

The Journey

by Michael Joel Held

(1)

Alone, hungry, tired, and frightened, his thin arms and legs roughly bound with horsehair ropes, White Deer sat painfully on the hard, packed, earthen floor of his captor's tepee. The young boy defiantly glared into the many war-painted faces of those who surrounded him, poked at his body, and tormented him.

In the dancing firelight, White Deer – the Sioux – likened the Arikara and Pawnee warriors to the monsters and demons described in the stories his grandfather told at winter camp when he sat mesmerized by each word the old man spoke.

The Sioux seers had warned that the signs for war were unfavorable. Their visions foretold of a grim disaster that would befall those who dared to venture on such a perilous mission against their Arikara and Pawnee enemies. But it was the council who argued that their action was borne out of necessity, and that the Arikara and Pawnee were growing bolder and more powerful everyday, "Soon," they all argued, "there may not be enough of us left to fight!"

When the raiding party departed the village, White Deer, the only son of chief Black Eagle, hid himself from view. Traveling deep within the tree line, riding quietly through the gullies and washes, he waited patiently to show himself. When he felt the time was right – when the war party was well on its way and could not safely send him home – he broke cover and rode brazenly to the war chief and announced his intention to join them. Bear Paw, the leader of the war party, smiled inwardly at the foolishness of the young boy. But, he thought, hadn't he done the very same when he was White Deer's age? How could he scold the boy for what he had done in his own youth? So, White Deer was invited to join them and became a member of the war party.

(2)

The battle had gone badly. The Sioux warriors had been surprised, surrounded, and massacred. One had escaped and only by running like a coward had he survived. Most had died instantly at the hands of the superior forces they met on the field of battle. Of the fifty men who had departed the Sioux village, only seven remained alive. Six were now tied to stakes pounded deeply into the earth. Only White Deer had been separated from the rest. The boy could not understand why, but he feared for the worst.

It was the Arikara and Pawnee who had taken White Deer prisoner, when all had gone awry, as the seers had predicted the battle would go. They had seen it clearly in their visions and tried to warn their brothers as to what would become of their fates. But their arguments had fallen on deaf ears and were not heeded.

The Arikara and Pawnee had a right to do with the prisoners as they saw fit, as the Sioux would have done if they had been the victors in the conflict.

Through the thick buffalo skins of the enemy's tepee, White Deer felt the heavy vibrations of the loud drumming coursing through his chest. Just outside, beyond his sight, the dancer's feet

pounded the earth. White Deer felt the chilling war cries, the dim shadows caused by the firelight reflecting on the thick skin walls of the tepee, the Arikara and Pawnee warriors affixing Sioux scalps to long spears – the crazed enemy warriors circling the pyre where his Sioux brothers were roasting at the stakes.

Those tied to the stakes remained resolute and stoic with their horrific torture. Their death songs were barely audible above the din of the camp. In a mournful fashion, they sang – their voices one – as they died slowly, painfully, but bravely.

On the morrow, White Deer knew that he would pass from the world of the living to the "other world", but he would do so without uttering a sound. He would die as a warrior was supposed to die –with dignity and bravery – and without protest or complaint.

Although the boy could not understand the language that the Arikara and Pawnee spoke he did comprehend that it was his death that was being planned.

A Pawnee shaman arose from his cross-legged position and walked directly to White Deer. He thrust his ugly war painted face close to the boy's and violently shook his rattles. With the back of his gnarled hand, the holy man struck White Deer viciously across his face.

White Deer's head snapped backwards from the blow, but he just glared hatefully into the hideous face that stood above him, and refused to acknowledge the assault.

The heavysset shaman turned to his friends and guffawed proudly at what he had just done, pointed with his shaking finger at the red stain that was smeared over the boy's face.

The taste of salty blood filled White Deer's mouth. With his tongue, he pushed out a loose tooth and spat it at the holy man's feet. To show fear would only make his situation worse, incite his enemy to inflict more pain and injury upon his frail person. White Deer would give no reasons for them to do worse. He would await his death without any emotion.

He raised his voice and began to lament his death song:

"Grandfathers,"

"you who breathed the wind of life into my body when I was born,"

and tomorrow, when you take the wind of life back,

hear a relative, one of your kind,

Hau!"

