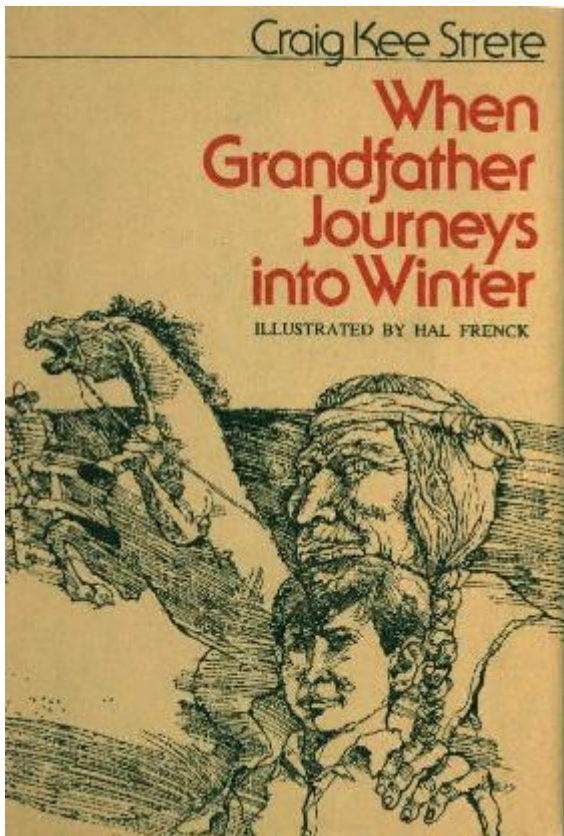


# WHEN GRANDFATHER JOURNEYS INTO WINTER

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Since this book has been out of print for some time, and I am aware librarians and teachers who want to use it as a resource are frustrated in their inability to find copies of it...I herein append a downloadable copy of the entire text of the original Greenwillow book with a bonus first chapter thrown in. This book may be read in classroom situations, or used for educational purposes by librarians and ethnic scholars. You may print out copies of this text for educational or classroom purposes...Additionally, if you think some child would benefit from this explanation a grandfather makes to his grandson about his own approaching death, please make by all means, a copy for that child.....if you know an Indian child who might also find something of worth, then too, make a copy for him or her as well.

Ultimately, it has always been my belief that books belong not so much for the people who publish them....as they do to the children....they were written for.

Take it then, as a gift, to be passed from one hand, to another.

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Craig Kee Strete

## WHEN GRANDFATHER JOURNEYS INTO WINTER

*by Craig Kee Strete*

Tayhua stared at the boy as he came down the trail from the top of the mesa. Tayhua's daughter, Elk Woman came up beside him. She said, "What do you think of your grandson."

"I think the world of him," said the old man as his eyes followed the boy down the steep rocky trail. He held his hands out in front of him like a man who held the world in his hands.

"He is much like his father, with his father's eyes and smile. I am sorry he is not to hear to see him," said Elk Woman. Pride and sorrow was in her voice in equal measure.

"Long are the days since he left the world. Your heart should be calm about this now. Time has seen many summers and it should have healed you."

"Even though one year follows another, there is no day in which I do not miss him," Elk Woman said with a look of sorrow on her face.

"He would be proud as I am proud. He left a big treasure in the world. This grandson is his gift to you and me."

"It still does not ease the ache in my heart. When my husband died I felt it ruined my life, then and forever."

Tayhua put his arm around his daughter. "But there was glory. That is what we live for. We hold on to glory. You had two good years with him. His death could never take that away. You will always have those two years."

Tayhua saw movement in the cactus and the rocks at the edge of his herb medicine garden. Something stirred.

The old man held up his hand, motioning for Little Thunder to stop moving toward him. The old man was not afraid. Too far away to see the snake, Little Thunder kept coming down the trail. Now he was just ten feet from his mother and the old man.

The rattlesnake moved, his head coming up, sensing a disturbance in the rocks around him. His sensitive tongue darted out to test the wind. The heavy steps of Little Thunder on the rocky path had awoken the snake from its sleepy vigil in the noonday sun.

Startled, the snake moved away from Little Thunder and toward grandfather.

The old man sat there calmly, the wind blowing his braids gently in the wind. The snake moved quickly, his shiny skin bright in the sun and his eyes aglitter like two unwinking jewels.

The snake approached the toe of the old man's cowboy boots. Now the old man was still as a tree. His daughter, Elk Woman, held up her hand in Little Thunder's direction. She too signaled the boy, cautioning him not to move.

"Hello brother rattlesnake," said the old man.

The snake raised his head until it rested on the toe of the old man's worn boots.

"I am too big to eat," said the old man with a smile.

The snake hissed, uncertain at the sound of the voice.

"And I am so insignificant, that it would be a waste of poison to bite me. Best to move on brother snake. Otherwise, I might bite you."

The rattlesnake moved suddenly. It went up and over the toe of the old man's boot, its skin dragging across the rough leather of the boot. As quickly as it had appeared, the snake was gone. There was a dry rattle in the wind, a last flurry as the snake shook it's tail and it disappeared in the rocks at the end of the rock garden.

Little Thunder stood in front of them. He did not know why they had motioned him to stop.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Come sit with us in the sun. There was a rattlesnake. You made more noise on the path than a buffalo herd and you scared the rattlesnake, that is all."

"I'm not afraid of rattlesnakes!" said Little Thunder. "Blue Houserook says he is going to show me how to catch them."

"You stay away from Blue Houserook. He is a joker. You leave the rattlesnakes alone. This is not something you need to know how to do," said his mother firmly.

Little Thunder came and sat down on a big rock in front of his grandfather.

"I guess I will learn how to catch them if I want to," said Little Thunder. "I'm old enough and pretty quick, don't you think so Grandfather?"

The old man just smiled.

His mother looked angry. "I don't want you to do dangerous things. You're not going to learn how to catch rattlesnakes and that is final."

"When I was his age, I learned to catch them," said Tayhua a look on his face that said his mind journeyed back to that time in his life. "It was a time when I learned much about the world."

"Things are different now," said Elk Woman with a hurt look on her face. "We can't afford to take chances now."

In the rocks at Grandfather Tayhua's feet something moved.

"A boy's life is always full of danger," said Tayhua. "You can not put your arms around him and hold it away from him. He will learn nothing that way."

"I'm his mother. I decide. I don't want to talk about this. It's settled. This is not something he is going to do."

Little Thunder looked angry at his mother's words. It was plain he did not agree. His grandfather read the defiant look on Little Thunder's face and smiled. They all sat there in the garden quietly for a time. The wind came down out of the high places and was voice enough. Dust swirled in eddies at their feet.

"It is a day to live under the sun. It warms my blood," said Grandfather finally. "Let us have no disagreements on a day as good as this."

The rattlesnake was back.

The old man had his eye on it. He winked at Little Thunder who saw the snake too. Elk Woman was looking across the land, her eyes on the far mesa. She did not see the snake.

Little Thunder started to speak, perhaps to say he saw the snake but the old man put three fingers to his lips, gesturing for him not to speak.

"It is hot in the sun. My lips are dry and my belly feels like ten miles of highway," said the old man suddenly.

"Are you trying to say you are thirsty?" said Elk Woman. "Because it just so happens, I have some sun tea cooling in the house."

"I can think of nothing I would like better," said the old man.

"I suppose I'll go get it then," said Elk Woman. "You want some too?"

Little Thunder nodded yes. He forced himself not to look at the snake so his mother would not see it. He knew Tayhua was hiding the snake from her.

"And if there were some fry bread," said Tayhua, staring up at the clouds, not looking at the movement in the rocks beside him. "I sure could probably eat some."

Elk Woman sighed as she got up. "I don't have the fixings. I have to make it from scratch. That'll take time." She began walking toward the house.

"I have plenty of time. I am in no hurry," called out Tayhua as the rattlesnake moved up next to him and coiled beside his right boot.

Elk Woman did not look back at them. Grandfather did not move now. He did not speak either until Elk Woman was safely in the house.

