dear, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Mr. Frank Hicks."

"Why am I not surprised," said Frank. "I assume it is something that was in a letter left at General Delivery."

“Yes, but it wouldn’t have made any difference even if you had received the letter. It is very rare, in these busy times, for the courts to actually process cases involving allotments. But in your case, a judge gave it his personal attention. It appears, Mr. Frank Hicks, that you have been judged mentally incompetent to handle your land allotment.”

“Mentally incompetent?” Frank nearly screamed. Everyone within about ten feet stopped what they were doing to listen.

“Don’t give them any evidence to bolster their case,” I warned my brother.

“That’s ridiculous,” said Frank to the clerk. “On what basis? I mean, who brought the evidence? Was I represented in court?”

“It was all explained in this unclaimed letter,” said the clerk. “Unclaimed, but requiring no response from you.”

“Gimme that letter,” hissed Frank.

“The letter, upon its return from the Post Office, became again the property of the Government of the United States of America. But you ask about evidence,” the clerk said, looking at the letter he did not show to us. “You are twenty-three years old, and still living with your mother,” he said.

“So as to save money until I can start work on my land,” Frank said fiercely.

“I’m twenty-seven and still living with...” I stopped, realizing this was not the right thing to say. Not that it would have made any difference.

“Furthermore, Mr. Frank Hicks, it appears that a government representative observed you at a time when you were unable to cope with a seemingly trivial difficulty.”

“What?” Frank asked in utter incredulity.

I whispered to him in Cherokee, “That guy who came in the store that day you knocked over the bottle.”

“Which bottle?” he whispered back in our old language.

“What in blazes does it matter which bottle? He just saw you overreact.”

“So, a white man can overreact, but a Cherokee can’t? A white man can go crazy, but an Indian is supposed to remain...” He reverted to school English. “...taciturn and impassive...”

“Now’s no time for Sir Walter Scott words,” I whispered to him in English.

“As you can see, Brothers Hicks,” said the clerk, motioning all around him with his soft hand, a hand that could never hoe a row much less saw down a bois-d’arc, “many others are waiting to be served. Meanwhile all I can say is that your land is being administered by guardians.”

“Who is the guardian administering my land?” demanded Frank.

“It is best if you visit this guardian only when accompanied by a federal marshal, which is why I cannot reveal his identity to you.”

“I could scalp him,” said Frank. Fortunately, he said it in Cherokee.

“Might you by any chance,” I said, with the last of my restraint, “be able to tell us who the new land owners might be?”

“This is confidential information, Mr. Hicks,” said the clerk.

“Meanwhile,” I said to the clerk, preparing to leave, and touching Frank’s forearm to bring him with me, “you know where you can stuff your eleemosynary.” God forgive me for talking like this, but it was for the greater good. Just like when Jesus called the scribes and Pharisees *whitewashed sepulchers*. That wasn’t very polite but they were asking for it. According to my little pocket dictionary, *eleemosynary* has to do with charity and money. “You know where you can stuff it.”

“Yes,” said the clerk, fingering the check in his pocket. “I do.”

Chapter 4

Frank and I walked out of the Indian Agency. We thought we had just about as much new information as we could handle. It's not every day you find out that your whole family has lost everything except itself. But we were going to learn more.

A young full-blood woman was sitting on the edge of the planking, right next to where our horses were tied. She looked up at us with tear-filled eyes. Her skin was very dark and smooth. Her face was so beautiful that it nearly broke my heart. Her body was so slim that she seemed to almost not exist inside her gingham dress.

"You look like you need someone to talk to," I told her in English.

"We better get going," said Frank.

"Now, Frank. Jesus had time to stop for the woman who touched the hem of His garment, didn't He?" I looked down at the woman, who smiled painfully. She might have been fifteen, or she might have been twenty-five. She had the sort of face that neither time nor suffering could shrivel, but which seemed to incompletely conceal a world of pain.

"Don't bother with me," the woman said, wiping a tear from her eye with a delicate finger. "Ain't nothing you can do for me."

"I'll allow how that is probably true," I said. "But I can listen to you." My motives were not entirely selfless; I could never know whether I might meet some woman who might, in time, be able to fill the gaping empty socket left by the departure of Mary. "Tsalagi?" I asked. When she seemed to not understand, I knew she wasn't Cherokee. "Which tribe?"

"I'm Coushatta," she said. "My name is Autumn."

"What a beautiful name," I said. "I'm afraid I've never heard of the Coushatta tribe."

"We live with the Creeks," she said. Creek is another word for the Muskogee tribe, more or less. "I came a long way here, from down in Wetumka. I came from the Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town."

"That's way south of Okmulgee," said Frank.

I smiled again. Since she lived so far away, I knew I would probably never meet her again, so I could now pour my emotions into helping her with no thought of myself.

"How did your tribe end up living with the Creeks?" I asked.

"Long time ago, the French drove us and the Alabamas from our land near the Great River. We took refuge with the Creeks. We came with them to Indian Territory. Our allotments are in with theirs." The Muskogee Agency, right at the border, handled the land of both Cherokee and Muskogee tribes. "We have our own chiefs, and a language a little different from the Creeks."

"So, what happened to you?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Not much to say. They have no record of me at all. That's what they told me as soon as I said I didn't know my Dawes number."

I realized that this is what might have happened to my family, had I not memorized our enrollment numbers.

“That means,” said Frank, “that you been conquered three times.”

Both I and the young woman looked at him. “Three times?” I asked.

“Yes, three times,” said Frank. “First, when your land got taken by the French and you had to join in with the Creeks. Second, when the Creeks were forced into Indian Territory. Third, right now.”

A full-blood man had approached and was listening.

“Hello, Father,” Autumn said to the man.

The man extended his hand to Frank. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” he said. “But I guess you’re right. It’s hard enough being conquered and trying to have some hope for the future. But being conquered three times? That pretty much kicks the wind out of a man.” He shook Frank’s hand firmly, and then mine. Frank and I looked like white men, but we were almost in the same boat as this full-blood. The only difference is that we had only been conquered twice.

“There is always hope for the future,” I said, more to the man and his daughter than to myself.

Chapter 6

Frank and I were getting on our horses as the young Coushatta woman and her father walked away. Right then a half-breed who had been listening to our conversation with the clerk inside the Agency stopped me.

“Hey, *asgaya*,” he said to me, calling me a man. “What’s your name?”

“Eddie Hicks,” I said.

“No, I mean your *name*.”

“My Cherokee name? I don’t have one. Although Dad always called me Tsisqua when I was growing up.”

“That’s close enough. Hey, Tsisqua. I can answer your question. About who got your land.”

“Well, then tell me.”

“It’ll cost you.”

“Then don’t tell me.” I unhitched and mounted Samuel.

“Not money,” he said. “Just your blessing.”

“So long as you will not ask, as Jacob did of Esau, for my birthright.”

“You don’t got that anymore, remember? No, just your blessing.”

“You’ve got it, *asgaya*. The Lord bless you and keep you. Now tell me.”

“Right. All the expropriated, as they say, or confiscated, as they say...”

“Or eleemosynary, as they say.”

“Haven’t heard that one, but sure. Anyway, all the Hicks land went to this banker’s son in Claremore. Same one who got mine. I can’t tell you exactly who it is.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“I might get in trouble if I just up and told you.”

“Are his initials A. H.?” thinking of Averd Hargrove.

A wide smile crossed the man’s face. “*Uh*,” he grunted. Yes, in Cherokee.

Chapter 7

And that was how I lost my land and my beloved Mary to the same man. And there was nothing I could do about the one or the other. A few days later, on the day that Oklahoma became a state, a state that I had helped to craft, I went to work and plowed through my responsibilities just like any other day. Looking back on it, I had reached the bottom of my bad luck. I had drunk the dregs. And, actually, it wasn't so bad. When the sunrise was beautiful, I felt happy. No white man could take the sunrise away from me. Food tasted good. No banker could take that away from me.

I thought about Mary being the wife of A. H. But after a while I found that I really did not care. When Frank showed me the newspaper article about the wedding, I could only feel sorry for Mary. They hired an orchestra. Oil man Phillips let them use his Tulsa mansion with the Roman porticoes and fountains and colonnades. But A. H. was a pig. You can put lipstick on a pig, Dad had always said, but it was still a pig.

*

A new family moved into the vicinity—the Hustons. I saw them first in church. They took up a whole row. It was the row the Carters used to use. Of course, I noticed the three girls. They all looked pretty much alike to me, all handsome and stocky.

“Oh, you're the man who owns the store,” Mr. Huston said to me after church the second week they attended.

“I run it, with my brother over there, but I don't own it.”

“Don't matter none. Nice store. That's the work of the guy that runs it. Which would be you-all.”

“Work is our holy offering to God,” I said. “Here on Earth, God's work must truly be our own.”

Then one day soon thereafter one of the girls came in our store. I figured she would just find what she was looking for, buy it, then leave. And, nearly as I can recall, that is what she did, except that we exchanged names.

“I'm Estella,” she said, her small mouth smiling. Her skin looked very soft. She had a small chin. She seemed to be blushing all over her arms and hands as well as her face. She fanned herself even though it was not a particularly hot day.

“Estella Huston,” I said.

“Middle name's Leona,” she smiled at me. Her voice was piping and a little squeaky. I knew I'd never be hearing her sing one of those alto solo lines in church.

I smiled. “Leona? You don't look like much of a lion to me.”

She looked at me with a serious half-smile. “When I pounce on something, I don't let it go,” she said. “I'm no pussy cat.”

I looked into her eyes and knew that she spoke the truth. Then she smiled at me and said, "E. H."

I had to think about that for longer than should have been necessary. "Yes, those are my initials."

"Mine too," she said. And from then on, we always called each other E. H. She came in the store the next day and we started talking about what it would be like to run a farm, and all the many different kinds of work that would go into it, especially if you couldn't count on having a store right down the road. She said she always wanted to live on a farm that was far enough away from even a small town that there was no temptation to go to a store very often.

"Temptation?" I asked.

"Like them candies over there," she said. "Lord wanted us to eat those, he would've made them grow on trees. Course, I'm sure it's acceptable to eat a few."

I gave her one.

Pretty soon we had everything figured out: pigs, beef cattle, milch cows, mules (she said they were more reliable than horses, and Samuel wouldn't live forever), corn, potatoes, tomatoes, beans, turnips... She went on and on. I could tell why she was a little stout. And sorghum. Sorghum? Sure, to make into syrup. And you can sell the cream from the cows. A cream ticket provides some money, which you need just a little of. She was looking for a man who wanted to live like this, and I was looking for a woman who wanted to live on a farm. Somehow, while we were talking, we just understood that we were going to get married.

"See you again, E. H.," she said, going out the door.

Her initials are still E. H. but I usually call her Stella.

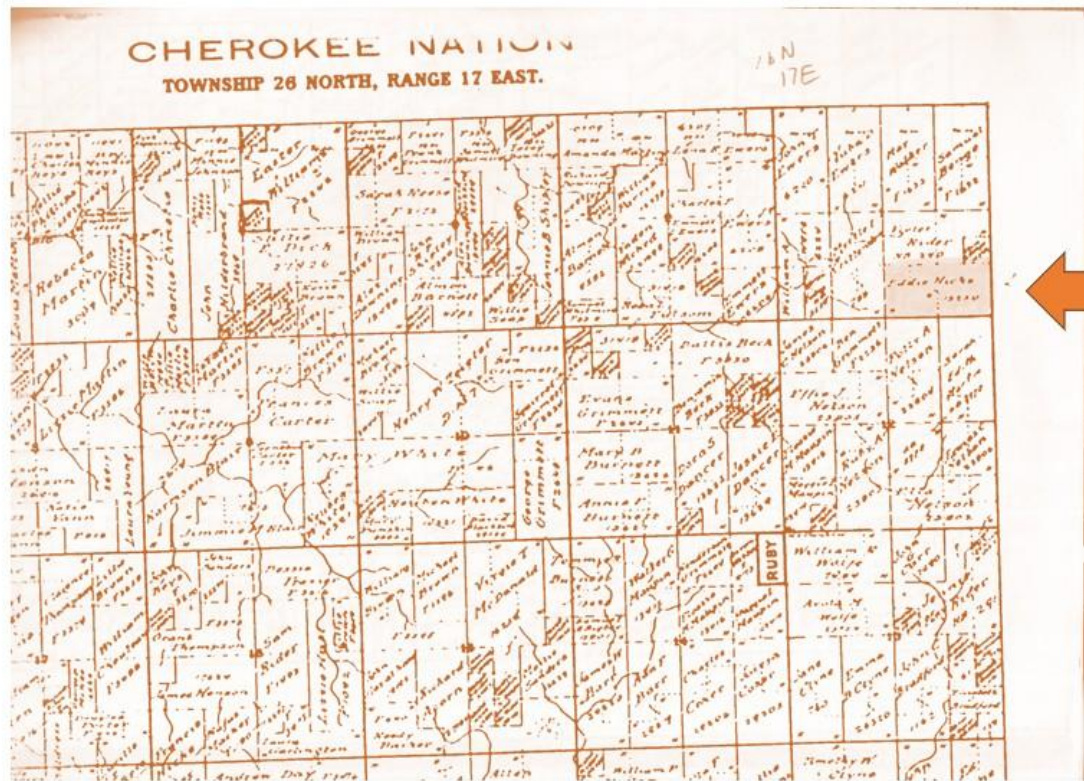
We got married and moved onto a farm. We couldn't buy it, of course. I became a sharecropper. Sharecropping is a good system. If it was a good year, there was a fair chunk of change for us and for the owner. If it was a bad year, the owner didn't expect so much. The owner did not treat me like a line in a bank ledger but like a fellow inhabitant of the Earth. When God blessed one of us, God blessed both of us. At least that is the way I saw it.

Our first child, Clifford, died before he was a year old. He was born deformed. But it wasn't external deformities that got him. It was something we couldn't see. Secretly I tried to think it through—you may have noticed I always do this—but I could find no reason for it. I'm healthy, as is my whole extended family. The Hustons, too. Stella didn't go galloping around on a horse when she was pregnant. We didn't eat any strange mushrooms. You hear about impure food in the cities, but I could personally vouch for the goodness of everything we ate. It was, I concluded, another test from the Lord. But it was a test I did not need to face on my own. With a woman like E. H., you can face almost anything. And it could be a lot worse. What with that awful German war going on, and there's talk that Wilson might get us into it, I am happy that I am a little too old to get drafted into the army, and I hope against hope that the war will be over before little Herb, our oldest surviving child, gets old enough for the Service.

I realized one morning, as I went out to milk our new cows, that I was as happy as I would have been had I gotten my land allotment. And, I was startled to realize, probably happier than I would have been had I wed Mary. I think. At least Stella's family was better.



Edd and Stella Hicks, about 1910.



From the Cherokee Allotment map, about 1904. Notice also the location of Ruby, which I pretended later was the black town where Bert lived.

Part three: William Hicks

Chapter 1

When she first came into my room, it was like a vision of Heaven.

It is 1916. I live at the Buggy Creek Sanatorium out in Clinton, in the western part of Oklahoma, out where it is dry. The managers say that dry air will help cure us of consumption, also known as the white plague, also known as tuberculosis or TB. But I don't see how all the dust that is in the air out here can possibly help us return to health. I haven't yet heard of anyone going back home from this sanatorium, so I expect that I will die here, and probably soon. I am only twenty-four years old. Mom has gotten a ride out to visit me a couple of times, but my siblings cannot take the week away from work that would be necessary for traveling to Clinton.

If, in fact, my days are strictly limited, and I have nothing to lose, I could just boldly walk out, and let them shoot me if they want to. But I have such a strong conscience that I would not dare to infect people on the outside. No matter how much repentance I might do, I would still feel Hell-bound if my reckless behavior should make anyone else have to come to this or any other sanatorium.

I knew that Miss Kate Barnard was coming to the sanatorium, because the administrators told all of us to keep our rooms as clean as possible. Certainly, no bloody spit on the floor or chamber-pots left open. But also to not leave our dirty clothes lying around or leave our bloody kerchiefs in view. It was easy enough for the orderlies, wearing masks, to whitewash my walls, for they were bare. All they had to do was to move my cot away from the inner wall, and my desk and chair away from the wall next to the window which allowed me a view of grass and shinnery oaks, and then move them back.

Miss Barnard is the head of the Oklahoma Department of Charities and Corrections, which has authority over sanatoriums and prisons. She is the first woman in the United States to be elected to a state office, and runs the only department that the Oklahoma Constitution allows a woman to run. In fact, I heard, the Constitutional Convention, at which my brother Edd was a participant, had specified that the commissioner of charities and corrections could be of either sex partly with Kate Barnard in mind.

"Yep, she's one powerful woman, all right," my friend Giddy told me between coughing fits during one of the rare times the staff let the patients converse, when we were each on our separate couches out on the porch. His name was Gideon. "She has a national reputation. Them rich people up in New York are really impressed by her. You or me, talking with an Okie accent like hers, would get ridiculed. But when Miss Kate speaks, the rich easterners hear it as a cry from the heartland."

"Yes, she's certainly a progressive," I said. I had no particular views for or against the nationwide tide of progressivism, as it is called, although if I was one of those men—or women—who had to work long hours for very low pay under unsafe conditions, I would probably have joined her cause. If I were a petty criminal thrown into prison with hardened felons who would turn me into one of them, I would admire her from afar. But from all I knew,

she was the type of woman with whom I was very unfamiliar, very different from the quiet homemakers like Mom or like my sister-in-law Estella.

"That's what we want," said Giddy. "Oh, she's a shrew all right, I don't find it puzzling at all that no man dares to get, you know what I mean, close up to her. You poke her the wrong way and you got a fighter on your hands, and I don't mean maybe. But for those of us who are never going to have to think about what kind of wife we might have..." He ended in another fit of coughs.

"My brothers Edd and Frank read books," I said as Giddy struggled to catch his breath. "One of those books was *Ben-Hur*, a novel written by a general who fought in the War Between the States. Set back in Bible times. Well, when Ben-Hur finds his sister and mother, I think it was, they had been locked up in a prison cell for years with only a little hole to stick in food. I don't remember if they were lepers before, or if that's how they got leprosy, but that's the way they used to treat lepers, just drive them away from all contact with other human beings, treat them like they weren't even human. They could do that with us consumptives, but they don't."

"They might," Giddy managed to say, "if it weren't for people like Miss Kate."

Back in my room, I heard the doors down the hall open and then close. I knew Miss Barnard must be making the rounds, watched over by the administrators. I did not hear her voice, but just that of the warden telling her the circumstances of each patient.

Chapter 2

And then my door opened. Two orderlies came in first to inspect, then motioned for the warden to enter, with Miss Barnard behind. She looked around the room first. Her eyes were sharp. They burned like coal. I think she would have noticed even a little bit of dust in the corner. Her mouth and nose were small, her whole face was small, her whole lace-adorned body was small. Only her hat was big. And I have never seen such a beautiful face, a perfect portrait of calm strength.

Then she looked at me. My own hair is short and dark, my face narrow and, I am told, handsome. My own eyes, I am told, are arresting. We could not look away from one another's eyes. Then she turned her face away and quickly left. I think I was only imagining the upwelling of tears. I learned later that she is sixteen years older than myself, about the age that my sister Amelia would have been, but at that moment there was a timeless connection between us.

About an hour later, all of the patients met in a dining hall that we seldom used, as we usually ate in our rooms. Miss Kate was on the dais with the warden, who introduced her and let her speak to us. She said, in a sharp, deep voice, that she was inspecting every prison and facility for the indigent in the state of Oklahoma and had visited many facilities in other states. She said she was happy to report that our sanatorium was far better than most, and that she would say as much in her annual report and when she spoke to the public tonight at the Clinton town square at 8:00.

As soon as I heard this, I knew that I would try to go and listen to her speech. Perhaps there is a God, as Edd believes, who watches over me. It must be He who gave me this opportunity.

Chapter 3

Back in my room, I took out pen and paper to write. I had learned calligraphy very well when I was in school, and I had a natural talent for it, so my writing got better and better even as my health failed. I had the best pen and the finest ink, as well as a beautiful notebook for my journal, and loose stationery and matching envelopes with line drawings of birds printed on them. I had not used the stationery, for I would leave germs on whatever I sent to another person. But I got out the stationery and knew without hesitation exactly what I wanted to write to Kate Barnard. I assumed she would wear gloves, and this might keep her safe from my germs.

I told her my story. As an enrollee on the Cherokee Dawes Roll, I was entitled to an allotment of land. But as a minor, I could not actually get the land, which was assigned to a guardian. As the date of my majority—June 22, 1911—drew nearer, it was clear that the Agency was not going to take the land away from my guardian, whose identity I never learned. Edd and Frank had told me of the subterfuges that had been used to take their allotments away from them. I, however, was not going to allow this to happen to me. I wrote letters to the governor and all of the legislators. This took a lot of time and paper. But my penmanship was so good, and my command of English so precise, that I knew my letters would make the recipients take notice of my case, especially as I sent them letters a second, then a third time.

Then in early 1913, a state official came around to the house, where I still lived with Mom. Dad had passed a few years earlier. I do not remember which agency the man was from, but I'm fairly certain it was not Miss Kate's agency. I had a particularly bad cold. When the agent heard me cough, his eyes brightened. I thought this was unusual but was not prepared for what happened next.

"I see, Mrs. Hicks," the man said to Mom, "that your son is ill."

"Ain't you ever had a cold?" she asked him.

"This is no ordinary cold," the man said. "Look at the pallor of his skin."

"Pallor?"

"That's a Sir Walter Scott word," I told Mom. "It means I'm pale."

"He's always been pale," said Mom.

"In my professional opinion," the man said, "young William is a consumptive."

"That's ridiculous!" said Mom. "I ain't a doctor, but I know a thing or two about home medicine. If William had consumption, he'd be coughing up blood."

"How long has he been ill?" asked the man.

"Only coupla weeks," said Mom.

"Well," said the man. "There you have it. Of course, he wouldn't be coughing up blood yet. That comes later. We don't want to wait until his illness becomes that far advanced."

"Well, then, how in tarnation do you know he's got consumption? He ain't even got pneumoney! I want a doctor's opinion on this."

“I am a doctor,” the man said. This sounded strange to me, because he had not mentioned this when he first introduced himself.

And less than a week later, some policemen and hospital orderlies came for me, all wearing their face masks. And they had a warrant signed by a judge.

Chapter 4

And so now, in the Buggy Creek Sanatorium, I really do have consumption. Of course, I believe I caught it after I got here. My cold had advanced to pneumonia, which of course left me helpless before the little germs that cause TB. And now the staff boils all my silverware and plates.

I wrote a summary of my experiences, in formal language, to Miss Barnard, and sealed it in an envelope. I was going to hand it straight to her tonight. I knew it would have germs on it, and I knew she would know this, but what else could I do?

The orderly took my supper dishes away. Gruel and bread and tiny pieces of meat and an occasional carrot. Of course, we cannot become strong enough to fight the germs on that diet. I would often light a candle and read and write into the night. But this time I put out the candle and I wrapped together some towels and robes to make a vaguely body-shaped bulge under my blanket. I used the knife that was meant for sharpening my pencil to slowly push back the bolt that locked my door from the outside. I slipped out into the hallway and out the door to the porch from which I could escape, if I was lucky.

It did not appear at first that I was lucky. I encountered one of the guards right away. But he seemed to not recognize me as a patient. He didn't even look to the side at me as we passed on the porch. Nor did the guard look up as I walked right underneath his little platform and slipped under the fence. Once I was outside, nobody could possibly know who I was, so long as I didn't start coughing. Unlike some sanatoria, Buggy Creek did not issue uniforms. I almost felt like St. Peter, when he walked out of the prison in Rome and the guards looked right at him as if he were invisible, as described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

After I passed a little ring of scrubby elms and chittamwood trees, I was in the town square. The light of torches created waves of red and orange in the faces of the small but animated crowd. A good place for a sanatorium, but not for a speech, fifty miles away from the nearest electric street lights. I remained hidden in the gloom of a persimmon tree as I looked at the angelic face of Kate Barnard, who sat in a chair behind the little rickety podium.

After some city official introduced her, Miss Barnard arose and stood in front of the podium, not behind it, her toes almost protruding off of the dais. No script. An angel, an angel, I kept telling myself. I loved every little curve of hair that slipped out from under her hat.

Her voice was not angelic. It was shrill as she began to speak. After the usual pleasantries of thanking and thanking and thanking, which were quite rushed, she began what must have been the speech she always gave. I wish I could remember it word for word. But as I write it now in my journal, I know I cannot do her words justice, no matter how prettily I write them.

"I love this great state of Oklahoma," she said, and the crowd murmured assent. I remained silent; what could I say, I who have never been anywhere else to which I could compare Oklahoma? But she had been all over the country. And she would not lie. I murmured my assent long after she began her next sentence. "We are the forty-sixth state; only Arizona and

New Mexico have entered the Union since we did. A young state full of promise. We do not sit back and just assume that all we have to do is to breathe to be Americans.

“We are still proving ourselves. Most of the other states wrote their constitutions back in the days before our recent progressive enlightenment about the rights of man—most of them back even during the days of slavery. They have modified their constitutions over time, these states, but they remain old and molded. But in Oklahoma we constructed our constitution along modern lines, which includes a department—the one that I now lead—that was an afterthought in other states. It came as somewhat of a surprise to these other states that we humans have a responsibility to our fellowman, to help the poor, to make sure that prisoners are treated fairly, and that the state government is the logical medium to coordinate these responsibilities. We have these responsibilities because we are Christians and it is our duty to love; the state does not make us do this, but enables us to do it well.

“But it is no mere responsibility. It is in our interests—the interests of all of us—to help the poor and the prisoners. Why keep the poor and the prisoners at taxpayer expense if it is possible, as scientific research shows that it is, to rehabilitate them and make them into constructive members of society? In the bad old days, prisoners would sometimes be used as virtually slave labor. But we have now learned to use prisons as places to train the men and women in job skills that they will need when they are eventually—except for the most hardened felons—released. Don’t you all want former prisoners who will inevitably live among you to be prepared for work rather than looking for opportunities to commit new crimes?” More assents from the audience, and this time I was right with them. “It only makes sense that we prepare ourselves for progress, rather than just lying in old dirty pools of habit from the past.” Everyone clapped for her, even those who had spent their whole lives in those dirty pools.

“And so,” Miss Barnard continued, “in my capacity as the director of the Department of Charities and Corrections, I came to Clinton to inspect your sanatorium. I am happy to report that its conditions are above average, although I have shared some suggestions for improvement with the officials in charge. Everyone can improve, and the greatest improvements always happen with those who, like your sanatorium administrators, have undertaken, with voluntary alacrity, the most improvement already.” She knew as many Sir Walter Scott words as I did.

Then she glowered, not at us but at memories of people who were not present. “None of this would have been possible if our opponents had not been overcome. And they keep coming back. You vanquish them in one place, and they reappear in another. I need hardly mention the name of William H. Murray...” But, of course, she did mention the name of the man who had opposed her vehemently in the State House and now opposed her from his seat in the U. S. House. “But the people, that is you-all, want to have effective prisons and clean sanatoria and orphanages, because you work hard for your money and want to see it spent on institutions that work.”

At this, a big cheer arose that would have struck fear into the black hearts of Murray and his devious compatriots. I did not actually know them to be devious—they could have just been stupid—but if Kate said they were evil, or if I inferred that she had said they were, then I

believed it fully. That woman had the crowd in her hands, and me in particular, for at that moment I knew I was in love with her.

"But the biggest struggle yet remains," she said. "I refer to the damnable injustice that has been wrought against the orphans of the Indian tribes." At this, there was no cheer. Every square foot of this town lay upon land taken from Indian tribes, and without taking their land, by any means possible, nobody in the crowd (except me) would have had any livelihood at all. My heart palpitated in excitement, but I dared not let it be known. Now I knew I was in love with her, because I was, from this moment forward, her only follower in Clinton, unless there were some Arapahos or Cheyennes hiding in the gloom underneath other persimmon trees around the square. Maybe they had slipped out of their reservations as easily as I had from the sanatorium, under the watchful eye of the same God of the Oppressed, and His Son the Bleeding-Heart Jesus.

"Yes," Miss Kate continued to her mostly silent audience. "Young Indians had land allotments, but they were cheated out of these allotments by so-called guardians. I have seen these Indian children in desperate poverty, obtaining what little bit of support they have at the expense of the taxpayers, while the entire worth of their land allotment is enjoyed by the criminal guardian." She looked around as if she expected a response. She looked around again, then continued. "I love my state. My father is buried in its soil. I love every tree and flower and I could scream my agony as I am compelled to say these things to you. But God knows there is no justice for Indians in Oklahoma. The only hope lies in the possible intervention of federal authorities." Now there was absolute silence and not a kind look on any face. I felt time slow down as I looked in every face, hoping to find at least one expression that was not hardened. The young man looking for a job, the middle-aged man flush with accomplishment, the old man smug with attainment, the young woman hoping for a man, the young mother hoping for a future for her children, the old woman hoping for a future for her grandchildren. None of them had a look of kindness for Kate or even grudging admission of what was clearly the undeniable truth.

Then Miss Barnard seemed to deflate. She bent over a little and held her hand to her forehead. When a city official sprang to her side to keep her from collapsing, she waved him away. She panted as she said quietly, "Truly I don't know why I was born. This battle is too much for me. It would kill a strong man." She sat down.

The city official who had introduced her said, "Let us show our appreciation for all the work that Miss Barnard has done for the poor and the imprisoned." Polite applause followed his failure to mention Indians.

The crowd began to murmur and disperse. I heard two men talking.

"That woman has to be stopped," said one.

"She's not running for re-election," said the other. "Just let her be."

"She spends most of her time at resorts, rather than in the office, I hear."

"She will soon be gone and vanished into obscurity. Nobody in Oklahoma a few decades from now will even remember the name of Kate Barnard."

The men bowed slightly to one another and walked in different directions.

I moved, as silently and swiftly as an angel, toward the side of the dais from which Kate Barnard descended, closely accompanied by a man. I knew this man would not let me anywhere near her, but I approached anyway. At the last moment, as a wave of humanity began to toss Kate and the man down the dirt road, someone stopped the man to talk with him. And suddenly Kate was face to face with me.

I bowed. I may have knelt. I don't remember. But I was overwhelmed by her beatific countenance, even though she was not smiling.

"I think I saw you earlier today," she said to me.

"Yes, Ma'am, you did. And you have a right to be frightened of me and my germs."

She actually smiled at me. "I have more to fear from the evil in the hearts of men than from your germs."

I pulled the letter I had written out of my pocket and held it out to her. "Please, Ma'am, read my story. I am one of those Indian children to which you referred. If you only knew how much it would mean for me if you just knew my story. Of course, I'm sure the envelope is covered with germs."

She smiled grandly and held out a gloved hand and took my letter. She searched for a pocket to put it in, but apparently had none. She slipped it into her bosom where it must have found a place somehow or other on the flat landscape. I imagined that she looked at me with empathy and love for the few seconds before a flash flood of humanity overtook her and pushed me aside.

I heard one man say to another, "Damn them Injuns anyway." By the time he realized I had coughed on him, I had slipped behind the trees and was on my way back to the sanatorium. I got inside as easily as I had gotten out—more easily, since I could slip the bolt of my own door from the outside.

