

Prologue: The Three Indians

The frozen winter wind rattled the windows of our shack. We all sat in a semi-circle around the fireplace. My mother slowly rocked in her rocking chair mending my old torn jeans with the remnants of another old torn pair. My father sat in a straight back chair next to her. He held a long stick and absently poked into the fire with it, sending sparks up the soot-darkened chimney. Occasionally, he and *Monsieur* Pete drank from the bottle of cheap bourbon whiskey at his feet. *Monsieur* Pete chain-smoked and told stories, the blue cigarette smoke puffing out with each word. I sat cross-legged on the quilt my mother, *Madame* Rowena, and *Madame* Miltaire had put together with scraps of material from the three families. She had spread it out on the floor between my father and *Monsieur* Pete.

"Are those true stories you're telling us, Pete?" My mother asked with a twinkle in her eyes. She knew that *Monsieur* Pete often sprinkled his stories with a little of his fertile imagination.

He had just finished telling us a story about how the Cajuns settled the banks of Bayou Serpent, which snaked its way through the woods behind our shack. He reached into his dirt and grassed-stained khaki pants and pulled out his sack of Bull Durham tobacco. He carefully folded the cigarette paper in half and shook some of the fine tobacco onto it. Then he rolled it into a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply before answering her.

"They sure are, *Madame* LeClerc. Or they're as true as I can make them." My mother set her sewing into her lap and leaned forward. She cocked an eyebrow at *Monsieur* Pete, and a small smile played at her lips. He grinned back at her. "You see, *Madame* LeClerc, a story should be told many times and by as many different people as possible."

"Why, *Monsieur* Pete?" I asked. I had not heard this explanation before.

He inhaled from his cigarette, and his words tumbled out with the smoke. "Because it changes every time that way. Stories should be like people. They should live." He turned and faced my mother. "And to answer your question directly, *Madame* LeClerc, they sure are true. A story can change a lot—just like a person, but it should always have some truth to it. Storytelling is too important not to."

My mother nodded and resumed her rocking and sewing. No one talked. The wind outside pushed at the house, and occasionally, a particularly strong gust rattled the tin on the roof.

I examined the pattern on the quilt, two rectangular flower gardens with cornflowers, magnolias, black-eyed susans, and morning glories. I remembered watching my mother and *Madame* Miltaire and *Madame* Rowena, sewing it together over long summer evenings in the dwindling daylight and later by coal oil light. They told stories as they worked. Stories sometimes inspired by the cloth they worked. I recognized some of the material on the quilt—a dress my mother wore when she and my father first started seeing each other, an old sheet *Madame* Rowena slept on when she was a young girl, an old shirt my father hid from my mother because he hated it, and part of *Monsieur* Miltaire's old overalls that he wore whenever he played Santa Clause. I stretched out on it with my head toward the fire.

Monsieur Pete inhaled from his cigarette, looked about the room, and started another story. I could hear the wind whistle through the cracks in the house but the fire kept us warm and comfortable.

"We were talking about storytelling just now and it reminded me of the story I heard a long time ago about three Indians. You know that the Cajuns relied a lot on the Indians when they first settled these parts." *Monsieur* Pete threw his cigarette into the fire and rolled another. He was slow, deliberate, and spent as much care it seemed rolling a cigarette as he did telling his stories. He lit it and inhaled deeply. My father nodded in his direction and poked at the fire. He had been strangely quiet all evening. "The first Indian was a great hunter. They called him Spirit of the Wind because he was as quiet as the wind when he wanted to be. He'd go out early in the morning and stalk deer. You never seen a hunter like this one. Quiet? This Indian walked on his toes for miles and miles through the thickest woods. Wouldn't break a twig or rustle a leaf. He'd stalk up to ten feet of a deer, draw back his arrow, and *swoosh*, let fly with one straight through some poor deer's heart. Always, he'd get so close that he never missed, and always, he'd furnish meat for the tribe. They were very proud of him and treated him with great respect."

"Sounds like he deserved all the respect he got, Pete," my mother said softly. I turned at the sound of her voice and studied her face. It was a beautiful face, filled with lines and wrinkles that could be soft and yielding, as it was then, before the firelight. Her face could be hard and rigid too when she needed to be. "A man who provides for his people deserves respect."

