

The Eyes of a Raptor

1964, Age Nine, South Miami, Florida

“Manatee? What kind of name is that?” asked Dougie in true third-grader fashion. Chad looked up from where he had been staring at a sea gull circling the playground. For a moment he contemplated this inquiry with silence as he often did when questioned by his peers. He stared at Dougie with those piercing blue eyes, a color so uncharacteristic of his tribe.

“Seminole. It means *sea cow*.” He continued to look Dougie straight in the eye, recognizing something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Dougie was still curious. Alex Rivera and Rudy Gonzalez were absent today so there was no chance of a pick-up softball game. It was no fun without the Cubans. His glove hung limp in his hand.

“What’s a sea cow, and what’s a Seminole?”

Chad stared again and the beginnings of a smile appeared, something Dougie had never seen before on that face.

“One’s a water mammal, lives in the canals and sloughs; the other’s an Indian. You like hawks? How come your nose is crooked? What’s that weird little lightning-shaped scar on your face from? You can only see it when you squint.”



“WATCH FOR THE young one, Chadwick. His nose will be crooked like the hawk’s, his medicine animal. The sign of the Thunderers will be upon his face. The gators have told me that you will find him. When you do, bring him home.”

Chad’s mother went back to the venison stew, stirring patiently.

“YEAH, I LIKE ’em. I got hit by a baseball; that’s why my nose is busted; and the scar was always there.” Dougie didn’t seem the least surprised by the questions.

“Want to come over to my place this afternoon? I’ll show you my snakes.”

No consideration was necessary; any third-grade boy would jump at such a golden opportunity. Dougie followed Chad across the bridge at the Tamiami Canal single file on their bikes. It was too narrow to ride side-by-side as they had from school. He looked over the side into the murky waters below.

“Man-made drainage ditches, eighty feet deep,” Dan Wilburn had said. “If your car goes in, let it settle to the bottom and then slowly open the windows. Let the car fill up; take a deep breath, and swim to the top.”

All the Rockway students had entered the “Don’t Swim in the Rock Pits and Canals” slogan contest. They made up hundreds of slogans about how dangerous it was. The boys couldn’t wait to get in it, nearly every day after that. There were tire swings everywhere.

Down along the Sweetwater road they pedaled until the cracker-box stucco houses disappeared. The Everglades rose up around them as they traveled until only the tall swamp grasses and cypress trees remained. Only the canal ran alongside, reminding them of civilization now.

They rounded a bend and started up a dirt road flanked by palmettos. In a deep boskage stood a strange-looking structure. Hidden by foliage, its outlines became clearer as they approached. A roof thatched with palmetto branches covered a wooden frame latticed with plywood up and down on stilts. Wooden stairs led to the door flanked by large awning windows like those of a hot dog stand. Dougie stayed on his bike, taking in the scene, as Chad dismounted.

“What kind of house is *that*? How come it’s up on stilts?”

“It’s called a chickee, eighteen inches off the ground, one inch higher than a flea can jump. Come on. I’ll show you the snakes.”

Dougie climbed off his bike and propped it against a banyan tree. They rounded the house and Chad stood in front of a giant oil drum with the top off. “They’re in the drum. Moccasins, cottonmouths. Can’t handle them. They’re poisonous.”

The smaller boy peered over the edge. “What do you feed them?”

“Mice, rats, small rabbits, birds. They strike real fast. Watch.”

Chad picked up an old tennis ball and took aim at the bottom of the drum. He threw it as hard as he could. There was a quick hissing and the ball did not come up again. “Wow. They’re fast. Would you die if they bit you?” Dougie was wide-eyed.

“Nah. Everybody believes that. You just get sick. Maybe blackens your skin and you ache for a few days.” Chad walked back around to the front of the house with Dougie following.

“Are you home, Chad?” A large woman appeared at the door. Her dress had almost every color Dougie could imagine sewn into it in varying sizes and patterns. Her long hair hung down her back, tied together at the neck. She smelled of orange blossoms and pennyroyal. Her voice was calm and sweet, but authoritative. It made Dougie happy in some strange way.