Chapter 5

The next morning, I finished writing about my experience, and had turned back to the beginning to re-read it, when my door opened. The warden looked at me, then went back out. Who should enter but Kate Barnard. My heart started racing as I looked into her face.

"Mr. William Hicks," she addressed me. Then she looked back and told the warden, "May we speak privately? It will only be a couple of minutes." The door closed behind her, almost all of the way. "Mr. William Hicks," she resumed, looking at me. "I am deeply moved by your story. If there is anyone who epitomizes the message to which I have now dedicated my life, it is you. It would be my distinct privilege to fight for your rights, even though you may not live long enough to enjoy them."

"I hardly dared hope for any response from you at all," I said. I started to slip down on the floor and kneel before her.

"No," she said. "I should be the one kneeling to you." She went down on one knee. "For you have suffered and yet remain a pure spirit. Have you ever read *The Brothers Karamazov* by the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky? Your writing tells me that you are a literate man, so I ask this question of you that I would not think to ask of very many other people."

"I'll bet one my brother Edd has read it. He's even read Sir Walter Scott." I smiled as I got returned to my chair.

"I'll have a copy sent to you," she said, standing up. "The three Brothers Karamazov, and their father, have a quarrel, and agree to plead their case before a Russian Orthodox priest, Father Zasima. Rather than to decide their case, Father Zasima simply kneels before the eldest brother to acknowledge that this brother had suffered much and would yet suffer more. I am humbled to meet you, Mr. Hicks, you who have suffered much but remain gracious and gentle."

Then she looked at my journal. I let her read it. I turned the pages for her so she did not have to touch it. She saw the line where I had referred to first seeing her as a vision of Heaven.

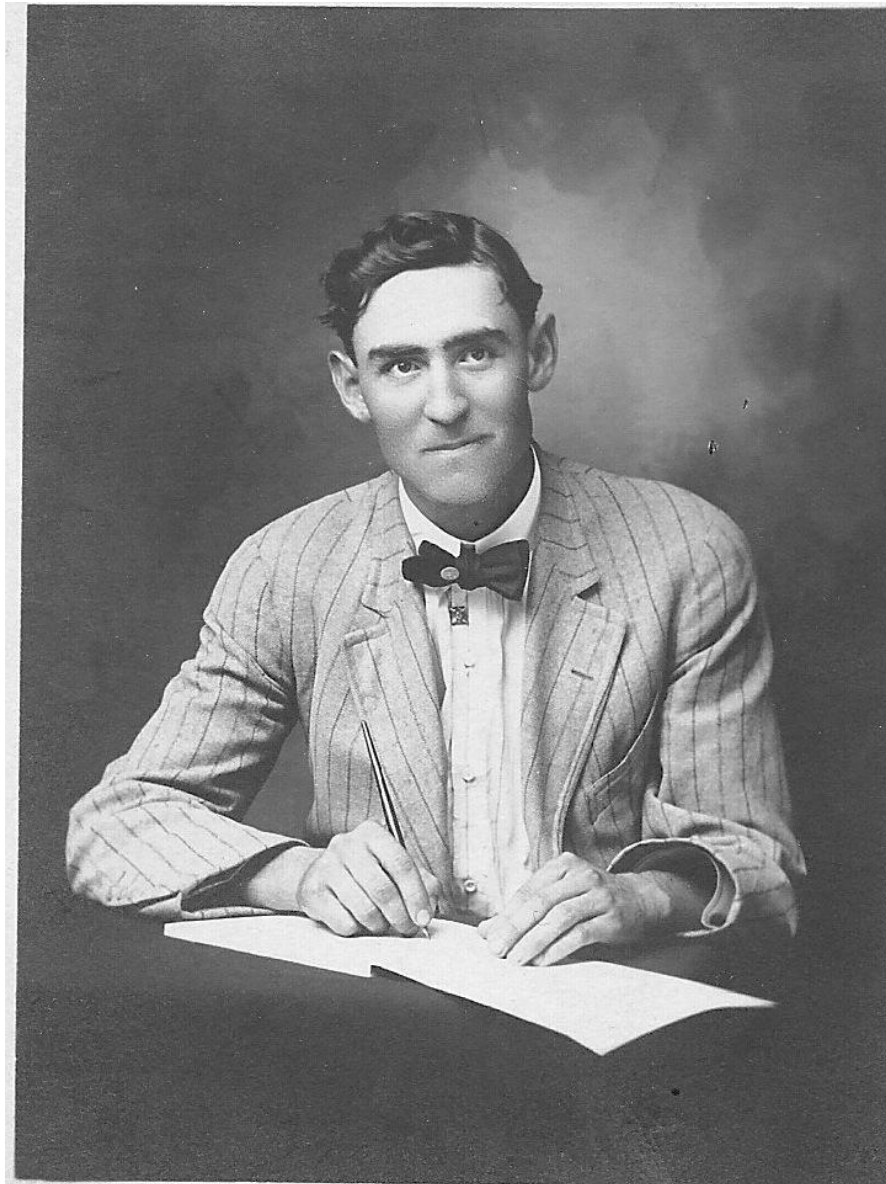
"Vision of Heaven?" she asked in a whisper. "Me? Dear God, me? And look how fancy you made that H!" She laughed silently. "Mr. William Hicks, I have never been so honored.

"And I would be honored to fight for your case. But..." The woman who heads the state agency that could possibly help me said, But. My heart started to wrench.

"...but, you see, my own days of fighting are limited. I am myself very ill, though not with the same disease you have." And then she pulled off her hat. Its loftiness collapsed into a pile of lace. Her hair was crinkled and thin against her scalp. Where the hat band had been, there were blisters. "I am very weak. I spend a lot of time resting. Whenever the blisters come, I am even more tired than usual. You cannot imagine how exhausted I felt after I spoke last night. Or, perhaps you can. How I wish I could help you. You are a lovely young man, Mr. Hicks."

“I love you with a love most pure and holy,” I said to her. And then I kept going. I would never have another opportunity to communicate with her, even in writing, since we were not permitted to write letters. “I wish I could embrace you, but they won’t let me even embrace my old Mother.”

When she heard the door start to open again, she grabbed her hat and slapped it back on her head. She mouthed to me silently, “I will not forget you, Mr. William Hicks.”



William Hicks, about 1916.

Part four: Frank Hicks

Chapter 1

I had just one chance to get this right, so I thought and planned and practiced. And practiced and practiced.

First of all, how *do* you scalp someone? None of my Cherokee friends had ever done it. Scalping pretty much ended back when the warrior Tsiyu Gansini, also called Dragging Canoe, died in 1792 and his second in command John Watts surrendered the Chickamauga towns in Tennessee in 1794. Thereafter, we Cherokees wanted to prove how civilized we were, thinking that the Americans would respect us, maybe even admire us. But they took our land and sent us to what became Oklahoma even though we made ourselves as white and civilized as they. Then they took our land in Oklahoma. It was 1923, and I no longer had my Cherokee land allotment. I rented a little house and worked in a store.

Not that Oklahoma was so bad; but it was not our land. It belonged to the Osage and the Comanche and the Caddo, whom the United States government displaced from their homes so that they could displace us from our homes. The Americans even built forts, such as Ft. Washita and Ft. Towson, to protect one set of displaced Indians from another. The white Americans have spent a pile of money to take our land away from us.

And then we Cherokees recommenced our attempts to show the Americans how civilized we were. Even before the Removal, we had a written language—not just English letters sounding out our words, but a unique set of characters used by no other language in the world, invented by Sequoyah. Our Cherokee schools were so important to us that, by the end of the 1800s, the Cherokee Nation had the highest literacy rate of any nation in the world. You can find Cherokee Bibles and Cherokee hymn books, with words written by Reverend Samuel Worcester and Elias Boudinot, the Cherokee who betrayed our land into the hands of the whites. But you won't find any Cherokee books about how to scalp someone.

And it's not as if the Cherokees *wanted* to scalp anyone by the twentieth century, being restrained from it only by the effort of civilization and refined custom. No. We Cherokees were very different people from what we were in the old days. Back in the 1700s, our warriors scalped enemies and enemy families because they were convinced to the very marrow of their bones that it was the right and honorable thing to do.

Scalping enemies was even part of Cherokee religion. Or what passed for religion. Our tribe didn't really have a religion in the white sense of the word. We had spirituality, an awareness of the powerful sacredness of the Earth.

It is true that we had mythological stories. The white preachers assumed that our mythology was like theirs—to be taken literally. But that wasn't true. Half our myths started off as stories for children, and the other half were jokes for adults. Let me give you an example: the story of Nunyunuwi, or the Stone Man. He was a big monster whose skin was plates of stone. He was headed into a Cherokee town to do some kind of no good. But the townspeople found seven menstruating women and positioned them along the path. As the monster approached the town,

he dared not approach the women. He became weaker and weaker as he went along the path until after the seventh woman he fell down. A medicine man drove seven sourwood stakes through the monster's heart.

Now, how could anybody believe that something like that ever happened? I can assure you that no Cherokees ever burned anybody at the stake for the heresy of not believing this story. We burned people at the stake for other reasons, but not for heresy. This was a story, damn it, a story that tells about the power of women! No warrior would come out and actually *say* women are powerful, but by telling this story, a warrior could say it without saying it.

But we don't have that religion, or whatever it is, anymore. There's the Keetowahs, the traditionalist Cherokees, but they keep to themselves and don't tell mostly white people like me what they believe or what they do. I think they dance around fires and chant and stuff like that. But I'm pretty sure they don't scalp anybody. The rest of us, we mostly go to Disciples of Christ churches like Edd and Stella. I can tell that Edd and Stella disapproved when I stopped going to church. We are not just a people conquered from the outside, but from the inside as well. I decided to not be conquered from the inside, but I had no advice to guide me back to the old path. If I was going to scalp somebody, I would have to figure out for myself how to do it.

I had no doubt about whom I would scalp or why. Of course, I could not write this part down. My victim would be Averd Hargrove, the man who took my land and Edd's too. The son-of-a-banker in Claremore. I considered the fact that Mr. Phillips, the oil man in Tulsa, deserved to be scalped too. But Tulsa was too far away. Hargrove deserved it, and he was within my reach.

Chapter 2

Before making any plans about scalping somebody, I had to prepare myself. I thought about it for years, but starting in 1918, right after the Great War, I decided to do something about it, to make myself into the twentieth-century version of a Cherokee warrior. And to do this, I had to figure out exactly what the way of the warrior was. They didn't teach us about that in Cherokee finishing school.

I got a notebook (Big Chief notebook, with a warrior's visage on the red cardboard cover) and a pencil. I sharpened the pencil with my knife and started on the first page. I decided to divide my ideas up into chapters, the way the books I read in the Tulsa Library do. I left room at the end of each chapter not only to keep adding thoughts but to rewrite the thoughts that turned out to be wrong.

In my first chapter, *The Heart of the Warrior*, I wrote about moments of holy rage, but that rage was futile and self-destructive unless the warrior's heart is at peace the rest of the time.

In my second chapter, *The Vigilance of the Warrior*, I wrote about how the warrior is constantly watchful for his chance to attack.

In my third chapter, *The Selflessness of the Warrior*, I wrote that a warrior never acts for his own greed or lust, but always in the service of his tribe.

In my fourth chapter, *The Prudence of the Warrior*, I wrote about careful planning, which must be done in the absence of rage.

In my fifth chapter, *The Love of the Warrior*, I wrote that it was essential for the warrior to love everyone else except his enemy. The love of friends is as much a part of our human nature as the hatred of enemies.

Now, any of you who think that, because I was secretly planning an attack on Hargrove, I was some kind of homicidal maniac, let me assure you about something. I really liked people. I was not pretending. You see, the best way to *seem* good is to actually *be* good, and to *enjoy* being good. As Abraham Lincoln said, in that book of quotes I read in the library, no man is smart enough to be a good liar. Somehow, sometime, a liar will trip himself up. And most people can tell if your nose is brown. Since you can't fake loving people, you have to *convince yourself* that you love them.

The way I see it, this is the way nature has made us. I'd been reading in books about what some of the European scientists had been saying about evolution, and about how humans are no exception to the grand story of evolution. You won't find any books with the word "evolution" in the title in the Tulsa Library, but the concept is there, hidden inside the pages of books about the science of life or the science of the Earth, for those who care to read about it. The people around here who disapprove of evolution don't know what it is, so when a scientist writes about evolution in a book but doesn't come out and call it that, or at least doesn't use the word in the title, the book can make it into the Tulsa library. Probably wouldn't make it into the textbooks like what the school board, led by my brother Edd, approve for use in the rural schools. But let

me tell you, you can find plenty to read about evolution in the library if you know where to look. My favorite places to look were books about animal behavior.

I first started going to the Tulsa Library just after it opened back in 1913 in the basement of the county courthouse at Sixth and Boulder. It was a long horse ride into Tulsa from Chelsea, so I usually arranged to take a day off from work to go there. By then I was working in Mr. Judson's store. He was the new owner of the store that Edd, Lon, and I used to work in. Sometimes he let me work extra hours on other days, but sometimes I just lost the pay. But it was important for me to go and read the books for free that I would not be able to buy even at Hannon's Book Store in Tulsa. I would ride right past the Frisco Trail Depot and the famous Pig's Ear eatery right across from it, where rich oil men ate quail on toast and custard pie. The country roads were dirt, but Tulsa had twenty miles of brick roads and twelve miles of electric railroad. And I kept going after the library got its own building in 1916, a big white limestone building at Third and Cheyenne. A lot of school children used the library. When they flocked in after three p.m., it was time for me to start my long ride home. All the children had to go to school: compulsory education was written into the state constitution, partly from the efforts of my esteemed brother, but largely because of the campaigns and speeches and rallies organized by that powerful good woman, Kate Barnard, one of America's great advocates for child welfare. All the big philanthropists, as they call themselves, back east knew Kate and esteemed her, a pretty little woman with a big voice, and she gave our state the reputation that I hope will endure, one of liberalism and fairness for the poor and disadvantaged.

Chapter 3

Nature made us humans capable of love and goodness. That is, goodness evolved. But the preachers around here see the science of evolution as a threat, as the enemy. Prominent among them is the evangelist Billy Sunday. He was a professional baseball player before he got saved. He is famous all over America. He liked to give sermons where he would jump around and preach up a storm and put up his fists to fight the Devil. He could really put on a show, that man. How do I know this? Because he came through northeastern Oklahoma one time. I saw him one Sunday in 1923 at the Disciples church in Claremore, over on Fifth Street just south of Chickasaw Avenue, only a couple of blocks away from the big Belvidere Mansion.

One of Billy Sunday's favorite topics was evolution. He said that this godless doctrine glorified the animal instincts, turning its adherents into vicious wolves. It was the law of the jungle, eat or be eaten, kill or be killed, slash open the arteries of your prey with your sharp and merciless claws. He got us all vividly imagining that we could actually see blood dripping from the ceiling and spattered all over the stucco walls and the table where the Lord's Supper sat, waiting to be nibbled and tippled after the altar call. And he went on. Whole nations have embraced this doctrine, he said. Germany (which previously had not even been a nation) found its racial identity and then used evolution as its justification for trying to conquer all of Europe. He said that Kaiser Wilhelm had specifically invoked Ernst Haeckel who invoked Charles Darwin as justification for his outburst of conquest, which had been stopped only by the immense sacrifice of the Allies in the Great War so recently ended. This law of nature had left France a barren countryside of bomb-shelled holes and twisted tree trunks, and it still stunk of mustard gas. Man, that Billy could preach. He had us all even smelling the consequences of evolution.

After church, it was time for somebody to invite Billy Sunday over for dinner. Of course, the obvious choice was Mr. Bayless who owned the Belvidere mansion. He was rich when he moved to Claremore in 1901, at a time when Claremore was bigger than Tulsa. He was the big benefactor of the church. But the elders of the church, with Bayless's blessing, had a surprise suggestion for Billy: to have dinner with Mr. Eddie Hicks, who lived outside of Chelsea, which was outside of Claremore, which was outside of Tulsa. They told him that Edd was the most upright man in Rogers County, that he was respected by everybody for his work with the church, on his farm, and with the school board, and that his wife Stella made the best fried chicken to be found anywhere between Spencer Creek and the Verdigris River.

Every bit of which was true.

Of course, it was quite a trip out to Edd's place at Winganon, so Billy loaded his trunk into Edd's mule-drawn wagon and waved goodbye to his admirers, riding away with Edd and Stella and the kids. Old man Bayless offered the use of his flivver and chauffeur, but Billy preferred the wagon. I had ridden my horse to church, so I trotted alongside the wagon, veering

off to my own place, then heading out to Edd's house in the late afternoon. Lon, of course, wasn't invited.

I sat in the living-room with Edd and Billy, while the boys (Herb, Roy, and Dick) did chores and the girls (Clara and Nina) helped Stella in the kitchen, where they also looked after the toddlers, Bill and Jack. I smiled as I thought about what an all-American family they were, with names like that. What if Edd had decided to name one of his sons Fivekiller, like Nancy Ward's son? I wonder what Billy might have had to say about that.

"Well," said Billy. "It must be quite satisfying, living out here in God's country, where everybody knows the truth of Christ."

"Pretty much everybody," said Edd, not looking at me, perhaps because I had not really told him much about my departure from orthodox Christianity.

"And the schools out here, no danger of them teaching evolution," added Billy.

"Legislature's poised to pass an anti-evolution law," said Edd. And, in fact, they did, later that year. This was two years earlier than Tennessee passed its law, which became more famous than the Oklahoma law because of the Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. You've all heard about The Scopes Trial, but I'll bet you didn't know Oklahoma was two years ahead of Tennessee in its anti-evolution crusade. Hell, we were the first state in the Union to have such a law.

"But," said Edd, "I don't think any of our teachers out here even know what evolution is, law or no law," continued Edd.

"But they do teach science?" asked Billy.

"Of course," said Edd. "For instance, we keep up on the latest about hygiene. The flu hit us pretty bad in '18, and we're going to enlist modern science to keep from letting something like that happen to us again. There's a few old people who teach their grandkids that disease is caused by bad air and such, but our teachers tell the kids all about germs. We don't have microscopes to see them with, the way they do in the cities, but we teach them anyway. And to be careful about the water. To keep the runoff from the outhouses and barns away from the wells and creeks. And to keep dirty animals out of the house. Cats, for instance. They're just disease-carriers. We keep our cats outside. Now, outside, they do a valuable service: they kill rodents, which are disease-carriers even more than the cats."

"So, what was it like for you and your family? I mean, during the flu." Billy sat back to listen.

"Didn't hit us too bad," said Edd. "Some families got hit hard. Roy and Herb delivered food to some of them, by leaving it in the mailbox so as to not get near the houses. The houses had ribbons on them to warn people of the flu. Now, smallpox, we got that once. But it wasn't deadly like you read about in history books. Stella was real sick for about three weeks, and little Nina got sick for a few days, but other than that we did well. Stella didn't even get any pock marks from it."

"Is that a fact?" Billy said.

"You can see for yourself," said Edd, not realizing Billy had spoken rhetorically. "And we teach the kids how to recognize the different kinds of plants and trees. Course, most of them already know it, but just in case. Little Nina, she and Clara were out in the forest playing with leaves. They invented a game where you suck on leaves, and they pop in your face. Well, Nina got a hold of a poison ivy leaf."

"Yow," said Billy.

"She won't do that again. Her face broke out in blisters so bad you almost couldn't tell who she was. I had to go to the store where I used to work and get some mercury salve to put on her face to kill the germs. I put it on her face with a turkey feather."

"You don't say," said Billy, who must have enjoyed for once not being the person to say things.

"Yes. You don't want to break the skin, because if you do, other germs might get in, and it also might leave a scar. I don't want my beautiful little girl to grow up with scars on her face. See, that's because I know about germs. And our teachers and students know about them too. And about plants. Nina is only five, but she knows more about plants than those city kids who ride around in their flivvers and listen to their Victrolas."

"Well, she certainly knows what poison ivy is," said Billy.

"And she knows where food comes from," said Edd. "We raise all our food here—except wheat; I buy flour at the store. Nina has an appreciation of how you have to work hard to get God's blessings."

"Right you are, Brother Hicks."

"And we teach other kinds of science too. Like about how airplanes fly and about what happens with gasoline inside of those car engines."

"And animal husbandry?" asked Billy.

"Well, we don't teach them about that at school," said Edd. "About where baby cows come from, and such like. They learn that to home."

"And history?"

"Of course, we teach them history as well," continued Edd. "All the way back to Adam and Eve."

"And about how the west was won?" asked Billy, narrowing his eyes a little.

"Well," said Edd, "you've got to understand that this used to be Indian Territory. We certainly aren't going to teach that it was good for white men to up and shoot an Indian whenever he could. But maybe the whites were right about Manifest Destiny and all. The only way for our Indian Nations to survive was to become part of the United States. So, we pledge allegiance to the flag, we do. Hands over our hearts. We just don't feel any obligation to make up any lies about our history."

"Well said, Brother Hicks," smiled Billy. "It must be such a blessing to have good Christian school teachers."

"Well, most of them," said Edd, gravely. "There was this one young woman from St. Louis, I think, or was it Kansas City. She had a certificate, but not a college degree. We can't be too choosy out here. She was only a couple of years older than the seniors. And some of the big guys, they had to be held back a few times from advancing to the next grade. They seemed to be in no hurry to finish school, since they were just going to stay on the farm anyway. You see where I'm going with this."

"I do," said Billy.

"Well now, I had to have a talk with this teacher. Being that I am the Chairman of the School Board. It was a cold day, but I had to make the kids all go outside while I had a talk with this young lady. Name was Amelia, just like my sister who died. Really pretty, and smart. I couldn't be mad at her, you know."

"Of course not. That wouldn't have helped any."

"Right. Well, Reverend Sunday..."

"I'm not Reverend, remember? I'm just Billy."

"...this Amelia took a shine to the most athletic young man in her class. One of the fullbloods. And he liked her, too; be hard for him not to. Like I said, he was about the same age as her. Now, they didn't actually *know* each other..."

"In the Biblical sense," clarified Billy.

In the sense of the *Song of Songs*, I told myself.

"But I had to tell her that she would have to leave. And that if a future employer asked me why, I would have to tell him, but I would not volunteer the information. She thanked me for that, not looking up from her folded hands. Oh, Billy!" Edd came to life. "Resisting the charms of the flesh can be such a difficult thing to do. Many's the time I've thanked God for Stella, because we can have all the enjoyment God means for us to have, and it's holy!"

"Amen, Brother Hicks. Them's my feelings exactly."

And I really believe Billy Sunday meant that, about being faithful to his wife. A few years later, in 1927, Sinclair Lewis wrote his novel *Elmer Gantry* which, everyone said, was modeled after Billy Sunday. But as much as I admire Lewis's crusade against oppressive religion, I am pretty sure that Billy Sunday was sincere, and was not the philandering swindler portrayed in Lewis's novel. When I read the novel in the Tulsa Library (I had to read it in the building, since they loaned out books only to Tulsa residents), I did not recognize Billy Sunday in one single characteristic of Elmer Gantry. Except the preaching, of course.

And then Billy Sunday turned to me.

"So, what are your views?" he asked me.

I had views all right, but I had no desire to get in an argument. So, I played my professional card. "I don't really have any views, least that I feel like arguing with anybody." I had heard of times when political or religious arguments tore up family get-togethers, although this had never happened to us. I was not about to change our tradition. I have heard all the clichés about heat and light, and I knew that dim fires also produced a lot of smoke and suffocation. These men were not going to draw me into a direct argument. "I just work at a store,

so none of this has much to do with me. I suppose it will when I get married and have kids someday.”

“Frank here isn’t too reg’lar in his church attendance these days,” my brother said.

Thanks, Eddie.

“But we’ll just let the Spirit do His work. Frank’s a good man, and we’ll just trust to the Spirit.”

Thanks, Eddie, and I mean it this time.

“Well,” said Billy. “If your brother here was the enemy of Christ, he’d be up yellin’ at us, wouldn’t he?”

Yes, Billy, I would.

“So, he’s not an enemy of the Word. He’s more like one of the sheep that has gone astray.”

Sheep? Thanks, Billy. Do you have any blessed idea how stupid sheep are?

“But he hasn’t wandered very far, looks like,” added the preacher.

Thanks, Billy, and I mean it this time.

“My views about Stella’s fried chicken are about the same as my brother’s,” I said.

The two men laughed.

“But I was wondering,” I said without thinking.

“Yes?” prompted Billy.

Having put my foot in my mouth, I had to continue. “Well, you talked in your sermon about how the Bible was literally accurate in every word.”

“Every word,” repeated Billy Sunday. “It is the truth, and if scientists say something different, they are wrong, that’s all there is to it.”

“Well,” I said, still mumbling, “I been reading about that. In the first book of the Kings, seventh chapter...”

Billy nodded at Edd. Edd reached over and got the Bible he always had at hand. He often referred to it as the Sword of the Lord. Sharper than any two-edged sword, he quoted the Bible as describing itself. He turned to the chapter I had indicated.

I continued. “Well, it describes there a big basin that King Solomon had built for the Temple. And it says that the basin was circular, that it had a diameter of a cubit, and a circumference of three cubits.”

“Yes?” prompted Billy.

“Well, that implies that the mathematical value of pi is three.”

“It is,” said Billy.

“No, it isn’t,” I said. “It is three-point-one-four. It is an irrational number, which means that the digits go on forever.”

Edd was smiling. I immediately knew I had said something wrong and was about to be embarrassed. “Pi is three,” he said. “That is, to the first significant figure. Our teachers teach about that. Rounding off, pi is three. There’s a difference between precision and accuracy. The Bible isn’t always precise, but it is accurate.”

He had me there.

"You would have missed that one on the teachers' qualifying exam," said the man who helped establish a system of teachers' qualifying exams in Oklahoma. "Anything else?"

What did I have to lose? I tried one more. "At the beginning of the book of Ezra..."

"Where did you learn all this?" Billy asked me.

"I think he read it in a book at the Tulsa library," said Edd, who turned to the first chapter of Ezra.

"In that chapter, there is a list of numbers."

"There is," said Edd, scanning the chapter.

"Well, add them up."

"I can do it in my head," said Edd. "This is a list of items King Cyrus donated to the Jews when they went back to rebuild Jerusalem. Ahem. Thirty chargers of gold, I guess that means bowls, a thousand chargers of silver, twenty-nine knives, thirty gold basins, four hundred ten silver basins, and a thousand other items. That adds up to 2,499."

"And what, according to the Bible, is the total?" I asked.

Edd looked surprised as he read, "Five thousand four hundred."

"Sounds to me," I said, "like the same kind of funny math they did when they were dividing up our Cherokee land allotments."

"There must have been some items they left off the list," said Billy.

"But it says, 'This is the number of them.' And if they left some out, well, maybe there were a few million years they left out of Genesis too," I said. "And I didn't get that from the likes of Clarence Darrow." Darrow was already a famous anti-religious lawyer, even years before the Scopes Trial. "I got that from..."

"I don't think Mr. Sunday came here to argue about arithmetic," said Stella, who was ready to call us in to eat her chicken.

"Do you have anything else to say, Mr. Frank Hicks?" asked Billy, with a big smile. To this day, I believe he was sincerely not offended, but just wanted to ignore what I'd told him. My brother, I'm not so sure. He was really good at math, and I could see him lying awake at night worrying about this. He never told me.

But I had just a few more pre-chicken moments to make my point. "Yes," I said. "You talked about the law of the jungle, and about how violent animals are to each other, and about how all the goodness that is in mankind comes from God and not from nature."

"I did," said Billy.

"Well, pardon, sir, but have you watched animals very much?"

"Well," said Billy, "I suppose as much as the next man."

"Animals don't act, you might say, like animals. The jungle doesn't follow the law of the jungle, as you've put it. Animals are usually fairly nice to each other, compared to humans."

"They're too stupid," said Edd. "The animals, that is."

“That may be true about cows and pigs,” I told my brother, “but what about that horse of your’n? Even your mules? Well, forget what I said about the mules. Take that horse. He’s intelligent as all get-out, you told me so yourself, and he’s a good, faithful animal.”

“Brother Frank has a point,” said Billy.

Thanks, Billy, and I mean it.

Billy continued. “The Creator has left a little bit of innocence in animals. It’s mostly man who thinks he’s got so much intelligence that he can treat his fellow man *worse* than animals do.” And then Billy said what I was going to say, only a little more piously. “Animals have a little bit of the instinct of the Golden Rule left in them. So long as we don’t breed it out of them the way some of your fellow Oklahomans have bred fighting cocks.”

And so that night, while Billy slept in Edd’s guest room (actually it was normally the girls’ room, so they had to sleep in the living-room) and I was back in my little house, I got out my notebook and wrote some more about the way of the warrior. Tyrants, ancient and modern, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Kaiser, were not really warriors. They were just evil men who loved to inflict suffering.

From what I read about William Jennings Bryan, the politician who kept running for president and losing, the man who made an even bigger issue out of evolution than did Billy Sunday, the one who later in 1925 was to argue the prosecution case against John T. Scopes, was motivated not so much by hating the *science* of evolution as by hating the *perversion* of it that was championed by tyrants. And in that particular way, William Jennings Bryan and Billy Sunday were right. The warrior follows the Golden Rule, except when it comes to a few selected enemies. The warrior is true to this particular part of human instinct. I believe we have this instinct from our animal ancestors, as Mr. Darwin has said, although his books are not in the Tulsa Library. But it is an animal instinct, and I have this on the authority of Billy Sunday.

Chapter 4

Living in my little shack, I continued making my plans and preparations. My rent probably went to a realtor who was acting as or working with a guardian of Cherokee land. For all I knew, it might actually be my own land I was renting. I only saw the map that one time I was in Muskogee with Eddie. What a sweet irony it would be if the owner of the land and house in which I planned my act of war was A. H. himself.

As I continued working in Judson's store, I got better and better at loving my neighbors. Or, for those that I could not love, I could at least try to not offend them. Again, I'll use Lincoln as my example. Someone asked Lincoln one time what he thought about a certain book. Lincoln didn't like the book but didn't want to say so. So, he said, "For people who would like that kind of book, this is the kind of book they would like." That doesn't mean anything at all, but it did allow him to weasel out of offending anyone. He had enough enemies as it was, and he didn't need to create any more. That's why I was nice to everybody. I didn't have time to not be.

As I noted before, I would have just one chance to do the scalping. Once an Indian scalps someone, here in the twentieth century, the whole state is going to be up in a furor, and no Indian warrior will get another chance at it. It's got to be one strike and then, as Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce said, *I will fight no more forever*. I read that in a book at the Tulsa library too.

Some of my library reading included the Congressional Record. They were a few months old by the time the library got them, and they were mostly pretty dry. You know, the Congressmen don't have to actually say all of those things on the floor of the House or Senate. They can just have it "read into" the Record. I just glanced through it and was probably the only person who did so. But the little bit that I read confirmed everything I'd heard about how the white grafters and swindlers had taken Oklahoma land away from Indians, even after statehood.