"He surely does, *Madame* LeClerc. He surely does." *Monsieur* Pete paused for a moment. "Now the second Indian wasn't as quiet as the first one whenever he stalked his deer," he said through blue smoke. "But he knew his deer. He knew where they ate, slept, and courted each other. He knew that and more. He could tell you where a deer stopped and shooed a fly off of itself. All he had to do if he wanted a deer was to wait for it, arrow drawn back in his bow ready to fly, and the first deer that showed its head, *swoosh*, and the second Indian'd furnish the tribe with deer meat. They called him Spirit of the Trees because he was as patient as the trees, and they treated him with as much respect as Spirit of the Wind."

The warmth from the fire and *Monsieur* Pete's voice made me drowsy, so I closed my eyes.

"That was a smart Indian, Pete," my father said quietly. I opened my eyes and watched as he uncapped the whiskey bottle and passed it to *Monsieur* Pete. Shadows from the fireplace danced around him. His face and pale blue eyes made dark by the shadows reflected the fire's red glow. Wrinkles crisscrossed over my father's face too—deep ones that mirrored his fields in the spring. "He doesn't work as hard as the other one to get his deer."

"That's where I got to disagree with you, Seth," *Monsieur* Pete said handing the bottle back. "I believe he worked just as hard and as long as the first Indian. It takes a long time and a lot of figuring to learn something well."

My father nodded. He capped the bottle and sat it on the floor between his battered work boots. Then he picked up the stick and resumed his poking in the fire.

"What about the third Indian?" He asked without looking up.

"Well, the third Indian didn't know much about deer, except that he liked the taste of them. He wasn't much of a hunter either. Wasn't one little twig safe when he was around." My father chuckled. I looked at his face. Only his eyes lit up.

"Sounds like this one was a bit lazy, Pete," my mother said. I could hear the smile in her voice.

"*Non, Madame LeClerc*, not this one. He wasn't lazy. It's just that he did all the work in his head. He didn't have to stalk the deer like the first Indian. He didn't have to learn about deer. He watched until he saw the two hunters come back with their deer. Then he went over to the Spirit of the Wind's wigwam just before dinnertime and told him a long story about the quietest hunter there ever was who could go through the woods as silent as the wind itself. Of course, Wind thought the story was about himself and invited the storyteller to stay for supper, so he could finish his story."

"That's pretty smart, Pete."

"It surely is, *Madame LeClerc*. The next day his stomach started growling again, so he went over to the Spirit of Trees' wigwam just before dinnertime and told a long story about the most patient hunter there ever was. Of course, Trees figured the story was about himself, so he invited the third Indian to stay for supper, so he could finish his story."

There was a pause. I could hear the coals snap and pop as my father poked into them. I listened to the soft squeak of my mother's rocking chair as she slowly rocked on the worn linoleum. I heard *Monsieur* Pete strike a match, and I smelled cigarette smoke mixed with wood smoke. I started to fall asleep, but *Monsieur* Pete's voice brought me back.

"You see, the third Indian was a different sort of fellow altogether. He didn't know much about hunting, and he couldn't care less about where deer did their business, but he knew men who hunted. That third Indian knew that all right."

"Didn't those Indians ever figure it out, Pete?" My mother asked.

"Sure they did, *Madame LeClerc*. Sure they did, but they needed him as much as he needed them. They called him the Spirit of the Smoke and treated him with the greatest respect."

I did not hear anything else *Monsieur* Pete said. I fell asleep. Sometime during the night, the Spirit of the Smoke visited me. He leaned over me and told me that smoke was an Indian's friend. It was a sign of fire and filled their houses, and when the smoke disappeared, the smell stayed behind as a reminder, so that it never was completely gone. Then he told me a long story about a quilt maker, a great spirit, who created a huge quilt out of stories about his people. I looked up into his earnest black eyes and saw my reflection in them.

The next day, I learned that *Monsieur* Pete stayed and told another story before he left. My mother said it was a great story, and she would try to tell it to me sometime.

"Why does *Monsieur* Pete tell stories, Momma?"

My mother studied me for a while before answering. She pushed back a strand of dark hair.

"I guess it's his way of saying thank you, *mon fils*."

"Thank you for what?"

"For his meal," My mother said through a grin.

I wanted to ask her some other questions, but she turned away from me. She had work to do.

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