

The Legend of White Owl Creek

I heard it from an old Indian who said his grandfather told him just before he died who heard it from his grandfather.

White Feather raised a bony, wrinkled finger. "If you go to White Owl Creek after the sun is down on the twelfth of the month and if you see the white owl, someone close to you will die." Did I believe it? Of course, I did. At ten years old, I believed everything White Feather said. That year 1921, he was pushing ninety.

He lived just down the dirt road from us about a half a mile. I walked down there to see him almost every day of the summer I turned 10. He set on his front porch in the afternoon smoking his pipe. He'd spent the mornings working in his garden or around the house. I can still feel the hot dust from the road on my bare feet.

Some days, he spoke of the trail of tears. Of his mother teaching him to live on roots, berries and small animals before the white man ran them off the land. The morning they came for them, his mother hid him in a big hollow tree.

"You are a brave warrior now, my son. Always remember, your mother loves you." She said, then she covered me with dead leaves. There was the glint of tears in her eyes."

"I never saw my mother, my father, or any of my relatives again. "He said in a quiet low voice. His eyes were moist.

"How old was you?" I ask setting the stump at the edge of the porch.

"I had just turned eleven in the winter months." He smiled. "I had proved myself as a brave by killing a deer for the family. My father had helped me make a shirt and pants out of the hide."

He disappeared into the small shack. I thought I had offended him in some secret way. After several minutes, I rose from the stump in deep disappointment. I just reached the edge of the yard when I heard the old screen door squeak.

"You try this on." He held out a deer hide shirt and pants. They looked stiff with age. My heart leaped into my throat. What he held in his ancient hands was the very outfit he made when he was my age. With trembling hands, I took them, feeling as if I were holding something honorable. This was the clothing White Feather received after his first test of manhood. I stripped off my shirt and tried to fit my arms in the sleeves. I was terrified I would rip it. Coming down from the porch, White Feather took it from me.

"Too stiff. You come back tomorrow afternoon. two, maybe. I have it ready for you." He smiled. "You make good brave."

Thus, I entered the longest 24 hours of my life. The next day, I moped around home all morning doing my chores. Cleaning out the barn feeding the pigs hoeing the garden. Surely it must be at least noon. I hurried to the house to check the time and was dismayed to see it was only 10:35.

My mother smiled and gave me more work to do. I scrubbed the front porch and swept the back steps.

Finally, the clock crept until the hands pointed at 12. My father came in from repairing the fence in the back pasture. I squirmed in my seat while he thanked God for our meal. My parents insisted I eat. I choked down just enough to make them happy.

At two in the afternoon, I ran down the road, slowing as I came into sight of White Feather's house. He sat on the porch smoking his pipe as if nothing was out of the ordinary. For the next ten minutes, we spoke of the day and how hot it was for the middle of May. I sweated my heart, failing me, thinking he had changed his mind about the suit of clothes.

With an effort, he rose from his rocking chair and opened the screen door. I sat on the stump impatiently waiting. A few seconds later, he emerged from the shack. Draped over his arm was the deerskin suit of clothes. I stared in wonderment. Where the beads were dull yesterday today, they shone in the afternoon sun. The fringe on the shirt waved in the southern breeze. I wanted to run to take it from him to try it on. Instead, I continued to sit on the stump, swinging my legs. He held it out to me.

"You try now." He said.

Eagerly, I stripped off my shirt. With trembling fingers, I slipped it over my head. It came down on my shoulders and chest, soft and gentle. "Bear grease. Work every time." He said, smiling.

Deliriously happy, I grinned at him. "Go around back try pants." He said. Running around to the back of the house I shucked off my pants and pulled on the deerskin. I walked around the front for him to see.

"Now you dressed like warrior." He said, looking at me proudly.

And I felt like a warrior. In my mind, I planned how to make a bow and arrows.

"You take off." I looked at him, tears coming to my eyes. "Bu... but I thought..." my voice trailed off. The deer hide pants and shirt were his to do with as he pleased. Still, I believed it was a gift. "Too hot today you wear when weather cooler." He pointed, indicating the buckskin. "Make you sweat."

Then I understood the deer hair was left on the inside to keep you warm in the winter months. I went behind the house and changed clothes. Coming back around, I held out the brave's costume to him.

"You keep. Make you warm in winter." My eyes started to tear up again, this time in gratefulness.

"Thank you. I'll take real good care of them." I said, my hand smoothing the hide.

“You give to your son. Make him brave warrior. One thing missing.”

White Feather said. He reached down onto the floor of the porch and picked up an object. In his hand, he held an eagle feather. Tenderly, he wove it into my hair.