It was a big business. The grafters were well organized at all levels: Indian Agents and judges and real estate agents were all working together like an efficient machine. And they used the arts of friendliness, not the arts of war. A couple of days before full-blood Indian land became eligible for sale, the land office agents would gather up a bunch of Indians and offer them a grand old time. Here, get on this train. We'll take you to a big hotel up to Tulsa, or Guthrie, or Oklahoma City. Fancy room, fancier than you ever saw in your life or will ever see again. Here, you can have all the cigars you can smoke. And food. You never saw the like. And you won't again. Then, at a minute after midnight, all you have to do is sign your name. Each group of swindlers had to outcompete the other by being nicer, offering better hotels or more cigars. We love'm Injuns.

These grafters, they not only knew their Bible, the Golden Rule and all that, they knew their Aesop also. You know, the fable about the wind and the sun. The wind and the sun make a bet about which one can make the man take off his coat sooner. The wind angrily blows and blows, but the man only clings more tightly to his coat. But the sun shines beautiful and loving warmth on the man, who removes his coat. I don't remember if that one was in *Chimney Corner*

Tales or not, but it should have been. But here's the point, for the swindlers. It is not important so much to offer warmth as the *perception* of warmth. If the sun can make the man or woman think he or she is warm, then he or she will remove first a little bit of clothing, then more, then more. Pretty soon the woman is vulnerable as Eve in Eden. Then it's perfectly acceptable to let the cold winds blow again. That's how many men get their women, and then toss them aside, and that's how white swindlers got Indian land and Indian oil.

It always seemed strange to me that the swindlers worked so hard to look like they were being nice. But then I realized that the swindlers wanted to avariciously grab the land, while still obtaining the benefits of having a good and even philanthropic public image. You see, the Golden Rule is so profitable that people will even go to great lengths to fake it. That right there is evidence that it confers a benefit on any animal or human who practices it. Take, for example, the maps in the Indian Agency office that Eddie and I looked at. They were so meticulously done. Beautiful penmanship, each enrollee's name and number written out. Somebody at the Indian Territory Map Co. worked really hard on that. For all the difference it made they could have just blocked off all the townships and ranges and written, "Y'all better give this land to us if y'all know what's good for y'all." But no, they went through a show of doing everything legally. Actually, I would have liked Averd Hargrove better if he's just ridden up with a gun and told us he was taking our land, and Edd's woman, too. That is, his first one.

But the worst crimes were committed not for land but for oil. There were a few full-bloods, mostly Creeks, and even some freedmen, who received some pretty good money for leasing their oil rights to the refineries. But for most of them, if they had oil under their land, their lives were literally in danger. I tracked down a reference in the newspaper room. The article told about two Creek freedmen, little black boys over in Glenn Pool, who had gotten some money for signing a document stating that certain white oil men were their heirs. Glenn Pool is, of course, the big oil deposit that made Tulsa rich. Little boys having heirs? The boys probably didn't understand what their guardians were signing on their behalf. But one night, the little boys died when somebody dynamited their house, and their heirs, the white men, got the land. There were also some mysterious deaths down in Choctaw country that involved ground glass and carbolic acid. Oil wealth can tempt men to commit atrocities that no animal can even imagine. Oil is concentrated wealth; a lot of wealth in a little bit of land that, these men think, is worth murdering to get. Murdering black people, or murdering Indians, or, when possible, murdering black Indians. Billy Sunday is looking in the wrong place. Oil, not evolution, is the cause of the most concentrated evil. The law of the oil field is far worse than any law or any lawlessness in any jungle.

All that reading I've done in the Tulsa library—that's why I don't talk the way I used to, ain't and all that. Sometimes I revert back to it when I'm to home or chatting in the store. But not when I write out my thoughts and clearly plan my path. In the library, I read about what the whites did to all the other tribes. Not just to us Cherokees. I grew up hearing about the Trail of Tears, as they now call it. But there is no tribe that has not had a trail of tears in some form or other. Practically all of them got sent here to Oklahoma, even the Apaches. Geronimo, the last

great warrior, a man I admire greatly, died while in prison at Fort Sill. The gum'mint crowded all the Indians in little reservations and then ridiculed them for being poor. Kiowas, Comanches, Arapahos, Cheyennes, all out in the grasslands of the west, but there are no buffalo out there anymore. Somehow the Osages got to keep their oil land, or some of it, at any rate. I wish I could scalp all the great Indian Killers. Even Teddy Roosevelt. He acted like a friend of the Earth and of the Red Man, but it was he who nodded his head in agreement with the so-called agents and guardians who took our allotments away. And he was a saint compared to later presidents like Fat Billy Taft and Lover-boy Harding. And Woodrow Wilson. What kind of warrior was he? To him, the Great War was like a chess game (which I've never played, but they play it in those novels I read in the library). He would decide which platoons to be sacrificial pawns. If Wilson had chosen exactly where and when to attack and given it all his force, that long war might have been over more quickly.

Well, if the gum'mint was going to treat me as if I am mentally incapacitated, l the way they said at the Land Office, I thought, I guess I might as well act like it.

Chapter 5

Now let's get one thing straight. Scalping is not necessarily murder. To scalp someone, you grab his hair and cut off his scalp. It leaves a bloody mess, but his brain is safe inside his skull, still receiving blood through those throbbing arteries running up the neck. Warriors would often cut the arteries also, or bury a hatchet into the skull, but that was not, to be strict about it, part of the scalping process. Sometimes, a warrior would leave a scalped person alive as a lifelong curse. Scar tissue would forever cover their heads. For them, wigs were not mere finery. You see, many Indian tribes have a tradition called in a mixture of French and English "counting coup," in which you show the greatest possible power by encountering your enemy and touching him, to show him that you *could* have killed him but did not, thus imparting to him a lifetime of shame. If you just killed him, his spirit would fly off and be free. But if you did not, his spirit was imprisoned within the body of a shamed man. This won't work against whites, of course, for they have no shame. You have to leave them with something physical that they cannot ignore. Scalping without murder is the perfect curse. I wasn't sure if I wanted to kill A. H. or just scalp him.

Then the question arises, what equipment should you use? Clearly, you need to use the sharpest possible knife. But this knife must not be mere equipment. It must answer to a holy office. Thus, what I needed was a knife that was very sharp and very hard and very Indian. The choice was clear: a knife with a blade of obsidian. Obsidian, the mineral that looks like dark glass but is very hard. The mineral which is also called Apache Tears, since it is often mined in the land from which that great people was driven. I knew there was a shop in Tulsa where I could buy an obsidian blade, and I did, on one of my library trips. It wasn't very sharp, but I sharpened it with files and polished it with buckskin. I spent several evenings doing it. I got it so sharp that I could cut things with it just by letting them fall against the blade. I sewed a buckskin sheath for it, with a blade protector made of deer bone that fitted perfectly.

Of course, you need other equipment also. In order to scalp someone without stabbing him, you have to knock him out. A hatchet will do this nicely—that is, the blunt end. A clean knife and a dirty hatchet are the two partners in a scalping mission.

Next, you have to know everything about the victim's habits. Men like Hargrove are creatures of habit. They have so much money they can do whatever they want to in the world, but what do they do? The same thing over and over. It only took me about a week to figure out Hargrove's daily habits. Mr. Judson, who runs the store, trusted me and did not ask why I needed to leave early afternoon on those days. Hargrove drove his Rolls Royce—the only one in Claremore—to the driveway of his mansion at just after five-thirty each weeknight. His mansion sat atop the hill right next to Oklahoma Military Academy, which we call OMA, and commanded a sweeping view of Claremore, or so I imagined, since I had never been to the top floor of the mansion itself and never would be. His paved driveway curved up through the woods where, conveniently enough, I could hide. It was not particularly difficult for me to get through a

rusted part of his iron fence. The bushes and vines hid me from the last light of day. Come early December, and five-thirty is dark enough that I could make my move unseen.

I imagined that, once inside, Hargrove greeted his wife formally, patted his children on the head, if he had any, and enjoyed a snifter of brandy. Of course, I could never come close enough to see, not with those big dogs he had. But I didn't need to. I would be able to catch him about one-third of the way up the hill. I even found a large log which I would be able to drag across the driveway just before he arrived, to make his car stop so that I could attack him when he got out. Of course, I would have to first knock out his chauffeur. But—see my earlier notes about the way of the warrior—I would not kill or scalp the chauffeur. Unless he gets a good look at me, I told myself.

Finally, you have to be spiritually prepared. I knew almost nothing about the medicine of the Cherokee warriors, nor was there any way for me to find out. Maybe someone had written a book about it, and it was in a library in St. Louis, but I would never be able to get there to see it. There wasn't one in Tulsa, is all I knew. Now that both Dad and Grampa were dead, and nobody seemed to know any of the old ways, what was I to do? Gramma, who now lives with Edd and Stella, doesn't know any of the medicine, and anyway she's white. But remember that we did not traditionally have a doctrinal religion. We had ceremonies, but they were just to focus the mind and spirit. Just as I could make up new endings to an old story, I could make up new ceremonies.

This is what I did. I had been gathering hawk feathers ever since I was a boy, and now I was ready to sew them into a mantle made of deer hide. Each evening, alone in my house, I wrapped my head in a turban. I had learned about this in school. The white teacher told us that white explorers in Cherokee country had seen chiefs with turbans. Then I draped the mantle over my shoulders and extended my arms, so that the mantle looked like hawk wings. Even though I had no music and could not remember the songs that Dad sometimes sang, I whirled slowly around the house and chanted, in Cherokee, about the cry of the people in the Darkening Land and about the low rolling hills with their stubby oaks and about the terrible secrets of the soil that had drunk so much blood and of the blood that it was yet to drink. *Ani Yunwiya*, the true people. And then, in one focused climactic moment, I imagined bashing Hargrove on the head, wrestling him down, grabbing his little bit of hair, and slicing away his scalp. But even here, not in a rage: I imagined making a perfect incision around his scalp, then slicing it away like Dad removing the skin from a slaughtered hog.

And I got a little practice at the process of scalping whenever I shot a squirrel for dinner. I had to skin it anyway. But this was so different from scalping a human that it was hardly a valid form of practice. I could pinch the whole squirrel scalp between thumb and forefinger. Of course, this did allow me to get used to the feeling of fresh warm flesh loose under my fingers. In the weeks prior to my planned attack, I quit fishing and ate mostly squirrel meat. I even practiced with my obsidian knife, always spending the evening re-sharpening it afterward.

But it just wasn't the same. I could not feel any rage against a squirrel, much less the glowing black rage that I sometimes allowed myself to feel against Averd Hargrove.

I was not guaranteed success. What would I do if my plan failed? If I do get caught, I decided, I will proudly admit my deed.

There was one medicine that I had learned about from Dad before he died. He told me about the black drink. It is what the warriors drank to purify themselves before battle. Long ago, warrior women made the black drink. One of them was our ancestor Nancy Ward, of whom Dad was endlessly proud. In July 1776, Nancy Ward mixed up the black drink for the warriors whom she was shortly to betray. Dad did not know all the ingredients, but he knew the main one: the leaves of the yaupon holly. He showed me one in someone's yard in Chelsea one day. He said there were two kinds of holly bush with leaves that looked very much alike, but the yaupon holly was the one that kept its leaves in the winter. When the leaves began to turn, I found a holly bush (not the original one; it had been cut down) that still had all of its leaves and they were all dark green. Fortunately, there was one growing right at the corner of my rented property. Perhaps, after all, there is a Great Spirit preparing the path before me.

I had to practice with the dosage of the black drink. Of course, the first time I made it, it was too strong, and I vomited all over the floor of my little house. I was gasping, trembling, and convulsing. But I felt like I was having visions. Billows of intense color rushed past me, time seemed to slow down, and what at first sounded like a susurrus of leaves turned into a torrent of loudness. It had numerous effects on me other than vomiting. I felt weak, but very clear-minded, for the next several days. I knew that if I could get the dosage right it would be the perfect preparation. The next time, I got the dosage too low, and I just had a numb pain in my stomach.

Chapter 6

Finally, I got the dosage of the black drink just right. When I went to work the next day, I astonished Mr. Judson with how quickly and precisely I stocked the shelves and kept the books and even swept the very corners of the floor. I, who was once so clumsy. I walked about the store, not extending my arms but imagining them extended, like hawk's wings. Just to remember the power of the black drink, I carried a little twig of the yaupon in my pocket, with dry but intact leaves.

"So, what do you spend that money on that I gives you?" Mr. Judson asked me.

I looked at his bald head and rimless glasses. I realized again that I might have difficulty grabbing onto Hargrove's balding scalp. Hargrove wasn't quite bald but close enough to it that I might just make a mess by hacking away. After all, even if I knocked him out, I would have to act very fast.

"Frank?" Mr. Judson prompted me.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "What did you say, sir?"

"I said, what do y'all spend all your money on? Not that it's that much, but it's the same I pay to married men with families. I know where their money goes. Not that it's any of my business. I was just curious."

I smiled. "Well, that must have been why my mind wandered off. I was thinking about what I would spend it on. I might have a family someday, you know."

"You're not getting' any younger, Frank."

"It's not like I haven't heard that one before, Mr. Judson. Well, maybe I'm just waiting for some young woman to walk in your store here, the way Estella did with Eddie years back. And maybe I can save enough to open my own place—not to compete with yours, of course, but some other kind of place."

"Like what?"

"That's what I'm thinking about, sir. Could be anything that people might want to pay for. In the cities, they show moving pictures. Maybe I could start up a moving picture the-atre."

"We ain't even got electricity out here," said Judson. "Claremore and Vinita, sure. Besides, who would pay for that?"

"Exactly what I told myself, sir. People paying money to watch movies? I haven't finished thinking about it. But this I know." I felt the hawk lifting up into the sky. "No bank is going to take it and run off with it the way...sorry, sir."

"No, I understand," Mr. Judson said, leaning back and sitting on his register counter. There was nobody in the store right then. "The way they took Edd's land, and yours. I'm just remindin' you that I don't believe those things they said about you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Mentally incompetent, my hinder! You're the best worker I've had in a long time. Oh, that's not a cue for you to ask for a raise. You know right well I'll give you one soon as I can afford it. You know I don't live in no mansion on the hill..."

"Thank you, sir. And since there's something in it for me, I'll keep helping you to afford it someday." I gave him my best smile. He was my ally. My smile was sincere right down to the core of my being.

"But one thing," Mr. Judson said. "I know those banks can be shady. But it's not too smart for anyone to store cash. You know, like the Good Book says, lay up treasures in Heaven, not on earth where thieves break in and steal..."

"I know," I said. I didn't want him to launch into a sermon. Like we wouldn't know that thieves steal things if the Bible hadn't told us so. And, in my own way, I *was* laying up treasures in Heaven, though there was no way in blazes I was going to try to explain Cherokee spirituality to Judson, as if I understood it myself. I couldn't tell him that, if I were only interested in what that Bible of his called filthy lucre, I would not have bought an obsidian knife. "I know, but you're talking to an old Cherokee here. Don't underestimate me."

"You're right, Frank," he said. "I keep forgettin' that you're Cherokee. Don't look it."

"Cherokee is something you are, not something you look like," I said, forgetting to add, sir.

"No offense, Frank," he said. Before I could tell him that I took no offense, he said, "Fine man like you, it doesn't matter much what you are, so long as you aren't black."

"I don't recall hearing of any black ancestors, sir."

That was back when there were still a few black families living by themselves in the little town of Ruby, an acre and a half of shacks less than a quarter mile from where I remembered Edd's land to have been. Some of the families around there would hire the black people as farm workers. Others, like mine, pretended that the black people were not even there. Even though in so many other ways Edd is the perfect gentleman and Christian, if he ever has to ride up in that direction, he takes the long way around to avoid coming close to Ruby. Of course, at the time I didn't like black people very much either. But, remember, I always think carefully about my feelings as a warrior and as a man. I had never met any black people, so I was forced to conclude that my dislike was possibly a mere prejudice.

"And you called yourself old," said Judson. "You're not old, but, remember that the pretty girls have a lot of younger men to look at than the likes of us."

Knowing that Mr. Judson's wife had passed away years before I started working for him, I decided this would be a good place to end the conversation. As if on cue, a customer came in.

It was Hargrove's chauffeur. He had grown up around here, and a couple of years ago we all had a party for him when he got one of the best jobs an unlettered country boy could get.

"Hallo, Judson," he said. "I got a flat tire. Kin you he'p me?"

"Sure," said Judson. "I got a patch kit, and the boy out back can pump the tire for you. Say, old Hargrove isn't out in the car, is he?"

The chauffeur wasn't too smart. He answered, "Young Hargrove. He told me to tell you he wasn't. I was supposed to get a cool drink for myself and give it to him."

I saw my chance. "Coming right up," I said. It seemed totally outlandish that the enemy whose humiliation I had been so carefully planning should be so close to where I stood. Of course, outside the biggest store in Chelsea, and in broad daylight, any attack I might make would be brave but stupid and unworthy of my warrior ancestors. But I knew what I *could* do. I started walking behind the counter. "What would you like?"

"Sarsaparilla," he said.

"One herbal tonic, coming up," I said, vanishing into the back room.

I had to work fast. I got the mortar and pestle that we use for compounding drugs and threw a few dried yaupon leaves in it. Then a few more. I ground them with furious elation. I got a bottle of sarsaparilla out of the ice box, pried off the lid, took a little drink to lower the fluid level a bit, wiped the bunghole clean, and used the druggist's funnel to slip the powder in. I used a straw to stir it, and was quickly back out in the store.

"Yep, the old man, he's been scoutin' out some land out this way," said the chauffeur as I handed him the bottle. Normally, this would have provoked me to anger that I would barely have succeeded in containing. He was looking at some more Cherokee land to grab. But the first part of my revenge was now in the hand of his chauffeur. I liked him. I sort of regretted that I would have to knock this chauffeur out first before throttling Hargrove on the dark forest driveway when the time for my revenge finally came.

As the chauffeur left, the tire being quickly patched, I did the only thing I could. I fantasized about what would happen next. Along the road out this way, there were plenty of trees. But nearer to Claremore, most of the trees had been cut down, except a few bois-d'arcs. How delicious it would be if there was no tree for Hargrove to hide behind when the black drink hit him. I went in the back to clean up the mortar and pestle and think about how I had just counted coup as good as any warrior.

Chapter 7

Finally, the day came. I had purged myself with the black drink the day before, and ceremonially bathed in herbs I had gathered. The white part of my ancestry made me smell bad, but I used the bar of soap that Judson threw in with my pay, and the herbs, to remove the stench. I used baking soda to prevent new odors from arising. I did my work at the store the next day quietly and with deliberation, counting the minutes before I could leave in mid-afternoon.

"I have some work I could use some help on," said Judson. "I'll pay extra."

I could not let anything interfere with my plans. "If you can wait until tomorrow, I would be glad to, sir," I said.

Judson thought about it. "There's enough work for two nights," he said.

"You know how fast I can work when I'm feeling good, sir. I can work double-quick."

"We can do it that way, then," he said. "Long day tomorrow."

"I'll be here bright and early," I said.

With my leather warrior bag, decorated with Cherokee symbols on the inside where nobody could see it, I rode on my horse, my faithful warrior stallion (who was actually a mare named Nanyehi), on the road into town as the sun was getting low. It usually took us an hour and a half, but we cut it to one. I lifted myself up like a warrior standing in the stirrups when nobody was looking. I chanted in a deep somber melody, like those melodies I used to like so much at church. Over and over, I sang *Ani Yunwiya*, the True People. Dragging Canoe lived in me right then.

When I got into Claremore, I tied my horse to a rail in the side street. Old Nanny wasn't too afraid of automobiles, and the few automobiles in Claremore remained mostly on the main drags. On a side street, the horse could get stolen, probably by some of the poor city Cherokees. But I had to trust something to the spirit of the Ani Yunwiya. I couldn't, if possible, let anyone know I was here. I took side streets, emerging onto the road not far from Hargrove's gate. I slipped through the fence. It was just nightfall when I rolled the log into the driveway.

And I waited. And waited. It seemed like a long time, although I might just have been nervous. Finally, I decided to look around. I slipped back out to the hill road. I knew Hargrove's Rolls Royce had to come this way. My heart was beating wildly because my careful plan seemed to be unraveling. I walked hastily downhill.

When I got to the main corner in town, I saw Hargrove's Rolls Royce parked, not in front of Fidelity Fiduciary Bank, but near the big hotel. I walked to an alley and waited. It was now night, and the streetlights were on. It may seem unusual for a minor Oklahoma town to have electric streetlights, but remember that we had oil and gas production all around, and Claremore had its own little electric power plant. Vinita had electricity as far back as 1889. I walked around and watched from every vantage point, without a clue as to how long to wait. And what would I do about the chauffeur? Alone in the woods with the two of them, I knew what to do there, but not on a city street.

I was about to tell myself that I would have to try again another night, when Hargrove emerged from the hotel restaurant, smoking a cigar. He was laughing with another banker, who was also smoking a cigar. They were both drunk, and almost tripped over one another. They wore suits on which they had spilled food and drink. I was just a few feet away from them and I heard everything they said.

"I can't believe our luck!" said the banker.

"The Bushyhead place. It's big, and good land too," said Hargrove.

He was talking about the major Cherokee landowner in the county, whose land was just northeast of Claremore. He was a descendant of an Indian agent back before the Removal, a Scotsman named Stuart, who had a big shock of hair. His mixed-blood descendants took on the name Bushyhead.

"And he signed the contract. He signed it! He can't even read..."

"Oh, he pretends to. He runs his eyes over it, nods his head, ugh ugh ugh, nods his head some more..."

"He's so blasted stupid."

"I'll say. And we didn't even have to get the judge to declare him stupid—he really *is* stupid!"

"Somebody needs to look after that old boy. You know, Averd, maybe we're doin' him a favor. He needs to move in with some of his poor city relatives, where they can look after him and make sure he doesn't hurt his-self."

"And this is just the Cherokees. And they're smarter than most. Out west, them Osages, Kiowas, Cheyennes, and all the rest, God knows, the gum'mint even shipped in some Apaches from Arizona. They wouldn't know how to piss in a pot. Ah, my friend, our triumph has just begun!"

"Lotta other bankers headin' out west, Averd."

"There's plenty of oil, and plenty of stupidity, for all of us. I'm gonna head into Tulsa and talk to Phillips tomorrow. Nothing can stop me now!"

"You ever seen his mansion, Averd?"

"I was at a party there once. Quite a place. It's like a Roman villa. He's got rooms painted with nubile women running around in gauzy outfits, playing flutes, dancing with satyrs, I think. And the faces are his own womenfolk. He's got more money than he knows what to do with. I can't for the life of me think why anyone would want to paint something like that on his walls."

"What you going to spend your money on, Averd? Whiskey and women?"

"Whiskey, yes, a little. But women? Why should I do that if I got Mary?"

"Good point, Averd, you lucky dog."

"We might travel."

"See some Roman villas? Real ones? Anyway, here's to our success over those stupid Injuns!"

"Hallelujah!"

The bankers started singing a song that sounded somewhat like the hymn “Hallelujah, thine the glory, Hallelujah, amen,” the same as the tune of “Hallelujah I’m a bum.” Back when I went to church, I hardly kept from laughing when they sang that one. Edd loved to sing that one really loud. But the only word these two bankers could remember was “Hallelujah,” which they sang over and over.

“Well, Averd, I best be heading back. Say, where’s your chauffeur? I’ll stick my head inside and ask for him for you. You don’t look too steady there.”

“Never been better in my life,” said Hargrove, whose face looked flushed even in the dim gaslight. There were little gasps between his words.

“You best be getting’ home, Averd. I’ll rouse up your chump and send him out.”

The next thing I knew, Hargrove was stumbling along the sidewalk almost to where I was standing. The good news is that I could pull him into the alley and scalp him. The bad news is that, as far as I could tell, the alley was blocked off at the other end. Surely, Hargrove would make some sound as I hit and scalped him, and someone would run into the alley and find me.

But I told myself that Dragging Canoe would never let a thing like that stop him. Blind alley? It’s all relative. I’ll bet there must be some way out, even if it involves some climbing, I told myself. I’m no Jim Thorpe, the great Oklahoma Sac and Fox athlete, but I’m not too bad. I could probably climb over some low fences. Now, someone with a pot like Hargrove’s couldn’t launch himself out of a bathtub without help, probably. I briefly wondered what Mary must think of him. Mary, who almost became Mrs. Edd Hicks, now the pretty spouse (and soon to be widow) of an older, fat man. God, Stella has it a hundred times better than Mary does even if she has to do laundry in a bucket and strangle chickens by hand.

I began breathing deeply and flexing my muscles. Colors began to swim before my eyes. *Ani Nunwiya!* I felt that I was entering into the spirit of the warrior. It was sapping all of my energy, which is why I had allowed myself to feel the surge of power only during brief practices at home, and why I had been saving most of that power for this very moment. I pulled my hatchet out of my satchel back.

When Hargrove arrived at the junction of sidewalk and alley, I was ready.

Right then, the other banker called out to A. H. from the door from which A. H. had just exited. “Found yer chauffeur,” he said. A. H. turned around. My opportunity was gone.

For now.

Part five: Frank Hicks

Chapter 1

Then I went and did something that caused a scandal in my family, only nobody talked about it very much. I took up with a black woman. This would have gotten me thrown out by my family, both because she wasn't my wife and because she was black. Only they couldn't throw me out because I was living by myself on my own income. Bigger income than Edd had, although he had a farm full of food and didn't need much money.

Or I should say, farms full of food, because he moved several times. Whenever there was some family dispute, and Edd felt his principles compromised, he would uproot and move to a different farm and start sharecropping all over again. Sometimes it was over little things, it seems to me. When he and his family were living at the Slocter place, he cut away a wild grapevine that was in the way. But Hazel Slocter loved that grapevine and got angry at him. Doesn't sound like something to move away for, but pretty soon Edd was back near Chelsea starting a new farm. I just tell this to show you the difference between me and my brother: image and principle were paramount to him, but if I wanted to take up with a black woman, I didn't care if anyone approved or not.

Truth be told, the older members of Bert's family weren't too happy about her taking up with a white man. But it had been a long time since she had ever cared what they thought about her.

Bert came into the store where I was working one day in 1925. I was working in back, and didn't see her at first, but I saw the angry look on Judson's face. Then I saw him walk across the store. I went out and watched him speak to someone I could not see, who was crouching in one of the aisles.

"We don't serve black people here," Judson said with restrained anger slathered with some bumpy politeness.

A black woman's head popped up, then her shoulders, then a hand holding a bag of flour. She held a burlap bag in the other hand. "I don't want a black person. I just want a bag of flour," she said, smiling.

Judson sniffed. "Everybody's a comedian," he muttered.

"'xceptin' you, I guess," said the woman, still smiling. Her eyes did not move from Judson's face. She stood. Her hair hung in long loose curls around her broad shoulders. She had a broad nose and broad hips. You could have lined up a row of mason jars on that rump of her'n.

When I first laid eyes on this woman, a lifetime of impressions flooded through my mind. The first was simple surprise at seeing a black person up close. My family and acquaintances stayed away from them, and they from us.

The first black people I ever saw was when I was out fishing with my Dad and one of his friends, Vern. It was on the biggest lake in Indian Territory. Oklahoma now has reservoirs built by the Army Corps of Engineers, and more on the way. One of them is even going to flood the old home place down by the Verdigris River and make it into Oologah Lake, but not back then.

We were in a canoe that Dad had built himself. Dad's vision wasn't too good, but he was afraid of losing his spectacles in the lake, so he didn't have them that day. We weren't catching anything, and Dad suggested that we try a different part of the lake. "We could go over by them stumps," he said.

Vern looked at him with a big smile. "You can't see worth a darn without your glasses, can you?" Dad had no response. "I've heard them called lots of things, but I've never heard them called stumps."

Actually, when I glanced quickly, that's what I thought they were too. Then they started moving. They were black people, wading into the water to fish.

By being so close to this black woman, hardly a dozen feet away, I was in a zone that felt almost forbidden. It was a little bit exciting.

Next, I had a sudden recollection of one of the books I'd read in the library. It was a biography of Francis Galton. Please, let me explain this one. Galton was Charles Darwin's cousin or nephew or something like that, about a half generation younger. He was as much an evolutionist as Darwin himself, but nobody had heard his name, so he was just one more dapper English explorer whose biography appeared on the Tulsa library shelves. And he did travel. He traveled in Africa and got to learn firsthand about the many different ways of being human, both physically and culturally.

Culturally, Mr. Galton found out that tribes out in the bush felt perfectly at ease wearing fewer clothes than did proper Englishmen. You could say the same thing about Cherokees before white contact, of course. So, when Galton met a young black woman named Saartje—a Boer name given to her by the Afrikaans conquerors of South Africa; her English name was Sarah, and nobody knows what her native name was—he saw her buttocks were quite on display, though her privities were not.

Mr. Galton was briefly surprised at Saartje's physical form, particularly that her buttocks were enormous. Just like the woman in the store right then. The technical term for this is *steatopygous*—I wrote that down in my vocabulary list, of what I called my Sir Walter Scott list—but *steatopygy* is not mere fatness. It refers to a concentration of fat in the buttocks, which stand out like shelves. I never thought I would see an example of this in the flesh or, should I say in this woman's case, as covered by gingham. Now, Mr. Galton being a scientist (in fact, a mathematician), he wanted to measure those buttocks. Somehow, unlike most men, Mr. Galton could not fully experience a carnal thrill unless he could stick a number on it. But, being a proper Victorian, he could not walk up to her with his tape measure and string it around her rump. So what did he do? He got out his surveying equipment and used triangulation to estimate her girth. I started to make a guess—though not a mathematically accurate measurement—of this woman's circumference, just in case I never saw her like again.

Back to the cultural part. Galton realized that most Europeans would not consider *steatopygy* to be beautiful. But what is beauty? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, they say. But that is not quite true. It is in the eye of the beholder's culture. Each individual beholder contributes to that culture, but the culture itself can influence, or bend, or even downright twist

the beholder's assessment of what he sees. Galton figured that European culture twisted Europeans into seeing steatopygy as disgusting, while South African black culture twisted them into seeing it as alluring or even downright carnal.

To tribal people, especially the southern African tribes who lived in or near deserts, highly visible accumulations of fat could be an indicator of being well-adapted to the conditions of life. Someone who was stupid or weak or poor could not accumulate that much fat out in the desert. Evolution might, under those conditions, favor a man who lusted after a fat woman, because such a woman was obviously doing something right, and could probably nurse a lot of kids, using those fat reserves to make milk. No wonder the Victorian magazines proclaimed Saartje to be the "Hottentot Venus." Any given individual might find a continent-sized rump to be attractive, interesting, or faintly repulsive, but it was culture that magnified these feelings into lust or disgust.

My white culture pressed me to think of a fat black woman as ugly. I was raised to not have any particular admiration for blacks, for starters. But I think I have already established that I am in the habit of letting my views and feelings depart from those of my white culture. As for my Cherokee culture, it was mostly something that I had reconstructed rather than something I grew up in.

All this went through my mind in a flash as I looked at the woman standing there, her eyes and teeth white, a defiantly large body with a little arm holding up a bag of flour. I was surprised at what I felt right then. Maybe I felt lust for this woman because I wasn't supposed to.