The shrieking of his Sioux brothers grew louder in his ears. Gruesome sounds echoed frightfully about the camp – the flames finally, mercifully, putting an end to the suffering of his Sioux brothers.

The sweet aromas' of burning brush, knickknack, sage, and the stench of roasting flesh all blended together and were carried on a soft wind that drifted throughout the camp.

The boy closed his eyes, drifted upon a warm breeze, and saw a place beyond his own.

(3)

Buffalo Hoof, the lone survivor of the ill-fated battle, brought the sad news to Black Eagle, the aging chief of the Sioux, and White Deer's father, "Most of us were murdered, cut down where we stood," he cried, "But others were taken captive. Your son is one of those taken prisoner." he said, ashamed of his cowardice.

Black Eagle listened, tried to fix on the words that were being spoken to him, but in his mind they were garbled and made no sense.

"Tell me this is not so?" he asked, his strained voice continuing, "Nearly fifty of our people

snuffed out? No, it is not possible. Tell me it is not true?"

After a moment, Black Eagle's body collapsed. He argued pathetically, "My people massacred! How could such a thing have happened to such brave warriors as we? The seers saw it clearly, but their admonitions were not taken to heart. We should have prevented our brothers from going on such a foolhardy venture. What a foolish act for White Deer to have joined them." He argued.

The women of the village began to wail and they sang desperate songs. Many of them used their sharp butcher knives to cut pieces of flesh from their legs and joints from their fingers.

Red Sun Rising, White Deer's mother, prostrate with grief, wept at the feet of the council, "Five daughters have I, but only one son."

Suddenly, Black Eagle's demeanor changed. He became resolute, and spoke softly, but firmly, "Red Sun Rising, my wife, tomorrow I will leave this village. You will see no more of me. I will go alone. No one shall follow me."

Red Sun Rising asked, "What is it that you intend to do, husband?"

The old man reached out his wrinkled hand and gently touched his wife's face, "You will know soon enough. Let me think and prepare myself." he ordered.

As soon as the council members filed from his lodge, Red Sun Rising placed her hands on her husband's shoulders, searched his puffy face with her eyes for answers, but there were no answers to be found. She then hugged him closely, and said, "I understand you now. For many years we have lived together. I will miss your warm body next to mine on the cold nights of winter."

The old man sighed and moved nearer to his sleeping mat. He undressed slowly, engrossed in his thoughts that only he understood. Then he looked up into the worried face of his wife, "I have had a good life with you, and have had much happiness. The other world is but a few years hence anyway. Come, lie beside me. Tomorrow I must go."

He said quietly, his voice choked with emotion. Lifting up his sleeping robe he beckoned his wife to slip in beside him.

Red Sun Rising pressed her body against his, wrapped her arms around his neck and gently pulled him to her breasts. In whatever fashion she was capable, she gave her husband kindness and comfort.

Black Eagle did not sleep that night. In his brain, his plan was crystallizing, and his actions that he visualized were repeated over and over until there was no questions left but to complete his journey.

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With the first light of morning, Black Eagle slipped from his warm bed, draped a robe around his shoulders, and left his tepee.

Laughing Kettle, the old shaman woman, had already prepared the sweat lodge, the Inipi, so that he could purify himself and speak with the Grandfathers, those who came before the world.

He was soon naked, sitting on the hard packed earthen floor of the Inipi. Black Eagle filled his pipe and lit it. He moved the bowl to the East, where the Sun rises and gives the people Knowledge. He then moved the pipe to the West where Thunder resided, and threw Bolts from the Sky to the Earth to frighten the people. He then moved the pipe to the North where Old Man Cold lived, and sent the storms of winter howling across the plains. And, finally to the South,

where all go when they die – to the warmth. Allowing the smoke to rise skyward, he honored Father Sky. Then touching the earth he honored Mother Earth. Taking in a puff of smoke, he released it slowly and allowed the smoke to drift from his mouth to honor Wankan Ta 'Tonka', the great spirit of them all.

