

The Ga-Du-Gi Walk

By Scott Little

The sun streamed through the window and woke him up, warming his cheeks and forming puddles of golden light on the nursery curtains. He felt slightly disoriented, like he had woken up in the middle of a strange library while reading a book. Then everything clicked; he was in his baby sister's room, sleeping in a fold out bed, the kind with a thin lumpy mattress shaped like a dried-up worm. He stretched his arms up over his head and stood to continue the ritual with his back.

The sunlight was now a stronger amber and had crept into all corners of the room, illuminating the stuffed animals and dolls stacked in a corner. He didn't like this room at all. He would be happy when his relatives were gone, not because he did not like them, but because he would have his old room back. His room, the one with drummers and baseball players on the wall, the one with a computer with all his favorite games on it.

The smell of pancakes flowed down the hall and into his nostrils. He perked up a little, and made his way to the source of that wonderful aroma. His mother was standing in the kitchen, quilted apron at her waist, and was washing her hands. She turned, her dark eyes flashing and ponytail swinging with her head. "Good morning Daniel", she said and smiled "Would you like some pancakes?" Daniel smiled back and said "sure". He could always count on his mother to know what he wanted, especially when it came to breakfast.

Daniel took his seat at the brown oak table and waited patiently. The entire kitchen was a scene of rubbed wooden furniture that his father, a skilled craftsman, had made for their house. Each piece had been made with the greatest of care and built for durability.

Daniel's father had told him his family, The Mc Allister/Whitebucks, were known for their furniture making skills for at least 4 generations in Cherokee Country. They had sold their wares throughout Northeastern Oklahoma.

Daniel sat and thought about his family for a moment, as he downed his first flapjack. They were all Cherokee mixed-bloods, born near Tahlequah, which is the Cherokee Nation headquarters. In the early 1830's, the United States Government, led by Andrew Jackson, saw fit to remove most of the Cherokee from Georgia to Oklahoma because gold was found on their land.

Many Cherokees died on the journey, and it became known "The Trail Where They Cried" or "The Trail of Tears". Daniel knew he had ancestors on that trail, and had even heard some of their names, strange sounding ones like "Snake Killer" or "Peeking Wolf". He always thought the old Indian names were kind of unusual to him, but interesting at the same time.

He also knew about his other heritage, that of the Scotch/Irish Trader named Mc Allister who had married a Cherokee woman back in the late 1700's, even before the removal. He knew that many Cherokee were mixed mainly with Scotch/Irish heritage and they were equally proud of each. He even knew that they played "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes

at many Cherokee Nation gatherings. Daniel had cousins with blond hair and blue eyes, and he also had relatives who were dark and Asian looking. It did not seem to matter to anyone, Cherokee was Cherokee, regardless of appearance.

Just then his sister Deana burst into the room, clutching her doll to her chest as she positioned herself at the table. She had the same dark brown hair as her brother's, but it grew lighter at the ends and began to curl up as it reached her shoulders. Her eyes were a deep hazel, the same as Daniel's and all other members of their father's family. "Good morning Mommy", she said and turned to her brother "Good morning Us-Di! (oos-dee)" She said with a mischievous grin. Us-Di is the Cherokee name for baby, and this was her way of teasing. "Good morning U-Gu-Ku (oo-goo-koo)" her brother responded. Daniel called her U-Gu-Ku which means owl because of her large round eyes. They both giggled and began to devour their pancakes.

Daniel loved his family, and enjoyed spending time with them, even his sister. He was 12 years old, and his sister 6, so he felt compelled to play the older brother role to her. He also cared deeply for his other relatives, including his cousins that were staying with for 2 weeks.

The Cherokee have a word called Ga-Du-Gi, which means community, but it goes much deeper than that. It refers to the large web of humanity that surrounds you, and how you are related to each individual on the string of that web. You are part of it too, so if you leave this world your strand will be broken, but not forgotten. You are still connected in the spiritual plane, and others will know that part of you is still there with them.

Even though Daniel's family is Christian and they go to church every Sunday, they still have respect for the old ways. As with most Cherokee, they have been able to effectively blend old Indian traditions with the newer euro-centric ones. To an outsider it may seem that some of the "Indianess" of their family may be lost, but to those who are close, they know it is still very much there and very much a part of their everyday lives.