The woman's dress was dull and threadbare and bore the marks of repeated repair. She straightened her back and marched toward the counter with a firm step. Judson's eyes followed her like a Gatling gun swiveling on a turret.

"I thought you-all had a store over in Ruby that you went to," said Judson.

"Just closed," said the woman, gently placing the little sack of flour on the counter.

"I'll get it," I said, stepping to the counter. That first step changed my life. "That will be fifty cents," I told the woman as I opened the ledger.

"Don't give her no line of credit," said Judson.

"I don't need no credit," the woman said.

"And make sure she don't got nothin' in that gunnysack of her'n," said Judson.

"Will do," I told him. Then, as I took her four bits, I asked the woman, "So, your store closed, did it?"

"People movin' out of Ruby," she said. "I'm about the only one left."

"I wouldn't be makin' no habit of..." Judson began.

"You're right welcome here as far as I'm concerned," I told the woman. She looked at me with big expressive eyes but did not smile. Maybe her smile was part of an act, and I had just interrupted the script. She was expecting hostility, and when she didn't get it from me, she had to figure out what to do next. About me.

I continued. "I imagine you'll be in fairly often?"

"Looks like it, don't it," she said.

"Well, when you do, just ask for me to help you," I told her. No credit, no change, transaction complete. She let the bag of flour slip into her sack.

"Show her to the door, before a customer comes in," Judson told me.

"Allow me," I said to the woman. My smile brought a flash of surprise from her face. She just looked at me when I opened the door for her. When she stepped through, I looked back at Judson and said, "I'll take my break now."

The woman and I stood outside the east door. A couple of our regular customers were approaching and decided to use the west door. The woman stood beside me as I pulled out my pipe and packet of tobacco. I didn't smoke cigarettes; a pipe was the closest thing I could come to Cherokee tradition, like Nancy Ward passing around the pipe at one of those treaty conferences back in the old Nation.

"I'm Frank," I told her. I looked into her eyes. Ruby was a little town with a remnant of the Freedmen, black people who had been slaves of rich Cherokee families until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, or perhaps it would be better to say until Cherokee Confederate General Stand Watie surrendered in Oklahoma in 1865. Her ancestors had been here in old Indian Territory as long as mine had.

"My name's Bert," the woman said. "Short for Alberta."

"So, what do you do over in Ruby?" I asked, drawing the match flame into the bowl of the pipe and then shaking the match flame out. A couple of puffs of cherry bark smoke emerged from the pipe. High quality tobacco is one of my few luxuries.

"Not much," Bert said. "My man left, but I have the house. House was in my name. And my brother brings me stuff, keeps me going. But most of the time, it's just little old me and the garden."

I looked in her face again. She couldn't have been over thirty years old. I was thirty-nine. "What do you grow in your garden?"

She smiled. "Okra," she said. "Lots of okra. And some tomatoes and squash and beans. You like okra?"

"Do I like okra?" I said. "I love it. Fry up with flour and corn meal. Sometimes I throw in some bacon."

"You need some okra?" she asked.

"Matter of fact," I said, "I do. I usually grow some of my own, but I didn't get it planted in time this year. You selling?"

"If you want some," she answered.

"Well, I might just be by for some," I said.

"Mine's the yellow house," she said. She didn't need to tell me where Ruby was.

"That little bag of flour," I said. "Is that all you live on? That and okra?"

She looked down at the gunnysack, shifting it from hand to hand. "Well, I was gonna buy some more stuff, but I sort of felt like I should get on my way."

"What else do you need?" I asked.

I gradually got a list of stuff from her. It would have filled that gunnysack pretty full: cornmeal, bacon, shortening, baking soda, salt, canned fruit.

"You on foot?" I asked.

"Yes, so I'd better get started," she said, looking down the road.

"What do you eat in the winter?" I asked. She looked a little uncomfortable, telling things like this to a stranger. "I imagine you put the vegetables in your garden in jars. Yes, that's what my Mom did. I never learned how to do it myself. But she had glass jars of all kinds of stuff in the basement. It's just like she'd canned up the whole summertime into those jars. When you opened one, it reminded you of spring rains, summer thunderstorms, and fall harvest." I looked up, and Bert's eyes were wide and shining a little. Her lips were almost pink and turned out. Her coffee-dark skin looked like it was blushing with invisible heat. Then I said, "You don't have any canning equipment, do you?"

She muttered, "No, I don't, Mr. Frank."

Right then I had everything planned out. I would ride my wagon out to this woman's house and bring her all the items she had not bought from our store, plus that big gleaming new set of canning equipment—the cans, the lids, the seals, the cauldron—that Judson had in his window and that nobody had bought for the two years that it had been sitting there. I figured she'd pay me what she could, and I just felt, kind of instinctually, that her credit would be good with me. She could also pay me in okra. I thought about all the people I don't see at church now that I don't go, all their words of showing kindness to poor people unless they were black—and thought about how I was going to out-Christian all of them tonight.

"Well, I got to get back in to work," I said. "And Frank is my first name. Last name's Hicks."

Bert gasped.

"Why? Something the matter?" I asked as I knocked the ashes out of my pipe bowl against the hitching post.

"That's my last name too," she said, and she turned to leave. I suddenly realized my ancestors might have owned her ancestors. Not even as far back as Nancy Ward, the first Cherokee slave owner. Maybe the white Indian who adopted my grandfather had been the owner of her grandfather. As she walked away, she looked back and said, "I'm right grateful for your help, and that's a fact."

I watched her walk heavily down the road out of town. Maybe it was time for some reconciliation, to use a Bible word for it.

Chapter 2

There was a man with her when I approached her house in my wagon. He looked like her, so I assumed this was the brother she had referred to. At least I could rest assured that she was well protected: this man was as wide as she was, but it was all in his shoulders. He came out the door and half-smiled at me. He looked about my age.

Alberta came out and introduced us. "Frank, meet Bert." They both smiled at my confusion. "He's my brother Bertrand," she explained. Then it was her turn to surprise him. "Mr. Hicks, meet Mr. Hicks."

"Well, if it isn't this Frank I just heard about," said Bert, extending his hand. "And look what he brought with him."

I had gone home to get my wagon so I could bring them boxes of things. They looked very pleased.

"Looks like I'm going to be doing some canning tomorrow," said Bert.

"Pay me when you can," I told Bert.

"I can pay you right now," said Bert.

"He can," said Bert.

Bert said, "I bring my sister some money, but I'm not set up to haul stuff out here very much." He had ridden a horse. "So, you come at just the right time: you got merchandise, and I got money."

And that night, we did in fact cook up a skillet of okra and bacon. While Bert was cooking, I sat on a worn-out couch with Bert and looked at the unfinished wood floor.

"Bert, she eats okra now, but time was not too long ago when she wouldn't touch the stuff," said Bert. "See, we was out on the porch, back when we was growing up, and this *big* tarantula come crawling out." His eyes got big, and he made his two hands into a tarantula. "Ma, she got up to get the broom to swat it, see, but Bert, she just squealed." We started laughing.

"What are you two laughing about?" asked Bert from the kitchen.

"You and that tarantula," said Bert.

"Better enjoy his story," Bert called to me from the kitchen. "He ain't got but one, and he'll tell it over and over until you get sick of it."

"So," continued Bert, "Ma, she come out with the broom and smashed the tarantula right there on the porch."

"I thought you were going to say it jumped up on Bert," I said.

"Well, it was about to," called Bert.

"No, it wasn't," said Bert.

"Looked like it to me," said Bert. "And it was a pregnant female tarantula, full of eggs. And the eggs were slimy and about the same size as..."

"Okra seeds?" I asked.

“So, every time we have okra in something slimy like gumbo, Bert, she always says...” Bert jumped up on his feet as light as a ballet dancer, in defiance of all the laws of physics. “Oh! Oh! It looks like that tarantula!” He sat back down. “See, okra is even bristly just like a tarantula.”

“You’re gonna make me not like it,” I said.

“Not after you taste this,” said Bert, bringing in the skillet and putting it on the little table on a hot pad made from an old towel.

“So, Bert tells me you’re Cherokee,” said Bert.

“Uh,” I said. Yes.

“Actually, we got some Cherokee blood back along the line somewhere, but we don’t rightly remember where,” said Bert.

When the sun was setting, Bert said he’d better get on the road. He said he was heading up to Nowata, a town so called because there was no creek nearby.

“Well, Bert, as usual, the best passel of okra around,” said Bert as he gave Bert a hug. Then he turned to me. “I imagine I’ll be seeing you around a bit.”

Chapter 3

And as Bert rode away, that was that. Bert and I didn't even have to talk about it. We sat together on the couch in silence. I lit my pipe, and then I handed it to her, like Nancy Ward handing the peace pipe around. Bert puffed it and handed it back. I don't remember which of us stood up first to walk into the bedroom. Her bulk spilled all over the place. Our love took some trial and error. A guy could get lost in there, you know, and I did.

And, thus, I had come with the most Christian of intentions, and ended up with a much more palpable and earthy kind of love.

The dawn was moist and fragrant. Bert was asleep and the skillet remained on the table, dappled with grease. I showed up to work in the same clothes and smelling like something that Judson did not approve of. He saw me looking off in the distance a lot between customers and figured everything out. He knew there was no point in saying anything. He did most of the work that I usually did in the store. He carefully counted the till and found every penny in place, and actually smiled over at the empty spot where the canning supplies had been.

I stopped off at home to get clean clothes before I headed over to Bert's. When I got there, Bert was just taking freshly washed sheets off of the line.

"What's this?" I said when I stepped inside. She had a big Victrola, and a little stack of records on the side table. "Bert, how did you get this?"

"Bert brought it," she said. "This morning, hauling it in from Tulsa. He and some of the guys unloaded it and checked it over to make sure nothing got shook loose. It works."

It stood a little over four feet high, with a big door in front and an elegant wooden cap on top. She opened the cap on its hinges, propping it up on its struts. Inside was a felt-covered turntable and a metal arm with a big metal circle at the end, from which protruded a thick needle.

"Where did Bert get this?" I asked. "I got the impression you-all weren't rich enough for something like this."

"In Bert's line of work," said Bert, "he comes across things like this now and again."

"What's his line of work?" I asked.

"General business," said Bert. She cranked the handle on the wooden side of the Victrola until the spring was tight. She picked up one of the records, a record by someone named Isham Jones. She couldn't read the Brunswick Records label. She showed it to me. The title was *My Mammy Knows*. She put the record on the unmoving turntable, then released the latch. The turntable started spinning at what must have been exactly 78 revolutions per minute, just like the ads say. She pulled the metal arm over and gently placed the needle on the record. The big circle of metal from which the needle emerged looked really heavy, but it was balanced just right, and the needle snuggled lightly into the grooves. The tune was a very pleasant jazzy piece with syncopated trumpets and saxophones. It was not very loud, until Bert opened the front panels to let out the sound. You could control the volume by opening the front more to make the sound louder.

Bert started doing a little dance across the floor, clapping her hands and turning around. She had to be careful, because she had momentum that might go where she didn't want it to before she could stop it. I watched her jiggle deliciously. I started imitating her, though I had no extra flesh. She was wearing green today, so we looked like a mosquito and a frog. It was more fun than the powwows I've been to, let me tell you. I kept brushing up against her. When the disc finished, she flipped it over and played the other side: *Just a Little Love Song*. She started humming along as she danced again. She was right in tune and had a golden voice.

"You're a regular Bessie Smith," I said. "Nice voice." I was listening instead of dancing. "You should, you know, do something with that voice of yours."

"Bert might find me a gig," she said. "Up in Greenwood." Greenwood had been the prosperous black part of Tulsa. The most prosperous black community in the United States, matter of fact. They even called it Black Wall Street. White people burned it down in 1921. There were even rumors that white men had dumped flammable materials out of airplanes onto black businesses and homes. Rebuilding got started pretty soon after the flames died down, but it was never the same again. In its glory days, Greenwood in Tulsa might have been the best place to find southern black culture outside of New Orleans.

"I'm serious. You should try to get a gig singing in Greenwood," I said.

When the record finished, she let the spring run down. She sat down and looked at me. "Gals that get gigs, it's not just for their voices." She looked down at her hands, folded in her enormous lap. She didn't sound like she wanted to explore this idea any further. "Not like I can sing in church or nothin'. We don't have enough people around here to have a black congregation."

I let my mind wander to the idea of Bert singing a solo alto line in the church Edd and Stella go to. I thought about the black origins of the jazz music that is so popular today, the black tradition without which men like Isham Jones wouldn't have much music to make. Come to think of it, the songs Edd and Stella sing in church come out of black spirituals too.

"I'll bet you sing some of the same songs in your churches we do in ours," I said. "I mean, the church you used to go to and the church I used to go to."

"I 'spect so," said Bert, stretching and tossing her hair a little. "Gawd, that felt good, dancing around like that. I been living in silence too long. Except for the birds and all. They make good music, and I sit and listen to it, but I like something I can dance to. Some of our churches, we dance to this gospel music, you know."

I smiled, trying to imagine Edd and Stella dancing in the aisles.

Then Bert started singing an alto solo that I had forgotten all about, but it was one of my favorites from back in the day.

*Jesus hold my hand
I need thee ev'ry hour
Through this pilgrim land
Protect me by thy power...*

Bert's eyes were closed in pleasure, and she swayed and waved her arms. I started singing along with her. Bert stopped and said, "You hear that little thing I do with my voice on *I need?*"

"Yes," I said. "You go a little flat there, off the scale a little. On the, what note is it? *Do, re, me...* that's the one, *me.*"

"That's the blues," she said. "That's not your European music there. That's from Africa." Then she continued,

*Hear my feeble plea,
Oh Lord, look down on me...*

She did it again, on *Oh Lord*. God, that note made it sound like a real cry from the heart, something the European music the whites brought over can't do. Just can't do it!

And five minutes later, we were on top of each other. They'd throw us out of any church, but what we had was real love right then.

God, Bert, what kind of world is it that says we can't have this kind of love? What is wrong with us? I mean, whites hate you black folks, and us Cherokees, we hate you too.

Oh, Frank, my sweet little Frank, my little skeeter bug, I love you, God, I love you. You know, some of us black folks hate you white folks too.

It was already pitch black at night when we got up to reheat some of the stew Bert had made earlier. I left her some potatoes from my garden, and she put that in the stew that we had the next night. I hadn't planted anything in my garden, but potatoes grow back if you don't dig them all out.

The next day I showed up to work. My brain was so addled by love that I forgot what day it was. It was Sunday and the store was closed. So I headed over to Bert's. We sat out on the porch and watched thunderstorms rake across the land.

"You afraid of tornadoes?"

"Course. Have to be an idiot to not be. Them things can throw you halfway across the county and I don't mean maybe. I heard some kid's doll from Talala ended up in Joplin."

"Yeah, you're right. But tornadoes ain't half so mean as people is."

"You heard about that catfish that was inside of a great big hailstone?"

"Oh, shut your mouth. You're just lyin' to me like all get out."

"God knows I'm tellin' you the truth, honey."

She baked some bread. It wasn't too good, by any objective standards, not like the kind Judson sells, but I loved it because Bert made it. I hear that the dough rises because of the little bacteria and yeasts and such like that come in on the dust. These yeasts came in on the Oklahoma wind and got kneaded in by Bert's fragrant fingers. Edd thinks we should be afraid of bacteria, but not these, I say. Any bacteria that eat flour probably don't want to eat people.

Before we danced around the Victrola, Bert pulled all the curtains down.

"People is talkin' about us," she said.

"Good," I said, then asked, "What people? There's hardly anyone left in Ruby."

"There's enough," she said. Then she put on a record with a bouncy military-sounding song, with a tattoo of drums and a fife. Some soldiers were marching through a town, and a little boy ran up alongside them.

*I want to be a soldier,
I want to be like you.
I want to have a rifle
And a uniform of blue.
I want to hear the bugle
And the call of my comrades too (Hooray!)...*

We just sat on the couch.

"I don't feel like dancing to that one," I said. "Nice tune but you gotta march to it. Not my idea of a good time. Makes it sound like war is a great adventure, that is, until you get down into the muddy trenches full of shit, blood, and vomit. And mustard gas. Sounds like a song the government used to try to get all the boys to sign up for the Great War."

"You lose anybody in the War?" Bert asked.

"No," I said. "My brother William died in 1917, so people probably think it was the war. But it was actually tuberculosis. He died in a sanatorium out west."

"Maybe Bert can tell you some war stories sometime," Bert said.

"Okay," I said, "this isn't getting off to a very good start. You got any other records?"

One of the discs was grooved only on one side. I supposed it had to be a really good song, if they used a whole disc for just one side. And it was a Columbia, the best company. The singer was Frances Alda, who was a famous opera singer. She sang *Mother of My Heart*. It was slow and sentimental.

"God, you can't dance to that one either," I said. "Where the hell did you get these records?"

"Bert got 'em somewheres," said Bert. "They sort of come with the Victrola."

"But where did the Victrola come from?"

"Some banker up in Claremore," Bert said.

I froze. I looked at more of the records. Bingo! I was right. One of the records had "A. H." written near the edge of the label in the center around the hole.

I didn't know what Bert's line of work was, but, somehow, he ended up with Averd Hargrove's Victrola. Maybe A. H. got himself—and Mary—a bigger one. He was probably so damn rich that he didn't even miss this Victrola.

"Looky here," I said when I looked at another record in the pile a couple of nights later. "I've heard of this guy. John Philip Sousa. Wrote marches."

"I thought you said you didn't like marches," Bert reminded me.

“Might like this one,” I said. And I did. *National Fencibles* was pretty good. There was another one on the flip side called *Stars and Stripes Forever*, which was pretty good too, but a little bit too fancy. I still think *National Fencibles* will be his most famous march someday.

“You know,” Bert said, “them marches are based on black music too.”

“Why am I not surprised,” I said.

“No, I mean it,” said Bert. “Listen to the key change in the third part.”

“I can read music, but I don’t know nothing about key changes.”

“Just listen. You’ll hear it. Ragtime does that too.”

I listened to another Sousa march. I still didn’t hear what Bert was talking about. But she pulled out a record of piano music by somebody named Scott Joplin. The music, with lots of syncopation (ragged time, or ragtime), didn’t sound anything like Sousa, but this time, I heard the key change in the third part of the next Sousa march.

Chapter 4

There never was a particular moment that we could point to and say, yes, right there, that was when Bert and I promised ourselves to each other. But one day Bert pulled out a brand-new record and played it on the Victrola.

*Frankie and Johnnie were sweethearts,
O Lordy, how they did love,
They swore to be true to each other
Just as true as the stars above.
He was her man, he wouldn't do her wrong.*

Of course, Bert changed it to *Frankie and Bertie were sweethearts*... I can't remember who was singing it on the record. The song got recorded by a lot of singers about that time.

And oh, it was a gruesome story. *Bertie went down to the corner just for a bucket of beer, and she asked Mr. Bartender, has my loving Frankie been here? He is my man, he wouldn't do me wrong.*

I don't mean to cause you no trouble, but I ain't gonna tell you no lie. I saw your Frankie 'bout an hour ago with a girl named Nellie Bly, he is your man, but he's doin' you wrong.

Bertie looked over the transom and saw Frankie making love to that other woman. She took her gun and shot him right through that hardwood door. For he was her man, but he was doin' her wrong.

Bring out a thousand policemen, bring 'em around today. Lock me down in that dungeon cell and throw that key away, for I shot my man, he was doin' me wrong.

It's the electric chair for you, for you shot your man, he was doin' you wrong.

This story has no moral, this story has no end. It just goes to show you that there ain't no good in men. He was her man, but he was doin' her wrong.

We didn't have a church wedding, but those lyrics sounded like "till death do us part" to me. That evening, beside the Victrola, was our wedding.

There's that book of the Old Testament that they never read in church. It has all kinds of stuff in it. Holy stuff. About how her belly is like a bowl of wine and her breasts are like clusters of dates and about feeding among the lilies. That's me and Bert. That book also says, *Love is as strong as death.*

Part six : Lonnie Hicks

Chapter 1

I got an extra twenty bucks when I sold my horse in Enid. I wouldn't be needing the horse anymore. That's where, in 1926, I caught the A.T.S.F. train. It was going to take me west. West! Toward the sunset, what our Cherokee ancestors called the Darkening Land but that never made any sense to me. If you travel west, you are, at least in a small measure, keeping up with the sun, chasing it down.

I was so glad to get out of rural Oklahoma. I had run off once before, and my trusting brothers let me come back home, though they didn't trust me at the store anymore. But I knew where the key was. I feel a little bad for taking the money from the till, but no crime was actually committed. It was just a long-term loan, you see. I planned to pay it back. I'd even paid back part of what I'd borrowed the last time. And when I make it big, I'll come home, just for a visit, and pay it back with interest. Maybe even bring gifts for all of Edd's kids.

I'll have to admit that I traveled over a thousand miles before I saw anything that was as flashy as Tulsa. Tulsa was full of new art deco buildings, sprouting up from oil money. Miracle City, they call it. But Amarillo? Dusty. Albuquerque? Gritty. The signs pretty much just proclaimed, "Yeah, we're here, come in and have a drink if you like." But in Tulsa, it was a celebration. So, for the first part of my journey I was wondering if I'd made a really stupid mistake. Compared to Amarillo and Albuquerque, the lights of Tulsa were saying "Yeehaw!"

Chapter 2

I got off at Flagstaff, in Arizona. The first thing I saw when I got off the train was a big casino, just as the sun was dipping below the piney mountains.

I checked into a hotel near the casino and put on my Okie outfit. I wore a big cowboy hat and used my thickest Okie accent. I could see the bouncers and floor managers looking at me and winking when I entered the casino. But I knew what they were up to. They figured I had lots of oil money and no brains, when of course the truth was just the opposite. On signal, a woman in a tight satin bodice with little sparkly doodads all over it—sequins, they call them, a word I never had occasion to use in Oologah—came walking over to me. She winked and looked me in the eye and knew perfectly well that I was enjoying a panoramic view of her landscape. All that lace and fishnet looked like it wanted to pop off.

“Hi, cowboy,” she said.

“Hi yourself,” I smiled. She shuffled close to let me have another look.

“Wanna buy me a drink?” she asked.

“A little snort,” I said. I nodded at a waiter. “You look like you got a long night ahead of you. And I imagine you can show me some action,” I said to the woman.

“Oh, we got action, cowboy.” The waiter brought us a couple of shot glasses of bourbon, and the woman motioned toward one of the tables. “And when you’re done here, I can give you some action, too.”

Five minutes inside the door and I was a universe away from Oologah.

There were at least twenty big tables under a vast ceiling of chandeliers. A band was playing jazz on a stage in the far corner of the room. The announcer said that this was *the* Isham Jones and his orchestra, not some knock-off. The green velvet was perfectly clean on the tables. I’d seen gaming tables in Tulsa, but they usually had old vomit stains and cheroot burnholes on them. But here, they probably replaced the velvet the very next day if some customer got a little careless. There were no discolorations on the brass fixtures. Hell, there wasn’t even any spit on the floor. In Tulsa, they spit everywhere. I’ll bet a hundred years from now they’ll still be spitting in Tulsa, at least in the streets. But this place, the floor was like glass, reflecting a thousand light bulbs. This place was classy, and the whiskey was fine.

“So, what’s your name?” the woman asked me.

“Lorenzo,” I told her. I’m sure she thought I was lying.

“Mind if I call you Lonnie?” she said, pouting a smile at me.

“What’s yours?” I asked.

“Bessie,” she said. Of course, that couldn’t be her real name. Someone must have told her that Okie women were named Bessie a lot. At least she didn’t say Fannie.

The woman laid her hand on my left shoulder and pressed her side against mine. “Show’em what you’ve got, cowboy,” she said.

“Minimum’s twenty,” said the poker-faced man from under his moustache as I approached the Money Wheel. I watched the men betting and the vertical wheel spinning and the leather pointer flapping against the pins.

I did some math in my head. I was always pretty good at math. So was Edd. While Edd could calculate up bushels, I calculated up takings. Frank always struggled with numbers.

“I think I’ll watch first,” I told the man and the woman. “Gotta see how you do things here.” No use pretending I was a regular.

The spin only lasted a minute, and it only took four minutes for the money to change hands, mostly one way. Twenty dollars each five minutes, plus whiskey, plus the room...you didn’t have to be a math genius to see where this was going. I could see that I had seriously underestimated the money I would need. Prices had gone up quite a bit from my last trip out this way. The wheel of fortune was just a game of chance. Not a good investment.

I told the woman, “I think I’ll check out the poker.”

“Good move, cowboy,” she said, hovering at my side as I walked over to the card tables.

“Minimum’s twenty,” said the poker-faced man with the chips.

Edd never knew about this, nor Frank, nor Mom, but I’d found ways to play a lot of poker, mostly in Claremore. I got pretty good at figuring out who had which hand, or pretty close to it. You see, not all of my money came from the store. I had something of a reputation in Claremore. Now, poker was not just a game of chance; this was something I could use my mind for. I put down a twenty—a week’s income at the store—and got my chips.

I should have known something was odd. None of the other men at the table had women clinging to them. But after the game started, my confidence returned. I could pretty much figure out which hands to play my chips against. It seemed strange to me that a couple of these men let their poker faces slip just ever so slightly, registering surprise or disappointment. Was it possible that I, who got my poker expertise in Claremore, Oklahoma, with a little practice in Tulsa, was smarter than these men who seemed to spend all their time in a casino?

My first flush of confusion had nothing to do with the cards but was from my sudden realization that I had not just randomly wandered to this table. The woman had guided me there.

Then, when I lost big, I knew that the cards were, somehow, marked. Or that the men had been faking the surprise and disappointment on their un-poker faces. They saw the look on my face and knew that I knew. I realized this situation could become real dangerous real fast.

“More chips?” asked the attendant.

Of course, I wanted more chips. Even when I had lost, I felt the rush of excitement just at taking the chance. It was, I smiled to think, a little bit like an Indian warrior counting coup, to walk right into someone else’s mind and know the cards in their hand, give them the royal flush, and walk away with a fistful of dough.

“Problem?” asked one of the players.

“No, of course not,” I smiled. “You fellows are pretty good. I think I might be in over my head.”

So, they got to count coup on me. But that was fine; I still had most of my cash. Of course, it wasn't coup they wanted to count. It was cash. They weren't going to let me go quite that easy. I'm sure I saw one of them wink at the woman.

"Oh, Lonnie, you can't let them beat you so fast," she said.

Right then I looked into her face and noticed a certain leanness, a certain meanness, a few lines. What I saw was a mask. I felt a little rage starting to build up in me. I knew I was in what they call a situation.

"No," I told her. "I can't. Maybe I'll have to let them beat me more slowly." I smiled at them, and they smiled back. "I just got here, you know," I said. "Of course, you know. I've hardly had a chance to look around. And I need to savor more of this here whiskey. Our Oklahoma moonshine, it really kicks, but this stuff, it's real smooth. Care to walk around with me a little more?" I glanced at the waiter, who went to get two more shot glasses.

The woman looked at one of the players. He must have signaled to her that there were no other rube Okies at the door at just this moment and that she could take her time.

"Sure thing, cowboy," she said. We walked a few steps away, and another man, apparently a regular, took my place and another poker game began. I turned back to watch.

"I think we might want to keep walking," said the woman. Before I had a chance to agree, a man who must have been a bouncer came up to me.

"No watchin,'" he said. "You either play or you don't. We're not a the-atre."

"Well," I said, "I'm new here and I truly appreciate you telling me." I gave him my biggest smile. He just stood and frowned at me until I turned away.

"Good move," the woman whispered to me as we walked toward the orchestra. I could smell the whiskey from her breath. She was wearing good perfume too.

"Not that it makes any difference," I said, "but why don't they want anyone watching?"

"They think you're going to see the hand of the person near you and signal it to the person on the opposite side of the table," she said.

I was astonished. Now, why hadn't I thought of that? And I was astonished that the woman had spoken straight truth to me for the first time since I'd entered the big room not twenty minutes past.

"Thanks," I said.

She turned and looked me in the eyes. Her face wasn't more than three or four inches from mine. "You're new here," she said. "You need me to protect you and show you how things work. After a while," she said, throwing a glance off into the universe of light bulbs, "you won't need little old me anymore." She looked at me again. "But I hope you'll still want me."

"Now, who the blazes wouldn't want you?" I grinned at her. I had almost all my teeth, something that not too many of my fellow Oklahomans can say.

There was a flapper singing with the orchestra. "Doop-doop de-doop," she began. They all do that, even in Tulsa. I heard one do it in Claremore, although it was a local girl who later disappeared and thought she could make it big as a singer in...somewhere, I forget where.

Then the flapper sang, "Things are seldom as they seem, skim milk masquerades as cream..." Something seemed a little backwards. Maybe it was because the trumpet was playing lower than the trombone as the flapper sang. The woman was looking back to the men at the table for a signal. When she got it, she said, "You don't got much money, do you?"

"We got a lot of oil wells in Oklahoma," I said.

"You don't," she said. "Am I right?"

I knew she was about to have me thrown out. I decided to take a chance and tell her the truth. "I should, but I'm a Cherokee kid who got swindled out of his oil land."

I was expecting her to say, *The door's over there, buster*, but instead she got an empathetic, almost sad look in her eyes. "Wanna tell me about it?"

"As you said," I answered, "I don't got much money."

"You got enough for me," she said.

Another trap. The flapper sang, "You think you're buyin' skim milk, and you find out you're charged for cream..."

I could see the whole thing in my head. I imagined her coming up with me to my room. I allowed myself just a moment of fantasy, thinking about her popping out of her lace and sauntering over to the brass-handled spigots in the marble bathroom. I give her twenty. Then her men come in and take the rest. And I try to jump on an empty train car headed back to Oklahoma.

"You're a darling," I said.

"Oh, you are too, cowboy," she said.

"Name's Lorenzo," I said. "Lorenzo the Cherokee Kid." I stole the Cherokee Kid part from Edd's friend Will Rogers. "Now, listen. You're such a darling, I just gotta get out and breathe some fresh air. I mean, you're just hitting me like a bolt of lightning. You can really knock a man out, and I don't mean maybe." She wasn't smiling. She was impatient as I finished my line. "After I takes a little breather, I'll be back in for you."

"Enjoy your visit to Flagstaff," she said, her voice flat, as I turned and walked to the door.

Chapter 3

I clearly wasn't going to do any high stakes gambling in Flagstaff, and if not here, why even bother trying to make a fortune from gambling in California? Last time I ran off to California, the gambling was pretty good. But now, even Flagstaff was thick with professional criminals. Thirteen years can make a lot of difference. I wouldn't be having any high-class women, either, if that's what Bessie is. I went back to my hotel. There was a restaurant downstairs. After I freshened up a bit in my room, I headed down for a late supper.

I did not recognize the waitress at first. I just glanced at her as she handed me a menu. I was about to order some barbecue when I recognized her.

"Doop doop de-doop," I said.

She froze.

"You're the girl that was singing in the casino down the street," I said. "And a few months before that, in Claremore."

She did not smile. "Don't tell anyone."

I grinned. "So long as you won't," I said. "I'm not supposed to be here either."

She relaxed a little. "Very well. How long you been here?"

"Just got here," I said. "Or can't you tell?"

