

The Greatest Gift

Without hope, we are all lost.

Kofi Annan

Secretary-General of the United Nations

Red Hawk did not appear to Robbie again for another twenty-eight days, until the next full moon.

"Hi, Robbie. Is there anything you'd like to do tonight?"

"Well, last time you mentioned Colonel Casey. Was that his name? Can you tell me how he got the stick?"

"Sure, but I must warn you that some of the scenes in this part of the story are also difficult to witness. Do you think you can do it?"

"I'll try," Robbie replied uneasily.

"Well, let me ask you this. Do you know anything about the Trail of Tears?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, when I was seventeen, our entire Nation was driven off our native grounds by the United States government."

Robbie immediately felt uncomfortable with the discussion, sensing the injustice toward Red Hawk and his people.

Red Hawk continued, "The first part of the process was for the soldiers to round us up and get us into their stockades with no regard for our property or families. So they took us at the end of their rifles, poking stragglers with their bayonets. As I was being forced from my family's cabin I was able to grab a bag my grandfather had given me with the sticks and some of my sister's clothes. I thought as I grabbed the sticks that my grandfather's spirit would help get my sister and me through whatever was about to happen. The soldiers got my sister, my mother, and me on a wagon. My father was way off in our field. He raced back a short time after we were carted off, but fortunately we were able to be reunited at the same stockade. Many other families were torn apart."

Robbie felt himself growing sick at the injustice and pain and wasn't sure whether he wanted to hear the rest. Red Hawk saw the change in Robbie's countenance and asked if he should stop.

"No, please go on," Robbie said reluctantly.

"I don't have to, Robbie."

"No—I want to learn about the stick and your people."

Red Hawk decided to edit out some of the more gruesome aspects of the horror, particularly the parts describing soldiers' stealing, extortion,

and the unspeakable liberties many took with the women and girls. Robbie wasn't ready for all of that, Red Hawk realized.

"Well, my mother died of cholera in the holding pen."

Robbie felt tears well up in his eye. How could this have happened?

"My father and uncle died when the raft we were on with several others sank in the icy Ohio River. Somehow my sister and I managed to make it to shore. I believed then and I believe now that my grandfather's spirit was with us, and saved us."

Robbie could not believe what he was hearing.

"Lieutenant Casey was, at times, the only thing that kept us going. When my mother died in the stockade, he diverted from his orders by allowing me and my father outside the gate to bury her. On the Trail he came by to check on us when he could. After my father and uncle died in the river, Lieutenant Casey went even further out of his way to see that my sister and I were faring as well as could be expected. We were not the only ones who benefited from his goodness. Whenever he could he went out of his way to help us. My people had built up a great deal of contempt for the officers and soldiers who drove them west. The soldiers were not

particularly sympathetic. They simply continued to prod us with little regard for the well-being of our people. I regret to say that it was probably the best they could do as they had little food, water, and provisions themselves.

“Lieutenant Casey showed a great deal of empathy for me, my sister, and many others. He helped push our wagons out of the mud, rather than simply watching us do it ourselves. Instead of drinking water first, like most of his comrades, he made sure that the weak and elderly had an adequate amount. Instead of leaving the sick on the side of the road to die, Casey sought medical assistance whenever he could. Many times he even stayed behind to help bury the dead.

“We could see that Casey had been regularly chided by his superiors and even mocked behind his back by other soldiers for what they believed was diminishing himself to a level below his station. We knew that the lieutenant would be unable to relieve all our suffering, but he made the pain more bearable. He became a hero to everyone he helped, and for the rest of their lives those people would remember his acts of kindness.”

Robbie was thankful for something positive in all of the misery.

“As my sister and I trudged along, day after day I quietly kept begging my grandfather to ‘Stay with me.’ Every day I became weaker and more heartsick, but I knew that I must go on, if for no other reason than to care for my sister. I think that if Lieutenant Casey had not helped us, we would have perished as well. For beyond the physical needs he met—a little food, some water, a blanket—it was the glimmer of hope he continued to keep alive in my heart that kept me going.

“I had nothing to offer Casey to repay his kindness. He gave us our lives. When we arrived in the Indian Territory after four miserable months, I wanted to thank him for the respect, character, and dignity he had worked so desperately to retain for all of my people.