Daniel began to get ready for school. His 2 cousins, Sammy and Tyler, were 1 and 2 years older than him. They loved to come stay at his house and go hike and fish for crawdads in the stream that runs behind their property. They live in Tahlequah, the center of town. Even though they still occasionally see wildlife and get snow every winter, it is still not the same. Daniel's family live deep in the green pine woods in a beautiful modern cabin that his father helped build. They have chickens, goats and a horse. His mother grows herbs in the back garden and sometimes Daniel is sung to sleep by the howl of a coyote. He loves his house almost as much as his family.

"Hey guys" Daniel says to his cousins as they walk out of his room, where they are staying. They both greet him with smiles. "So, can we go hiking after school?" Asked Tyler. "Sure, as long as we get our homework done" replied Daniel. "My Dad is usually home from the mill by around 4:00, so we can go until then". Daniel always wanted to be home when his dad arrived from work. He didn't get to see him in the morning when he left, and would look forward to the time they spent together. He also knew if his dad was not too tired, he would even go hiking with them if they waited.

The boys gathered up their books and lunches and began to head out the door. They said goodbye to Daniel's mom and his aunt, her sister. She looked like his mom, but slightly heavier and with a darker complexion. They began walking to the school bus stop, a quarter mile down a long dirt road that snaked through the deep woods made up of fir and cedar. Along the way the boys could see the traditional cabins that some of the older Cherokee still lived in. They had the long front porches supported by stumpy posts, and thick shingle roofs the color of maple syrup. They always seemed to have smoke coming out of the chimney, and Daniel liked the smell; the sweet fragrance of burning cedar.

Daniel knew some of the families who lived in these cabins, although most of them were too old and did not have kids his age, he still would stop by their cabins occasionally with his mom or dad to see if they needed anything, or if their homes needed repair. Often his dad would do the work for free, and the neighbors would repay him with fresh fruit or vegetables grown in their gardens. He especially liked Mary Kingfisher. She always gave him candy every time he went there and would pinch his cheeks. It was all in the spirit of Ga-Du-Gi, helping others.

However, as is the case in many communities, there was always one family that everyone seemed to steer clear of. For Daniel, it was the Choker/Adairs, a group of mixed-bloods who owned a farm way up at the top of Flint Peak. They have had a reputation way back since the removal times of being shaman or medicine people. This does not mean they healed the sick or blessed marriages, this means they were A-Gi-Ga-Ge(a-gee-ga-gey), or practitioners of the dark arts.

There were stories going around that many who died on the Trail of Tears perished because of the dark spells they created. Some said, not openly but in hushed tones, that they set up the removal so their descendents could take over the land in Georgia. Daniel did not believe this, because the only Chokers he knew were in Tahlequah, and they certainly did not seem to be real wealthy or powerful, only scary.

All Daniel knew is that there were some nights when the gray fog rolled in, that he swore he heard a wolf howl coming from their land. He knew wolves had been extinct from this area for over a hundred years, but he heard it, nonetheless. He also knew that sometimes, again on a quiet, windless evening, he heard whisperings of the Nv-Nv-Hi(nu-nu-he). The Nv-Nv-hi are the Cherokee little people who live underground. They look just like the traditional ones but they are only 2-3 feet tall. Many of the elders still leave out food offerings for them, and talk loudly when they go outside at night to scare away any that may be planning mischief.

Daniel would tell his cousins these stories, and they would laugh at him and call him an old lady. They said these stories were told to little kids so that the elders could control them and make them be good and not wander off at night. One thing Daniel could not understand is that if they did not believe in these tales how come, if one of them had to go out to his aunt's car at night the other would go, and they would always bring a flashlight with them.

Now the boys were nearing the bus stop. Daniel, Tyler and Sammy were all walking together, side by side along the dirt road. The trees began to open up and allowed some light to spill onto their shoulders. He looked at Tyler and noticed a strand of light brown hair over his ears. He really did love his cousins, and his family. Even with their occasional squabbles, they were still very close. The spirit of Ga-Du-Gi was always there, in their hearts, and in the background, on their minds. He smiled, put his hands on both their shoulders and looked for the approaching bus.

The End.