She looked around. "I'm Bessie," she said. "I'm not supposed to spend too much time with the customers. We get kind of busy. The only decent cheap food in Flagstaff."

"Is it?" I asked.

"That's my story and I'm sticking to it," Bessie said.

"Wasn't your stage name..."

"I called myself Helene back in Claremore. But you might as well know it's Bessie. No use pretending. I shouldn't be talking with you..." She looked over her shoulder.

"You're explaining the menu to me," I said. "You're telling me what chicken-fried steak is. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

She smiled at me briefly. "Well, it's..."

"You need help," I said.

She said loudly, "*It's a filet of high quality...*" Then she spoke soft and fast, "Tough as shoe leather..." Loudly again, then softly, over and over. "*Beef that has been coated in batter* God you don't know how much I need to get out of here *and fried in oil* left over from yesterday," She said it all with a straight face.

"Damn, you're good," I said quietly. "You'd make a good actress. *What else could you recommend?*"

"Stay away from *the fresh-caught seafood flown in from Capistrano by airplane* sometime last week. *Or you could try the Oklahoma-style barbecue* which means they don't put as much sauce on it *or the Texas style barbecue slow cooked over creosote wood* which means they use old railroad ties."

“Railroad ties?”

She threw me a venomous look, turning her face so her boss, suddenly interested in us, could not see it.

“Well, hon’, this here Okie is staying upstairs in room 13 will try the Okie barbecue, if’n you’d be right pleased.”

“Coming right up and I mean it,” she said.

For the rest of my meal she pretended we had not talked, which was pretty easy because there were plenty of other customers ordering week-old Capistrano seafood and railroad tie barbecue. When I laid down twice the price of my meal and told her to keep the change, her eyes got big. But otherwise she said nothing other than a friendly good evening.

She said nothing to me when she came to my door. It was late, so I was already in my light summer smoking jacket. I would have maybe kept my pants on if I’d known when she was coming, but she had had no opportunity to tell me when to expect her. Her eyes met mine just briefly as she closed the door behind her. Her back was turned to me as she started to undress. First her waitress uniform dress, then her slip. She unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it off. She started to slip out of her brassiere when she felt my hand on her shoulder. She tensed up. When she turned to me, she was trembling, with her forearms clutched in front of her chest.

“You’ve never done this before, have you?” I whispered in her ear.

“No,” she squeaked. “I just ran out of money. And here you come, from back to home, and I just thought maybe you’d be kind to...” She looked into my eyes, calm for just a moment. “I’m not desperate, mister. Almost, but not quite. But I can tell you’re a gentle man and won’t hurt me.”

“You got that right,” I said, slipping the straps of her brassiere back over her shoulders.

“Don’t turn me away,” she said, starting to pop out of her straps again.

“I’m not, Bessie.” I put the straps back again. “I’m taking you with me to Hollywood.”

She looked at me in astonishment, dropped her arms, and stood before me in her brassiere and bloomers. Then she grabbed her blouse and dress. “If you think this is some kind of joke...” she started.

“Not at all,” I said. “I’m serious. Now look here, Bessie. I was in that big casino down the street less than one hour before I figured out that if I stayed for two hours I’d be flat broke. So, what am I gonna do? I could go east, or I could go west. I think I want to go west, and I think you do, too.”

“Why Hollywood?” she asked, holding her clothes against her, but relaxing a little.

“Because that’s where you want to go,” I said.

“Yes, you’re right. I do. I can’t pay, though. I guess I could always...” She came closer to me.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” I said. “By the way, Bessie, you wouldn’t make a very good whore. I’m just saying. And I’m not putting any conditions on you. If you want to go off on your own when we get there, you can.” I knew she wouldn’t, even if I wanted her to.

She slowly slipped back into her clothes. She hadn't unbuttoned her shoes. Then she looked into my face. "Hollywood? Me? You think I'm beautiful?"

I looked closely into her face, all around both sides. "I hadn't really looked before," I said. "Yes, I think you probably are."

She met me at the train station the next morning with her suitcase. She was wearing the same blouse but not the restaurant uniform. We found a seat together. The train descended into the vast Mojave Desert. We watched the dry, barren volcanic spires float in the distance and watched the desert shrubs, spaced out evenly like doodads on a blanket, rush past. She fell asleep on my shoulder, as limp as a wet sheet.

Chapter 4

When we got to Los Angeles, I told Bessie Angle that we could get a two-bedroom flat if she needed her privacy. But by now she had begun to trust me. The one-bedroom was plenty big. It was hot, and the ceiling fan was in the living-room, and the mattress in the bedroom was filthy, so when we were out buying clothes I bought us a big thick Indian blanket and we rolled it out on the living-room floor under the fan. Not long after sundown, and not needing to add anything unnecessary to our electric bill, we turned off the lights and lay side by side on the blanket under the fan.

"You okay with this?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

I touched her shoulder, and she pulled back.

"I thought you said..."

"I did," she answered. "Sorry. It was just a reflex, I guess."

"I already know you've never done this," I said. "Which is strange, come to think of it. Those songs you sang on stage back in Claremore, they had a lot of hidden sexual meaning to them."

"I didn't write the lyrics," she said. "Lonnie, you know, you're going to have to explain things to me as we go. Not very romantic, I know, but my parents just couldn't talk about, you know, the act. Mom gave me this little speech about where babies come from, but it was pretty vague. So, what do we do first?"

"Well, first we take our clothes off," I said.

As we continued, and she kept asking questions, I finally had to admit that I didn't know anything about it either.

"I talk a big line," I said. "But..."

"You're a virgin too?" Bessie almost whooped.

"Yes," I said quietly. I thought back to Jennybelle in Oklahoma. I'd dallied with her, felt around a little, but there had never quite been the opportunity to go further.

That was when Bessie turned into a real animal. We did everything wrong and loved every moment of it. When it came to the actual moment, I was very gentle. She liked that so much that she grasped me and cried. The next morning, we found out the bathtub wasn't quite big enough for both of us at the same time. Then we got ourselves into our new clothes and went off looking for work.

First, we checked at the cabarets and recording studios.

Sorry, we don't need anybody right now. Check back later.

But, if you just hear her sing, you'll love her.

Sorry, no openings. You're welcome to sit out on the curb and wait for some dame to come stomping out and yelling "I quit!" and then you can come in and we can talk.

You'll be sorry you turned down the great Helene, mister.

"I have an idea," I told Bessie about noon. "We could find out where the talent scouts walk or drive when they go to work, and you could sing out in the street."

"They'd think I was a beggar," she answered.

"Think of it as practice," I said. We checked out the streets around the studios and decided the corner of Hollywood and Vine was the best. When traffic started picking up after four, Bessie cleared her throat and started singing.

"I am thinking tonight of my blue eyes..." she crooned. None of the people who walked past looked at her or looked like talent scouts. She also didn't sound as good as I had remembered. By the time she got into the second verse of *Maiden's Prayer*, however, she started sounding pretty good. A policeman stopped her and told her it was against regulations to create a public commotion.

But, officer, she's singing. Her voice is a blessing to the fine citizens of...

So, you don't sound like you're from around here.

No, officer.

Well, you got any idea how many good singers there are around here? If they all sang, there'd be so much commotion around here that there'd be too much commotion around here.

We ate at a restaurant. Bessie could tell I was doing calculations in my head about how long we could eat in restaurants, or whether we could afford an ice box, which was not part of the apartment furnishings.

Chapter 5

That night under the fan, after we had bathed in cold water, I touched her, and we both became motionless.

“So, have you decided yet whether I’m beautiful?” she asked. But I knew she was asking something else. We both knew there would be plenty of jobs for her if the stage was small enough.

I answered the question she was thinking. “Remember when I told you that you wouldn’t make a very good whore?”

She started crying and buried her face in my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Lonnie...”

“Oh, darling, relax.”

“You know I wouldn’t let any other man touch me...”

“No, but they might want to *see* you. Strip shows. It’s something to keep in mind as a backup plan. It beats going back to Oklahoma and being Cow Chip Throwing Festival Queen.” This really was a festival they had every year out in the Panhandle. Loud cars chugged by outside of our apartment. “Although I sometimes think I’d rather be with you on hay in a quiet barn rather than in this hole.”

“Some cows got it better than us,” she said.

“Moo,” I said, and from there things started happening.

Chapter 6

"Your turn today," she said the next morning as we finished getting each other dressed.

"I'm not done with your hair yet," I said, continuing to comb her auburn waves. I couldn't decide whether I liked her hair over her ears or behind her ears, so I kept trying it each way. And kissing her ears each time.

At first, she closed her eyes and luxuriated in my attention. Then she opened her eyes and said, "You're stalling. It's time for Lorenzo the Cherokee Kid to go looking for work."

"With his sidekick Helene," I said, putting down the comb.

"With his sidekick Bessie," she answered.

I was ready for a string of responses just like Bessie had gotten, about how there weren't any openings. But at the very first movie studio we checked, the receptionist said, "Right this way, Mr. Ross." I had randomly chosen a famous Cherokee name—John Ross was the chief at the time of the Trail of Tears—as a stage name. Hicks? That just wouldn't cut it in Hollywood. I had considered an Indian name like Running Horse, but it was too late, I was already Lorenzo. I brought Bessie with me into the interview room.

It was more of a warehouse than a room. The man who greeted us was obviously in a hurry.

"So, Lorenzo the Cherokee kid. You do rope tricks?"

"You're thinking of Will Rogers the Cherokee Kid. No, sorry, I don't."

"You don't look Cherokee."

"I speak Cherokee," I said.

He waited for me to say something.

"*Agayuh-li saloli juhyo gihli uwaka eduji*," I said. I think Bessie was impressed.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, 'My uncle has an old squirrel dog.'"

The man smiled and snorted. "You could have been telling me to go eat shit, for all I could tell."

"I guess you'll just have to take my word for it," I smiled.

"Well, you won't be writing any scripts. People go to movies, they won't be hearing you anyway. I hear they're going to come out with talkies pretty soon, but this studio won't be able to afford them." This was one year before Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*. "The captions will just say things like *Me wantum wampum* and stuff like that. Let's see what you look like in a headdress."

"Cherokees don't wear headdresses," I said.

"Now look, Mr. Lorenzo. In movies, there is only one kind of Indian man, and he wears a headdress. And only one kind of Indian woman, and she wears a buckskin dress with beads. Your girl there doesn't look Cherokee at all."

"She isn't."

“We might need her for an extra sometime, but not now. Can you ride a horse?”

“I can ride a horse from Oologah to Vinita in forty minutes flat,” I said.

“Tyler?” the man called to his assistant. “Let’s see what this man looks like in a headdress.”

In a headdress, I looked pretty Indian. I had to squint and puff out my cheeks a little, and I think they were in a hurry to fill in a position, so I landed a role as an extra in a cowboys-and-Indians movie.

That evening, Bessie and I celebrated at a restaurant. Not a lot, just small steaks and a glass of cheap red. But in California, even the cheap red isn’t bad. And that night, Bessie kept asking me the Cherokee words for all the animals that my fingers pretended to be when they were running up and down the contours of her landscape.

I spent most of my time on the set the following week standing around. When my turn came, they wanted to get the filming over with as quickly as possible. If you saw *The Return of Little Dove*, about Indians rescuing their princess from a mean white rancher, I was one of about twelve braves in headdresses frowning and folding arms across bare chests. There was a brief outdoor scene where I got to ride a horse.

When we saw the size of the check for my role in *Little Dove*, we didn’t exactly feel like going out to celebrate. We ate in the apartment.

“Could be worse,” I said.

“Has been worse,” said Bessie.

“Little Dove didn’t look very Indian,” I said. “You look more Indian than she did.”

Bessie started laughing. “Rescue me,” she said. She started running around the apartment and I caught her and carried her to the blanket and laid her down as on a royal throne such as the Cherokees don’t have. I pulled a muscle in my leg doing this.

Chapter 7

Bessie got an extra position as one of the farm girls in a cowboy movie. She got to jump up and down when the Big Star rode in on a horse. You probably saw her in *He Rode His Horse Back*. She was the one with the doodad in her hair that looked like a dead fish.

Then I got a stint as one of about two dozen Indian men to form dancing lines on either side of a stage for a concert. My muscle didn't hurt as much by then. The concert was Isham Jones—the Isham Jones—leading his orchestra in a concert of popular favorites. The pay was even worse than before. We wore headdresses and were bare chested. We waved our arms around while the orchestra played *Love Song of the Waterfall*, sung by a pretty good crooner. But it came with dinner for us and a guest, so Bessie was sitting back with a bunch of fake Indians and one more or less real one.

Then Mr. Jones announced his next piece. It was *Just a Little Love Song*.

"Oh, I love that one," Bessie said to me as I came back to my seat next to her.

A man came up to Mr. Jones and whispered something to him. Mr. Jones turned around to address the audience. "Miss Alice Wiggins was going to sing this piece, but she has suddenly taken ill."

"Must have been the Capistrano seafood," I whispered to Bessie, who watched Jones with rapt attention.

"But my orchestra is prepared to do an instrumental version." Jones turned to his orchestra and raised his baton.

"I can do it!" yelled Bessie, who stood up, holding her hand high in the air.

Jones whirled around and glowered. I was as surprised as anyone. I was also glad we had decided to spend a little extra money getting her the first flapper outfit she had worn since the old Claremore days. And, truth be told, she looked pretty good in it.

Suddenly everyone started cheering. Jones's glare softened a little. "Sure, what the hell," he smiled as Bessie ran up, moving her arms and legs like the flapper she wasn't.

The orchestra played. I could tell that, right at that moment, Bessie froze in fear. I expected the worst. Then she closed her eyes, and the words came, clumsily, but in tune and on time. They were bouncy and getting them right was no easy task.

*Just a little love song
That's what I'm singing for you
Just a little love song
Whene'er you're lonely, whene'er you're blue
Just a little love song
That's what I'm singing today
A little love song, because my love's strong
That's what I'm singing always.*

Partway through, she relaxed. There were some really beautiful intonations that were not merely part of a major scale, you know, the *do re me fa sol* stuff that we did back in church. As she sang, Bessie moved her arms a little, at first just a very little, then like waves of the sea. She hit those intonations just right. Her voice lilted out with just enough freedom to show that she was not imprisoned by the melody but chose to follow it, like a bird flying. When the orchestra did the little triplet notes at the end, just before the final cymbal crash, Bessie held up her hands. The crowd was cheering before the piece even ended. Jones walked over to her and gave her a big hug, which was the only kind of hug he could give. Bessie smiled and bowed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you just heard...” said the announcer. Bessie spoke in his ear. “You have just heard Miss Helene Angel.”

Chapter 8

I didn't see her at the apartment that night. But I did see the name of Miss Hélène Angel in the newspaper the next day.

And I found a note from her in the apartment the following day. I knew what it was going to say so I barely glanced at it. I was torn up inside, the way I thought Lonnie Hicks would never be, a lot more tremblingly torn up than Edd had been about losing Mary, and even though it was exactly what I wanted for Bessie, I was filled with rage. I was furious with Isham Jones, and furious at myself for being furious. I was furious at Bessie for doing exactly what I wanted her to do and what she would have wanted me to do and for which she would have been furious at herself for being furious about. I was furious even though I knew that Bessie was still clinging to me in whatever little way she could. During the few minutes she could get away from the enormous sphere of influence of Isham Jones (who was only a little smaller sphere than Paul Whiteman), she slipped into our apartment and left some money. That's how I knew she still cared about me, even while she traveled around on her feet and on her back with Isham Jones.

It seemed like things couldn't get much worse, when I had a break, a chance to get out of the endless cycle of bit parts I had settled into. I got a phone call at work. We didn't have a phone in the apartment. The phone call was from the Richest Indian in the World.

I had read about him in the papers. His name was Jackson Barnett, and his land allotment, which he had miraculously been able to keep, was over the Cushing Oil Field and had the biggest oil reserves of any plot of land in Oklahoma. Black gold! Texas tea! He was a full-blood Creek. Even while he was raking in the money, he continued to live in a little shack near Henryetta, right near the Canadian River at the southern border of the old Creek Nation, just north of the Choctaws. He'd been involved in some lawsuits. He'd offered to give fifty thousand dollars to the Baptists to build a church in Henryetta, and they sued him because they wanted a quarter million. That suit didn't really get anywhere. Things got really dicey when he married a full-blood Choctaw woman whose allotment wasn't nearly as valuable. Everyone thought she had just married him for money, which was probably true, but he really liked her.

And they decided they wanted to move to Los Angeles. Enough of living in a shack, enough of cold winters. He wanted a mansion, just a little one, stuck away in the curving streets of Beverley Hills. The newspapers carried every bit of his story, including how he barbecued whole beeves in his backyard for his acquaintances and neighbors. He heard rumors that Californians thought that Indians ate dogs. He decided to play along with it. At one of these barbecues, he served the usual food but also had a pot of stew. There were always lots of people who just wanted him to loan them some money on a semi-permanent basis, so he had a trick ready for them. Two men followed him around at the party, and he led them back to the pot of stew. He invited them to take some on their plates. They did, ladling from the top.

“That ain’t the way to do it,” Barnett said. And he plunged the ladle down deep and pulled up some nice hunks of meat. “Dig more deep, get more dog.” And that was the last he ever saw of those men.

Another time, he pretended that his mouth was watering as he kept looking at some rich dame’s poodles. “Just big enough to be horse doovers,” he said. That didn’t go over too well. But he didn’t care. He was the Richest Indian in the World.

It was shenanigans like that that made me one of his great admirers. I lost my land—would’ve lost it even if I hadn’t run off—and so did my brothers. Surrener kept hers, but it was such a small plot that it wasn’t of much use to her. But at least here was one Oklahoma Indian who came out on top.

Apparently, Jackson Barnett was so tired of hangers-on and moochers that he decided to track down another Indian. Of course, there was Will Rogers, the Cherokee Kid, the boy across the creek from us when I was growing up. Barnett befriended him. But Will Rogers had his own money from a string of little movies—*The Cake Eater*, and others like it, not exactly box office hits but he was the star. Then Barnett heard through the grapevine that there was another Cherokee Kid (there were no Creek Kids). He found out which studio it was and called me. Next day, I was having a light lunch with him and his wife and her kids.

“So,” he said, “you like our sandwiches?”

“They’re pretty good, sir. Very tender beef,” I answered.

“They’re tongue sandwiches. They speak for themselves.”

This caught me off guard and I laughed briefly and sincerely. It turns out Barnett could read faces and body language. He could tell I was the first person who actually thought he was funny. That was when he knew he could trust me. And he told me about a movie idea he had, if he could just find a script writer, a producer, and a studio. He was hoping that I would play the lead. I told him to leave out the rope tricks.

“You don’t look Cherokee,” he said.

“Cherokee is something you are, not something you look like,” I told him.

He allowed that this was true. There were almost as many quarter-breed Creeks as there were quarter-breed Cherokees like me.

“I saw your movie, but I couldn’t tell which one was you,” he said. “All the braves looked like white guys they picked up off the street.”

“They were,” I said. “But in your movie, there won’t be any doubt.”

“That’s a fact,” he said as we had an aperitif.

His movie was supposed to be about a Creek man in Tulsa who got his land swindled from him, so he lost all the oil revenues. The pollution was so bad, not just the oil spouting from the gushers but from xylene and other chemicals cracked from the petroleum, which polluted the streams, that all this man had to do to get his revenge was to drop a lit cigarette on the ground and watch the whole oil field go up in flames.

I left with a good feeling but no contract.

As a matter of fact, nobody in Hollywood wanted to do his movie. They never told him why, until one day he talked off the record with an assistant to one of the producers. I was there as we met in a little bar down in Santa Monica, trying not to be seen by anybody. The assistant told me and Barnett that the movie hit too close to home for some investors. Barnett had explained that he would finance the whole thing.

“What you don’t seem to understand, Mr. Barnett,” said the assistant, “is that you, and we, could get sued for all we’re worth. You see, the situation you are describing has really happened, and there are some powerful, powerful people in Oklahoma business and government whose fortunes are entirely based on swindles. Oh, we’ve read all about it from Miss Kate Barnard’s dispatches.” Kate Barnard was the most famous woman that had ever been in Oklahoma government, though she was now ill and seldom made public appearances. She had been, and still was in her heart, a crusader for Indians who had been swindled—especially the orphans—even though she was as white as she could be. White, but with a red heart.

“So?” said Barnett. “I don’t name names, so no particular one of them could sue.”

“Oh, yes, they could,” said the assistant. “That scene at the end, with the oil fields burning up? If we made the movie, somebody might actually try to do it. And we could get blamed for inciting it. And it’s not just sex that the code office is trying to damp down.”

“Oh,” said Barnett, who had not thought of this complication.

Chapter 9

I never expected to hear from Jackson Barnett again, except for an occasional howdy-do git-together. But one day, when I was between movies, Barnett called me over for lunch. And who should be sitting at his table but Rudolph Valentino.

Rudolph Valentino, the sleek heartthrob of millions of women. *The Shiek. The Son of the Shiek. Blood and Sand.* The big ones. Barnett had not warned me.

But Valentino looked very sick. He looked like dog stew that had been boiled way too long. The studios must have done a really good job making him look like somebody he wasn't.

When he greeted me, he moved slowly and appeared to be in pain. I could tell he was very ill. And he refused to go to a doctor. He didn't trust doctors. He was desperately seeking an alternative. Pola Negri's gypsy spells hadn't worked, even though they kept at it every night. He wondered if maybe Indian medicine might work.

"Jackson has put me in touch with Creek medicine men," he said. "But they can't read so I can't write to them." He smiled briefly. "My handwriting is beautiful, by the way." Then he got serious again. "And they don't have phones. So, I have to call someone who will talk to someone who will talk to someone who will talk to them. No answer yet. Then Jackson mentioned he knew you. You know anything about Cherokee medicine?"

I smiled big. "No, I don't, but I bet my brother Frank does. He handled all the drugs at our store back in Oologah. That's the same place Will Rogers is from."

Valentino would have smiled had he not been in so much pain. "Give him a call for me, will you?"

"I'll see what I can do," I said.

"Please," said Valentino. "You get me cured, and you—and your brother—will be very glad you helped me."

No time for an after-lunch drink. I had to try to contact Frank as soon as possible. Problem was, he didn't have a phone either. Nor did Edd. Nor did Judson's store. I didn't want to tell Barnett and Valentino that there would be delays. Not having any better idea, I wrote a letter to Frank care of Judson's store in Chelsea. *Frank, I wrote, you've got to trust me this time. I found us a very famous and very sick man who wants me to find some Cherokee medicine for him. And he will make it worth our while. When you see that money, Frank, you'll be glad I came out here after all. Repaying you and Edd and Judson will be nothing compared to the money that will be left over.*

A month later I saw in a newspaper that Valentino had up and died. No doubt long before Frank had had any chance to respond to my letter, even assuming he cared to. I didn't go to Valentino's funeral—people were already lined up six deep at each stop of his funeral train all the way from New York, where he died, to Los Angeles. I just saw the newspaper pictures of Pola Negri going through great gyrations of gypsy grief.

And it wasn't too long after that when Barnett died also. I went to his funeral, of course. And later, I stopped by to see his widow. The house was for sale, and she was packing to return to Oklahoma. She remembered me fondly but had no intention of investing in movies.

Chapter 10

And so pretty soon I was back to where I started. Every week or so, Bessie would leave a little bit more money. Pretty soon it was enough money that I could have just quit work. I could have sat around the apartment, maybe even with a beer once in a while. Later, with lots of beers. But I could not do this. My Cherokee male ego would not let me. I had to earn money myself.

One day my career took a bump up, though nothing like Bessie's. I actually got a role. It was not a lead role, but it was not a bit part either. I was the Indian that would get to scalp the evil cavalry man. Now that I think back on it, it might have been the only Hollywood movie with an evil cavalry man in it. In *Thunder Over Pine Ridge* I was the brave that got to scalp the soldier who was loosely modeled after General George Armstrong Custer.

The soldier, Adam Flambough, was played by Hal Miffey. And he was a real son of a bitch. Every chance he got, he called me all the names he could think of. I was the only real Indian, such as I was, on the set. But he was the star, and I couldn't talk back to him.

"Hey, Lorenzo. Tell me something."

"Yes, Mr. Miffey?"

"They say Injuns used to eat raw liver and gall bladder from their victims. Zat true?"

"Not in my tribe, Mr. Miffey. The others, I wouldn't know."

"Well, if you Cherokees didn't eat liver and gall bladder, what did you eat?"

"Corn, mostly, sir."

"No humans?"

"No, sir, I think that was Comanches, or maybe it was Arapahos, I don't remember."

"So, corn. Beans, too? So, you can fart a lot?"

"Sometimes, sir. You should try it. Feels good."

He let me get away with that.

"Hey, Lorenzo. Tell me something."

"Yes, Mr. Miffey?"

"They tell me you Injuns ride your women from behind. Zat true?"

"I was raised in a white church, sir. I don't know."

"From Oklahoma, eh, Lorenzo? Lotta oil there. I heard that the Injuns used the oil as medicine. Loosens the bowels up, I hear. Zat true?"

"I haven't tried it myself, sir, but I hear it works. You should try it sometime."

He let me get away with that one too.

"Hey, Lorenzo. Tell me something."

"Yes, Mr. Miffey."

"So you're a white Injun. Lotta white Injuns. I heard that this was because Injun men had little tiny peckers and as soon as the white men came the squaws went running after them. Zat true?"

"I wouldn't know, sir. I haven't made a habit of checking out peckers on other men."

He was about ready to thrash me for that one, but the director called for a take. It was the scene where I got to throw Miffey down on the ground and scalp him.

"You ready, redskin?" Miffey asked me as we went to the set.

"Somebody ought to scalp you for real, paleface shitlicker," I said quietly, smiling politely.

Miffey started to punch me, but I ducked out of the way.

"Set!" cried the director. "Miffey, damn you, I pay you to pretend to fight, not to beat up my other actors. Act like a man, not an animal."

Then the filming resumed. Miffey, as Flambough, came out from behind a bush with his carbine and started shooting. I came up from behind him to grab him by the neck and throttle him. Only this time I really did it. He dropped his carbine, which was not in the script, but the director apparently wanted to see what would happen. Then Miffey threw himself to the ground, but I helped him a little more than usual. The director continued to watch. I jammed my knee into his back and grabbed his fake scalp.

"God damn you, Lorenzo, that hurts."

Remember this was not a talkie, so nobody could hear us in the film.

I pretended to slice his scalp with my flimsy rubber knife. It was supposed to look like a blade made of obsidian. I pulled the fake scalp up in the air and smiled more gleefully than I ever had.

"*Ani Yunwiya!*" I yelled. Dad had told us that this meant *The Real People*. It was what warriors said in battle. I held up the fake scalp and pretended to look all around the horizon with a crazy light in my eyes.

"Cut," said the director. "That was your best take ever, Lorenzo," he said. And didn't I know it.

Miffey did not get up.

"Hey, Miffey, we're done, you can get up now," said the director. "Miffey? Somebody check Miffey."

I was right there and felt his forehead. His eyes were unfocused. I felt for a pulse in his neck. Nothing. Other men converged on the corpse like vultures. The ambulance came for Miffey and the police came for me. After the autopsy, the police concluded that there was no way I could have killed Miffey; no bruise marks around the throat, at least not enough to have caused strangulation, no broken bones. Certainly, no scalping.

The junior police investigator asked me what I had said at the moment of the movie scalping.

"Just some random sounds," I said.

"Doesn't mean anything? I hear you speak Cherokee."

"Might mean something. I don't even remember what I said."

"Give it a rest," said the senior investigator, wiping his brow under his worn-out police cap. "We aren't investigating a magic ritual incantation here. What, do you think he killed Miffey with a magic phrase or something?"

I hadn't thought about that. It made me wonder. I had time, sitting in jail, to wonder a lot about it. Maybe there is such a thing as Indian magic.

The next day, when they were sure that there was no way I could have induced Miffey's death, and that he had probably died of a stroke, they let me go.

Bessie was waiting for me at the apartment.

"Welcome home, Miss Hélène Angel," I said.

She started to cry. "Oh, Lonnie, I hated it, I hated being that man's concubine."

"It got you a lot of gigs," I said. "That's what I wanted for you."

She stared at me in astonishment. "You did?"

"Sure," I said. "That's what I would have done. If Mary Pickford had come around asking for me, I would have run off with her. No hard feelings, baby. When the money showed up, I knew you still cared about little old me. That's what I would have done too. I would have slipped back and left you some money. I take it that Mrs. Jones found out?"

Bessie bit her lip and started crying as she nodded her head.

"Well, welcome home to your Cherokee hero," I said. I showed her the newspaper article about me.

Chapter 11

And now, in 1939, Bessie and I are back to the way we were before. Her Jones money supplemented our meager income from odd jobs for quite a few years. She couldn't get work. Even though she was a really good singer, all the agents assumed that she had gotten her work from being Jones's whore. Nobody knew that Jones had never seen her before that afternoon when she ran to the stage. And I couldn't get work either. I was exonerated of Miffey's death, but I am a legal risk, and do not have enough talent to compensate for this. There is always some other B actor to choose without the kind of legal baggage I had. I get to be in the crowd scenes in the new talkies. None of the gigs pays very much, but they add up. And Bessie is a singing waitress. Pays better than being a regular waitress.

There's a war starting up in Europe. That son of a bitch Hitler looks like he wants to take over all of Europe. First the Anschluss of Austria. Oh, just a friendly little cultural union. Then Sudetenland in Bavaria. Another friendly little cultural union. And he's got his tanks lined up along the border of Poland. Now how can that be a friendly little cultural union? But that's what Neville Chamberlain thinks. It occurred to me that Chamberlain is the Nancy Ward of modern Europe. She seriously thought there could be peace between whites and Cherokees. Well, maybe what they need is a Dragging Canoe. What they need is somebody who can go and scalp that man Hitler.

That egomaniac Mussolini in Italy. And then what the Japanese are doing in China. They won't bother us, though. The Japs want Asia. The Pacific Ocean is way too big for them to get us. But we're going to be fighting in Europe, against Hitler and Mussolini, sure as hell. Even if America doesn't get into the war, we're sure going to have a lot of war industry. Lot of jobs. Me and maybe Bessie too can get jobs. Doing what, I don't know.

I do have an interview lined up, though. Seems that the government wants to do some training movies for the armed forces. Mostly for support missions, about how to maintain airplanes, and such like. If I get the job, I'm going to be doing war training films with this young actor named Ronald Reagan. When I first came to Hollywood, I thought I was going to be a regular Douglas Fairbanks. I imagined that someone like Mary Pickford would be swooning over me. Bessie swoons over me sometimes, and that's pretty good, but it's only on the floor of a little apartment, not on a big silver screen. Men like me and Ronald Reagan will just end up being footnotes to history, I guess. But that doesn't mean we aren't important. Actually, I kind of like it. Doing something useful for the country instead of just entertaining rich people.



Left: Lonnie Hicks and unidentified girlfriend. Right: Lonnie and Frank Hicks, about 1950.

Part seven: Stella Hicks

It took a lot of nerve for her to do this. But God was watching over us. When Mary Hargrove's car drove up in our driveway, Edd was on one of his trips to town, taking the cream to the store. It was early afternoon and Herb, Roy, Clara, Nina, Dick, and Bill were still at school. Herb was about to graduate, and Bill had just started school, in 1927. Jack and the newborn Clifford were taking naps upstairs in one room, Edd's mother Mary in another.