“Then I saw a vision of my grandfather, who suggested that I present Casey with one of the sticks. I could almost feel my grandfather choosing the words as they came out of my mouth to Casey:

My grandfather presented this stick to me when I was a boy. It had been crafted for him by his grandfather many years before. He shared with me many of the lessons he believed would carry me through a difficult life. He also shared with me the spirit of the warrior and the spirit of our game. He died a short time later. Since he has passed to the

Great Spirit, I have been able to feel his spirit in the stick, and I have even been able to communicate with him through it. He is always with me. When my mother, father, and other family members died during this dreaded march, my grandfather became my strength. Whenever I was in need, I invoked his spirit. I want you to have this stick because you have shown great character, empathy, and compassion. During the march your honor and courage were not overlooked. My people will always be heartsick for having been driven from their homes. But it would be of no use for me, you, or our people to live in anger. Though many of my people will mock and ridicule me for retaining hope despite this unthinkable tragedy, just as you sometimes bore such rebuke for your humane efforts, you give me hope, the greatest gift one can offer, that our people might still be able to live together in harmony. Please keep this stick as a reminder of the great heritage of my people, and continue to be upright in all of your dealings with them. Perhaps when you are in need of assistance, you might solicit my grandfather's spirit to stay with you.

"After my sister and I survived the crossing of the Ohio River, I carved a Sunflower in the shafts of the sticks so that she would be with me for all time. We will keep the other stick and pass it down to our descendants, should we be so fortunate. You

and I will be forever linked as individuals and as a people by these sticks. All I ask is that you continue to respect my people and all people.

“Respect the game of the Creator that means so much to us. Of all the things that were stripped from us in the removal, we will be able to maintain the dignity of our game. Pass the stick along to a worthy person of your choosing. Like you he should be a person of strength, spirit, character, leadership, courage, empathy, and compassion. I hope, he, like you and I, will feel the spirit in the stick and use that strength to the betterment of all people.”

“I’m so sorry that you and your people were treated so badly, Red Hawk,” Robbie offered sincerely.

“Thank you. Lieutenant Casey made it much more tolerable. He was a great man. Let me show you something, Robbie.”

Red Hawk took Robbie for a short visit to the Cadet Chapel at West Point, New York in 1841.

“That is Captain Casey,” Red Hawk said as his eyes trained on the only person in the Chapel, sitting on the end of a pew beneath a wooden slatted window. The shards of light coming through the window bathed Casey’s face with alternating light and darkness. Casey had made the pilgrimage to his

alma mater in search of relief for his nagging conscience.

The boys sat near Casey. Robbie could not help but notice the many bronze plaques and cannon commemorating the conquests—and losses—of the Academy’s graduates mounted upon each of the walls. Cannon, the boy pondered, in a chapel? Robbie continued to survey the beautiful simplicity of the Chapel: white walls, white benches covered with crimson seat cushions, four Greek-style pillars on either side of the center aisle.

Casey stirred in his seat, drawing a thump of the boy’s heart. Robbie saw the stick in Casey’s hands. The officer was thinking of Red Hawk as he carved away on the shaft with a small knife. Robbie followed Casey’s eyes to the magnificent “Peace and War” mural above the altar. The captain studied the scene depicted in the mural, a woman in a flowing white dress, a man holding the American flag, and, centered between them, the nation’s symbol, the bald eagle with its wings outstretched and holding a streamer in its beak with the motto E Pluribus Unum. The stars strewn above the heads of the figures proclaimed the majesty of the heavens.

Casey mocked the Biblical passage framed below the eagle in the mural: Righteousness exalteth

a nation: But sin is a reproach to any people. Prov. XIV.

“Righteousness? What we did to those innocent people was not ‘righteousness.’ I thought this school was about protecting people’s freedoms. We stripped freedoms away from them! Is that not a ‘sin?’ Well?...”

Casey paused, inviting a response to his questions from God. Receiving none, he continued his soliloquy, “How many people did we kill for no reason? How many people died from exposure or disease? At least Red Hawk and Sunflower survived.” His voice began to rise slightly, “But how many died?”

Again he paused, soliciting a Divine response.

Casey waited quietly, chipping away on the shaft. Robbie’s heart leapt with excitement when he recognized the pillars of the Chapel taking form on the stick.

For over an hour Casey sat brokenhearted, occasionally wiping moisture from his eyes, still waiting and hoping for a reply. The captain then rose slowly from his pew, looked to the cross sitting upon the altar and made one last plea, “I need some help on this.” He lingered once more—to no avail, and shuffled out.

“He resigned his commission not long after this, Robbie, and returned to his farm in Alabama,” Red Hawk offered with little emotion.

Robbie awoke with a completely different outlook on his life and later that night commended the story to his journal.