Laughing Kettle brought in the first of glowing stones and placed it into the fire pit on a long forked stick. Then she brought in the second, and continued until there were seven stones that were in the fire pit. Seven was a holy number. Black Eagle held his pipe to each of the cardinal points – up, down, and around spreading the smoke to all the cardinal points in the World. And the old man prayed:

*“Grandfathers, hear a relative.
Give me the strength to carry out my final mission.
You who breathed life into me,
and you who will take it back.
There will be no more tomorrows in this world for me.
Grandfathers,
grant me the strength and fortitude to do what I must do.
Hau!”*

Black Eagle took a horn ladle and splashed cold water over the glowing stones. The tiny hemispherical structure, the Inipi, was instantly filled in blinding scalding steam. For several hours the old man stayed, as new glowing stones were carried in to replace the cool stones. More water was splashed on the glowing ones. When he was finished with his prayers, he left the Sweat Lodge and walked over the cold earth to the river and bathed himself.

When he returned to his tepee, Red Sun Rising had already set out his War Bonnet – which signaled to the world that her husband was a distinguished chief who had counted many coup on his enemies. His bleached white buckskin leggings and blouse were spread out neatly for him. Lastly, his beaded moccasins that Red Sun Rising had carefully sewn for him – all were placed neatly on the sleeping mat.

Black Eagle carefully dressed. He prepared to depart from the village. No fear did he feel. Death was just a journey to another place, another World beyond the one he was familiar with, and with that there was nothing to fear. When he finished dressing, he walked out of his lodge into the bright morning sunlight. All the villagers waited upon him, and all stood by the portals of their lodges. In quiet recognition and tribute, they all stood silently. No words needed to be spoken, only furtive glances of the many upon the old man’s calm demeanor, all knowing his grim fate. He mounted his painted horse, and without a backwards look, he rode quickly away.

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White Deer felt a soft touch on his shoulder. He bolted awake. He was not aware that he had fallen asleep, but fatigue had granted him a respite from his fear and loneliness.

A young round faced Pawnee woman undid his bonds and placed a bowl of warm stew at his feet. The boy looked up into her black eyes and nodded his appreciation. Till that moment, he had only been allowed to relieve himself, but had not been granted any nourishment from his captors.

The young woman gave him a quick smile, got to her feet, and went to tend the fire.

With his palms, White Deer massaged the life back into his arms and legs and then devoured his meal with relish. When he turned his head, by his side, he saw a cup filled with water. He drank deeply of the liquid quenching his parched throat.

Several Arikara and Pawnee warriors sat around the fire feasting. The dreadful sounds of the previous night had quieted. But the stench of the many killings still hung heavy in the still air.

Occasionally a Pawnee warrior would steal a glance in the boy's direction, making sure he would not bolt and try to make an escape, but White Deer was too stiff and weary to have considered such a foolhardy act.

Suddenly his mind focused on his impending death, and the boy's body trembled.

The day nearly spent, dusk descending over the village; White Deer looked up through the smoke hole of the tepee and into the grayish-pink evening sky. He began to sing:

*“Grandfathers,
Give me the strength to die like a man.
Give me the power to overcome my pain and suffering,
as my brothers were capable of doing.
Grandfathers,
Listen to my prayers.
“Hau!”*

Outside the tepee, beyond its thick skins, White Deer heard the preparations being made for his death. There was the sound of a stake being hammered into the earth, a pile of brush stacked, and he could hear the quiet conversations among the Arikara and Pawnee warriors.

As night fell, White Deer would exist no more. Yet, with each passing moment, he grew calmer and more resolute, convinced that his enemy could not injure him, the great mystery would protect him from all harm.

(6)

On a low hillock, hidden behind a stand of trees, Black Eagle sat upon his horse studying the camp below. The sun had just set. The night fires had just been lit. There were many dim shapes in the distance that moved about from place to place. The old chief kicked his mount and rode slowly onto the flat. As he neared the village, he heard the loud sounds of drumming, the shrill war cries, the Arikara and Pawnee warriors dancing their dance of death.

Black Eagle quickened his pace. Straightening his spine, the Sioux chief rode boldly into his enemy's village. None had detected him until he suddenly appeared. An abrupt hush fell over the village. The drumming stopped. So did the dancing and the war cries. The villagers stood dumbfounded as Black Eagle, dressed in all his finery, slowly made his way to the stake where his son was bound.

The Pawnee warrior who was about to light the brush that would immolate White Deer, moved backwards upon seeing the Sioux chief. An Arikara chief neared Black Eagle's position, he looked up into the old man's calm face and turned his eyes away.