The chauffeur got out of the fancy car with the dark windows, walked around, and opened the door for Mary Hargrove. She got out and looked a little dazed. She looked up in the slippery elm tree as if there was something different about it from the elm trees in Claremore. She almost stepped on a chicken. She jumped just a little when the rooster crowed, which he does off and on all day, not just at dawn. The outdoor cats scurried away, and the dogs Dagwood and Blondie came up and started slobbering on her. I watched all this from the kitchen window. Here was the richest person to ever visit our house—even Billy Sunday wasn't all that rich, just famous—and, somehow, I felt sorry for her. She almost turned her ankle on a little rock. Don't they have rocks in town, where she lives?

"Hello?" came the weak voice from the back door, which was open. The screen door kept out the flies, which were rather numerous because of all the farm animals we had. A moment later the screen door stood between us. "Hello? Mrs. Hicks? I'm Mary Hargrove."

"I heard about you," I said. "And now I get to meet you."

"Sorry to disturb you like this, but..." She hesitated then made a decision. "Can I come in a moment?" I was already opening the door for her.

"Your chauffeur can come in too, if he'd like," I said. But the chauffeur had already found Edd's wooden chair in the shade and looked mighty comfortable. It was a cool spring day. The animals were all taken care of for the moment. I imagined Edd would be relaxing out in that chair when he got back from the store.

"I thank you kindly, Mrs. Hicks," said Mary.

"Have a seat," I said, motioning to the living room. "Don't mind me, I was just making some dumplings to have with the chicken." There were still streaks of white flour on my hands and on the gingham dress that hung loosely from my plump form. I wiped away the flour with a dish towel. "Would you like something to drink? We have water, water, and water."

"Maybe later," said Mary, lightly sitting herself on the silky chair with the wooden armrests. A new corduroy dress covered her slim form. Her long brown hair hung from under her small white hat like the kind Edd offered to order for me from the catalog. I had chosen a black hat instead, black just in case I needed to wear it to another funeral, like Clifford's, our son that died as an infant. Mary looked around at the spare but clean house. I imagine she noticed that we had no Victrola. She saw the painting on the wall of the prophet Samuel, a little boy kneeling in prayer. I wonder if she thought it was a real painting. Actually, it was a print Edd bought from a Cloverbloom Salve salesman a few years back. We had another print, of Jesus on the cross, in the hallway. They were copies of some famous European paintings.

"Edd's not here right now," I said. "Otherwise I'm sure he would have been glad to see you."

"Sorry to hear I missed him, but I was just passing by and wanted to say hi." Mary was obviously not telling the truth; nobody ever just happens to drive past our farm, or anybody else's farm in Winganon. It's not on the road to anywhere. "And it is nice to finally meet you."

"The feeling is mutual," I said. It might have even been true.

"Well, this is a nice quiet place you have out here. So relaxing," Mary said, settling back into the chair.

"Relaxing," I said. "When the kids are here, it is a pretty wild place," I said. But it was a wildness on which Edd imposed the straight lines of order. He organized all of our days around his own self-discipline. Our house looked peaceful enough at the moment, but this was only because of ceaseless labors on our part. It took all day Thursday just to do the week's laundry. Basin, washboard, rinse, then hanging out the clothes for the Oklahoma breeze to rapture away the water. The garden plants needed constant attention, or else the insects would eat them up. It took all the kids all afternoon after school just to pick the beetles off the potatoes and tomatoes and throw them into pans of boiling water to kill them. And when the vegetables were fresh, we had to can them right away with the pressure cooker. Edd watched over us, between chores, to make sure everything was spotless. That man knows all about germs and our health was safe with him. Apple trees don't grow as well here as in the Northwest, nor peaches as well as in Georgia, but we got enough from our trees to can for a winter of pies. When peaches fall off of the tree before they are ripe, as they always do here in Oklahoma, all you have to do is bring them inside and let them ripen just a little, then can them. A little store-boughten sugar makes them taste like they grew that way on the tree.

I guess relaxation is a matter of attitude. When it came time to fry up a chicken for supper, I just went out and caught a chicken—usually one that didn't look healthy enough to go on living—wrung its neck, chopped off its head, and let the blood drip a few minutes after I tied its twitching feet to the string connecting the back porch to the mulberry tree. I could scoop out the guts faster than any other farm wife. The dogs love the guts. Edd's favorite piece was the gizzard. I have never cut open a gall bladder, which can spill all over the gizzard and turn it green and make it taste bitter. Edd told me his Cherokee ancestors would eat raw liver and gall bladder. I think he might just be kidding. Frying up a chicken didn't seem like work to me, from barnyard to table. I do get tired of peeling potatoes, but Clara helps me with that after school.

Maybe Mary was right. She sat around in a rich house most of every day and had a round of parties in Claremore high society many nights. But I'm the one who's relaxed. I hadn't ever thought of it that way before.

"Well," said Mary, "what a blessing it is that all your children are healthy and happy. I don't have any children."

"Actually, Edd and I lost our first child," I said, not sure if I should open this subject. But I went on. "And then we lost our last one, too. Floyd was the only one in the family to have blond hair. He was a gentle child, and we treated him gently. But this was not enough to keep the

bacteria from killing him. There are probably medicines today that could have saved him, but they were not available out here in the country and maybe never will be. Hospitals are for rich people in cities.” I was sure Mary could go to the doctor any time she needed to.

“I am so sorry to hear of your loss,” she said.

“Edd said, *The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord.*”

“Yes, he would say that, wouldn’t he,” said Mary. “He is a strong man.”

I thought of Edd as a stout piling of a pier against which the waves crashed day after day but a pier that never weakened or bent. He was a piling into which no shipworms ever bored and on which no barnacles could grow. I was a seagull on the top of the piling, confidently facing the wind because of Edd’s strength. Mary was the seaweed on the waves, unable to see the sky.

“Yes, he is,” I said, looking at the straight beams and rafters of the house that Edd had built with his own hands, even though the land on which it stood was not his.

“You’ve had quite a few children besides them, though.” Mary made it sound like having children is such an easy blessing, as if us country women just drop them on the floor, pick them up, and go back to the kitchen.

“Yes,” I said. Each child living or dead sucks a whole life’s worth of love out of a mother. Somehow the Lord provided me enough love for nine lives.

“I do have a cat, though,” said Mary.

“Edd says they’re just disease carriers.”

“Not mine. She stays indoors.”

I thought about this. My kids practically grew up outdoors. Their bare feet knew how to find the only strong footholds on a weak creek bank and their hands knew which leaves to touch and which ones not to touch, though they sometimes had to learn the hard way, like little Nina getting her face in the poison ivy. Well, she recovered, with nary a scar. I smiled a little at the memory. Mary must have thought I was smiling about her cat. Would Mary’s kids, if she had had any, have grown up indoors as weak as her cat? An indoor kid is sickly, like the weak stems of a potato whose eyes have sprouted in the darkness of the bin.

I looked closely at her face. She had the kind of face that would be beautiful in a photograph. But what I saw was a beautifully sculptured face that had a plaster of makeup that, for the moment, kept it from frowning. Truth be told, she was still almost as beautiful as she was in that photograph of her and Edd that was supposed to be their wedding portrait. Edd had given it to me to hide away. Edd and I had no money for a wedding portrait. We did, however, have plenty of little Brownie camera pictures of us and our children.

“Well,” I said, “it’s about time for me to milk the cows.” God forgive me for lying, but it was for the greater good. You milk cows at dawn and dusk, not in the afternoon. “You can stay to dinner if you like,” I said, as was my Christian duty.

Mary arose and looked out of the screen door. The chauffeur had stood and was walking around, not impatiently, at least not yet. “No, but thank you,” she said. “Jenks gets off work at five, so we have to be back in Tulsa by then.” She and Averd had moved away from Claremore.

“At least let me give you a carton of eggs,” I said. “Fresher than anything in the store.”

"Your eggs will certainly be fresher than mine," said Mary.

I led Mary out into the barn where the hens were sitting on their nests. She breathed deeply. I think she was surprised that the barn didn't smell like what she thought a barn must surely smell like. I lifted one of the hens and picked up one of the eggs and put it into one of the cardboard cartons stacked on a rude plank table in the barn.

"What's that?" she said, pointing to a number written in pencil on the egg I left behind.

"Oh, that? That's so that I know how old the egg is. I'm letting that one hatch. Takes twenty-one days after laying for a chick to hatch." I put down the carton and took the egg with the number on it and walked outside. Mary followed me and watched me hold the egg up to the sun to see how the chick was developing. "This one's coming along just fine," I said. "Care to look?"

Mary took the egg and held it up to the sun. She squinted her face into an ugly mask. "All I see is a dark mass," she said.

"Turn it around."

"Oh, yes, now I see the head." She handed the egg back to me and her face became statuesque again. "Why did you write the number in pencil?"

"Chemicals from ink might soak in through the shell and kill the chick," I said.

"Oh, yes, of course. I should have thought of that."

We went back in the barn, and I gathered the rest of the eggs. Come morning, there would be plenty of eggs for all the kids. I'd already put an egg into my dumpling batter for tonight's dinner. Dumplings don't need eggs, but I always used them.

Mary looked at the empty stalls. "Is that where you keep your horses?" she asked.

"No, we don't have horses anymore," I said. "Maybe you remember old Samuel." That was probably the wrong thing to say, so I rushed on. "He died. Now we have two mules, Kate and Beck."

That reminded me of a funny story, so I started laughing and told Mary about it.

Edd had a sharp mind for numbers. Old Man McSpadden, who lived on a farm just down the road, had seventeen mules, and in his will he left one-half of his mules to the oldest son, one-third of the mules to his second oldest, and one-ninth of his mules to his youngest son, and then up and died. The three sons were not stupid, but they had the devil of a time trying to figure out how to divide seventeen mules by two, three, or nine. The oldest boy told Edd about it one day, not long after the funeral. It was this son's responsibility to divide up the mules, and just didn't know what to do. The Old Man was always telling jokes, and had a pretty good mind for numbers, too. The part of his will about the mules must have been his final joke. Now Edd knew that the oldest boy had one mule of his own.

"You got one mule of your own and seventeen from your old man."

"That's right, Edd."

"Well, what does that add up to?"

"Let me think. That would be...eighteen?"

"Now divide eighteen by two, by three, and by nine."

"Let me think. That would be...why, by jiggers! That's nine, six, and two mules."

"What do nine, six, and two add up to?"

"Let me think. That would be...why, by jiggers! That's seventeen!"

"So, throw in your own mule, divide up the lot, and you get nine, the middle kid gets six, and little Jack gets two. And you get your mule back too."

Mary and I had a good laugh over that one. I think that was the first time that afternoon she fully relaxed. Her makeup showed that a little tear of mirth had dribbled from one eye.

"I can see why Edd always heads up the school board wherever he goes," said Mary.

"How'd you know about that?" I asked, sincerely wondering.

"Oh, I read the papers pretty thoroughly," she answered. "Not much else to do. I do have a few books. Lots of parties, but that doesn't occupy my mind very much."

"And let me give you a little butter," I said. Edd had taken the fresh cream, but we kept just enough ripened cream to make butter in the churn. I led Mary back into the house and wrapped a little bit of white butter (we didn't buy the coloring for it) in waxed paper and put it in a little paper bag that I had saved from the last time I had gone to the store. "If you have an icebox put it in there, but it won't go bad very quickly on the table if you eat it up in the next week or so. We don't put salt in it."

"Oh, it sounds like it will be delicious with orange marmalade," said Mary.

I smiled again. I had often considered asking Edd to bring home some marmalade from the store, back when he worked there, but we decided against spending the money on it. The only oranges that ever made their way into this house, or any of the others we had lived in, was at Christmas when we got an orange for each child. They come downstairs from their rooms and find an orange on each of their plates. Our Christmas tree was always a cedar from the fields. We couldn't afford a pine tree hauled in from Arkansas or southeastern Oklahoma.

When we got back inside, Mary walked over to the bookshelf she had seen earlier and started looking at the books. One of them, of course, was *Ivanhoe*, which she had given to Edd on his birthday in 1904. She looked at it and saw the date on the frontispiece. I smiled as I remembered that Edd told me Mary's brothers probably didn't even know what a frontispiece was. It occurred to me that I had not asked about her husband, her brothers, or anyone else in her family. But I really didn't want to know, so it would have been sort of a lie for me to ask about them. Mary's face betrayed no emotion as she looked at the book, which she put back. Then she looked at *The Brothers Karamazov*, which had been William's book.

"I see Edd still likes to read," she said.

"Yes, he does," I said.

"You know, I'm on the Library Committee. I can get him books and bring them by once in a while."

I had an answer ready, and it was true. "Edd's brother Frank gets a lot of leftover books from a bookseller in Tulsa. He lets Edd borrow some from time to time." I did not mention that Frank did not come over very often. He would have brought that black woman with him, the one he isn't married to. We know it is our Christian duty to love her, for she is a child of God just

like the rest of us, but it was a struggle for Edd to be civil to her on those few times they did visit. "So, Edd already has all the books he needs."

"Well," Mary finally said. "I'd best be going." She stood up and smiled awkwardly. "Would you be so kind as to tell Edd I stopped by?"

I looked at her. The lightly curtained window outlined her still-shapely form. The idea that Edd might ever take a shine to her seemed utterly ridiculous (I kept myself from laughing at the idea of him visiting her and having to put up with a cat sitting on his lap) but not entirely impossible.

"No," I said. "No offense, Mrs. Hargrove, but I would just as soon not tell Edd anything about your visit."

Mary looked down at her feet in fine patent leather shoes. "Well, leastways," she said. "I am happy enough to hear that you all are doing well."

"I appreciate that," I said.

I held the screen door open for Mary. When she stepped out, her chauffeur opened the back door of the flivver for her. I could not say, *See you later*, or *Come by again sometime*. So, I said, "Thank you for visiting."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Hicks," said Mary, slipping into the car.

As the car turned around in the little space by the barn, headed out along the driveway, and turned onto the road, Edd was coming down the road on his wagon pulled by Kate and Beck. Mary's car did not slow, nor did her window roll down, as she passed Edd. Edd, who had not seen the car emerge from our driveway, did not look up from the straight road ahead of him.

Part eight: Frank Hicks

Chapter 1

Bert's garden was pretty good every year. And then she had an idea that sounded sort of useless to me at first but which turned into a pretty good moneymaker as well as a great joy. She wanted to plant lots of flowers. Snapdragons, lantanas, sunflowers, the works. We took a little of just about everything that Tulsa seed store had. I had no idea at first why she wanted them, but I decided that, whatever life was left to me, I'd enjoy whatever Bert wanted. But, a half-acre of flowers?

Bert's Fresh Flowers was at first just a little display on a table at Judson's store. I told him I'd take care of everything, he'd get most of the profit, and nobody had to know who Bert was. They didn't even have to know it was a woman. And people started buying them. And then people started ordering Bert's flowers for weddings and funerals and such like. Of course, they were kind of out of luck in the winter. We didn't have one of those fancy greenhouses like they have in Tulsa. But a little bit of prairie remained unplowed just outside of Ruby, and there were always a few stalks of gayfeather that grew there, and which looked almost as good dried as they did fresh, only without the color. And some of those grass seed heads were really beautiful, especially ryegrass. We couldn't sell them for as much, but it was something. Bert even did a little bit of basket weaving with the grass stems. That's supposed to be an Indian thing, but remember that Bert was a freedman Cherokee, a former slave in the tribe, and probably got it from generations back. I mean, they weren't very good baskets, but they were nice decorations. We always had enough pickled okra for the winter. We'd stick the okra pods into each other's mouths. But that's another story.

*

One winter night, Bert and I washed dishes together, our hands in the frothy water of the basin where she'd just made some soap that afternoon.

Right then Bert and I looked into one another's eyes. The soap bubbles were quietly popping right next to us. I started slipping Bert's dress off of her, and she helped me unbutton my shirt and pants. The soap for the dishes was the same soap that we used for bathing, and we soaped each other down, then poured water over one another's bodies. We made a mess, but a clean one, on the kitchen floor. Bert swept it out the back door. We were still wet when we went into the bedroom.

Another evening, as spring was getting started, Bert asked, "You know any Bible stories?"

"Been a long time since I thought about them," I said.

"I understand Jesus done told a lot of stories."

"That he did, Bert, that he did. One of them was about The Prodigal Son."

"I've heard of that one," said Bert. "The one about the two sons? The older son, he took his half of the inheritance and squandered it on, well, whatever men squandered money on those

days. Then he run out. So, he come home with his tail between his legs like a sorry old coon dog. Then his father done forgive him.”

“‘Tain’t fair,” I said.

“But that’s what the father done.”

“Sounds like my brother Lorenzo, takin’ the store money and goin’ off to California.”

“I guess that means you’d better think about what you gonna do just in case Lorenzo shows up at our door sometime.”

“I got a letter from him a while back,” I said.

“You answered it, I ‘xpect.”

“No, I didn’t. He said he wanted to make money selling Cherokee medicine. But I didn’t feel like answering. He’s as good as dead as far as I’m concerned. No need to answer him. There’s nothing for him to inherit. I guess that takes care of that.”

“Lorenzo shows up,” said Bert, “Just hand him a broom. I’ll hand him a hoe for the okra patch, get them cockleburs out. He would have to do whatever we told him if he comes back.”

Another night, further along into the spring, we played a record on the Victrola. Two Stephen Foster songs. *Old Folks at Home* on one side, *My Old Kentucky Home* on the other. I loved the melodies, but Bert almost smashed the record when she heard the lyrics.

*The sun shines bright on my old Kentucky home,
‘Tis summer, the darkies are gay,
The corntop’s ripe and the meadow’s in the bloom
While the birds make music all the day...
The young folks roll on the little cabin floor...*

“Them lyrics, it makes life on the plantation sound pretty nice, don’t it, Frankie?”

“Idyllic,” I said.

“What does that mean?”

“It means nice, like in an idyll. That’s a sort of poem. But those lyrics were all written later by a white man who yearned for the old days before the War when the black slaves did everything for the whites. Yearned for that lost era, gone like a puff of smoke with the wind.” I was getting angry.

“You sound like it was your ancestors that was the slaves, not mine,” said Bert. “Besides, I’ve heard that song lots of times. It goes on...” She waited until the refrain and joined it. *Weep no more my lady, oh weep no more today...*

“Bert!” I exclaimed. “You have such a beautiful voice.”

“Why, thanks, Frankie, I’m glad you like my singing. Anyway, that songwriter man wanted people to think that us blacks was happy when we was slaves. There’s still a few old folks who was slaves when they was children...”

“Around here?”

"No, but I've heard tell of them. They ain't got nothin' good to say about them old days. Besides, Frankie, the music the slaves played at dances didn't sound like that music at all."

"It wasn't sentimental and maudlin," I said.

"Never heard them words. But the music at the slave dances, it was like dancing in a fire. The womenfolk cooked up a passel of crawdads. And lots of cornbread. And ribs. You get me some ribs, order them to the store, Frankie, and I can make some barbecue sauce that will make you dance. Even you, Frankie, even you."

"Shall we dance, Bert? That Isham Jones record again?"

"I'm tired, sweetie," said Bert. "Maybe some horizontal dancing, later?"

*

A week later, when I got home from work, Bert was waiting with his Model T.

"We got an hour to eat," said Bert. "The movie starts at seven."

"Supper's already cooked, Frankie," said Bert.

"I don't want to see a movie," I said. "Maybe some other time?"

"This movie can't wait," said Bert. "Just one night. You ever heard of Hal Miffey?"

"Of course, he hasn't," said Bert. "If it's not in the Tulsa library, he don't know about it."

"This is the one in which Hal Miffey dies," said Bert.

"Well?" I prompted.

"I mean," said Bert, "he really dies."

"I think I heard about that," I said. "Seems kind of unfeeling, in a way, to have an actual death scene in the movie."

"He had a stroke during the filming, is all," said Bert. "The family objected to it for a while, but the amount of money the movie was likely to rake in, they decided that is the way Hal would've wanted it."

"And it did rake in a lot," said Bert. "And it finally made it to Oologah." Oologah now had electricity, and an old building had been converted into a theatre. It was 1927 but it would take a long time for the talkies to make it to Oologah. The soundtrack was an old Victrola playing music I later learned was written by Scott Joplin.

After a quick supper we were at the theatre in the one-block downtown of Chelsea.

Bert and Bert had to sit in the back. They almost didn't get in at all, but Bert tipped the guy. And I, a white man, was just as trapped as they were by the segregation laws. I was not allowed to sit back with my family.

And there was Miffey riding around on his horse chasing and being chased by fake Injuns. Then I sat bolt upright with the first of two surprises. The first was that I recognized one of those fake Injuns. It was my brother Lonnie. Darn if he didn't get into the movies. At least this one. The second was when I saw that it was Lon who scalped Miffey and held the obvious stage prop up in the air. This was when Miffey actually died. People started chattering. The movie was over pretty soon.

I met my family outside.

"You look like you seen a ghost," said Bert.

"After a manner of speaking," I said, calming myself down, "I did." I told them about Lon.

*

It was early summer. The okra plants had grown. Bert and I harvested the first okra pods. We had to harvest them when they were just the right size: not so small as to be hardly worth eating, but not large enough to be hard and stringy. The ones that got too large, we just left them on the plant, stuck out forever like the organ of Priapus, to let them mature and produce seeds for next year.

I brought a nice steak home from work for Bert. It was a fresh shipment that Judson got from a local farmer who'd just butchered a calf that injured its leg, and there was a line of people to buy the meat. But Judson gave me first choice. He even told me to have a good time. I could tell in his eyes that, even though he hated Bert because she was black, he was softening a little, and maybe wasn't such a bad son of a bitch after all. Soon I had the meat on a spit over an open fire in Bert's yard.

"This is a lot of meat," said Bert. For such a fat woman she didn't eat much. I think her body was just storing up fat for a famine that never came.

As if on cue, Bert came driving up in a new Model T.

"Well, looky here," said Bert. "Someone to help us eat up the meat."

"Just don't ask me where I got the car," said Bert.

"I never ask you where you get anything," I said. Soon we were eating steak and potatoes and spring collard greens.

Chapter 2

About that time, Bert kept asking me what was wrong. I couldn't answer. Everything seemed fine to me. What could be better than to have a steady job doing something useful for other people and to live with a woman like Bert out in the green countryside? But I started thinking about what Bert might have noticed in my behavior, some little thing that I did not know about. I came up with two things.

First, I mistrusted the world enough that I wondered whether our little nest of love would remain undisturbed. By this time, our house was the only one left inhabited in Ruby. The other black folks moved over to Langston, near Cushing. Most of them worked for the oil fields there. The Cushing Pool has turned out to be the biggest explosion of black gold in the history of the world. I knew that whatever God there might be was allowing us this wonderful time of spiritual intimacy and we had better grab it while we could.

Second, I could not get the movie image of Lon scalping Miffey out of my mind. I thought back twenty-five years to the time I almost got to kill that Claremore banker, Hargrove, who stole my land, and Edd's land too. And Edd's woman. Of course, Edd and Stella had been married so long that it was ridiculous to think he harbored any regrets about losing Mary Carter. I really did not want to try to scalp Hargrove. But I could feel my Cherokee ancestors telling me that I was a coward. An absurd thought, but one I could not shrug off.

One morning not long afterward, Bert hung out the laundry. She stood still. I could only see her large shadow cast by the sun on a white sheet. "Frankie, I know there is still something you need to do. Promise me that you will do it. Don't tell me what it is but promise me you'll do it."

I don't think she knew anything about my attempt to scalp Hargrove. She knew about Hargrove, of course. I'd told her about the way he swindled us, and even how he got Mary, but I am nearly certain she did not know what I was thinking about at that moment, just that I was thinking about *something*.

"Another thing, Frankie. It has to be the right time. You can't force it."

"Then why are you forcing me?" I asked.

"I'm not. I just know that, unless you do it pretty soon, it won't get done. It doesn't have to be the perfect time, just the right one."

"I'll think about it," I said.

"No thinking about it," she answered. "You've been all tense and holding back to yourself, nights. Whatever it is, sweetie, it's coming between us. We can't have that. We come too far, you and me. We broke down every convention, as they say, every barrier. We can't let this one separate us. Until you get this thing, whatever it is, worked out, I'm stayin' with Bert."

Chapter 3

Lord, it was lonely without Bert. I was staying in her house. Since moving in with Bert, I rented out my house. Brother Bert, with whom she stayed, had a phone, and Judson's store—which I was mostly running, since he was ill and gone a lot—had recently gotten one installed, so I called Bert every day, and he let me talk with Bert. But we never talked much. It was always the same thing. She kept saying that she wanted to come home to her Frankie when he was at peace with his life. This went on for a few months.

I knew what I had to do. I had to finish off what I had started with Averd Hargrove. But I had no idea how to do this. Maybe I could just tell Bert that this was what was bothering me and getting between us, and that there was no way I could do it. I pretty much decided that I would leave the whole matter in the hands of the Great Spirit. If the Spirit wanted me to complete my vengeance upon Hargrove, it would deliver Hargrove into my hands.

And that is exactly what the Great Spirit did.

I started getting pretty good at drugry, and before long that was Judson's main income. He pretty much let me set my own schedule. I figured I might try to come up with something to sell based on yaupon. On the side, of course; I don't want to attract the attention of the G-men from that FDA agency. The main thing I did, though, was to go to Tulsa almost every day and read in the library. By that time, I had saved up enough money to buy an old Model T and could drive the distance in an hour that it used to take me half a day to cover.

One day, who should I see in the library but Averd Hargrove. I recognized him readily from the time that I tried to kill him in Claremore. I decided to try again to kill him. But how? I needed more information about him.

Hargrove was sitting at a table reading a big book about the Civil War. Confident that he would not recognize me, I walked right over to him.

"Whatcha reading?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon, but I was not aware that it was any of your business." His fat face scowled.

"I just mean, it looks like history, and maybe we have a shared interest, is all," I said. I exuded friendliness even as I checked around his scalp for the best places to cut.

"Well, I do have an interest in Civil War history," he said.

"Is that so? My interest is more in the Civilized Tribes of Indian Territory. But these two areas overlap, see? Indian regiments on both sides were very important in the Civil War."

"Only marginally," Hargrove said wearily. "The Indian troops were not very well organized and disciplined. The Cherokee Nation had two factions, loyalist and rebel, and neither were trustworthy. They were a footnote to American history. Not too much happened here in Oklahoma until oil came along. Now the whole world knows who we are."

“Well,” I said, hiding my annoyance at his dismissal of Indians, “at least now the whites and Indians are living together in peace. Not quite the way Nancy Ward envisioned it, but at least peaceful-like.”

“Who?” asked Hargrove.

“Nancy Ward,” I said. “Important Cherokee back over a hundred years ago.”

“Never heard of her,” said Hargrove. He closed the book and started putting on his coat and hat. I wondered why he came to the library rather than just buying books for himself, rich as he was, but I didn’t want him to know that I knew who he was.

He continued, “Yes, the Indians are pretty quiet now, but those niggers! You can’t trust them a-tall! They’re a bunch of no-goods up to no good. One of them even stole a bunch of stuff out of my house when I was away, including my Victrola and a bunch of records. I know who it was, too. I don’t know his name, but if I see him, I’m not letting him get away.”

“Shouldn’t you contact the police?” I said.

“They don’t do any good,” said Hargrove. “They put a guy in prison, then let him out. Now, for us God-fearing white men, a prison record is a source of shame and makes it hard to find a job. But these niggers, their job is just to steal stuff, and a prison record is, if anything, a recommendation.”

“This is a nation of laws,” I told him. “That’s why the patriots fought for independence, so we could have a constitution that guaranteed certain rights. And we fought the Civil War so that all men could have those rights...”

But he already had his coat on and was headed out the door.

“All men, except blacks and Indians,” I finished, nobody hearing me.

Chapter 4

A few days later, I sat in the library again. I just pretended to read. What I was actually thinking about was the fact that I knew what I had to do—scalp Averd Hargrove—but I could not think of a time or a way to do it. I sighed and decided that I would never do it. Maybe Bert would come back to me anyway. She tells me almost every day that she loves me. I certainly do not need to earn her love. But she still thinks I need to earn my own self-respect. Surely, I thought again, she would understand me if I told her what the true story was. I had called her after the last time I saw Hargrove, but neither she nor her brother answered.

I was still protecting Bert from the truth about the man I had almost killed years ago. But I was about to find myself unable to protect her any longer.

I heard a commotion outside of the library. I closed my book, left it on the cart, packed my belongings, and went outside to look. A crowd of white people had gathered around Bert Hicks, the brother. They were yelling at him and pointing their fingers at his face.

A thief, he is!

A robber!

Ain't nobody stopping him neither!

Look a-that stuff in his car! It's all stolen!

Car's prolly stolen too!

The leader of the crowd was Averd Hargrove, who said, "He's the one who broke into my house and took a bunch of stuff! My servant boy just now pointed him out to me!"

I watched in horror and wanted to tell them that I knew this black man and that he was a good man. But I could not tell them that he was an innocent man. Hargrove's Victrola and records were in the house I shared with Bert, who had still not returned. I knew that she would not return until I finished my work.

"I deserve a trial!" yelled Bert.

"We showed them six years ago," yelled Hargrove. "We showed them niggers what happens when they try to nudge in on our wealth here in Tulsa and Claremore." He referred to the rampage during which whites attacked and burned the Greenwood district, Black Wall Street. It was called the Tulsa Race Riot, as if the blacks had started it. But they were the victims, not the attackers.

"We ran prosperous businesses," Bert tried to say over the crowd. "We earned money fair and square. That's not a crime."

I could do nothing but tremble as I watched somebody put a rope around Bert's neck and throw the other end of the rope over a stout light pole. It took several men to pull Bert up from the ground, where he writhed and struggled, unable to breathe. His immense bulk was at least one merciful thing that God had given him: his neck was soon broken, bringing his suffering to a quick end.

Several white community leaders, Hargrove foremost, stood beside the dangling body for photographs which would never be in the newspaper.

Then the not-so-prominent men started shooting the cadaver. They loaded him with so much lead that the light pole fell over.

Finely dressed white women strolled around, nodding in approval.

Another white man ran up and held up a Bible. I expected him to begin a sermon about how black people were cursed in the eyes of God, descendants of Cain who killed his brother Abel, their blackness the mark God put upon Cain's descendants. This was a Confederate myth that Mom told me, without saying whether she believed it or not. But instead the man with the Bible called out, "What sin has this man committed that he deserves death at your hands? You have committed great evil in the eyes of the Lord!"

Hargrove walked up to him and said, loudly, so that everyone could hear, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" The crowd cheered. These were the words that the crowd had said during the trial of Jesus.

A few black men hid in corners, dashing to safety when they could. One of them rushed right past me. As he passed, he spat in my face. I stood there and allowed the sticky mass to roll down my cheeks, because, by doing nothing, I shared at least some of the guilt.

Chapter 5

I rushed back home as quickly as possible and awaited my beloved Bert's inevitable return. Before midnight, a car pulled up and I heard loud weeping.

