The Way

IT HAD TAKEN Granma, sitting in the rocker that creaked with her slight weight as she worked and hummed, while the pine knots spluttered in the fireplace, a week of evenings to make the boot moccasins. With a hook knife, she had cut the deer leather and made the strips that she wove around the edges. When she had finished, she soaked the moccasins in water and I put them on wet and walked them dry, back and forth across the floor, until they fitted soft and giving, light as air.

This morning I slipped the moccasins on last, after I had jumped into my overalls and buttoned my jacket. It was dark and cold—too early even for the morning whisper wind to stir the trees.

Granpa had said I could go with him on the high trail, if I got up, and he had said he would not wake me.

"A man rises of his own will in the morning," he had spoken down to me and he did not smile. But Granpa had made many noises in his rising, bumping the wall of my room and talking uncommonly loud to Granma, and so I had heard, and I was first out, waiting with the hounds in the darkness.

"So. Ye're here." Granpa sounded surprised.

"Yes, sir," I said, and kept the proud out of my voice.

Granpa pointed his finger at the hounds jumping and prancing around us. "Ye'll stay," he ordered, and they tucked in their tails and whined and begged and ol' Maud set up a howl. But they didn't follow us. They stood, all together in a hopeless little bunch, and watched us leave the clearing.

I had been up the low trail that followed the bank of the spring branch, twisting and turning with the hollow until it broke out into a meadow where Granpa had his barn and kept his mule and cow. But this was the high trail that forked off to the right and took to the side of the mountain, sloping always upward as it traveled along the hollow. I trotted behind Granpa and I could feel the upward slant of the trail.

I could feel something more, as Granma said I would. Mon-o-lah, the earth mother, came to me through my moccasins. I could feel her push and swell here, and sway and give there . . . and the roots that veined her body and the life of the water-blood, deep inside her. She was warm and springy and bounced me on her breast, as Granma said she would.

The cold air steamed my breath in clouds and the spring branch fell far below us. Bare tree branches dripped water from ice prongs that teethed their sides, and as we walked higher there was ice on the trail. Gray light eased the darkness away.

Granpa stopped and pointed by the side of the trail. "There she is—turkey run—see?" I dropped to my hands and knees and saw the tracks: little sticklike impressions coming out from a center hub.

"Now," Granpa said, "well fix the trap." And he moved off the trail until he found a stump hole.

We cleaned it out, first the leaves, and then Granpa pulled out his long knife and cut into the spongy ground and we scooped up the dirt, scattering it among the

leaves. When the hole was deep, so that I couldn't see over the rim, Granpa pulled me out and we dragged tree branches to cover it and, over these, spread armfuls of leaves. Then, with his long knife, Granpa dug a trail sloping downward into the hole and back toward the turkey run. He took the grains of red Indian corn from his pocket and scattered them down the trail, and threw a handful into the hole.

"Now we will go," he said, and set off again up the high trail. Ice, spewed from the earth like frosting, crackled under our feet. The mountain opposite us moved closer as the hollow far below became a narrow slit, showing the spring branch like the edge of a steel knife, sunk in the bottom of its cleavage.

We sat down in the leaves, off the trail, just as the first sun touched the top of the mountain across the hollow. From his pocket, Granpa pulled out a sour biscuit and deer meat for me, and we watched the mountain while we ate.

The sun hit the top like an explosion, sending showers of glitter and sparkle into the air. The sparkling of the icy trees hurt the eyes to look at, and it moved down the mountain like a wave as the sun backed the night shadow down and down. A crow scout sent three hard calls through the air, warning we were there.

And now the mountain popped and gave breathing sighs that sent little puffs of steam into the air. She pinged and murmured as the sun released the trees from their death armor of ice.

Granpa watched, same as me, and listened as the sounds grew with the morning wind that set up a low whistle in the trees.

"She's coming alive," he said, soft and low, without taking his eyes from the mountain.

"Yes, sir," I said, "she's coming alive." And I knew right then that me and Granpa had us an understanding that most folks didn't know.

The night shadow backed down and across a little meadow, heavy with grass and shining in the sun bath. The meadow was set into the side of the mountain. Granpa pointed. There was quail fluttering and jumping in the grass, feeding on the seeds. Then he pointed up toward the icy blue sky.