"Today would be a good day to learn how to catch a rattlesnake. If some person wanted to learn how to do that."

Little Thunder stared at his grandfather. The rattlesnake was coiled at Grandfather's feet, lazy in the sun but still alert. The sound of the old man's voice seemed to disturb the snake. It cast its head from side to side, tongue darting out rapidly to taste the world around it.

"She said I shouldn't," said Little Thunder doubtfully but there was eagerness in his manner. "But if you said it was fine to do it, that would be different."

"She is your mother and you should obey her," said the old man solemnly. "But your father would have taught you to do it and I speak for your father now. The heart of a boy sometimes does what it wants. If this is something you want to learn, I would teach you, as your father would have taught you."

"Other boys my age are learning how to do it. John Tall and Billy already know how. I don't know why she doesn't want me to learn."

"Because she lost your father and she is always afraid of losing you," said Tayhua. "Sometimes she holds on too tight. Come next to me and learn. I'll show you how it is done. It will be our little secret."

Tayhua moved slowly so as not to startle the snake. He bent forward slowly and picked up a short piece of broken tree branch. He carefully stripped it of all side branches until he had one long straight stick about three feet long. He unloosened a faded red bandana that hung around his neck and tied it to the stick so that it dangled down like a flag at the stick's end.

"What's that for?" whispered Little Thunder, his eyes on the snake in front of him.

"You'll see," said Tayhua. "Move slowly and come sit beside me. Be careful you don't scare the snake."

Little Thunder edged around the snake, making a wide circle and then came up behind his grandfather slowly. He put each foot down carefully so the ground wouldn't shake. When his grandson was safely placed at his side, Tayhua stretched the stick out until it hung above the rattlesnake's head.

The rattlesnake sensed the movement of the stick and raised its head.

"To catch a rattlesnake, it is smart first to let him be angry," said Tayhua.

"How does that work?"

"This stick is what he must be angry at, not us. Watch and you will see."

The old man dangled the bandana towards the snake, until it almost struck the snake's head. The snake reared back, and hissed at the piece of cloth.

"Why does he hiss?" asked Little Thunder.

"He is just breathing. He is exhaling air toward his victim. It is a sign that he is angry."

The old man waved the stick back and forth in front of the snake. The snake moved its head from side to side, captivated by the movements of the cloth at the end of the stick.

"Be careful grandfather. Don't let him bite you."

The old man smiled. "I have no wish to be bitten. His fangs are sharp as a cactus spike and hollow."

The old man kept the snake busy with the stick. He held the stick in his right hand and kept his left hand held tight to his side. He said, "When your father was a boy he got bitten by a rattlesnake. Have you heard this story?"

Little Thunder shook his head no.

The old man never took his eyes off the snake as he talked. "For five summers, on the very same day the rattlesnake bit him, your father went crazy. He wandered off in the desert to spend the day playing with bugs, toads and lizards. For just that one day he lost his humanity and forgot who he was."

"That's kind of scary," said Little Thunder. "I didn't know such things could happen. Why did that happen and how did he get better?"

"I do not know how it happened or how he got better. Life is mysterious. Not everything can be explained. But a rattlesnake is dangerous. I tease the snake with this stick but it is serious business."

The old man suddenly lowered the end of the stick. The bandana struck the already angry rattlesnake. It reared up and struck savagely, fangs striking the cloth. The old man yanked the stick back and the snake threw itself forward half its length.

The old man bend down as quick as an eagle swooping out of the sky. With his left hand, the old man seized the snake just inches behind its poisonous head. He held tight, muscles straining to hold the churning body of the angry snake. The rattlesnake made a din with its rattles and writhed and coiled its body about like mad.

The snake wrapped its body around Tayhua's arm. Tayhua dropped the stick and put his other hand next to his left hand, so that he could more tightly hold the snake.

"There. That is how it is done," said Tayhua with pride. "Mind you do not catch him too far behind the head. An inch too much and he will turn his neck and bite your fingers. He will wrap his body around you but pay him no mind. It is only his head that can hurt you and if you grab him just as I have grabbed him, he can not get at you.

"It looks easy when you do it," said Little Thunder.

"To catch is easy, it is holding on that is hard. Also letting go," said Tayhua with a smile.

"Then you better watch out."

"I do not think I am ready yet to catch one on my own," said Little Thunder suddenly as his grandfather brought the snake close to him.

"Perhaps that is wise. When you are older, it will be easier. But when you feel the time is right and you have him in your hands, hold tight and do not let go. Then you drop his body inside a sack and then carefully lower his head after him. Then you would throw his head toward the bottom of the sack, letting go quick. If you throw him hard enough, he will fall to the bottom of the sack before he can strike out at you. Today I do not have a sack, so I will let him go."

"Can I help?" said Little Thunder but not sounding very eager.

"Only by stepping back," said the old man solemnly. "This is one very angry rattlesnake. When I let him go, he is not going to be happy."

"How far should I move back?" asked Little Thunder.

"How far do you want to move back?" asked Tayhua with a laugh.

The snake lunged, throwing its body off Tayhua's arm. It whipped from side to side in an angry circle.

Little Thunder had already stepped back.

"Could I move back to the house? Like into my room for example?" said Little Thunder.

"Good idea," said Tayhua. "I already wish I was there with you."

Little Thunder ran back toward the house. Tayhua looked nervous. He bent over slowly, with the thrashing snake dangling from his hands.

"It would be good to forget about all this and just go your own way," said Tayhua but the snake did not seem to be listening.

Tayhua lifted the snake up high and marched to the end of the rock border of his garden. "Go in peace, brother rattlesnake."

Tayhua dropped the snake suddenly on the other side of the rocks. The snake hit the ground with a thump, reared back and then came up and over the rocks and made straight for Tayhua's feet.

Tayhua yelped once and jumped back. He turned and ran. The snake slithered right after him. The rattlesnake moved surprisingly quick and relentlessly chased the old man all the way to the house.

Tayhua ran as fast as his old legs would carry him which was not very fast. He did not stop until the front door of the house slammed behind him. The snake was hot on his heels. The furious rattlesnake reared up and struck against the battered wire mesh of the screen door.

Little Thunder had been watching from the front window. He was laughing. Elk Woman, his mother, was also standing at the window with her son. She was not laughing. "Serves you right if that rattlesnake bit your tail off," she said. "Old man your age ought to know better."

Tayhua panted. He was out of breath. He turned and looked through the screen door at the angry rattlesnake. The snake coiled in front of the door, unwilling to abandon its prey. It was still very angry.

The old man sighed and said defensively. "Well, I was always good at catching rattlesnakes, everybody said so."

Little Thunder's mother just laughed. "Sure but it's the letting go part you never ever quite got right."

The old man nodded gloomily. "Remind me not to catch any more of them."

"It's them catching you that's got me worried," said Elk Woman. "Come eat your fry bread. You can bite that and it won't bite you back," she said with a laugh.

"Sounds like a big improvement," said Tayhua with a big smile and they all went into the kitchen to eat. And they stayed inside the house all day, just in case a still angry rattlesnake was out there. CHAPTER TWO

The next day when the rattlesnake was long gone and it was safe to go outside again, Tayhua and Little Thunder sat once again by the rock borders of the herb garden.

The old man drew signs in the thick gray dust with a crooked stick. Tayhua drew the eagle sign and bear and deer and big turtle. Then he drew a line along one edge of the symbols and began making another row.

His grandson, Little Thunder, was watching very closely. His own hands were restless. He wanted to learn to make these signs himself.

It was late in the afternoon, and the hot sun made the sweat stand out on their faces. The dry dust that swirled around the squat, ugly buildings on the reservation caked their faces. This was a place where dust was in everything. Even in the lives of the old and the young.

Tayhua pushed his grayish braids behind his shoulders and bent over close to the images in the dust. "You see, it is like this," said Tayhua, "the signs are made thus and thus. These symbols represent the things that have been sacred to our people since the world was little and the air was hot."

Little Thunder, down on his knees, crawled closer. His fingers touched the lines of the drawings.

"You always draw them the same way?"