“So this is the little hawk from your school. Ho, little brother.”

“Afternoon, ma’am. Just fine, I guess.” Her tone sounded familiar. He had heard it somewhere a long time ago. He was sure he had never met her, though. More strangeness. Whatever’s-comfortable strangeness. She motioned them inside.

Dougie grasped the step railing. Cypress. It was rough and hard against his palm as it slid diagonally up the steps toward the door. Chad walked in and seated himself at the uneven table. The chickee looked much larger inside. Open awnings allowed a steady breeze throughout. Rows of canned goods on shelves covered one wall, stark and solemn. Another wall was hung with animal skins. Dougie recognized numerous snakes, a panther, a black bear, and some rabbits, fluffy and gray.

Across the open air of a windowed wall hung dry meat and insect screens. The floor was slanted and you could see the earth through it. In one corner were two long woven mats rolled up close

to the edge. He guessed these were for sleeping. The table where they sat was hewn smooth from a cypress stump. The chairs were made of a strong wicker. "Have some meedy cakes, Little Hawk. I just made them."

"Thanks, ma'am." He bit into one of the seedy little cakes. It tasted of honey and sesame. "These are good. What are they made out of, ma'am?"

"You call me *Momma*; everyone else does. The cakes are made from wild honey, saw palmetto berries, seeds, and spices. We call it *meedy*, Seminole candy."

Dougie munched his third cake, watching the Indian woman's face in wonder. Where had he seen that face before? Those pronounced cheekbones; the jutting jaw, the hard brown skin. Those words, that voice, echoed from a time far away.

"THE CREEK ARE tracking us by day, my Chief. They will soon be upon us. We must make a stand, or they will cut us down along with our women and children." Little Hawk stared at the feet of his adopted father.

"Let us make our stand on the meadow plain. I will stake myself out as you lead the charge, my son." Medicine Hawk's eyes met his son's. The morning was misty in the Appalachian foothills where the meadow stretched for nearly a flat mile. The warriors were ready and mounted, weapons and shields at hand when the scout approached.

"They come," he spoke, and then turned his pony to face the enemy. Little Hawk rode to the middle of the field where his father stood. A leather thong was tied by one end to Medicine Hawk's right ankle, and the other end to a stick driven into the earth. His shield covered his right arm; his left arm brandished a wooden war club, sharp points protruding from under the hawk feathers.

"Remember, my son, that I must remain here. It is my day."

"I know the law," smiled Little Hawk. "You may be freed by a Hawk-Soldier who cuts your cord, and I am a Hawk Soldier." With that he spun his horse and returned to the warriors awaiting the charge.

They had not long to wait. The Winktes rode forward, their gay gowns glistening in the dawn light. They rode out, flanking Medicine Hawk on either side.

“It is our day also, my Chief,” said the one on his left. Over the rise rode the Creek. With scathing war cries they waved bright clubs over their heads. They urged their painted ponies forward. The Winktes leaped ahead into the fray, scattering the war party, for they had strong medicine. They were soon down, however, for Winktes bear no arms.

The cries of Little Hawk and the Cherokee warriors sounded as one as they passed the staked-out chief. The foremost mounted Creek fell backwards over the haunches of his pony, wounded fatally by Little Hawk’s club. Ponies reared as warriors pressed the attack, passing and jockeying into position for blows. A Cherokee warrior yelled, reeling from a blow to the face. She toppled forward, falling to the dust in front of her horse. The Cherokee were hard pressed and vastly outnumbered. Little Hawk gave the order to withdraw.

The Cherokee turned in the fray, retreating in the direction of the trees. The Creek, although in disarray, organized pursuit.

All save Little Hawk had passed the staked-out chief. A warrior bore down upon him, swinging a club in an arc from horseback. Medicine Hawk glanced the blow off his shield and, using the Creek’s forward motion, buried his club in his side, dragging him from his horse. The club finished the work as the warrior hit the ground.