"Frankie, oh Frankie, please be there. Oh God I need you!"

I quickly went to the door, opened it, and stood on the porch.

Once we were inside, and the car left, I let Bert cry on my shoulder, my stomach, whatever she could find. She tried to speak but was incoherent. I slept when she fainted and awoke when she started crying again.

I told her that I had to go to the store to at least ask if I could take some time off. When I explained to Judson that my woman's brother had just been lynched, I expected him to say the man deserved it. But he not only let me go back home but also paid for and gave me a bottle of laudanum. Bert slept a lot, or at least was sedated, which may not be the same thing, but she awoke at irregular times and needed comfort. I fixed food that I didn't eat and kept washing the grime of human sin off of me using that sweet lemon soap I brought from the store for Bert.

On the second day, at sunset, Bert's mind cleared for just an instant. "I'm going to kill him," she said.

"Whom?" I asked.

"That man who led the crowd. You know who I mean."

"No, you won't," I said.

"Oh, yes, I will!" Bert screamed. "No force can stop me!"

But a force did stop her. She fell to the ground and pressed her hand to her chest.

"Bert!" I exclaimed. "Are you having a heart attack?"

When she did not answer, I dragged her to the couch and made her comfortable. It's not like we had ambulances out in the country. I got a cold rag for her face. She was breathing and moaning rapidly. I pressed my cheek against hers and breathed in time with her. As I deliberately slowed my breathing, just a little at a time, her gasping came more and more slowly.

When she was breathing normally, Bert looked into my eyes. "Oh, Frankie, what would I do without you? I would have died, sure as anything."

"You'll be all right, if you take it easy," I said. "Relax. And keep up those laudanum draughts."

"They can make me fall asleep, but they can't make me forget."

"I'm not trying to make you forget," I said.

"You could've died too," said Bert. "Bert's friends out in the car was ready to kill you when they saw you was a white man. I hadn't told them it was a white man I was livin' with. Just before I got out of the car, they tried to stop me. They said no white man could love me. I said you did, you showed it over and over and over, a lot more than they had. That shut 'em up. That's when I rolled out of the car screaming for you. Oh, my Frankie." She kissed me long and wet. "But, Frankie, I'm going to kill that man."

“I already said you will do no such thing.”

“Don’t you see, Frankie? I have to. It’s my right of revenge. Didn’t our Cherokee ancestors have something like this? I’m going to kill him.”

“No.”

Bert started screaming. “I’m going to kill him!”

I grabbed Bert and shook her into silence, right there on the couch. “No, you won’t,” I said. “I will.”

Chapter 5

At last, I made preparations to kill Averd Hargrove.

Of course, I was not really ready. I had put my obsidian blade and hatchet in Bert's shed. Though it had only been a few years, the hatchet had started to rust. I kept going back to the library, and within a couple of weeks I knew that Wednesday afternoon, until closing time, was when Hargrove was in the library. I planned the date for my first attempt to assassinate him: the following Wednesday.

Bert started taking an interest in what I was doing. She could see that I was very, very serious. First, cleansing myself a little at a time with the Black Drink. I sharpened my blade over and over until it could once again cut leather that brushed against it. She watched me dance and chant. She cried about Bert for over an hour each day, but when I started my ceremonies, she came and watched me with complete attention.

I pulled out my notebook and re-read what I had written before. Only this time, instead of meditating in solitude, I shared it with Bert.

"You either kill that man, or I will," said Bert.

"We have to do this right," I said. "A few years back, I figured it all out. I figured out the way of the warrior. And guess whom I was thinking about killing?"

"I'll make a wild guess here and say it was this same man."

"Spot on."

"No way! What reason did *you* have to want to kill him?"

I told Bert the story of how Hargrove stole Edd's land and his fiancée. "I chickened out," I told her. "But now I have a reason to put my plans back into action."

I opened my Big Chief notebook.

"Chapter one. The Heart of the Warrior.

"A warrior may experience brief periods of holy rage, where he fantasizes about denouncing his enemy, then killing him. But he kills the enemy only after the enemy fully understands why he is being killed. The enemy has to experience a blinding period of understanding just before he dies.

"The warrior does not act selfishly. But I now have a whole new reason for taking action. I pursue the way of the warrior for the sake of my beloved Bert.

"Many is the time, since I lost my land, that I have felt this volcanic fury. But this is just exercise. It is just preparation. The warrior must, the rest of the time, which is to say most of the time, be calm and have peace in his heart. He fantasizes that he sees fields red with blood on battle days, but on most days, he sees the green grass and trees."

"That's good," said Bert.

I continued. "When the opportunity comes to act, as it may at some unanticipated time, the warrior must be rested and clear-minded. I know from personal experience that sustained fury can suck the energy and dexterity out of life: on days at the store after my nights of fury, I

was clumsy and dropped things or knocked things over, just like I used to when I was younger, and Edd ran the store.”

“You? Clumsy? When I first saw you, Frankie, you seemed like some kind of god. I would never have imagined you to be clumsy.”

“Well, I was. You probably are, too, but we see each other with a cloud of love.” I continued reading my notebook. “No, the rage has to stay inside the volcano, ready for the blast, rather than dribbling forth useless little runnels of lava. I have striven very hard to be calm and cheerful each day. And it worked. Each day, all day long, I felt peaceful waters and a susurrus of leaves inside my soul.”

“Oh, that’s excellent, Frankie. But you got to move on from there, so you can do something, not just feel.”

“That brings me to Chapter two, The Vigilance of the Warrior.

“A warrior must be constantly vigilant and imaginative. Every moment of every day, the warrior keeps his eyes and his mind open. He watches the path for spoor of the enemy. He flares his nostrils for the scent of danger. Every person and circumstance is, to a greater or lesser extent, a potential threat.

“And this is where imagination comes in. The warrior must imagine all possible threats that may develop under the circumstances and think ahead about a response to it. Every forest path is filled with spiders and snakes, and every vine is a potential cause of stumbling. Back in Old Testament days, if Absalom had thought ahead before plunging his horse into the forest, while fleeing from his father David’s general Joab, a forest thick with interlocked boughs of short trees very much like our Oklahoma forests of stubby oaks, he might not have gotten his mane of magnificent hair tangled in the branches. This left him helpless for Joab to slay him. This one oversight nullified all the preparations on the path of the warrior that Absalom had made. Also, on this path, any breath may bring in a mote of dust that may carry some germ, as the scientists now believe, and it must have been these germs that killed my siblings Annie and Alvie when I was young. Every bite of food may contain a hidden spore that can grow into a poison. Oh, I have been reading about these things. The warrior has to be vigilant against even things he can only imagine.

“Vigilance is not the same as worrying. Vigilance is awareness, while worry is a drain on emotions and on health. Thinking, or imagining, ahead is a kind of power. Some of those visitors from the city who occasionally came through on their fancy buggies or motorcars have no idea what poison ivy looks like, and so they must be afraid of every vine in the forest. But with knowledge-based awareness, the warrior can feel confident in his preparations; and with his imagination, he can keep from being blind-sided by an enemy. He can run through the forest, knowing which vines are safe and which are not.”

We had not only a plan but even a date. Wednesday was coming up. I went to the store each day a few hours, to fill scrips for patients and clean up the shelves.

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The next night, I continued reading to Bert. "Chapter three. The Selflessness of the Warrior.

"The warrior is never selfish. The warrior never goes out to seek personal revenge for an affront against just himself. The warrior fights for justice. In the old days, Cherokee warriors took revenge on behalf of their clans, not themselves. Dragging Canoe fought on behalf of the Cherokee people, even those Cherokees who, like his cousin and my fourth great grandmother Nancy Ward, did not want him to do so.

"History is full of war lords who carved out empires to aggrandize themselves. The Bible tells about Nebuchadnezzar. He wanted the spoils of war, not justice. The conquistadors of Mexico and Peru killed lots of people in our fellow tribes to the south, not to make the world better, but for their gold. And, from what I see in newspapers on those occasions when I am in Tulsa, the Soviets have an empire in which the Party rulers want power for themselves and seem to not care about what happens to the very peasants in whose name they carried out their revolution. Not that the czars, like Ivan the Terrible, were any better. None of these leaders, and none of their loyal soldiers, were warriors. They were pirates, except for the soldiers who were conscripted, who were slaves.

"Chapter four. The Prudence of the Warrior.

"The warrior must very carefully identify which enemy to attack and when. The warrior cannot just start hacking away at enemies. Dragging Canoe never, ever went stomping on the warpath and hacking away at everyone he hated. He had a clear idea, though not always the right idea, about which battles he could win and which he could not. This is why he died undefeated, except for that one embarrassing day when he got wounded at the Battle of Island Flats. Of course, this happened because someone in his family betrayed him. And that person was none other than Nancy Ward. Aside from this, he died unconquered. He knew exactly how to aim his tomahawk, and at whom.

"I do think that Dragging Canoe went too far, when he and his warriors scalped white families, including the children, who had not directly caused his people any harm. Such attacks, which intended to inflict terror, win the warrior no respect. All the whites hated him and, by extension, hated all Indians, a hatred that continues. This is a totally unfeasible approach and is unworthy of a warrior. I am sure Dragging Canoe knew this. I am simply saying that I would have drawn the line between life and death at a different place than he did."

This brought me to chapter five. The Love of the Warrior.

"Now you've got some explaining to do about that one," said Bert. "I mean, love? Love is something that we're going to do, and real soon."

This was exactly what I wanted to hear, not just because I missed Bert's abundant carnality but because I finally knew that she was at peace with herself, just a little, while waiting for my attack on Hargrove. Of course, what if I failed? I chose to dismiss this thought.

The next morning, Bert said, “You never did explain that love-of-the-warrior thing to me, Frankie.”

“We were kind of occupied with other things,” I reminded her. Then I continued reading from the notebook. “Lest you think that love and war cannot mix, let me explain it to you. In order to work most effectively against his enemies, the warrior needs his friends, even if he does not enlist those friends in his attacks upon the enemies. When he gets to know someone who has proven himself—or herself—to be good right to the core, the warrior builds strong bonds of comradely unity with that person. Vigilance is still necessary, but friendship must be cultivated and built up. I don’t have a lot of these friends, as a matter of fact I don’t have any whom I can completely trust...”

“You do now.”

“It makes all the difference in my life, being able to trust you, honey,” I said. “But at the time I wrote this I was living alone in a little rented house. Of course, I can trust my brother Eddie. I can’t tell him or Stella what I plan to do, but short of that, I can trust them.

“This just stands to reason, doesn’t it? A warrior can do well by doing good. If you help someone in your family, they will help you; families are perhaps the most important way in which humans survive. I once read a book about the Donner Party, those people who got a late start on the trail out to California for the gold rush. I’m glad this was before Dad was born; he probably would have joined them. They almost got buried in snow in the California mountains. It was a grisly story. Far as is known, nobody killed anybody else to eat them, but when a corpse showed up, it was a source of vittles. And the people who survived the best were the ones who were in families. Half the Donner family died, and one-fourth to two-thirds of the people in the other families, but single individuals, who had no family in the party, over three-quarters of them died. As I said, I can trust Edd and Stella. But not Lon, wherever he is. He up and left some years ago. I don’t know Surrener and John well enough to trust them.

“And if you help a friend, the friend will probably help you. That’s what the Bible says in the book of Ecclesiastes:

Two are better than one. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls down and has no one to help him up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

“Of course, we didn’t need the Bible to tell us this.

“And there are also benefits to having people trust you, even if they don’t know you. I’m talking reputation here. A good reputation is like money in the bank, or maybe even better. That Hargrove, money in the bank is practically the only thing he has, except Mary. Even though I don’t have any close friends, besides Bert, everyone knows me as a reasonably friendly man. My boss keeps telling people what a good man I am. A warrior needs as good a reputation as he can get. This is an aspect of war that Nancy Ward understood better than Dragging Canoe. She had a

reputation of friendliness—a little too much friendliness, if you get what I mean—with the whites, which meant that she could call on favors during the treaty negotiations. Not that it mattered in the end; we all got sent on what is now called the Trail of Tears anyway.

“The three kinds of love that I have just outlined—love of family, love of friends, and love of all the people around you—is so obvious that it is part of nearly every religion in the world.”

“I thought we was planning a murder,” said Bert.

“Not a murder,” I corrected her. “An assassination for the good of humankind. Like when The Ridge assassinated Doublehead.” I had read my Cherokee history.

“Who?”

“I’ll tell you sometime.”

Tuesday night, Bert helped me with the Black Drink, just the right amount, and even danced around with me a little. The next morning, my mind was clear.

Chapter 6

I was ready. I had my bag with me. I stood outside the library. I saw Hargrove climbing the steps very slowly. He stopped often to catch his breath. When he got inside and sat down with a book, I sat at the next table. It was late afternoon, and getting dark, as it was now winter. It had rained, and the dirt highway would be muddy when I drove my little car back to Ruby. I could smell the scent of the earth in the air. Mother Selu the Corn Goddess was calling me just as she had called Dragging Canoe.

Hargrove got up from his seat at the table, apparently preparing to leave. I walked over. I followed him out the door and down the steps. I looked around. The street seemed deserted. We were standing by a little alleyway, not too different from the one in which I hid years ago waiting to kill him. Now!

"How's Mary doing these days?" I asked.

Hargrove whirled around and faced me.

"How do you know my wife's name? I don't know you."

"Oh, just coincidence. Mary is not an unusual name, like Estella or something."

The name seemed to mean something to him, though he seemed unable to think where he might have heard it. I continued. "My sister-in-law is Estella Leona Huston Hicks." I pushed him gently into the darkness of the alley. "Mrs. Eddie Hicks."

"So, you *do* know who I am," said Hargrove, starting to become nervous. "No wonder you knew Mary's name. Say, what's this all about? So, I married your brother's fiancée. Anything illegal about that?"

"That's not all you did, *yonega*," I said, calling him a white man in Cherokee. "You stole his land, too."

"What?"

"And mine, too, and Lonnie's, and William's."

He was trembling. He seemed to turn even more white than he already was. His breath became labored. "I don't remember any of that," he said.

"And you directed the murder of a certain fine citizen named Mr. Bertrand Hicks."

"Murder? No. Bertrand Hicks? A relative of yours?"

"No, just the same last name. The last time I saw him, he tipped over that lamp post." I indicated the direction with a turn of my head. The post was still leaning against a building, unrepaired. "You know," I said, pulling out my blade. It glinted just right in a shaft from the electric streetlamp. "I actually believe you, about not remembering Eddie and me and Lon and William. You swindled so many Indians out of their land that you can't possibly remember all of us."

"I'd give it back to you..." He paused and gripped his chest.

"Like hell," I said, turning the knife in my hand.

"...but I don't have it anymore."

“Lose your money gambling? Or in bad investments?”

“Some of it, yes. But I had to sell your land to pay for Mary’s hospital bills. I can’t even pay my own hospital bills, so I just...” He held his hand to his throat and began to cough and make strangled sounds. “I can’t afford a doctor for myself. I have a heart condition.”

I stood for a moment. “You had me believing you there for a minute,” I said. I pushed him into nearly complete darkness. I could see his white scalp in the slight glow from the walls above. I grabbed his thin white hair with my left hand, as I raised the blade with my right. How miserable a scalp this would be, compared to the scalp I might have gotten the last time.

I felt him go completely limp. Alarmed, I listened for his breath, and checked for a heartbeat. He must have died of a heart attack even as I held his hair. At least he would not make any sound as I sliced off his scalp and placed it in my bag, in which corn meal soaked up the blood. Instead of yelling it, like a young warrior, I simply whispered, *Ani Yunwiya*.

Chapter 7

The next morning, back out at Winganon, I arose early and bathed in a metal tub of cold water. I told Bert what had happened and showed her the scalp. She fell asleep with a smile and continued to sleep. I cooked my usual oatmeal, the kind Judson sells in the store. This time I put in some extra honey and some buffalo berries I gathered the previous fall. The berries were pretty tasteless, but I imagined they connected me with the way of the Cherokee that I had just the previous evening reclaimed.

When I arrived at his store in Chelsea, Judson ran up to me. "Didja hear?" he asked.

"Hear what?" I responded calmly.

"The news!"

"Now, Mr. Judson, you know I never hear any news. Could be another war over to Europe and I wouldn't know."

"About Hargrove the banker over there to Tulsa."

I realized that I had not planned this stage of my attack: what to do after the news got out. How to keep myself from suspicion. I knew I had to get the warrior's balance, walking the mountain trail between acting too happy and acting too outraged at the news.

"No, I haven't heard the news," I said. And it was true; I had not heard what anyone had said about the deed that, so far, only I knew I had done.

"Somebody kilt him," said Judson.

"Robbery?" I asked.

Judson snorted. "The cash was still in his vest pocket anyways when the po-lice found him. Good thing too, for whoever done that to him. Bills was marked."

I smiled a little to myself. I had forgotten all about taking any money he might have on him. I rejoiced that I had, in true warrior spirit, felt no greed. Spending that money might have done me in.

"Frank," said Judson. "He was scalped."

"You mean," I said, "for real?"

"Damn straight," said Judson. "The murderer must have killed Hargrove first, because the scalping was done so cleanly and neatly. No sign of a struggle there. But the po-lice can't find any way that he might have been kilt. No other wounds or bruises or broken bones or nothin'."

I whistled. "Don't that beat all," I said.

Judson said, "An Injun musta done it. Prolly because Hargrove swindled so many of them out of their land." Even though there had been no prosecutions, most everyone had by this time recognized what the white bankers, real estate people, lawyers, and judges had done to us Indians.

I said, "Well, that narrows it down a lot, don't it?"

Judson smiled. “Zackly. Gonna take those city cops a lot of work to track anyone down for it. An Injun? Not even necessarily Cherokee, you know, Hargrove done in a lot of Creeks too. Tryin’ to narrow down which Injun mighta done it, there’s half of Rogers County. Not like Hargrove exactly built up any friendships around here.”

I smiled really big right then. I had built a reputation of goodness. Hargrove had not. I could not have guessed it, but my reputation for being a good man might have been my surest way of staying out of prison. Hallelujah to the way of the warrior!

“Course, it does mean something else,” said Judson. “Now on, every white man is going to be suspicious of every Injun.”

And that, I thought, is not necessarily a bad thing. Let white people steam in their own agony for a while. “Maybe they need to be suspicious of us mixed-bloods too?” I asked.

Judson looked at me. Had I said a little bit too much?

“Good point, Frank. I done forgot you was Cherokee.”

“I forget it sometimes myself,” I said, openly lying for the first time. “You know, Mr. Judson, this just makes me happy that I try to treat every man and every woman and every white and every Indian and every black fair and square, like they was me.” I cultivated my Okie dialect a little. “That way, there’s fewer people might want to scalp *me*.”

“Damn straight,” said Judson. Right then a customer came in and Judson started talking to him about the Hargrove scalping.

At home, I started drying out the scalp with rock salt. I couldn’t hang it in the air, case anyone saw it, nor out in the woods, where an animal would get it. I had it hidden back in a cabinet where nobody would ever find it except Bert. I sprinkled it with some vinegar too.

The story of the scalping of Averd Hargrove became a national sensation. First the students over at Bacone Indian College made a play out of it, in which a wandering band of Keetowah Nighthawks did him in as revenge for him deflowering a Cherokee maiden. A New York playwright got hold of the idea, but nothing ever came of it. That was the play—to be titled *Little Wild Rose’s Revenge*—where *Indian Love Call* was supposed to first be performed. I heard George Gershwin was thinking about writing an opera about it, but nothing came from that either. Aside from some federal agents always skulking around at our powwows, we never heard about Averd Hargrove again. Mary Hargrove lived the life of a rich recluse after that.

Chapter 8

It is now 1943. Bert and I are still together. She can't get around very well now, even though she is not elderly. We have to be careful about her heart. But I still love her. She's almost spherical now, and her boobs hang down past her waist, but she is still my Bert.

Course, it's not like we could make absolute plans for the future. Not with that war going on. Three countries at once! All of Edd's boys were in the military, except Herb, the oldest. Roy and Jack are Navy, Dick and Bill are Army. Herb works the gas fields, which the gummint considers a job essential for the war effort. Same as Everett, my niece Clara's husband, who works in the tire factory. They say an army runs on its stomach, but it also runs on its tires. My niece Nina's husband Art is in the Army. Bill and Roy are overseas. Roy is sailing around the South Pacific, and Bill is on the front lines in Europe. Just a teenager fresh off the farm, but he will be the one with the war stories. If he comes back. Art is out at a base in California, living the good life. He and Nina get to take trips up the coast on furlough. Of course, it's like that Damoclean sword I read about in the library. King Damocles lived a rich life, but a sword hung over his head suspended by a horsehair. Nina never knew when Art might be shipped overseas. Whenever I looked around at the peaceful countryside, the war seemed so far away. The only way we suffered here in Oklahoma was that we had to use ration stamps. But living on farms the way most of us do, except a few people like me, we are in no danger. Why, Edd and Stella hardly use any of their ration stamps. What would they buy with them that they don't already raise for themselves? A little flour, a little sugar, a little coffee, is all.

Not that I have any doubt that America will win the war. The jerries and japs can't do much to us, with those oceans between us. I just worry that the war will exhaust our national treasury and we will have an even worse time than we did in the '30s. But so long as Bert's garden grows as well as it did this year, we'll certainly be fine, just fine. People always want drugs, and I keep up with the new ones.

If all of Edd's sons and sons-in-law get back from the war, it will be a miracle. A miracle, I say. If that happens, I might just start going to church with Edd again. Or not. Not if they won't let Bert come with me.

Chapter 9

Now, in 1953, I'm living alone again. Bert passed quietly in her sleep a while back.

There's something I haven't explained yet. I started off by outlining the way of the warrior. Scalping Hargrove made me the great Cherokee warrior of the twentieth century, and was the climax of my life, though nobody knew about it except Bert. I was a druggist living with a woman who raised flowers. And now I'm just an old man. So, you might reasonably ask if I'm still a warrior, or if I've settled into my own version of a veteran's rest home.

I am still a warrior, though not on active duty. But I am ready.

I still have the heart of a warrior. I still feel passion and fury when I read about what the rich still sometimes do to the Indians here in Oklahoma and think about all the swindles that will never be resolved.

A scholar named Angie Debo wrote a book (*And Still the Waters Run*) all about it. Yes, the whites promised us we would keep our land as long as the grass shall grow, and the waters shall run. I had no idea that swindles were so pervasive. Hardly any land allotment escaped from the greed of the whites in any of the enrolled tribes. Debo originally sent the manuscript to the University of Oklahoma Press, but they declined to publish it. They said it was a dangerous book. Some of the swindlers, whose crimes Debo documented, were still alive in Oklahoma. Instead, Princeton University Press published it. I found it in a library in Joplin. I ordered my own copy. I read and re-read it. It was written in a thick, scholarly tone. Debo was muted in her accusations. But to me the words seemed to be printed in smeared red ink.

I still agonize when I hear that white schoolchildren learn about the glorious advance of white civilization across the continent, like it was God's will that the whites conquer the Natives. Surely by the next century no history classes, not even in Oklahoma, will be teaching that Manifest Destiny humbug. We need to have the truth taught now.

I am still vigilant, watching out for every trick that salesmen or the gum'mint might pull, and most certainly being very careful about what I say.

I still have the selflessness of the warrior; I will never hurt anyone else for my own gain.

And I still live the Golden Rule by loving everyone I can. Part of that is that I am never ashamed of good people. I am never ashamed of Bert. We walked right down the street together, and everybody knew about us, not just in Oologah and Chelsea but in Claremore too.

And while there's not much I could actually do, other than to be honest in my business, there is still a lot I can say to people. I have written letters and made contributions to the causes of those who have been unjustly treated. It started when I read the newsletter sent out by Miss Kate Barnard, the woman who spoke out years ago for the poor and oppressed, right here in Oklahoma. Physically, she was as weak as a blade of grass in the wind, but before her death in 1930 her words were heard all over these United States. I still send contributions to the organization she founded, and I write letters to the government officials that this organization tells us to contact. And when I see a pharmaceutical company marketing a deceptive product, I

write to them and, in my professional capacity, tell them that I refuse to market their product—neglecting to mention, of course, that I am now retired.

And I have spoken to our elected representatives about not only issues of justice but also about the abuse that we are heaping upon our forests and prairies and creeks and rivers. Have you seen what the landowners and corporations are doing? Have you seen the garbage and sewage being poured into our rivers and creeks? Have you seen our forests and prairies being hacked away and the soil washing and blowing away in the wind? Bert and I knew something about those plants, and we knew that some of them have pharmaceutical properties. Not just the yaupon holly, but lots of others. I have been trying to gather together stories that my fellow Cherokees tell me about medicines used by their parents and grandparents. But what good will it do if we destroy the wild species of plants?

I will almost certainly never again have an opportunity to scalp an enemy. I might sometime need to poison one, and if so, I know how to do it.

Now my problem is to figure out what to do with the scalp. I made a special box for it, strong bois-d'arc wood on the outside, cedar wood on the inside to help preserve it. I've got it hidden away.

I could give it to one of the Heape boys, Serena's kids. They seem to be proud of their Cherokee ancestry. They might appreciate it.

Or I might give it to one of Edd's kids. I'll keep an eye on them. Maybe Nina. I guess I could tell her it was a scalp left over from the old days before the Trail of Tears. Maybe I could make up a story about it being one Dragging Canoe himself took.

I will just note one more strange experience I had. A sorry-looking white dog has been skulking around my house. I never felt threatened by it, and it did not seem to be begging. Instead it seemed to be watching me or watching over me. Not that its oversight would be of much use to me; it was pretty scrawny and its pelt none too fine. I wonder if it was the white wolf that I heard about when I was growing up, the white wolf that Nancy Ward saw. But, how can it be? I first noticed the dog when I was making preparations for scalping Hargrove. After the scalping, its visits have become less and less frequent. But its eyes seem to convey a feeling of gratitude, even of pride, to me.

Part nine: Edd Hicks

We lost our Cherokee land three times. The first time was when Nancy Ward, my fourth great grandmother, tried to use diplomacy to keep the whites from taking Cherokee land in Tennessee. But they took most of it anyway. The second time was the Trail of Tears, which brought us to Oklahoma. The third time was when the whites swindled us out of our allotments.

Of course, I don't want to second-guess the Lord and His ways. Suppose, for a moment, that us Cherokees had been able to keep our land allotments and the oil rights that went with them. We might have become as rich as the members of the Osage tribe. And the whites might have murdered, poisoned, or bombed us the way they did the Osage families. Would this have happened to us? Would I have been killed by white Americans? I almost was. It appears that my only choices were to have my land taken, or to have my life taken, by the whites. The Cherokees had the former experience, the Osages the latter. At least I have lived long enough to see my happy family prosper.

I have lived through two world wars. Not that I participated directly; matter of fact, I have never left Indian Territory or Oklahoma. But we're starting to have so many world wars that we have to number them. The way they have those new bombs, I am fearful when I think of what number three might be like. The other two, I could just stay on my farm. The front was a long way off. But with nuclear bombs, the front would be everywhere. If everybody just did like me, there wouldn't be any wars. I'm too busy, from before dawn milking the cows to night-time when Stella and I massage one another's sorry old bones, to fight anybody.

All four of our boys, and my sons-in-law, survived the war. Arthur's three brothers too. We were really blessed, though I cannot understand why God would let so many other families suffer such great losses.

Just before the war, I believed strongly that America should stay out of it. Of course, we should as Christians care about what the Europeans were suffering from the Nazis. But we have enough problems of our own, I thought, thinking about the many people who were out of work and migrating from Oklahoma to California. Most of the migrants came from western Oklahoma, where the dust storms were brutal. Here in the east, the dust blew in, and the heat was overwhelming, but our crops did not fail the way they did out west. The kids slept outside in the summer under wet sheets and would wake up with little ovals of dust where their nostrils had been. So, our family did not suffer from the Dust Bowl, as it had come to be called. I had a little money in the bank and lost it, but not much. Many people did suffer, and we should be helping those people, not Europe, I thought.

America had to join the war. After the Japanese Empire bombed Pearl Harbor, there was no reason to stay out of Europe either. A lot of people thought that this war on two fronts, which America was not guaranteed to win, would be the final battle of the End Times prophesied by Scripture. I told people that the world would end when God decides to send Jesus back, and we have no business trying to guess when that will be.

You see, most Germans weren't Nazis. My son Bill was on the front lines in France and Germany. Once, he was in charge of a bunch of German captive soldiers. A lot of them were downright glad to be captured. They knew we would treat them right. Most people don't realize that we had thousands of German POWs right here in America during the Second War. We treated them mighty nice in our prison camps, which were like little resort villas. We coddled them, as Walter Winchell said.

The Nazis just gunned down captive American soldiers. But that was the hard-core Nazis. The regular German soldiers had no choice; they were drafted. The true-blood Nazis were crazy. No two ways about it. That's what Bill said. He said you could tell an S.S. officer by looking him in the eye. If you didn't see anything human there, it was probably an S.S. officer.

One time, Bill was in charge of a band of captured German soldiers. He put his rifle down just a moment to cup his hand to keep the wind from blowing out his cigarette while he lit it. In his group of captives, there was one S.S. officer, turns out. While the others remained quiet, the S.S. officer lunged for Bill's gun. They struggled over it. They pulled each other back and forth, back and forth. The seventh time, Bill let the man's momentum carry him down. The S.S. guy had the rifle now, but it didn't do him any good, since Bill got out his pistol and shot him five times in the back. I know this sounds like a tall tale, but who will ever know? I might as well believe it. There was a military investigation afterwards. An officer asked Bill why he shot the German five times. His smart-aleck answer—just like Bill, even when he was a kid—was, "Four times wasn't quite enough, and I didn't have six bullets."

Now they're rebuilding Europe. Marshall Plan and all. Looks like it's working. Twelve years on and Germany is still our friend. I think it's because we beat the crap out of the hard-core Nazis but treated the everyday krauts nice. Like the regular people they are. And in Japan, too. Jack was in the South Pacific after the war and brought back a Japanese record. One side had this old-style Japanese ballad. But the other side was an American-inspired jazz piece. *Tokyo Boogie-Woogie*, I think it was called. The label is all in Japanese, except for the company name: Columbia Records. Stella has it in the cedar chest. Japan doesn't want to go back to war. They seemed really amazed that we didn't invade their homeland and slaughter them, the way they did the Chinese before we entered the war. I think that even Japan will be our ally, going into the future.

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It seems strange that it has been eleven years since Herb, our second child, died in that gas field explosion. There was a gas leak, and somebody lit a cigarette. Next thing you know, what had been a refinery was a hole in the ground. Men from the gas company drove out in the big company car to give me and Stella the news.

There was still all the farm and house chores to do, but fortunately the kids took over and did everything while Stella and I went upstairs to pray and to cry. Clara was visiting, and her little daughter Gloria—she calls herself Gogo—brought up some of Clara's soup for us, and

some cold water from the well. Stella didn't feel like eating, but I ate. I said we had to keep our strength up. I whispered to Stella that life was going to go on right now. The world did not stop when one family had a tragedy. When I said that, she ate a little too.