The old man nodded. "You always call a fish a fish, don't you?"

Little Thunder nodded yes, but then he smiled. "Sometimes I call it something else, especially when I let it sit around in the sun too long. Then I call it rotten."

Tayhua threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"That's not quite the way I meant it, bumblebee brain. How shall I teach you anything when your mind is on fish one meets too late in the day?"

Little Thunder was laughing, too. He shrugged. "I guess each picture, each symbol is the same like a word is always the same."

Tayhua nodded. His face was grave, but there was a note of laughter behind his eyes.

Tayhua motioned toward the figures in the dust.

"Study them closely."

Little Thunder bent closer, fingers tracing the lines.

"See how each line fits. There is a meaning in all this, and you shall learn the proper way it is done."

Little Thunder concentrated, trying to move his hands above the drawings in the exact order and pattern that Tayhua had used in creating them. Tayhua continued working on the row of symbols on the other side of the line.

These symbols were very different.

There was a half smile on the old man's face as his hands pushed the stick through the dust. The figures he now drew were sometimes simple, only a few lines, sometimes very complicated, almost complete little pictures in themselves.

"Now look at these other signs," said the old man. "You will see they are very different from the signs that are sacred to our people. That is because these are some of the symbols that are sacred to white people."

"I didn't know anything was sacred to white people," said Little Thunder.

"That is because you have never played poker with any of them," said Tayhua.

Little Thunder looked at the new figures in the dust. Some of them he recognized, and those made him smile. Some he had never seen before, and those made him shrug.

Tayhua touched the first figure with his stick. It was a dollar sign, \$. "You know we have the symbol of the eagle. To us the eagle is a brother in this world. He is a creature of great vision. A fierce, true thing that the sky and wind worship because proud eagle has a heart that is free. That is one of our symbols."

"A good symbol," said Little Thunder.

"This first symbol is one of the most sacred of the white man's symbols. Have you ever seen it before?" asked Tayhua.

"I've seen it before on cash registers. It's a dollar sign."

"Cash registers are not the only place you will find it written," said the old man with a trace of bitterness.

"You will find in this world that there are many sad people who have dollar signs written on their hearts. You will find many white men and women who put this dollar sign high above all other things in their lives. They respect it in the highest manner they know just as we respect the life of the eagle."

"Some of our people are like that, too," said Little Thunder. "It's sacred to some of our people, too."

Tayhua put his arm around his grandson's shoulder and gave him an affectionate hug. "The little one is wise despite fondness for fish jokes."

Tayhua pointed next to a small drawing of a car.

"This is what white people use to go nowhere in a big-time hurry. They drive cars on big freeways so they can go faster and get nowhere sooner. I do not understand white people. I think they try to tell me that life is a journey by car, but I do not believe them."

"I'd rather ride a horse," said Little Thunder. "If I had one, I wouldn't have to ride the dumb school bus every day."

"Perhaps I can get you a horse," mused Tayhua, thinking about it. "It would be a simple matter to buy one if it were not for the fact that it is not a simple matter to get the money. I have three dollars in my other pair of pants and roll of dimes."

"That's not quite enough to buy a horse," teased Little Thunder.

"Maybe I could buy you a picture of a horse, instead. Then you could put a picture of yourself on its back and wait to see if you get to school without the school bus."

"Not very practical," said Little Thunder.

"Oh well, forget the horse idea." Tayhua nodded at the next figure in the dust.

Tayhua pointed at the last symbol. The mocking smile on his face faded.

The symbol was the letter F.

"This symbol," said Tayhua, putting his hands on his hips and staring very hard at Little Thunder, "is what there were three of on your last report card from the white man's school! It stands for Falling down on the job. It stands for Fooling and Failing and Frittering time away."

Little Thunder gulped. The school had mailed the report card again instead of giving it to him.

"F stands for Fireball, which schoolwise you are not," said Tayhua. "Perhaps Grandson would explain why he is so fond of this letter F that he gets three of them?"

Little Thunder opened his mouth to speak, but Tayhua wasn't finished just yet.

"F stands for the Fifth grade, which my grandson is going to be in again next year if he doesn't quit bringing home these three F signs."

"But..." began Little Thunder, "but..."

"But is a word in front of a sentence you better not tell me, because if I hear an excuse for this F fondness where no excuse is possible I am going to show my grandson how to draw eagle, bear, deer and great-turtle sign in the dust with his nose. Does my grandson understand what I am saying?"

Little Thunder nodded.

Tayhua took his hand and erased the symbols in the dust. Little Thunder looked as unhappy as last place in the reservation horse race. Tayhua uncrossed his legs, wincing a little at the stiffness in his joints, and stood up.

Little Thunder was still down on his knees. Tayhua reached down for him. Little Thunder caught Tayhua's outstretched hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. Little Thunder had a hard time meeting his grandfather's eyes.

"Course," said Tayhua, "three F's out of seven subjects isn't the worst thing in the world."

Little Thunder looked up in surprise.

"It could have been seven F's out of seven. Instead you are only half bad which is only half good," said Tayhua with a twinkle in his eyes. "It is the white people's world we live in so we have to take them seriously. We have to go through their schools to survive in their world. So it is something you should take seriously--not too seriously, since most white people are as crazy as goats eating rocks, but a little seriously."

"My grades are going to get..."

"No promises are necessary," interrupted Tayhua. "All you have to do is try to get one-half better. I know you'll do that."

Tayhua tossed away the stick and touched Little Thunder's nose with the tip of his finger. "Besides, your nose is not as sharp as a stick and to get the drawings just right I might have to sharpen it on a rock, and I'm pretty sure because of that, that Grandson's grades are going to get better and better as time goes by."

Little Thunder gulped and nodded yes. He knew Grandfather was kidding about the rock and the drawing in the dust with his nose and everything. At least, he hoped he was kidding. Sometimes with Grandfather Tayhua you couldn't tell. Anyway the thought of what might happen if he actually got another F on his report card gave him an itch in the place where he didn't do enough homework. Funny how now, the idea of homework seemed like a good idea. Even a great idea.

There was a shrieking noise. It was somebody female yelling for Tayhua and Little Thunder. The voice belonged to Little Thunder's mother and it sounded like a loose fan belt on a '57 Chevy. Tayhua winced as the voice loudly informed them that supper was ready.

"Looks like we better go in," said Little Thunder. "She sounds mad."

"She also sounds like a cow swallowing barbwire sandwiches," snorted Tayhua. "Why can't she yell more quieter? She's gonna wake up everybody in the next reservation, in the next state!"

A short-haired brown dog ran howling past the building beside Tayhua and Little Thunder. The dog seemed to be in full flight from the sound of Little Thunder's mother's loud voice.

Tayhua watched the dog and shook his head.

Several dogs around the reservation also began howling.

Tayhua covered his ears as the shrill voice called them once again.

"It happens every time. One of these days, my two-legged screech owl of a daughter is going to call us in for supper and her yelling will make the whole house fall on her head."

The old man put his arm around Little Thunder and together they set off for home.

### CHAPTER THREE

On one shoulder Tayhua carried a saddle, on the other a bridle. Little Thunder carried a saddle and bridle, too. The old man's steps were sure and steady. He carried the weight on his shoulders easily despite his age.

Little Thunder was having trouble. The weight of the saddle seemed to be pushing him into the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye Tayhua saw Little Thunder stumbling.

"Saddle too heavy?" asked Tayhua.

Little Thunder tried to straighten up under his load.

"I'm ok," he said, but he was sweating with the exertion. The saddle was really too heavy, and his knees were buckling.

Tayhua draped the bridle more securely on one shoulder, freeing one of his hands. Being careful not to let Little Thunder see him, he put his freed hand on the horn of the saddle his grandson was carrying and lifted up. He put on just enough pressure to make the load light enough for Little Thunder to carry.

"It take a big heart to carry a heavy load," said Tayhua with a smile. "You carry that heavy saddle like a strong young horse."

Little Thunder's face lighted up with pride. His steps became certain. He squared his shoulders beneath the weight of the saddle and the spring of pride was in his steps.