Now came the main body of the war party, hotly pursuing Little Hawk. As he approached the chief on his left he reached low over the pony’s neck and slashed the stake-cord through, slowing his pace. With his left hand he grabbed the chief’s left, as the club swung on the older man’s wrist by a thong. As the chief swung up onto the horse’s haunches a feathered shaft whizzed past his ear, sinking into Little Hawk’s right shoulder. Another whistling arrow pierced the younger warrior’s right thigh. Both men dug their heels into the pony as the shield stopped yet more shafts. Into the woods they were carried where the waning Cherokee defended an easier position.

Medicine Hawk dropped his shield to the ground and yanked the arrow from his son’s shoulder. Dismounting, he ripped his skinning knife from its sheath. Placing it at the base of the arrow’s entry he yanked the shaft from Little Hawk’s thigh. When the fires were lit he would cauterize it with the same blade.

Hours later the clan was out of reach of the Creek for the time being. Little Hawk reclined on a rock, plantain poultices dripping from their placement on his wounds.

The elders held council at the fire. "They require the Chief's life. It is the law. Then they will leave the clan alone," muttered Medicine Hawk.

"Would you have us hand you over to our enemies? Have your son's wounds bled in vain?" shouted Indigo, his wife.

"It is my day, oh my Love. My people must live. I am an old man of nearly sixty winters."

Indigo was a medicine woman, a prophet. She knew his words were true, but she was not ready to give him up. "I shall wait on the road through Cougar Pass alone. The clan must move tonight to be out of their reach." It was a hotly disputed decision, especially with Little Hawk.

"You cannot make me go. I will remain with you, my father."

That afternoon, Medicine Hawk stood in the middle of the pass, staked out again. The clan was mounted and prepared for flight, all save Little Hawk and Indigo. At a signal from the chief, six of the strongest warriors grabbed the younger man and dragged him fiercely struggling to his pony, throwing him astraddle its back. Four held him while the other two lashed his ankles under the belly. Little Hawk writhed helplessly, the fire of his wounds searing his very being as they lashed his wrists tightly below his mount's chin. As they mounted and led their charge away his words echoed against the Tennessee cliffs.

"He must not die alone! I must be at his side!"

Alone in the pass Indigo gazed into the dark eyes of her husband for the last time. She spoke softly to him, choosing her words. "I have ever loved you, Old Man Hawk. My spirit is one with your own. Though they spill your blood upon these ancient stones I shall return to you in the land of talking ropes and stone mountains. It is a good day to die, my Eternal Love." She embraced him, and turned away, prodding her pony. As she rode away, the evening light flickered its last. Medicine Hawk stood alone, out in the shadows, on the road through Cougar Pass.



DOUGIE STARED AT the eyes of his friend's mother, perhaps a bit too long. She stepped out the door and motioned for the boys to follow.

"Come along, Chad, we must plant some seeds. You too, Old Man Hawk."

Notes

Seminoles: The Seminoles are historically composed of Creeks, refugees from white persecution of other tribes, and runaway slaves. As with most other Native American tribes and groups, the Seminoles were attacked by the military, ruthlessly slaughtered, rounded up, and deported to the Plains. Most of the Seminoles, though, were not captured and remained in the swamps of the Everglades.

Creeks: The Creeks (nowadays called the *Muskogee*) were another southeastern tribe. The Creeks were allied with the British against the Spanish, but were abandoned by them when the British lost the Revolutionary War. In the War of 1812 they tried to stay neutral but split into opposing factions, some supporting the Americans, some the British. This weakened the tribe and General (later to be President) Andrew Jackson was able to militarily defeat them, as he did the Seminoles. Many Creeks fled south and joined the developing Seminole group, only to again be defeated by Jackson.

Winktes: Another term for this group of people is *Berdache*. The Winktes were (generally) men who dressed and assumed the female role in the society. They would have sex with men, dress as women, and perform female duties in the tribe. Unlike our society which condemns homosexuals (actually slightly different from Winktes in some respects), Native American society generally looked quite favorably upon the Winktes, also referred to as *two-spirit* people. With the coming of Christianity into the tribes, however, sentiment turned against the Winktes.