Stella said that the ways of the Lord were impossible to understand. I agreed. Then she started trying to help me understand the ways of the Lord, which I had no desire to do. Maybe God wanted Herb up in Heaven with Him, she said. Herb was a fine boy, but no better than other men whom God had not called to Heaven, I thought. Then Stella told me that it was natural to wonder if God had punished us for doing something wrong. I wasn't wondering that at all, since it was ridiculous on the face of it. Then I said we should look on the bright side. Look, I said, we still have six strong healthy kids, grown up, some of them with their own kids now.

The trip to Oklahoma City for Herb's funeral was the longest trip I have ever taken, both geographically and emotionally. By the time my sister Serena and her husband John drove us to Oklahoma City, I felt at peace about the whole thing. But Herb's wife, Eleanor, could not take comfort in any religious thoughts. All that she knew was that the father of her two children was dead. She was emotionally delicate. Surely Eleanor was not the person whom God would choose for another tragedy. But this is exactly what happened. Within a week of Herb's death, Eleanor's little baby Larry died of a disease. We all went over to her home in Nowata to try to keep the household going while she lay in bed and cried. I will never forget her screams when she cried out, *I don't want to live!* I believe that this was just her emotions talking, and not Eleanor herself. God will not hold her responsible for those words. Eventually we lost contact with her. Her ship crashed on the same rocks that strengthened Stella and me.

Stella and I finally had to move into Chelsea and leave my land. Well, it wasn't mine; like all the other places we lived, I was a sharecropper. My Cherokee land is underneath Oologah Lake, created by that new Army Corps dam. The man who stole it from me is dead. As an upstanding citizen, I had to share the shock of all my fellow Oklahomans at the scalping of Averd Hargrove. But secretly I allowed myself to admire whoever it was that scalped him. He must have been, or must be, a brave man with the heart of a warrior. It was almost certainly the last act of defiance that our tribe will ever make. Not that it is a bad thing for our tribe to be consumed into the overall American economy and polity; but we have lost something too. Our tribal government, over in Tahlequah, refers to the federal government in Washington as "our ally the United States." Ally, my hinder. God forgive me for talking like this, but it is for the greater good. We are the ally of the United States the same way a bird is the ally of a cat: caught, digested, and excreted. The president of the United States chooses who our chief will be, for crying out loud.

I was not born an American citizen. The federal government did not grant American citizenship to Cherokees until 1901. But I always voted as soon as I could. Back then we had a poll tax, which meant you had to pay a tax in order to vote. I could not afford the tax, so I took the option of doing road work for a couple of days in lieu of the tax. Can you imagine anyone today doing physical labor in order to vote?

My generation, at least among the Cherokees who have intermixed with the whites—as some of us have been doing as far back as my ancestress Nancy Ward—is probably the last to speak the Cherokee language. Back in the 1930s I sat my youngest children down—Nina, Jack, and Bill—and tried to teach them Cherokee. They thought it sounded funny and would not sit still and listen. They know nothing but English. They did not realize that, until very recently, any children speaking Cherokee would be forcibly sent to boarding schools, and I could actually have been arrested, as some were, for teaching Cherokee to my children. When I would sit on the porch and sing the old songs, the kids would run around and laugh. *Dad's singing Cherokee again.*

None of my children will continue my traditional life of farming. Stella and I were alone on the farm. We did all that we could; Stella planted flowers along the dirt driveway leading to our farmhouse, but this could not make up for the fact that I had become too weak to rebuild damaged buildings and keep the house from looking like a hillbilly shack. The kids all left the farm for city jobs. And not necessarily good ones. Nina said she got eleven cents an hour working at Woolworth's in Cushing. Is that worth leaving home for? Not such bad pay, since store-bought bread costs only three cents a loaf. But it's free, here to home. The only way she can afford to live in town is by having free room and board as a live-in maid for an older couple. She could have done that for us, but no, she had to go to the city. Cushing is a major crossroads for oil pipelines. Lot of industry there. Bill, Jack, and Nina's husband, Art, work for the post office. Nice, safe gum'mint jobs. I guess, if I think about it, I can't blame them. Farming is hard work. I could never take a vacation. Never. But Nina can hop in the car with Art and drive out to California to visit Art's parents and sister.

And what is happening to the next generation? My grandkids show me no respect. Especially bad is Dick's little boy, Donald. He sassied back at me so much that one day I told him to go cut a switch off a tree and bring it to me so I could switch his be-hind. He did it, then, of course, ran away. I can't move fast enough to catch him.

But my family has been blessed. Never saw the hand of God clearer in anything in my life. As I said, zero percent death rate in the war. Can't get any better than that. We survived the 1920 influenza pandemic, almost certainly because we were so far out in the country. We survived what they now call The Great Depression.

I have no regrets. Well, maybe a couple. Those brothers of mine. Could I have reconciled with Lonnie? He actually came back and visited one time. An old man, but with that same impish grin. We had no hard feelings, but he understood without my having to tell him that he would have to go back to California. And then there's Frank. Stella and I were polite enough with him and that black woman, but looking back on it, we could have tried a little harder. We could have shown some more love. Love is not just being polite. Now they've both passed.

All I can do is sit on the bench in downtown Chelsea, about a block from my house, and swap stories with the other old men. But as God is my witness, I have done the best I could my whole life. Those who were richer, like Averd Hargrove, or those who sought lives of pleasure and sin, like my brother Lon, never experienced the kind of happiness that I have. I try to remind myself of this when I wake up in the night and the whole burden of sadness of this land feels like it is weighing down on me.

Epilogue: Nina Rice

Chapter 1

A check came in the mail today. Arthur delivered it himself since our house is right on his post office route. He works so hard, though not harder than my father, Edd. Arthur has three eight-hour shifts a day on weekdays. I'm sure you are at least as good at arithmetic as I am, so you know this adds up to twenty-four hours. But Arthur can do an eight-hour route in five and a half, which leaves him a little over seven hours to come home and rest.

It is nice that we have three incomes. That means we will have the little house on Cleveland Street here in Cushing paid off soon, and we owe nothing on the big, green, almost new '59 Dodge with fins and double headlights that is the envy of the neighborhood. We still have to count pennies, and the fish that Arthur brings home on weekends really helps with the groceries. I mean, good fish. I just get tired of cleaning them, is all. He leaves them in the sink for me to deal with. One time I got so tired of it that I threw the fish out in the back yard. He cleaned them. I only did that once, though, because I know how hard he works. He came home once from fishing with a big fishhook through his thumb. Because of the barbs, of course, he couldn't pull it out. But I got out the wire cutters and cut off the part that had stuck through his thumb, which meant that the only part he had to pull out with pliers just had one barb on it. Merthiolate and a little bandage, and everything was back to normal. Oh, and once in a while he gets out his hunting rifle and brings home some squirrels. They taste pretty good, depending on what they've been eating. Around here they mostly eat acorns from the post oaks and the blackjacks, so their meat is bitter but not too bad.

The extra income is also nice because Karen is going to be sixteen this year. And we can afford her Sweet Sixteen portrait at the studio and to have a nice party for her. She is a cheerleader and one of the most popular girls at Cushing High School. Little Stanley hasn't started school yet, but the money will come in handy for him, too. I can get him all new clothes each year when he starts school, even nicer than that red jacket he wears to Sunday school. When I was growing up, Dad could only afford to buy each of us kids new shoes once a year. We got a ride into Tulsa with my brother-in-law Everett to get shoes each fall. We drove in on Eleventh Street, old Route 66, back then. Mom made all our clothes, but they were pretty good, as good as anything from a store or catalog.

Maybe one of these days we won't have to count each penny so closely. While the future is not absolutely certain, it is pretty close to it. Arthur is going to be appointed the acting postmaster when the current postmaster retires. Of course, Arthur's appointment as the actual postmaster has to go through Congress first, and it will be a political appointment. But Arthur is friends with Congressman Tom Gelding, who will put in a good word with President Kennedy who will make the actual appointment. We have the photograph of Arthur and Gelding standing together at the reception after the ceremony to mark the renovation of the post office building. I'm in that photo too, in my smartest dress. Our future course is set. What could possibly go wrong?

We're about as happy as we can be, except that the threat of nuclear war hangs over us. Cushing, Oklahoma is right on the top of the Soviet list for getting bombed. That is because all the oil pipelines converge in Cushing. To blast Cushing off of the map would be a crippling blow to the United States of America. And now that the Soviet Union has nuclear bombs and the ability to deliver them by missiles, the danger is real: in World War Two, we were also vulnerable because of the pipelines. No enemy planes could have gotten this far inland. But now our enemies can send in missiles. It is a Cold War, which means that there are no actual battles. You can walk out on a spring day in Cushing and see the white wildflowers with leaves that look so much like grass that you'd never guess they weren't grass filling the lawn. You can hear the robins and the sparrows, and realize that neither your family, nor any family you know, has men sent off to war, now that Korea is over. But you are only moments away from annihilation. We knew this as soon as the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, the year little Stanley was born. Arthur called him Sput because of this. I didn't think it was so funny. And at Harrison Elementary School, the kids practice air raid drills by crawling under their desks, as if this could possibly save them from a fate in which the living will envy the dead. What kind of world waits for Stanley when he grows up?

Little Stanley is surely going to do something with his mind. When the yard fills with flowers in the spring, he spends hours looking at them down at their level. He spends hours watching the inner workings of our wind-up clock. He is already learning to read. I didn't intend to teach him, but he kept asking questions, so I answered them. Two years yet to first grade—Oklahoma doesn't require kindergarten—and he can already read. At least until one day he encountered the word *tongue* and said that spelling made no sense—it looked like ton-gew to him—and he refuses to learn any more for now.

One thing is for sure: the twentieth century is the century of the white man. No room for Cherokees unless we become white; and those of us who already look white might as well just accept this fact. A long time ago, Dad tried to teach us Cherokee. I wish now I had learned some Cherokee from him. But all I know is that his childhood nickname was Tsisqua. He died in 1959, so I'll never have a chance to ask him to teach me anything.

Dad was an upright man. When I was growing up, this seemed mostly to be just an annoyance. For example, Dad didn't like me going to see movies. But I went. They showed the movies down in Chelsea on an occasional Saturday night. Herb, the oldest, would take the mules and wagon and we would go down the hill—we almost seemed to be flying, back in those days before rural people like us had cars. It only cost a penny, and so the movies were old ones from the previous decade. The older people didn't want us to see racy movies like Theda Bara's *A Fool There Was*, but we got to see Keystone Cops movies; the *Perils of Pauline*, about a woman escaping from all kinds of evils and imprisonments; and *Dolly of the Dailies*, about a woman reporter in the Big City. The early movies of Charlie Chaplin, Lillian Gish, and Fatty Arbuckle. Anything with a Bible theme in it, like *Joseph in the Land of Egypt* or *Samson*, was acceptable. And somehow sex and love were acceptable if they happened in an earlier century and wasn't actually shown, as in *Jane Eyre* or the *School for Scandal*. I think Dad had his hand in some of

the movie selections, once he recognized that he could not keep even his own kids from seeing them.

Chapter 2

I wanted to leave the farm behind. So as soon as I was twenty-one, I moved to Cushing. That's where I met Arthur. Recently, Arthur started thinking about how nice it would be if we could live out on a farm. I let him know right quick in a hurry that this was not a very good idea.

I don't mean to suggest that every aspect of growing up on a farm was unpleasant. Sometimes it was fun. Take, for example, the turkeys. These days, when producers raise turkeys, they keep the turkeys in big pens. And the turkeys have been bred to be stupid. So stupid, in fact, that the men have to bring the turkeys inside if it rains, because the turkeys will just look up at the clouds and the rain will drown them. Least, that's what I've been told. Most of the wild turkeys here in Oklahoma have been killed. But when I was growing up, they still lived wild. A female turkey would not lay her eggs in a pen. Instead she would run out into the forest and make a nest. It was my job, as a little girl, to follow the turkey around in the woods and find the nest. Then Dad would come back and pull some eggs out of the nest so the mother could hatch them in the pen. Back in Dad's day farming was not so much a factory-type operation but was still something that had to fit into the natural world.

And maybe part of the reason that I do not want to ever live on a farm again has to do with Dad. Everything on all of his farms, that is, the farms we rented, was straight and orderly. He would remove every rock so that every furrow could be straight. Most houses built in Oklahoma are a little crooked, but when Dad built a house, he used a plumb line and a level to make sure every angle was as right as a man can be right with God. This is good, of course, and a service to God, but it was a little burdensome for us kids. Dad's righteousness was just too much for the boys. When they get together, so long as Mom is not around, they cuss up a storm. And they just couldn't live up to Mom and Dad's moral standards. Some of us kids have pretty strong marriages, for example me and Art, and Clara and Everett. But Roy up and married that Lola May, who was already pregnant with someone else's kid; that didn't last. Bill and Lil aren't happy, and neither are Dick and Betty. Little Jack married a divorced woman, Alice, who already had a son, but that marriage seems to be working out.

There is starting to be news about black people getting their civil rights. They are starting to make everyone remember that they were slaves a hundred years ago. But what about the Cherokees and other Indians? Freed slaves became citizens soon after the Civil War, but not the Indians. And will there ever be any compensation for the lands that were swindled away from the Cherokees here in what used to be Indian Territory? Will the federal government ever apologize, or even acknowledge, the atrocities committed against Indians?

There have been no Cherokee warriors for over a hundred years. I hope that if Stanley is ever a warrior or a soldier, he will use words rather than bullets.

*

Aunt Surrener and Uncle Frank preceded Dad in death. Dad died in 1959, at the age of eighty. He had a series of strokes, and he kept collapsing when he tried to get dressed to go to the hospital. I wasn't there when he died, but Bill and Clara were. Clara told me that, when Dad died at the Nowata hospital, there was a light that arose from his body and flew out the window. I know it was probably just car lights, but Clara swears that there was no parking lot or road from which such car lights could have originated. A similar story is told about the light arising from the body of Nancy Ward, my fifth great grandmother and a famous Cherokee leader, when she died in 1822. The light hovered then flew out the window. I expect no such thing at my death, since there is no Cherokee light left in me.

The only one left from Dad's siblings is Uncle Lon. We are out of contact with him. He is penniless, confined to a wheelchair, and lives in a welfare shelter in Los Angeles. That is all I know. I heard he was writing a book about a man in a wheelchair. Now, if he would write about his early days and whatever he remembers about his Cherokee heritage, that might be interesting, but someday he is going to die, and his body is going to be dumped in a common grave and his manuscript thrown into the trash bin.

Clara, Roy, Dick, and I took a drive out around the land that is now under Oologah Lake before the reservoir filled. We saw the foundation of one of the houses we'd lived in, though the forest had grown up all around it. I know it, at least, is underwater. After Dad retired from farming, he and Mom lived on Social Security at their little house in Chelsea, the last house before the highway turns to go east out of town.

Now that Dad is gone, Mom lives on welfare. The siblings and I were together one time, griping about people living off of welfare who expect the taxpayers to hand them a living in return for doing nothing. Mom started to cry and said that welfare had been a real blessing to her. We instantly realized that we should have thought before speaking. We all hugged her and said that she had worked all her life and deserved that welfare money.

A generation ago, one of us siblings might have taken her in, the way Dad did with Grandma. But Grandma always felt that she was in the way. Mom wanted her independence. We let her stay in her little house on Cherokee Street in Claremore.

*

I think the worst thing the governments of Oklahoma and the United States did to us Cherokees and the other Civilized Tribes was the way white men adopted Indian children and took their land allotments. One day, when she was young, Karen came home from school singing a song she had learned there, one you probably know:

*John Brown had a little Indian,
John Brown had a little Indian,
John Brown had a little Indian,
One little Indian boy.*

*One little two little three little Indians,
Four little five little six little Indians,
Seven little eight little nine little Indians,
Ten little Indian boys.*

This is probably a perfectly innocent song teaching kids how to count, but I shuddered for a moment when I realized it might be referring to a man who adopted Indian enrollees in order to get their land. And then on top of that they charged the taxpayers for the expenses of raising the Indian kids—money they also kept for themselves. When I think about what happened to our tribe, and all the other tribes as well, I wonder just how different it was from what the Germans did to the Jews or what the Stalinists did and are still doing to everybody in the Soviet Union.

Arthur fixes radios and televisions out in his shop behind the carport. He has a whole case full of vacuum tubes, all shapes and sizes. I had the radio on. A man was singing.

*Way down yonder in the Indian Nation
God has given me an obligation
To take all their land by occupation...*

I switched the radio off and continued my work.

Chapter 3

Just when it looked like everything would be perfect for us, it all fell apart. It was the same story that happens over and over in Oklahoma, and has for our entire history, so I should not have been surprised. I dared to breathe happiness and feel optimism. But in Oklahoma, if you are not one of the political insiders, your life is practically irrelevant. You don't even have to be an Indian to lose everything, when the politicians circle around a pot of money like vultures around a dead cow.

Arthur came home and was a little worried about things. He was the Assistant Postmaster and was in line to be Postmaster. But the postal inspectors had been around. When they come, they always find something to criticize and to put into their reports. That's normal. But the inspectors came around again, and then a third time. By doing this, they came up with a little list of things they found wrong with the way Arthur was running the post office. Had the list been that long from a single visit, they might have had legitimate cause for concern. But it took them three visits to compile their list, which they reported as being from a single inspection.

One day Art came home trembling with fear and rage. He told me that the position of Postmaster had been given to a man named Albert Newman. I immediately understood why Art was upset far beyond simply losing the position he had hoped for. Newman was a used-car dealer, and not a very good one. He went into bankruptcy. There was only one possible way that he could have gotten the Postmaster job. He bribed somebody.

We considered our options. Art could have sued, but that would have sucked up all of our financial resources and consumed our emotions for years. Besides, the district Post Office chief told Art that they had a file of complaints from inspectors about him. Art decided, and I agreed, that we had to leave town. There was just one other option: Art could stay on as a clerk, and work under an incompetent postmaster. We did not consider this option for very long. Art was satisfied to be a clerk, but not under Newman.

Art began a craze of energy alternating with despondency.

The energy part was when Art borrowed a typewriter and sent lots of letters. His older brother Alvin was a high official in the Tulsa post office. He did not have any leverage to offer Art, but he did have his own personal typewriter. Post office employees were all members of the American Postal Workers Union, and we got their magazine. The back of the magazine always carried advertisements for employees who were looking to exchange jobs with other employees. Art wrote letters to some of them and posted his own advertisement to see if anyone wanted to exchange places with him. Soon we got fistfuls of mail addressed to "Jack," at a post office box. Employees who were looking for a transfer kept their identities secret from their supervisors.

The despondency part was when Art started drinking. He didn't miss very many days of work from it. He accumulated so much sick leave that he could miss a few days of work. But it was sad to see him drunk, especially when he passed out on the floor of our carport. He lay snoring on his back behind the car.

Eventually, he agreed to a job exchange with someone in a little dusty town in central California. We had to pack up and leave our house in Cushing, a house we had only recently expanded by adding a bedroom and a porch.

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That was when I had to go through all of our stuff and throw most of it out. We ended up with all of Uncle Frank's stuff, as well as some of Dad's. Dad had the final issue of the *Cherokee Advocate* from 1906. I sat down and read some of it. Page two was all in Cherokee, but page three had some interesting stuff.

"To the Cherokee people," it said in column 1, right underneath the name of the editor, W. J. Melton.

We have been telling our people that this time would come and that they would be without a government and would be only a part and parcel of the Indian Territory, and that they should be prepared to meet this change. We have tried hard to convince our full-blood friends that this day would come and have done all in our power...to have them prepare to meet this change. The Advocate has tried to be honest with the full-blood Cherokees, but we...have been...called a traitor to our people for telling them the truth...Poor deluded things; we know that they were sincere and...didn't want to believe anything else.

The editor was referring to the inevitability of Oklahoma statehood, and the loss of tribal lands, and that as of March 4, 1906, there would be no newspaper to inform the Cherokees of what was happening in Washington and with our entire future. Mixed-bloods like Dad had prepared as well as they could, but the full-bloods thought that the problem would go away if they ignored it. But even the mixed-bloods lost their land.

You must meet this change squarely and fearlessly. Use your common sense and show to the world that you are not a lot of good for nothing Indians, so to speak, but really and truly average American citizens in everything that goes to make the man. Go to work like men and make an honest living...Hold to your land at all hazards. Don't sell under any consideration. If you do you will find that in a little while, even before you hardly realize it, that your land and money are both gone and you are worse off than before.

I put this newspaper away, next to Dad's copy of *Ivanhoe* and *Chimney Corner Tales* that I wrapped in plastic. These, at least, we would take to California.

In with Uncle Frank's stuff, I found a little tuft of hair on skin inside of a wooden box. I assume it must be from a possum or something. No point in keeping it.

Chapter 4

Our move to California was very disruptive, especially for Karen, whose senior year in high school was interrupted. She dropped out.

Almost all our relatives were back in Oklahoma, so we drove back to visit once in a while. One time, we were at Art's brother's house. Alvin was the one who was high up in the Tulsa post office, as I have said.

When Art and Al sat on the sofa in the den, Al cleared his throat and said, "I found out some more things about what happened to your job in Cushing."

"I've kind of gotten over it by now," Art said.

"Good. Otherwise I wouldn't tell you, since there's nothing we can do about it now. First of all, you know that the inspectors were gathering dirt on you."

"They had to work pretty hard to find any," said Art.

"They did. But they couldn't come right out and say they took a bribe from Newman. Well, you know that old house next door to you?"

"Old Lady Askins's house," I said. "Least, it was until she died. We didn't know her too well. We only saw her when she brought out food for her dog. She would call, *Here, Shep, here, Shep...* And when the dog wouldn't eat its food, she would say, *Eat that, you fool.*" We laughed a little. I added, "Then she died, and the house was empty. We were a little worried that criminals might move in there."

"Worse than that," said Al. "Some private detectives moved in there." His long face was set in anger; thick glasses magnified his eyes. When he didn't speak, I started guessing what he was going to say. When he said it, I was not surprised. "Newman hired them. They needed to find out if you were doing anything shady."

Art said, "I thought I saw someone over there watching us with binoculars."

For a moment, I felt violated. That was the side of the house with our bedroom window. I was 46, but still good-looking. I was usually pretty careful about closing the window-shades. But I quickly realized that no one would hire private detectives to watch me through the window.

"Did they find anything useful?" asked Art.

"Not that I heard," Al answered. "But I found out something else."

"Might as well tell me," said Art.

"The bribe money? It went straight to Congressman Gelding."

The Congressman for whom the State of Oklahoma later named a reservoir, and for which a section of the new interstate highway system in Oklahoma was also named. The politician whose career was never tarnished by the faintest whiff of political scandal, as far as the public knew.

But I knew. The entire history of the United States was built on the blood, work, and treasure of the darker races, and even people like me who look white. The red dirt of Oklahoma might as well be blood. Figurative blood for us Cherokees, and literal blood for the Osages, in the twentieth century. Our entire state history is also built on corruption, on rich people sucking

the wealth up from the middle class. What Gelding did to our family was typical of what powerful men of influence did to common citizens and was far from the worst example. To him, it was probably just another typical day of doing business.

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Oh, that check? It was part of a court settlement. The Cherokee Nation sued the United States government because they had taken away the Cherokee Outlet, which is a strip of land that connected Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory to New Mexico. That strip of land is where the Panhandle came from. The court decided that the government owed the Cherokees millions of dollars for that land. As is right, the full-bloods got the most, the half-bloods half as much, and so on. I am one-eighth Cherokee. My check was for \$6.52. For me, that is all that is left of the sweat and blood of the Cherokees, in return for the Trail of Tears, for the land and oil swindles. Edd got nothing at all, because he was dead.

That check was just enough money for me to buy a new pair of shoes.

THE END

Author's notes on EDD'S LAND

Part one.

- My grandfather Edd really did grow up across Spencer Creek from Will Rogers. They did not know each other very well after youth. Edd actually did not have a high opinion of Will, whom he considered to be a goof-off, which he was most of his life. Will Rogers (the "Cherokee Kid") became one of the most famous entertainers in America before he died in a plane crash in 1935.
- Rerouting the train route in Choctaw territory: true.
- Edd knew where to dig coal when his family needed it in cold winters, but he couldn't find oil.
- All I know about Frank Hicks is that he had a scowl on his face in every photo I ever saw of him.
- Lon Hicks really was a professional gambler, and managed to earn enough money to live on. That is, until he was old. He died indigent in a county home in Los Angeles about 1965.
- I still have Edd's copy of *Ivanhoe*, with the date he wrote in it.
- To erase the memory of Minerva: He almost succeeded. Only our examination of marriage and birth records, mostly by Cherokee genealogist David Keith Hampton, uncovered the truth, and then only the most rudimentary facts, which he privately published in *The Descendants of Nancy Ward*.
- Edd knew Cherokee songs. He wanted his younger children, including my mom, to learn Cherokee language and songs, but they thought this was silly and did not do it. Much later, Mom and her siblings regretted not learning more from Edd.
- Chimney Corner Tales: I have my Dad's copy from about 1930 rural Oklahoma.
- Jesse James had been recently active in the nearby state of Missouri.
- The road from Oologah to Chelsea, even today, goes down what my mother, as a kid, considered a steep slope.
- I have always considered it to be my holy duty... This paragraph gives a brief summary of the evolutionary science of altruism.
- In the original story, I thought the Carters were white and that their dislike of Edd was racial. But dang if I didn't find Mary's name on one of the Cherokee allotments on the map; she was Cherokee too.
- I cannot find Edd's name on the list of Oklahoma Constitutional delegates, but it is family legend. I suspect he was a delegate to the Sequoyah constitution. Never heard of the state of Sequoyah? The U.S. Senate did not want to have four senators from what used to be Indian Territory, so they forced Sequoyah and Oklahoma to join together.
- The story of Edd Hicks and Mary Carter is true. [I intend what was supposed to be their wedding photo to be on the cover of this book.] Also, I have the book Edd signed in 1904 and the Chimney Corner Tales. Lonnie really was a no-good who gambled whenever he could and died in absolute poverty.
- We know almost nothing about Frank except that the scowl on his face in the photographs suggested to me that he could do some serious good or serious harm, as he chose.
- Mary Franklin Hicks's civil war story is as I heard it through my mother.
- Joel Whittenberg is real.

Part two.

- The swindles of Cherokee and other Native land away from its owners is described in Angie Debo's *And Still the Waters Run*, a book that the University of Oklahoma Press was afraid to publish when it was first written. This may be the only historical book about the Oklahoma land swindles of the early twentieth century.
- Actually, forfeiture of Cherokee land for non-payment of taxes did not happen until two decades later. But it happened.
- The story of the Creek kids living in a tree is real: from Angie Debo's book. It was the Oklahoma crusader Kate Barnard who found them (*A Life on Fire: Oklahoma's Kate Barnard*, Connie Cronley, University of Oklahoma Press).
- This was in fact graft, and the white agents happily called themselves grafters.
- Jot and tittle: from the King James Bible.
- I have a reprint of the March 3, 1906 issue of the Advocate, from which all material is taken.
- I used our real enrollment numbers, which are a matter of public record, though hard to find. Mom always told me that I needed to remember Edd's enrollment number, in case I ever needed help from the tribe.
- God's work must truly be our own: John F. Kennedy.

Part three.

- There is no record that William Carroll Hicks was married, but we have a photo of him looking domestic with a cute woman. Kate Barnard is real. A woman with her progressive convictions would never be able to lead a state office in Oklahoma today. But I don't think William ever met her.
- Billy Sunday really did have lunch at Edd's place. The story about Mom getting poison ivy and the turkey feather story are true, also the story about the schoolteacher whom Edd had to fire. He was usually on local school boards wherever he lived.

Parts four and five.

- There is no family story about Frank doing anything to claim his Cherokee ancestry, certainly not scalping anyone. I made up the part about him having a black lover. I certainly would have heard about it. He really did have a wife named Bert but she was white.
- I modeled the town of Ruby after Toni Morrison's story, but there really was a town called Ruby exactly in the location used in this novel.
- The tarantula story really happened, to my sister.
- The black Cherokees are called Cherokee Freedmen.
- The town of Nowata really did mean "no water," a translation of its original Cherokee name.
- OMA is now Rogers State University.
- The United Keetowah Band still have a government separate from the Cherokee Nation.
- The black drink is real, derived from a holly bush *Ilex vomitoria*. The Latin name says it all. It is mainly noted for having high levels of caffeine.
- Greenwood and Black Wall Street: the most famous unknown race massacre in American history. See *The Ground Breaking: An American City and Its Search for Justice* by Scott Ellsworth. The Osage murders (*Killers of the Flower Moon* by David Grann), just like the Tulsa Race Massacre, both happened in Oklahoma. Even the town of Whizbang is real.
- That old TB: from Jimmie Rodgers, TB Blues.
- They still spit on the sidewalk in Tulsa.
- Edd really did say cats were just disease-carriers.
- The story of Nina (my mother) and the poison ivy really happened.
- My grandmother really did have the mild version of smallpox.

Part six.

- The Isham Jones song is real (and is just an instrumental), but he was not fat. *Just a Little Love Song* is, as far as I can tell, only an instrumental.
- The Jackson Barnett story is true. The Richest Indian in the World, he lived briefly in Hollywood.
- The plot of Barnett's movie is actually the plot of the 1949 movie *Tulsa*, starring Susan Hayward, Robert Preston, and Chill Wills. I suppose it was safe to make the movie by 1949.

- Dig more deep: I don't know how many times my mother told me this Cherokee story.
- Oil used to loosen bowels: I got this from the Thomas Fall novel *The Ordeal of Running Standing*.
- Bessie coming to the room assuming she had to offer her body, then being astonished at generosity: from the beginning of *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Claire Bloom was amazed that Yul Brynner let her keep the money.
- This is really how Rudolph Valentino died. He hated regular medicine and died of peritonitis. I made up the part about him seeking Indian folk medicine. His handwriting was, indeed, beautiful. I made up the part about him meeting Jackson Barnett.
- Jap Zero was an early Ronald Reagan movie, a training movie for pilots in the Pacific Theatre.

Part seven: Most of this, except for a visit from Mary, which did not occur, I heard from grandma Stella.

Part eight

- There were a lot of lynchings in Tulsa. Mark of Cain: I've heard this from racists. And in Oklahoma in the 21st century, they still teach a toned-down version of Manifest Destiny, where you don't hear much about the swindles or the Tulsa Race Massacre.
- "Let his blood be upon us..." is what the mob screamed at the trial of Jesus. This is still used by fundamentalists in Oklahoma (I have heard it on their radio stations) as an "explanation" for why the Jews have suffered so much throughout history.
- I still have the record. Two songs by Hattori Ryoichi. On one side, his sister Tomiko sang an enka ballad, *Ai no Kobako* (little box of love). On the other was what became the most famous song in postwar Japan: *Tokyo bugiugi*.
- The last president to choose the Cherokee chief was Richard Nixon.
- Even now there has been no full and unequivocal apology from the federal government to Native tribes.

Part nine

- Those aren't the real words to the Woody Guthrie song *Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation*. It actually goes, *Way down yonder in the Indian Nation, riding my pony on the reservation...*
- The bribe to the congressman really happened to my Dad. The Congressman's real name bears a slight resemblance in meaning to the name Gelding as used in this novel.

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About the author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website <https://stanleyrice.org/>.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.