"You going to ride today, Grandfather?"

"Does a dog get wet when it sets down in water?" said Tayhua. "I am not carrying this saddle on my shoulder to keep it warm. Every year we go to the horse breakings and every year I ride, don't I?"

"But this year will be different. Suppose to be some white people bringing their horses here this year. Some new people, rich ranchers from Texas."

"Why should that make a difference to me?" said the old man.

There were near the corral now, and most of the other men were already there. There was a carnival atmosphere. Dogs and children running all around, men yelling to each other across the corral. Women were standing in groups beside their men.

Little Thunder shrugged. "I heard some of the old men say they would not ride in front of white people. Some of the old ones say..."

Tayhua frowned. "When you hear a story that all old men are wise the man who tells that story is nine years old and has never talked to anyone over the age of ten! Some of these old fools are afraid to breathe too loud for fear of what other people might think of them. I don't care what people think. I do what I think is right."

They drew up along the corral fence and the old man swung their saddles up on the top rail.

One one side of the corral a long line of tables stood heaped with a generous supply of food. There was fry bread and squash and big rump roasts of beef. There were pies and cakes and all manner of sweet things to eat.

Women stood around the tables talking and trying to keep the sticky fingers of the young ones from getting into the food before everyone else had a chance.

Little Thunder and Tayhua climbed atop the fence, sitting next to their saddles on the top rail.

A big black stallion paced nervously around the corral. A heavy-set white man in a big white stetson hat was giving orders to several other men who were trying to corner the stallion against the side of the corral with a hand-held wooden gate.

"Who's that?" asked Little Thunder, motioning toward the white man in the white stetson.

"That's the man from Texas. They say he is very rich and owns much land and many horses," said Tayhua.

Little Thunder and the old man watched the black stallion carefully. He was one very fine, high-spirited horse.

The big black horse reared against the fence as the ranch hands pushed the gate against the horse's side, forcing him up against the rails of the corral.

The horse struggled valiantly against the gate as the men struggled to hold him against the fence. Even with many men pushing against the gate, the big black was almost able to knock

the men right off their feet. The horse drove his body solidly against the gate, staggering the men.

"That is some horse!" said Tayhua with admiration. "See how his nostrils flare! See how his back arches like a proud cat stretching before the fire. They will not ride that horse so easily." For a minute it seemed that the men would not be able to hold the horse, but then a few more men came down off the corral rails to help. With enough of them holding on, the black stallion had no choice but to stand still, trapped between the corral rails and the gate the men held.

The white man stood in the center of the corral. He took off his stetson and fanned himself in the hot sun.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, sweeping his hat in an arc that took in everybody around the corral. "My name is Wilson Tanner and I've just bought a lot of land next to the reservation, so looks like we're going to be neighbors."

He looked around as if expecting applause or some indication of welcome. No one spoke. No one smiled.

The white man grinned uncomfortably and went on with his speech. "I thought I'd provide everybody with a special treat today. I've got a stallion"--he motioned toward the big black horse that the men held against the side of the corral----"that nobody can ride and nobody can break. I call the horse Rolling Thunder because once he gets rolling the rider usually gets launched from his seat like a lightning bolt."

Around the corral, a few people laughed quietly, politely.

"I'm offering five hundred dollars to the man who can ride him down."

There was a gasp from the crowd. Five hundred dollars was a great deal of money. Few Indians here had ever had that much money at one time. Times were very hard for the people who lived on the reservation.

The black stallion whinnied furiously and shook his head angrily. He did not enjoy being trapped against the fence. The men holding the gate had to keep steady pressure on the gate to hold him back.

"Now a few of my best ranch hands are going to ride him first. I promised a couple of them they could have first go, and if none of them can make the ride I welcome any of you to try and ride Rolling Thunder," said Tanner.

Tayhua bent over and whispered to Little Thunder again. "You see with one hand he offers a prize and with the other he allows himself a chance to win it back. Be careful in your dealings with white people. It is said the large print giveth and the small print taketh away."

Little Thunder nodded. He understood.

One of Tanner's ranch hands stood up on the top rails of the corral above the stallion. Carefully, he lowered himself on the back of the struggling horse.

Seeing the rider getting in place, Wilson Tanner plunked his stetson back on his head and made a beeline for the side of the corral. He had no wish to be near the horse when they let him go.

The cowboy took a tight grip on the horse's sides with his legs, bunched the reins tightly in his hands. With a yes nod, he signalled he was ready, and a cheer rose up from all the people as horse and rider burst out into the center of the corral, scattering the men who dropped the gate like frightened chickens.

It didn't take much imagination to see why Tanner called his horse Rolling Thunder. The horse exploded into the center of the corral like a keg of dynamite with legs.

Horse and rider whirled around the corral, the horse a picture of savagery. Back curved like a cat, the big black stallion leaped straight into the air and came down stiff-legged, all four feet in a bunch. For the rider, the concussion was considerable.

The horse seemed like lightning going up, like thunder coming down.

The rider lasted only a few seconds before he went tumbling to the ground.

There were derisive whoops and cheers from the crowd around the corral as the rider slowly and painfully got to his feet, dusting off the seat of his pants with his hat.

Tayhua whistled in admiration. "That is what I call a horse!"

Little Thunder asked. "Are you going to try and ride him, Grandfather?"

"Wait and see," said Tayhua. "Let some of the others try first."

Three other ranch hands tried it in rapid succession and they didn't do any better than the first rider. They were able to stay on the black stallion's back only a few seconds before the horse threw them to the ground.

Little Thunder nudged his grandfather. "Aren't you going to try it now?"

Tayhua shrugged. "Fat Elk should try it first. His family needs money badly. Blue Houserook needs money too. Let them try first."

"But I want to see you ride," said Little Thunder. "I know you can ride him."

"Patience," said Tayhua. "I think I can ride him, too, but others have more need. Let those go first that have need of the money. I'll get a chance, I think."

"Not if I have anything to say about it." The voice came from behind them.

Tayhua and Little Thunder turned and looked behind them.

Little Thunder's mother stood behind them with an angry expression on her face. Elk Woman's arms were crossed sternly against her chest. There was a look on her face that was as much concern as it was anger.

"Have you forgotten what the doctors said at the hospital? You're too old for this kind of horse-breaking foolishness. Your heart won't stand this. Your bones are too old and too brittle and you know you're not supposed to..."

Tayhua turned his back on her.

"Don't you turn your back on me," she said, stamping her feet angrily against the ground.

"You know I'm right. You're just too proud to admit that you're too old. You just want to go out and make a fool of yourself. That horse will throw you sure as the world and you'll break forty-seven bones and I won't be..."

"If breaking forty-seven bones would make you stop nagging me," said Tayhua and his voice teased more than it was angry. "I would let the horse ride me."

"I'm warning you," threatened Little Thunder's mother. "I better not see you on that horse."

"Close your eyes then," said Tayhua with a grin. "And close your mouth too. That way you will not see any flies and you will not catch any, either."

She shrugged. She had done the best she could do but nothing she could say could make him any different than he was. He would catch rattlesnakes and ride horses because his heart forever chased those things. Nothing could change that. She marched off sadly in the direction of the picnic table.

Little Thunder watched her walk away. "Is it true what she said, Grandfather. About the doctor? Is that true?"

"Pay no attention," said Tayhua with a big grin. "Those white doctors look at bones and they think they know what a man is. My bones may be old, my heart may be old, but my spirit is only fifteen summers old and I can ride anything anybody can put a saddle on, including tornadoes and dynamite explosions."

Fat Elk now stood on the rail above the black stallion.

"Let us hope Fat Elk has good luck," said Tayhua.

Fat Elk slid down on the horse's back and nodded that he was ready. The men holding the stallion against the fence dropped the gate and jumped back quickly to avoid getting trampled. The horse burst away from the side of the corral with such terrific force that Fat Elk went head over heels backwards off the back of the horse.

"One and a half seconds," said Little Thunder. "That's not too lucky, is it?"