I left White Feather’s house that day feeling ten feet tall. I couldn’t wait to show my mother and father my new outfit. But most of all, I wanted to show Tommy Stevens. Tommy was my best friend in the whole wide world. He and I did everything together. Both of us were in the same Sunday School class. We were in the same grade at school. We made a camp down by the creek and pretended we were pirates or soldiers. But most of all, we were Indians. We played like it was hundreds of years before the white man ever arrived in America.

Tommy was in the backfield of his parents’ place hoeing soybeans when I saw him. I ducked down behind a bush at the edge of the field. Leaning on his hoe, Tommy looked around.

“I see you.” He said, grinning. “That’s poison ivy your settin’ in.”

I jump up. “Ain’t neither.” I said, hoping he was a fooling.

He ‘d done it to me before. One time when we were in church. I had to go to the outhouse. When I got back, preacher Homes had already started on his sermon. He was really into it. I tried to sneak in quiet like. I ‘d made it too if it hadn’t been for Tommy. As I entered the pew, I open my Bible. I didn’t know where the preacher was, but that didn’t never mind. As I set down, Tommy slipped two tacks under my bottom, one for each cheek. I eased back into my seat, congratulating myself for not disturbing the service. Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in my backside. I jumped to my feet with a loud “Yelp” and grabbed my butt. The congregation laughed.

Reverend Homes said with a smile. “It looks like someone got the point of my message.” The people laughed again. If I could have gotten away with it, I would have murdered Tommy. We had a fist fight over it later that afternoon. On Monday, we made up and became best friends again.

It took me six Sundays to get him back. He kept checking the pew before he set down. One morning just before service started, he plopped down, only to jump to his feet with a loud “Ouch!”

I wanted to use four tacks but could only manage one. After he got done preaching, Preacher Homes called us back in our Sunday school room. Both Tommy and I were sweating. If we had done it in school, we would have faced a whipping for sure.

He closed the door, then perched on the edge of Miss Marple’s desk. “Tommy, you got Franky last month and now Franky, you got him back. Are we all done now, boys?”

He looked from me to Tommy.

Tommy, his face flushed, said softly. “Yes, sir.”

He looked at me. “Yes, sir.” I whispered.

“Good.” He stood up. “I want you boys to know something.”
We looked at him, expecting to be berated for disturbing his preaching. Of course, both of us knew we deserved it.

He smiled. “When I was a boy a little younger than you, I did the same thing.” We stared at him, our mouths hanging open. “Only it was a girl.”
“For sure?” Tommy said.

“You can ask her yourself. She’s standing right behind you.”
We turned around and there stood Mrs. Homes, the preacher’s wife.

“And I married him, anyway.” She said, smiling.

Tommy and I never put tacks on the pew again.

I stood up, protecting the deerskin from touching the ground. Tommy let the hoe fall. “What ye got there?” He said, meeting me at the edge of the field.

He reached out to feel it. I shied away, turning my back. “Come on, let me look at it.”
“Ok, but no touching it. Your hands are dirty.”
“Ok,ok, but let me see it.” He leaned over, getting his eyes as close as he could get. He straightened up. “Where did you get it?”

“White Feather, give it to me.” I said proudly.

“Boy, I wish he’d give something like that to me. Say, let’s go camping down by the creek on the twelve.”

Being my best friend, I had told him about the legend of White Owl Creek. It was already the tenth of the month.

“No way. I don’t want my mom or dad to die.” I said, backing up into the middle of the dirt tract.

“Oh, come on, it’s just an Indian legend. I’ll go with you to tell White Feather. It’ll be fun.”

He ragged on me until I agreed. “But you don’t tell no one. Far as they’re concerned, we’re just going camping.”

“Cross my heart.” Tommy said, moving a finger over his chest.

I trudged the rest of the way home. All the fun taken out of the day. With no joy I showed mom and dad the deerskin. Compelled by Tommy, I told them about going camping.

They gave their consent. I skipped going to White Feather’s home the next two days. I was sure he would worm out of me about going camping the twelfth on White Owl Creek.

Tommy arrived at my house about five the afternoon of the twelfth. On the pretense of showing him the newborn pigs, I took him behind the barn and tried to talk him out of going camping by the creek.

He got mad. "If'n you're too chicken to go, I'll go by myself."

"It ain't that I'm afraid. It's just..."

"You don't believe that old Indian legend, do you?"

"Yeah, I do. "

He just looked at me. Then, turning, he stomped off.

"Wait wait." I yelled after him. I hurried to the house, kissed my mother goodbye picked up my gear and ran after him.

As we set up camp, I tried to put White Feather's words out of my mind. After a while, I halfway forgot about the legend. We swam, we fished, we saw how close we could sneak up on squirrels. Tommy got closer than I did.