There were no clouds but at first I didn't see the speck that came over the rim. It grew larger. Facing into the sun, so that the shadow did not go before him, the bird sped down the side of the mountain; a skier on the tree-tops, wings half-folded . . . like a brown bullet . . . faster and faster, toward the quail.

Granpa chuckled. "It's ol' Tal-con, the hawk."

The quail rose in a rush and sped into the trees—but one was slow. The hawk hit. Feathers flew into the air and then the birds were on the ground, the hawk's head rising and falling with the death blows. In a moment he rose with the dead quail clutched in his claws, back up the side of the mountain and over the rim.

I didn't cry, but I know I looked sad, because Granpa said, "Don't feel sad, Little Tree. It is The Way. Tal-con caught the slow and so the slow will raise no children who are also slow. Tal-con eats a thousand ground rats who eat the eggs of the quail—both the quick and the slow eggs—and so Tal-con lives by The Way. He helps the quail."

Granpa dug a sweet root from the ground with his knife and peeled it so that it dripped with its juicy winter cache of life. He cut it in half and handed me the heavy end.

"It is The Way," he said softly. "Take only what ye need. When ye take the deer, do not take the best. Take the smaller and the slower and then the deer will grow stronger and always give you meat. Pa-koh, the panther, knows and so must ye."

And he laughed, "Only Ti-bi, the bee, stores more than he can use . . . and so he is robbed by the bear, and the

coon . . . and the Cherokee. It is so with people who store and fat themselves with more than their share. They will have it taken from them. And there will be wars over it . . . and they will make long talks, trying to hold more than their share. They will say a flag stands for their right to do this . . . and men will die because of the words and the flag . . . but they will not change the rules of The Way."

We went back down the trail, and the sun was high over us when we reached the turkey trap. We could hear them before we saw the trap. They were in there, gobbling and making loud whistles of alarm.

"Ain't no closing over the door, Granpa," I said. "Why don't they just lower their heads and come out?"'

Granpa stretched full length into the hole and pulled out a big squawking turkey, tied his legs with a throng and grinned up at me.

"Ol' Tel-qui is like some people. Since he knows everything, he won't never look down to see what's around him. Got his head stuck up in the air too high to learn anything."

"Like the bus driver?" I asked. I couldn't forget the bus driver fussing at Granpa.

"The bus driver?" Granpa looked puzzled, then he laughed, and kept laughing while he stuck his head back in the hole, pulling out another turkey.

"I reckin," he chuckled, "like the bus driver. He did kind of gobble now, come to think of it. But that's a burden fer him to tote around, Little Tree. Nothing fer us to burden our heads about."

Granpa laid them out on the ground, legs tied. There were six of them, and now he pointed down at them. "They're all about the same age . . . ye can tell by the thickness of the combs. We only need three so now ye choose, Little Tree."

I walked around them, flopping on the ground. I squatted and studied them, and walked around them

again. I had to be careful. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled among them, until I had pulled out the three smallest I could find.

Granpa said nothing. He pulled the throngs from the legs of the others and they took to wing, beating down the side of the mountain. He slung two of the turkeys over his shoulder.

"Can ye carry the other?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said, not sure that I had done right. A slow grin broke Granpa's bony face. "If ye was not Little Tree . . . I would call ye Little Hawk."

I followed Granpa down the trail. The turkey was heavy, but it felt good over my shoulder. The sun had tilted toward the farther mountain and drifted through the branches of the trees beside the trail, making burnt gold patterns where we walked. The wind had died in that late afternoon of winter, and I heard Granpa, ahead of me, humming a tune. I would have liked to live that time forever . . . for I knew I had pleased Granpa. I had learned The Way.

Trailing through the mountains in the winter's evening sun
Walking through the patterns on the trail
Sloping towards the cabin; been on the turkey run
It's a heaven that the Cherokee knows well.

Watch along the mountain rim and see the morning birth
Listen for the wind song through the tree
Feel the life a'springing from Mon-o-lah, the earth
And you'll know The Way of all the Cherokee.

Know the death in life is here with every breaking day
That one without the other, cannot be
Learn the wisdom of Mon-o-lah,
and then you'll know The Way
And touch the soul of all the Cherokee.