Medicine Woman: There seems to be a misconception that the word *medicine* always goes along with the word *man*. Such is not the case at all. Women in many tribes held true equality with men. There were women chiefs, inheritance was considered along the matrilineal line, and women could divorce men, throwing them out along with their belongings. Women were not restricted to only certain activities due to their gender. So medicine women

were not that uncommon. Also, menstruation still held some of its mystic significance, and some tribes would not allow women on her moontime near the medicine man because her powers would be too much for him to handle! (Moontime is a nice term for *being on one's period*. Sounds much more polite, really.)

Boskage: A mass of trees or shrubs; thicket. (*American Heritage Dictionary*)

Star-spider Speaks: The Teachings of the Native American Tarot on page 102 gives some descriptions of the events referred to in this chapter. The book notes that, in some tribes, a warrior could participate in a dance before a battle, and pledge that he would not turn his back on the enemy, and would stake himself in the face of the enemy.

The reasons a warrior would choose this rather final step were fairly numerous. Something might have happened that shamed the warrior terribly, his pride might have been hurt, or he might have just decided that it was his time to die.

Whether the warrior was secured with a pin and a rope, or a leather thong and a lance, the result was the same; a person basically stuck in place, no matter what, to face the enemy. It was possible for others to attempt to defend the warrior, and at least with the Cheyennes, if this was done four times the defender could free the warrior from his vow.

This is definitely an ultimate act of bravery and of honor. For those who follow *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, many Native American tribes gave an importance to this honor that would make a Klingon proud.

Walking The Medicine Path

It is a good day to die!

We have heard the cry given in movies and TV films. It is even the title of a book about Crazy Horse entitled *Hoka Hey!* (It is a good time to die!) To a society that is obsessed with youth and heavy in its denial of the biological process of aging, the above statement makes very little sense indeed. How can it ever be a good day to die?

Tecumseh, the great Native American warrior and philosopher, advised people not to be afraid of death. He told people to prepare a noble death song for the day when they would die. He said one should be prepared to die like a hero going home.

Let's concentrate on Tecumseh's statements about death:

*So live your life that the fear of death can
never enter your heart . . . Sing your death song,
and die like a hero going home.*

What he seems to be saying here is that we should not fear death, and that when it is our time, we should meet our death chin up, eyes straight ahead.

Let's look at the first part of the statement, about being afraid of death. Why are we so afraid of death? Several reasons come to mind.

We fear there is absolutely nothing after this life. We fear that we die and just go into the ground. All thoughts, all consciousness, all high-sounding philosophy mean nothing. There is no purpose to life (other than the biological directive of surviving long enough to reproduce). Our religions would all be nothing but a sham. Humans would be nothing but another animal, period. Nothing special about us at all.

We fear that there is something after this life, and that it is bad. Organized religion has stuffed the concept of Hell down people's throats for so long that many have come to accept the concept of eternal torment for our wrong-doings here on earth. Fire and brimstone await the sinner. Only the just go to heaven. And what if I am not one of the just? Maybe I haven't been the worst person the world has ever seen, but have my sins been enough (small though they individually might have been) that I will be condemned to suffer through the rest of eternity?

Whether we fear death or not, we may have an incredible tie to this physical life, especially to the pleasures of the senses. Some people have a special desire to retain power over others, and they would lose this on the other side. So these people fear death in that it would take away from them the perks of having a physical body. For these and other reasons, people fear death. They don't

want to die, and go to their deaths struggling all the way. Yet you have undoubtedly read reports of people who died peacefully, a smile on their face. Gives one hope, doesn't it? Actually, not. In the book *Vampires, Burial, And Death* you can read that this smile is actually a physical reaction caused by a temporary loosening of the muscles upon physical death.

So, is there any "happy" death? Is there any noble death? Is there any reason *not* to fear death?

Death, basically, is a doorway into another dimension of being. The physical body of course, does not survive, but we are not merely our bodies. The *we* that is the *eternal* we is the soul of the individual. Some of the best evidence for this type of continuance can be found in the near-death experiences. Ghosts, channeling, and mediumship all provide some further evidence for the continuance of a being after death. The existence of spirits of the dead has long been accepted and is a staple part of the Native American spiritual outlook.