At sunset we got hungry. I started a fire. I wanted to rub two sticks together but used flint. Tommy had brought his hatchet. I had a good fire base going when I heard Tommy yell. I went to investigate, thinking he had found a snake. We had camped on a hill overlooking the creek. Tommy was about a hundred yards away in some deep brush. "Help me." He screamed. I ran splashing a crossed the creek. Then I saw it swooping low over the water until it came to rest on a hollow tree. A snow white owl with yellow eyes. A shock ran through my body, making it hard to breathe. My hair stood up on end.

I skidded to a stop, the owl's call running through me. I heard White Feather's words coming straight at me like a freight train. "If you go down to the creek on the twelfth of the month and if you see the white owl, someone close to you will die." I was sure Tommy was near death.

"Johnny, help me! "Tommy's voice came out more like a scream. The owl flew toward Tommy's voice. "Johnny, help me!"

Shoving down my panic, I followed the owl. Tommy was lying on his back, holding his bleeding foot. There seemed to be blood everywhere. If the amount of blood was any indication, he was bleeding to death. His foot was almost split in half. I didn't know how to stop it. Tommy was sobbing. I thought of the white owl. My best friend was going to die right before my eyes. I felt so helpless. Tommy continued weeping, holding onto his wounded foot.

Suddenly, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I looked up into the smiling face of White Feather. "Help me White Feather." Tommy said, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"It be alright." White Feather said.

He bound up the wound. The bleeding stopped. "Now you get him home. His mother know what to do." The old Indian said.

"The fire. I need to put it out. "I said, helping Tommy to his feet.

"I take care of fire. You go now." Then he was gone.

Starting and stopping, it took us an hour to get to Tommy's home. Finally; I helped him set down by the well pump and banged on the kitchen door. Within seconds, his folks were carrying him into the house. They send his older brother for the doctor. Laying him on his bed, his mother covered him with a quilt. She filled a glass with water from the bucket in the kitchen. She gave Tommy a drink then offered me some, but I was too scared to drink.

Twenty minutes later, the doctor arrived. With all of us standing around, he took the bandages off Tommy's foot. There was blood all over his foot up to his ankle. Blood caked between his toes, but no wound. His mother brought in a basin of water. The doctor washed Tommy's foot. But could find no cut or wound. Not even a scratch.

"It was there, I swear." I said, staring at his tanned foot.

"It hurt so bad I thought I cut it off." Tommy said, wiggling his foot.

"Yeah, if it hadn't been for White Feather, he would have bled to death." I said. The adults looked at each other.

The doctor said. "Boys, it couldn't have been White Feather."

"Yes, sir, it sure was. He knew just what to do." Tommy said.

I nodded my head.

"I went to see White Feather this afternoon about six hours ago." Tommy's father said. "I found him setting on his front porch. He was dying."

"By the time I got there, it was too late. White Feather was already dead." The doctor said. "That was almost three this afternoon."

Tommy and I started to cry. My old friend had helped us one last time.

The next day, Tommy and I went to White Feathers' funeral. No one could explain the smile on the old Indian's face.

Now, half a century later, I still think of my old friend. Today was my 60th birthday. My grandson just told me he and a friend went camping at the creek last Saturday night. The twelfth of the month. A charge went through my heart. I tried to calm my voice.

"Did you see anything special?" I said, my voice trembling despite myself.

“We sure did, grandpa.” He said, his eyes shining. We just got in the tent when we heard a fluttering. This beautiful white owl came down and set on a limb just above the fire. He just stared at us like he wasn’t scared or nothing.”

“Let’s have some cake.” My wife said. “Then you can tell us all about your camping trip.” After we ate cake and freshly churned ice cream, I opened my gifts. My daughter-in-law gave me a nice shawl to cover my shoulders. Fairly dancing, my grandson gave me a small wrapped gift. “Mom helped me wrap it, but I bought it with my own money.”

I unwrapped and opened the box. I almost dropped it. It was a silver pocket knife with a drawing of a white owl on both sides.

“Do you like it grandpa?” He said eagerly.

“It’s a wonderful gift.” I said, smiling. I put it in my pocket. “I’ll keep it forever.”

My son, his wife and my grandson left, promising to return the next day. After they left my wife and I sat on the old porch swing, we talked about the early days of our marriage. The birth of our one child and growing old together. Of Tommy drowning in White Owl creek at only fifteen. At 10 o’clock, we prepared for bed. As she kissed me goodnight, she said. “Happy birthday, sweetheart. I hope it was a good one. I love you”

“It was, dear, just perfect. Thank you. I love you too.” We drifted off to sleep.

About midnight I woke with a terrible pain in my chest. I reached over and gently squeezed my wife’s hand. Standing at the foot of our bed were Tommy and White Feather. Tommy had the appearance of a man in his twenties. White Feather a young chief in full headdress. I climbed out of bed, leaving my dead body by my sleeping wife. I looked in wonderment at the clothing I wore. A beautiful deerskin. Tommy, White Feather and I flew out of the house and a crossed White Owl Creek. To our side flew a snow-white owl.