“Who are you who boldly rides into my camp?” signed the painted warrior.

Black Eagle sat straight on his mount, "I am that boy's father." he signed back, pointing with his extended arm in the direction of White Deer.

The quiet village was suddenly alive with angry voices that broke the silence.

"Either you are a very brave man, or very stupid," laughed the Arikara leader.

"I am neither." Black Eagle explained. "But you have my son and he is to die this evening. White Deer is the love of my life and I don't want to lose him. Five daughters have I, but White Deer is my only son. I will strike a bargain with you my enemy. My son has not seen many winters. He has never traveled the war path. The boy is only what you see, a frightened child. If you will allow him to go free and to return to his mother, I will take his place at the stake."

Agitated voices echoed about the camp.

The Arikara's face darkened, "You play with me. You are very brave and at the same time very stupid. It would be nothing for me to seize you as prisoner too, tie you and your son to the stake, and roast you both." he laughed heartily.

The camp laughed loudly with him.

Black Eagle laughed also, "Yes, you have many men to do just that, but I do not believe that you will do such a thing. Think! If he was your son, what would you do? A warrior is one who faces death, but never fears it. What is there for you to fear from this boy? Only a coward would strike coup upon his head, and take his scalp. Tell me, what price in pain would you pay if this was your boy? Would you allow him to suffer at an enemy's hand while you looked on and allowed it to happen? You and I are warriors. We have traveled the war path many times. We have struck coup upon our enemies and have taken many scalps. I love my son more than life itself. I ask of you – free him now so that he can grow up to show his bravery on the field of battle. Let him become a warrior like you and me, and not die as a little boy tied to a stake like an animal this night. One day, when our people are at war again, he will show that he is a brave warrior, a worthy adversary."

The Arikara chief was stunned by the logic and by the love that his enemy showed for his son. He had no answers to the questions that were posed to him. He looked into the many faces that surrounded the Sioux. This was a decision that could only be made by the council as he had no authority to make that decision.

"We must all debate the outcome to reach a decision." he stated, "Come; smoke the pipe with us while we ponder your fates."

Black Eagle fixed his eyes on the Arikara, "Release my son first. Have him sit by my side so he can see how honorable the Arikara and Pawnee peoples are."

All nodded their heads in agreement, "Then it is agreed. Free the boy and let him sit with his father in your lodge where we can smoke and talk as the brave men that we are."

When the boy was freed, Black Eagle whispered, "You have been very brave. I am proud that you are my son. I have traveled here to tell you how much I love you."

A single tear ran down the boy's cheek. They both entered the lodge of their enemies together. Places of honor had been set for them, to make them comfortable and to show respect. Food and drink were set before them by the women who scurried about tending to the men's wishes. When the dishes were removed, a pipe was lighted and passed around the holy circle. But it was not the chief of the Arikara's who smoked first, but Black Eagle and White Deer who did.

The Arikara chief signed, "I have given thought to your proposal. In my many years, never have I met a man as brave as you. You do not care if I put you to death at the stake, a most horrible way to die. I must respect such a man. I am not sure that I am as brave as you. We

have decided; your son will grow into a man. Someday, it may be my son that will take the scalp of your son in battle. I have ordered a small party to take your boy back to his mother, but you must take his place at the stake, that is what we have decided.”

Black Eagle carefully considered the words before he signed back, “I grant you this, I shall go willingly to my death. Someday, when you join me in the other world, we will do battle, you and me. We will show each other our skills learned in war during our lifetimes. Perhaps we may even make peace with one another.”

The Arikara smiled, as he watched the graceful hands of the Sioux sign the words. “Tell me your name, brave man?” he asked.

“My people call me Black Eagle.”

“I will remember your name for all time, chief Black Eagle. And I will look for you in the other world.” Then, turning to several warriors, he said, “Take this boy back to his mother. Let nothing happen to him. Tell chief Black Eagle’s wife that he was a very brave man in his death.’

(7)

The old chief fixed his gaze on the star studded sky, sang his death song, and prayed for his son, White Deer. The flames rose higher, and the heat became unbearable, but the old chief refused to make any protest, offered no complaint, as he completed his journey to the other world in the south.