Tayhua grinned as Fat Elk got to his feet and slowly limped toward the side of the corral. "Just about anybody could last that long even with the saddle put under the horse."

Blue Houseroot was the next rider. He was tall and well muscled. He was skilled in the riding of broncos and had ridden in many rodeos throughout the states and often taken top honors. If anyone could ride this black stallion, it would be Blue Houseroot.

"Now we shall see a ride!" said Tayhua, but he was mistaken.

Blue Houseroot lasted only a few seconds. A high leap, a frantic whirl and an explosive side kick, and Blue Houseroot sailed over the corral fence. He landed with a big splash in a long wooden horse-watering trough. Everybody started laughing at this strange sight.

Tayhua slapped his thigh and laughed so hard he was in danger of losing his seat on the top rail.

Little Thunder was laughing, too.

Even Blue Houseroot was laughing as he stood up in the horse trough and put his hat on. It was full of water, and it streamed down his face. He spat water out of his mouth in a little stream and took a comic bow. This just made everybody laugh all the harder.

"That is one very fine horse," said Tayhua. "When I was your age, I had such a horse as that one. Full of wildfire and free-blowing prairie wind, that horse. He threw me over every fence in Indian country before I got him tamed. That is the kind of horse you should have."

Tayhua got a strange look in his eye. He started climbing off the fence. "I think I've got me an idea."

Little Thunder looked worried. "Grandfather, that horse doesn't look..." He stopped talking unable to say what he wanted to say for fear of hurting Tayhua's feelings. "Maybe you shouldn't try to ride him because..."

Tayhua put his hands on his hips and stared at his grandson with a fierce, angry pride. His shoulders went back and his back stiffened and Little Thunder could tell that Tayhua was not pleased.

"I hope my grandson wasn't going to say something about how I might get hurt and all that kind of nonsense, that scared-mouse noise."

Little Thunder gulped. "After you finish riding the horse down, can we get something to eat? I'm starving!"

Tayhua lit up like a Christmas tree in a store window. Tayhua had said exactly the right thing. He smiled his biggest smile at his grandson and made a hand gesture that said very plainly, "Everything is gonna be all right."

Tayhua walked across the center of the corral and went toward the white man who owned the horse. He placed himself directly in front of Wilson Tanner, who stood leaning behind the corral rails. Tanner was chunkily built, with a body that once might have been well muscled but now ran to fat. His western clothes were tailor-made and the cigar he held clamped between his teeth was the expensive kind.

No more riders seemed willing to try riding the big black stallion. The men held him against the fence once more, but no one had made a move to climb the fence and get on the horse.

Tanner took the cigar out of his mouth. "Do something for you, old man?"

"I want to ride your horse," said Tayhua calmly.

Wilson Tanner ran his hand along the side of his jaw, eyeing the old man with astonishment. He broke out in rude laughter.

"Whooooooeee!" said Tanner, slapping the leg of his pants with his white stetson hat. "You can't be serious! That horse will throw you right into the old-age home and halfway into next week!"

"I said I wanted to ride him," said Tayhua. "It doesn't matter to the horse that I am old, why should it matter to you?"

"But..." Tanner began, hesitation evident in his face. He didn't want anyone getting hurt, especially an old man. His horse was just too wild. "That's a pretty wild horse there and I don't think..."

"I am pretty wild myself," said Tayhua with a smile.

"I don't want to see anybody get hurt," said Tanner, throwing away the stub of his cigar. "Don't you.."

"If a man wants to ride and you offered the ride to anyone who wanted it, should not that man then ride?" said Tayhua, a determined look settling on his face.

Tanner sighed. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He knew an irresistible force when he saw one. He laughed unpleasantly and gave in. "Guess you got as much right to end up in traction as anybody."

"Good," said Tayhua, not letting his anger show in his voice.

"Five hundred dollars if you can ride him," said Tanner with an ironic smile. He didn't think there was any danger of paying out that prize.

"I don't want the money."

Tanner's mother dropped open in surprise. "What?"

"I said I don't want the money. You keep your five hundred dollars. If I ride the horse down, I'll take the black stallion in place of the cash."

Tanner was stunned. Of course, there was no possibility that he would lose the horse. What amazed him was that the old man did not want the money. With that much money he could have bought four horses. Tanner shook his head, not understanding at all but willing to go along with it. "Sure, whatever you want. The money or the horse, doesn't make a big of difference to me. Nobody can ride my stallion."

Tanner looked the old man in the eyes. "Beats me why you'd want a horse like that. You could buy a pretty good horse with five hundred dollars. Horse like that ain't good for anything but throwing blamed fools on their tailbones."

Tayhua shrugged. "Maybe I'll use him to knock buildings down."

Tanner hitched his hands in his belt. "You're welcome to ride him. Just be careful, if you can. I wouldn't want you getting hurt just 'cause of..."

Tayhua frowned. The white man's concern was making him angry. He was not an old woman to be worried over. He was a man.

"Enough has been said. I shall ride," said Tayhua, cutting Tanner off. "I will win your horse from you."

Tanner pointed. "You go over to the corral and get ready to ride. I'll explain the details of this." With those words, he climbed over the rails and stepped inside the corral. Wilson Tanner walked toward the center.

He raised his arms to get the crowd's attention. When he had it, Tanner announced, "Last rider! I've found one more rider who wants to get his pants dusted." There was a small laugh from the people around the corral.

"And this time, by special request, if the rider stays on, he wants the horse instead of the money." Tanner left the corral.

In Tayhua's eyes, the white man did not respect his old age. Tayhua felt that Tanner was secretly laughing at him, and it made him even more fiercely determined now to ride the big black stallion.

Tayhua did not like to be reminded he was old, that he should be careful. He felt his pride was being tested, his worthiness was being disputed. The old man displayed his anger in the stubborn thrust of his shoulders. He was going to ride that horse if he had to hold on with his teeth.

Little Thunder's mother ran up to the fence, ready to scream at him, ready to pull him off the fence and stop this foolishness. The old man, aware of her presence at his back, turned and gave her such a fierce stare that she backed off. She held in the harsh words she had been about to say.

"I'm going to win this horse for my grandson," said Tayhua. "A boy should have a good horse." There was a plea for dignity in his words. By the tone of his voice, she knew Tayhua's honor was at stake. To the old man it was not just a chance to ride, it was a chance to maintain

his dignity as a human being. Wisely, Elk Woman felt these things, and though hating the danger in it, she made herself step back, saying none of the things she had at first meant to say.

Tayhua nodded at her. He knew she understood his feelings and he smiled his thanks at her.

"Ride well," she said and she turned away so that he would not see that the danger to him almost broke her heart.

"I'll try not to fall asleep," said Tayhua with a grin.

The ranch hands holding Rolling Thunder against the fence wished Tayhua luck. He nodded at them and slid down in the worn leather saddle. He hooked his legs around the big black's body.

Tayhua could feel the powerful body twisting and thrashing under him. Here was a horse with spirit! He felt as if he was mounting a coiled spring. It was all the men could do to hold the horse against the corral rails.

Tayhua nodded. "Let'er rip!"

The men jumped away, dropping the gate. Rolling Thunder pushed away from the fence like a black hurricane. The first jolt almost loosened Tayhua's teeth. His hands bit into leather, his old arms strained. Grimly, he hung on.

Rolling Thunder wheeled, dove and rocketed up again and again. The first savage lunge caught Tayhua off balance. His right leg flew up, driving his knee hard into his chest. The pain was harsh, almost intolerable, but Tayhua refused to let go.

The leather reins cut cruelly into his hands. His back and shoulders ached with the awful strain. Still he held on.

Rolling Thunder careened across the corral like a ricochet from a high-powered rifle. Dimly Tayhua could see the people near the far side of the corral fence back away as the big stallion neared the rails in one of his savage lunges. He heard a roaring sound from the crowd as the stallion hit against the fence.

For a second, Tayhua glimpsed Tanner staring at him with his mouth open and his eyes wide. The look of shock, of disbelief on Tanner's face, pleased Tayhua. It gave him a little extra incentive. He was beginning to need it.