There is an afterlife. It is also not one in which punishment in the form of hellfire continues for eternity. Such a concept actually presupposes the existence of a vengeful, spiteful, and unforgiving God. Such a God is useful in keeping the masses in line (from the viewpoint of an administrator of religion X, Y or Z), but in effect such control attempts do not help people but breed only fear and disillusionment.

There is a purpose to our existence here, and there will be a purpose to our existence in an afterlife. All things in nature have a purpose, and death is part of nature.

Instead of fearing death, you should really ask yourself three questions about your life:

1. Have you tried to help others whenever you can, and avoided hurting others when at all possible? *Do what thou wilt and harm none*—the Witches creed. *If you cannot help someone, then at least do them no harm*—Buddhist thought (paraphrased).

It seems that a major purpose in being here is to help others, to build a true community of humanity. Yet how many really try? How many really show any kind of charity other than begrudging? Help others when you can, hurt no one you can avoid hurting.

2. How did you work on fulfilling your life's purpose? This, of

course, presupposes that you know what your life's purpose is. You can find out, or at least get a good idea of that purpose, through meditation. The purpose may not necessarily be something we are comfortable with, but it can still be our purpose.

3. Do you live your spirituality? Do you really practice what you preach twenty-four-hours a day, every day, or as near to that as humanly possible? For example, to talk of a God of compassion, and then to condemn people on the basis of their choice of lifestyle does not seem to be living one's spirituality, at least not in a positive way. Look at Tecumseh's statement again:

“Trouble no one about his religion . . . beautify all things in your life. Seek to make your life long and of service to your people.”

Native Americans lived their spirituality all the time. All things were alive to them. They were not perfect, of course. They warred and killed people—but if anyone was perfect, then they probably wouldn't be on this physical plane in the first place.

A Meditation On Death

As with all meditations, you should be in a comfortable position, in a somewhat darkened room. Hold an amethyst crystal for calmness, or some other crystal if you feel more comfortable with it. Calm yourself, center yourself, and focus your thoughts.

See a doorway in front of you. Through this doorway you can see a beautiful land filled with flowers, grass, trees, and animals. You walk to the doorway and stand in it, looking at the land. You can see a stream of pure water running gently through the area; the smells, the warmth of the sun, the feeling of the breeze against your face all carry the message of purity and love.

There is a small bridge across the stream, and over the bridge walks a being. The being is tall and so filled with light that you cannot make out its features. The being walks from the bridge over to near where you stand. Gradually the light begins to dim, and in a short time you can make out the features of the being.

The person you see before you is a female, almost a fairy-princess type of woman. Here long dark hair flows down over her

shoulders. She is dressed in very gauzy, pastel-colored robes. She wears a garland of flowers in her hair, and when she smiles it seems as if her whole being is concentrated into that smile.

She is also a large woman, with a full bosom and a full figure to match it. She is barefoot, her feet almost gliding over the grass when she walks.

This is Mistress Death, the person who comes to take you to the other side. Talk to her now. Tell her of your fears of death. Tell her of your fears of the other side of life. Listen to her replies. This is not only Mistress Death talking, but this is also the Earth Mother from whom you were created and to whom your physical body returns upon death.

Listen carefully to her words. Believe her when she tells you that you should not fear death, but embrace it when your time comes. Listen as she explains the importance of going willingly, with a full heart, to the other side so that you can begin your work there. For you shall have work to do, things to learn, people to see. There is an eternity of learning and experiences on the other side for you.

There are also love and compassion. Some of us will need to take a long rest when we arrive on the other side, to recover from the physical hurts and emotional pains of this life. That comfort shall also be given us and, when we are ready, we shall be lovingly introduced to our purpose on the other side of the door.

Thank Mistress Death for the information she has given you, and for the hope you have received. Turn away from the doorway and return to your physical body. See the doorway fade away and vanish into the air of the room. Return to yourself.

Be sure to ground yourself, using procedures outlined in previous chapters.

“The Peace Ebbo For One With An Incurable Disease” in *Urban Santeria* by Medicine Hawk is a good reference for meeting death.