Tayhua was in danger of becoming seriously ill. The savage jolts of Rolling Thunder were playing havoc with his insides. It felt as if his ribs were tearing apart.

Rolling Thunder was letting loose with all the savage cunning and brute strength of a wild animal. The stallion was plunging, sawfishing, back-kicking and side-whirling. Still, somehow the old man hung on.

Tayhua just wrapped his legs tighter around the stallion's sweaty, heaving sides. He felt as if every bone in his body was working loose, but he would not let go.

The jolts were so hard that the blood burst from Tayhua's nose and splattered him and Rolling Thunder like rain. Tayhua was past caring. There was pain and holding on and those were the only two things he knew.

Together, horse and rider lunged near the far side of the corral fence, causing several people on the top rail to dive for safety.

Unable to shake off the stubborn old man by bucking, Rolling Thunder made for the corral fence. Slamming his sweat-covered side into the rails, the horse dragged Tayhua against the fence.

Tayhua gritted his teeth in pain as his one leg rammed into the wooden rails. The hard wood ripped his pants and tore small chunks of flesh from his leg.

Tayhua kicked hard with his free leg, digging the heels of his boots into Rolling Thunder's sides. This only served to provoke the horse even more.

Rolling Thunder jumped forward and ran. People began backing away from the fence as the big black stallion wheeled in a tight circle around the corral. Tayhua fought the stallion every

step of the way. His arms were tired. And he ached. The pain was terrible. His body was screaming for him to stop, but he would not stop.

Rolling Thunder reared against the fence. The fence rails buckled and broke with a crash. People scurried away like cackling chickens.

Thrown off balance when the fence broke, the big black stallion toppled sideways.

When Tayhua saw that they were going to fall, he raised his down-side leg out from under the horse. He used it as a lever to keep the big black horse from rolling over on him. It took every last ounce of muscle the old man could muster. Somehow, even though the pain had brought tears to his eyes, the old man kept the horse upright. Had he not been able to, the horse would have rolled completely over, pinning him under horse and saddle.

Rolling Thunder threw his head up, wild-eyed. Struggling mightily against the creature that clung to its back, it leaped up, legs bruised from the hard rails. Tayhua wrapped his legs around the horse again as it rose up, holding on for dear life.

On his feet once more, the horse bolted through the break in the fence. Running blindly, he ran head-on into a water trough, which overturned, water cascading every whichway.

Bucking and snorting, the horse lunged toward the picnic tables loaded with food. Tayhua tried to turn him aside, but he did not have the strength. The horse smashed headlong into them. The air exploded with overturned tables and flying platters of food. Women scurried away, like pin feathers driven by a storm.

Dogs, asleep under the tables, began howling and running around in confused circles. Men, women and children ran for cover, showered with a spray of foodstuffs.

Rolling Thunder and his grim-faced rider smashed past the overturned tables and bolted straight into a big tree. There was a solid crash, a meaty thunk, as the frenzied horse, in his blind fury, rammed his head with great force into the thick trunk of the tree.

Stunned by this unexpected turn, Tayhua lost his grip on the reins and fell forward on the horse's neck. He could ride no more. He had lost the strength to hold on.

But Rolling Thunder was finished, too. The big sweat-drenched horse stood shaking under the tree, sides heaving. The stallion was spent. He had been ridden down. His spirit had not been broken, but the fight in him was gone.

From this point on, Rolling Thunder would be ready to learn to carry people on his back.

Tayhua lay across the big stallion's neck, his face and chest covered with blood from his nose. His heart raced as if it were going to burst. His chest rose and fell spasmodically.

His face was deathly pale.

Little Thunder and his mother raced to Tayhua. The horse stood there, too spent to react to the strangers standing at his side. The people around the corral were cheering. No one, in all of the years of the horse breakings, had ever made a ride like that. No one.

In the coming years, Tayhua's people would be telling the story of his magnificent ride.

Wilson Tanner pushed his way through the crowd that was forming around the weary horse and rider. Tender, caring hands helped the old man slide off the now gentled horse.

Tanner looked down at his boots and then looked at the crowd. The people fell silent, aware that the white man was about to make another speech. Tayhua stood weakly beside the horse, leaning against his heaving sides for support. His face was contorted in pain.

Tanner hesitated, still a little stunned by all that happened, and then he said. "I have never in all my life seen a ride like that. Not in twenty years of rodeo! I'm just sorry I didn't take this old man seriously at first. I could have saved myself from losing a good horse!" He spoke as much to the crowd as to Tayhua.

"Yessiree! This man just won himself a horse. I hope when I get as old as this man is, I hope that when I get that..."

Tayhua interrupted. "If this is gonna be...long speech... I will fall down right now! I am whipped! Let me take....horse...and go home. I am ambushed...from bottom up." His joking manner could not hide his pain. Tayhua's knees were wobbling and he almost fell over.

Little Thunder put his arm around his grandfather's waist, giving him a hug.

"I give you this horse, Grandson," said Tayhua. "Remind me not to ask you if I can ride it." The old man tottered weakly on his exhausted legs. His grandson held on to him tightly, helping support him. Tayhua's breath still came in ragged gasps. He looked very sick.

Little Thunder's mother put her arms around the old man from the other side. Painfully, Tayhua bent over and whispered in his daughter's ear. "Take me home, Elk Woman." He spoke ever so softly so Little Thunder would not hear. "I am dying."

The crowd parted and Tayhua, Little Thunder and Elk Woman, his mother, moved through slowly. Rolling Thunder trailed along behind them, led docilely by his reins. The horse was still weak. His legs and chest were bruised and there was a large bruise on his forehead where it had rammed solidly into the tree.

They were all going home.

Home was only a short distance away, but their progress was slow. Tayhua was having a hard time walking. He leaned heavily on his daughter and on Little Thunder.

"Don't tell the little one yet," said Tayhua, still whispering so Little Thunder could not hear.

"I don't know for sure yet. I have to lie down. Just get me home, then I will know."

Tears glistened in the eyes of Little Thunder's mother, but she did not let Little Thunder see them. Elk Woman was mad at the old man for being so foolish but she was proud of him, too.

"How do you like your new horse?" asked the old man.

"It's the best gift in the world," said Little Thunder, his hands controlling the reins that led Rolling Thunder. Little Thunder was bursting with pride for his grandfather. He was still excited. "I bet there's never been a ride like that! Not in a rodeo or anywhere!"

Tayhua coughed weakly. "I had to struggle to stay awake. It was such a peaceful ride that several times I almost fell asleep."

Little Thunder laughed.

Even Elk Woman smiled. Her father might be old in his bones and weak in his body but his spirit was a blazing comet. Foolish or not, he had danced this day in the sky like the very brightest of comets, and she would always be proud of him. CHAPTER FOUR

All that day and all that night Tayhua lay weakly in his bed, and many were the things said between father and daughter.

Little Thunder wanted to stay home from school the next morning, but his mother made him go.

Little Thunder wanted to be home because he had never seen his grandfather look this way, so pale and weak. There was something very frightening about the way the old man looked. When they had brought him home, they had had to help him undress for bed, and that was very unlike Grandfather, who was always so strong.

Little Thunder was very worried about him. At school, he paid little attention in class and twice the teachers yelled at him. One of the teachers called him a "stupid Indian," but that didn't bother Little Thunder too much because that particular teacher called everybody a stupid Indian. Little Thunder didn't much care what the teachers said. He had bigger things to worry about than school. Even the thought of the big stallion running free in the pasture behind the house--his horse--did not fill Little Thunder with any happiness.

At noon, Little Thunder's mother called the school in the city. She asked his teacher to send him home. Tayhua was dying, his mother told the teacher, and he asked to see his only grandson.

Little Thunder looked out the bus windows, staring at nothing. He was the only passenger. The yellow school bus was making a special trip just for him.

"How do you feel?" asked the bus driver, trying to be kind.

Little Thunder just stared out the window. He didn't feel like talking so he didn't say anything. The teacher was only supposed to send him home, not tell him why. But the teacher had to fill

out the proper forms necessary to excuse him from class, and it was from those forms that Little Thunder had learned the truth about his grandfather.

It was not a good way to learn that his grandfather was dying.

As the miles rolled by, Little Thunder just sat there. Several times the bus driver spoke to him, trying to cheer him up, but Little Thunder was in no mood to be cheered up. He wished the bus driver would leave him alone.

The school bus turned off the main highway onto the dirt road that led to the reservation. The old road was deeply rutted from constant use, and the bus driver had to slow down a great deal to keep from breaking an axle.

"Not much longer," said the bus driver, looking at Little Thunder in his mirror.

Little Thunder settled back restlessly in the hard plastic seat. Thousands of times he had traveled this old road in the yellow school bus, but never had it seemed to take so long to get home as it did on this day.

The thick dust rose up behind the bus in a gray cloud, but Little Thunder did not see it. The bright sun had turned the barren land beside the road into a shimmering haze that stretched as far as the eye could see on all sides, but Little Thunder did not see it. For a few brief moments, a soaring hawk kept pace with the yellow bus as if it were racing it home, but Little Thunder did not see it.

Little Thunder's eyes saw only into the past. His eyes saw only the times gone by that he had spent with his grandfather. He saw the long, learning afternoons of summer, the walks early in the morning when the sky was new and the world began all over again with each day.

They had hunted together and fished together, and in the cold nights of winter Little Thunder had slept under his grandfather's thick blankets with him. In the morning, sometimes, his grandfather would tickle him with a feather to wake him up.

"I didn't tickle you," Tayhua would say, pretending as hard as he could. "An owl flew through our bed this morning. It must have been an owl because here is his feather." And then Tayhua would show Little Thunder the same feather he had tickled him with.

No matter how many times his grandfather played this joke on him, Little Thunder would always laugh because it would be a chicken feather or an eagle feather or any other kind of feather except an owl feather.

There were so many things about his grandfather that he remembered.

The stories Grandfather used to tell! Stories to make one laugh when the wind howled outside the house and the shadows crept out of the corners the scary way shadows sometimes did. Or "tells how" stories that told how all the things of creation came into being. There were hero stories about strong men and strong women, ghost stories and vision stories. And there were, best of all, trickster stories about crafty Old Man Coyote who played tricks on everyone and everything under the sun. There were wonderful worlds in those Grandfather stories, scary things and sad things and happy things and things that kept alive the wisdom of Little Thunder's people.

"I see a story riding on the back of Old Man Coyote," Tayhua would say. "Shall I catch Old Man Coyote and tell his tale?"

"Yes! Yes!" Little Thunder would cry, and Grandfather would lean out the window and pretend he was catching Old Man Coyote. Grandfather always pretended very hard. Once he had pretended so hard that he had fallen out of the window.

"What a fat story Old Man Coyote carried on his back this night!" he would say, and then he would tell the story.

The days he and his grandfather roamed the hills hunting rabbits and fishing in the secret places in the river that only Grandfather knew. His grandfather's wild ride on Rolling Thunder. All of these things Little Thunder remembered. Together they had shared a thousand things, large and small, and now inside himself Little Thunder knew those days of sharing were coming to an end.

The bus driver hummed a cowboy song to himself as he drove. He looked back at Little Thunder again in his mirror.

"This is it," said the bus driver. He slowed the school bus to a stop beside the gate that led to the reservation.

When the bus came to a complete stop, the bus driver pulled the lever that opened the door. He turned around in his seat to look at Little Thunder. He tilted his cap back on his head. He knew why Little Thunder was going home and he felt sorry for him.

Little Thunder hurried to the front and started out the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow," said the bus driver, "and I hope everything comes out all right."

Little Thunder ran down the bus steps and away. He did not turn to thank the driver as he would have done on any other day. He just kept running and never looked back.

He was crying, and he did not want a white man see him crying. CHAPTER FIVE

Tayhua's house badly needed paint, and some of the windows were cracked and broken. There were more weeds than grass in the front yard, and the battered wreck of an old Ford pickup truck with all the windows and doors gone stood in the center.

Today, as Little Thunder ran toward the house, he could see a great crowd of people standing around it. The relatives and friends of Tayhua were there. Aunts and uncles and nephews and nieces, all of the members of the family were there.

Little Thunder had wiped his face carefully so that no one would know that he had been crying. Among his own people, he felt no shame when he cried. Indeed, many of the people there were crying too. But he did not want his grandfather to see him crying.

His mother came out the front door. Her eyes were red and Little Thunder knew she had been crying. She was dressed in a long, bright red dress that Tayhua had bought for her many years ago when she was a young woman and was still unmarried.

Elk Woman put her arms out, and Little Thunder ran to her and gave her a hug. She looked around at the people gathered there. She raised one arm and motioned them to be quiet.

"Tayhua has asked that you all return to your homes. Tayhua wants to thank you for coming and to ask you to come again after his spirit goes to another world. Today, he wants only to be with his grandson. He thanks you all for your love, for the honor you have given him. Go and be in peace for him, for he had found peace in you. That is what Tayhua says, these are his wishes."

Silently, the people agreed to this, nodding their heads at the wisdom of the old man's decision. They began scattering in all directions as they went back to their homes. Tomorrow they would come together again and talk and laugh and cry as was right and good.

Soon, only Little Thunder and his mother were left in the yard in front of the house.

They looked at each other for a little while and did not speak.

"I don't understand," said Little Thunder. "Tayhua is dying, but I don't want him to die. I don't want him to leave me."

"These things must happen," said his mother. "You are too young to remember your father. He died when you were very little, still a baby. From that time, your grandfather has been like a father to you, and I know it is hard for you. But it is as it should be."

"But why? Why does he have to die?" asked Little Thunder. "I love him and I don't want him to leave me."

"Go in and see him," said Elk Woman. "Go see your grandfather. He knows you will be hurting inside and he wants to speak of this hurt to you."

Little Thunder leaned against his mother, and she gave him an extra little hug and then pushed him through the open door.

The door closed behind him, and Little Thunder was alone with his grandfather Tayhua. Alone with him on the last day of his life on earth. CHAPTER SIX

Inside the house it was very quiet except for the dry rasping sounds Tayhua made when he breathed.

He lay in his old wooden four-poster bed with a heavy winter blanket pulled up over him. A fire burned in the fireplace, sending its light and heat throughout the room.

It was still summer, the air hot and heavy, but Little Thunder's grandfather was shivering beside the warm fire with the cold of his old age.

"I'm here, Grandfather," said Little Thunder, standing in the middle of the room.

Grandfather Tayhua opened his eyes. He seemed very fragile, like something delicately carved that could easily be broken. "Come to my side, my grandson, so that these weak old eyes of mine can look upon you again."

Little Thunder came up beside his grandfather's bed.

"Sit beside me. Hold my hand and we shall talk," said the old man, his voice soft as falling snow.

Little Thunder pulled a chair up next to the bed and sat down. Tayhua pulled his right arm out from under the blanket. He was too weak to do more than let his arm lie across the top of the covers. Little Thunder took hold of his grandfather's hand.

For the first time, Little Thunder noticed how white Grandfather's hair was, his braids like two white ropes against the pillow. He saw how painfully thin his grandfather had become. When he saw these things, he could not hold it in any longer, could not hold back his tears.

"Oh, Grandfather!" he cried. "I don't want you to die!" Little Thunder buried his face in the blanket covering Grandfather's bed and wept unashamedly.

Grandfather Tayhua just patted the hands that held his and let Little Thunder cry.

After some time had passed, Tayhua said, "Grandson, if you love me, you will dry your eyes so that you can listen to what I have to say, for I do not have much time left upon this world."

Little Thunder sat up in the chair and wiped the tears from his eyes. He straightened his shoulders and tried bravely to choke back the flow of tears.

"I am sorry we did not have more time together," said Tayhua with a look of deep regret on his face. "There was the school they sent you to....so much of our time together was lost there."

"I didn't want to go," said Little Thunder.

"Yes, I know. There are things in this world we have to do that we don't want to do. Tell me, are you learning good things in the white man's school?" asked Tayhua.

Little Thunder looked away for a second. He wanted to say no, to say that nothing the white man had to teach was any good, but the truth was, there were many good things to be learned. And many bad things too.

"I am learning some things I need to know. And some things I don't want and don't need to know," answered Little Thunder.

The old man nodded his head a little. He understood.

"We have this time together, then. It will be enough time for me to tell you the last of the things that is mine to give you. Bend over close to me so that I do not have to talk so loud. I shall whisper this last story to you. It is my last gift to you."

Little Thunder seemed ready to cry again. "Oh, Grandfather, I don't want you to die!"

"Yes, I know how you feel. I have felt this thing you feel," said his grandfather. "Dying seems to you a very sad thing, but do not feel sorry for me. I have lived a very long time and I have had a full life."

"But it isn't fair," said Little Thunder. "I want to be with you always."

"That is not the way of this world," said his grandfather solemnly.

Little Thunder got down on his knees beside his grandfather's bed and leaned over close to Grandfather's mouth. Grandfather Tayhua began to whisper to him.

"It is so, in this world of ours, that all things that live must some day die. It is true for me too."

Little Thunder held tightly to Tayhua's hand.

"I don't understand, Grandfather."

"You are young and your heart is big and your hurt is big, but you must try to understand," whispered Tayhua. "The life of a man is like the life of a bird. He has a journey of spring and summer which he must travel. In this time, he builds the nest of his life and raises his young."

"Like the barn swallows?" asked Little Thunder. "Like the barn swallows in the nest above the old smoke house? Every year they have their babies there."

"Yes," said Tayhua with a smile, "just like the barn swallows."

There was a look of pain on Tayhua's face, and he stirred a little on the bed before he spoke again. "Each year they raise their families, and when the winter comes each bird is on his own, each little bird must make his own journey. So it is with you, so it is with me."

"But why must I make my journey without you?" asked Little Thunder. "Why can't you be with me always?"

"If the old birds never died, if they lived forever, there would be no place in this world for any new birds. My wings are weak with my old age. I am too tired to fly. A bird who cannot fly. No, it is not a good thing. But you are young. Your wings are strong with youth, Little Thunder, so I know that there will be one bird who will fly for me. Will you fly for me when I am gone?" The old man's voice was soft and gentle.

"Yes, Grandfather," said Little Thunder with a catch in his voice. "I'll fly for you. But I don't want you to leave me!"

Tayhua smiled and shook his head. "Even though I must go away. I will never leave you. As long as you remember me, as long as you remember that I loved you, that I loved you always in my heart, then I shall always be with you."

Tayhua coughed. "Bring me some water," he whispered, licking his lips. "My story-telling tongue is all dried out."

Grandfather winked at Little Thunder, who managed to smile a little, but only a little. Little Thunder went over and got a gourd full of water and brought it back to his grandfather. He tilted it up to Tayhua's lips, and the old man drank a little bit of it.

"Thank you," said Grandfather when he had had enough to drink. "Now listen closely, because this is the most important thing I have to tell you. Do you remember the year when the barn swallows did not come?"

"I remember. I went out every day to look for them. The nest was empty that year," said Little Thunder. "I guess they went someplace else that year."

"And you remember what happened the next year. Do you remember what we saw after the last snows of winter had melted?"

"They came back! They came back to their nest!" said Little Thunder. "They had two babies that year."

"No," said Tayhua. "They did not come back. You were young, and I did not have the heart to tell you then. Now I must tell you. Those were not the same swallows we had watched through the years."

"But if they were not the same..." Little Thunder did not understand. "They looked like the same ones to me."

"Yes," said Tayhua. "They looked very much like our old friends but they were....the children of our friends. The little female swallow had...returned to raise a family of her own."

"But what happened to the barn swallows we knew? Where did they go?" asked Little Thunder. "Did they move away?"

"The old ones? Who is to say what happened to them. It was a cold winter that year. Perhaps they did not survive. It may have been their time to leave this world, as now it is for me, my time. But the little female swallow built a life of her own. The life of her father and mother she continued in the life of her children. So it is with you and me."

"I think I understand," said Little Thunder.

Grandfather nodded his head very slowly. He said, "Now you see why you should not be so sad. Life must give way to life. It is the way of the world."

Little Thunder managed to smile a little, even though, down deep, he did not feel like smiling. Tayhua coughed again. He seemed to be getting weaker and weaker.

Little Thunder rubbed his grandfather's hands with his own. The veins and wrinkles on Tayhua's gnarled hands were like a map of the world, with rivers and mountains and plains.

"Listen!" suddenly whispered Tayhua. "Listen! Do you hear it?" The old man seemed excited.

Little Thunder cocked his head to one side and listened. At first he couldn't hear anything, and then, from very, very far away he heard the same sound his grandfather was hearing.

It was the cry of the wild geese, flying south for the winter.

"Do you hear them?" asked Tayhua. There was a smile on his face now, and he seemed at peace. "I was hoping to hear them before I left this world!"

"I hear them, Grandfather!" said Little Thunder. "It's the wild geese! They're flying south early this year!"

"Run to the window and see if you can see them!" said Tayhua. "Hurry! Are they in sight?"

Little Thunder ran to the window and looked up at the sky. He looked in all directions. He couldn't see anything. Then, a long way off, he saw them. A long, sweeping V formation high in the sky. They were flying toward Tayhua's house.

"I see them! I see them!" said Little Thunder, excited.

"Help me up!" commanded Tayhua.

"But you're not supposed to get up," said Little Thunder, worry in his voice.

Tayhua slowly sat up in bed. "My mother said the day I was born the wild geese were making their journey across the sky. Today is the day I die, and I want, once again, to see the wild geese in their winter flight. So please, help me up!" pleaded Tayhua.

Little Thunder rushed to his side and helped him out of his bed. Tayhua could barely stand.

Little Thunder had to hold him up to keep him from falling.

Somehow he managed to get Tayhua over to the window.

The old man leaned against the window frame and looked up into the sky. "Where are they? I can't see them. My eyes are too weak."

Little Thunder pointed. "Here they come, Grandfather! Look! They're heading straight for us!"

The honking of the geese grew louder and louder.

On and on came the wild geese, until they were right overhead.

They swooped low over Tayhua's house, almost as if they wanted Tayhua to be able to see them.

"I see them! I see them!" cried Tayhua.

Then they were gone, the sound of their honking getting fainter and fainter.

"It is finished," said Tayhua. His legs gave out. He fell slowly against the window and slid down to the floor. Little Thunder could not keep him from falling.

"I can't make it back to the bed," said Tayhua, gasping for breath. "It is all right. Let me rest here."

"Is there anything I can do for you, Grandfather?" asked Little Thunder, his heart heavy within him.

"No," said his grandfather weakly. "You have already done it for me."

"What is death like?" asked Little Thunder. "Will it hurt you, Grandfather?"

"It is said that there is no death, only a change of worlds. But no one knows, because it is not ours to know. I don't think it will hurt me." Tayhua was very tired. His voice seemed to come from faraway.

"How do the birds know when the season is over?" asked the old man. Little Thunder had to bend closer because his grandfather's voice was so very weak.

"I don't know," said Little Thunder, a lump in his throat.

"Because..." Tayhua's voice was below a whisper now, "because they are here..." he coughed a little "...here on this earth to remind us of the gift given to all the things of creation."

Little Thunder had his ear next to his grandfather's mouth. He could just barely hear what Tayhua was saying.

"We have...all been given a gift...given a gift of a journey...a journey into winter." A strange look passed over the old man's face, and then Tayhua spoke no more. His head settled back upon the floor and he passed away quietly as if in a dream, asleep forever.

Little Thunder took Tayhua's blanket off the bed and gently pulled it over him. He loved his grandfather and he was crying. He would miss his grandfather for a long time, a very long time. But down deep, a part of his heart was happy for his grandfather, who had died at peace with the world.

Happy for his grandfather, who, like all the things in creation, had taken one final look at the sky and made his journey into winter.