

# How I Became a Ghost

A CHOCTAW  
TRAIL OF TEARS STORY

THE HOW I BECAME A GHOST SERIES  
BOOK I

**Tim Tingle**

THE ROADRUNNER PRESS  
OKLAHOMA CITY

Published by The RoadRunner Press  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
[www.TheRoadRunnerPress.com](http://www.TheRoadRunnerPress.com)

Copyright © 2013 by Tim Tingle. All rights reserved.  
Cover and map copyright © 2013 by The RoadRunner Press

Cover illustration: Uliana Gureeva

Map by Steven Walker / Cover design by Jeanne Devlin

This is a work of fiction. While the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

First Edition July 2013

Printed in the USA  
by Maple Press, York, Pennsylvania

This book is available for special promotions, premiums, and group sales.  
For details e-mail Director of Special Sales at [info@theroadrunnerpress.com](mailto:info@theroadrunnerpress.com).

**Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data**

(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Tingle, Tim.

How I became a ghost : a Choctaw Trail of Tears story / Tim Tingle. — 1st ed.

p. : ill., map ; cm. — (The how I became a ghost series ; bk. 1)

Summary: A Choctaw boy tells the story of his tribe's removal from the only land its people had ever known, and how their journey to Oklahoma led him to become a ghost—one with the ability to help those he left behind.

Interest age level: 009-012.

Issued also as an ebook and an audiobook.

ISBN: 978-1-937054-53-3 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-1-937054-55-7 (trade paper)

ISBN: 978-1-937054-54-0 (ebook)

ISBN: 978-1-937054-56-4 (audiobook)

1. Choctaw Indians—Relocation—Juvenile fiction. 2. Indian Removal, 1813-1903—Juvenile fiction. 3. Ghosts—Juvenile fiction. 4. Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma—Juvenile fiction. 5. Choctaw Indians—Fiction. 6. Ghosts—Fiction. 7. Historical fiction. I. Title.

PZ7.T489 Ho 2013

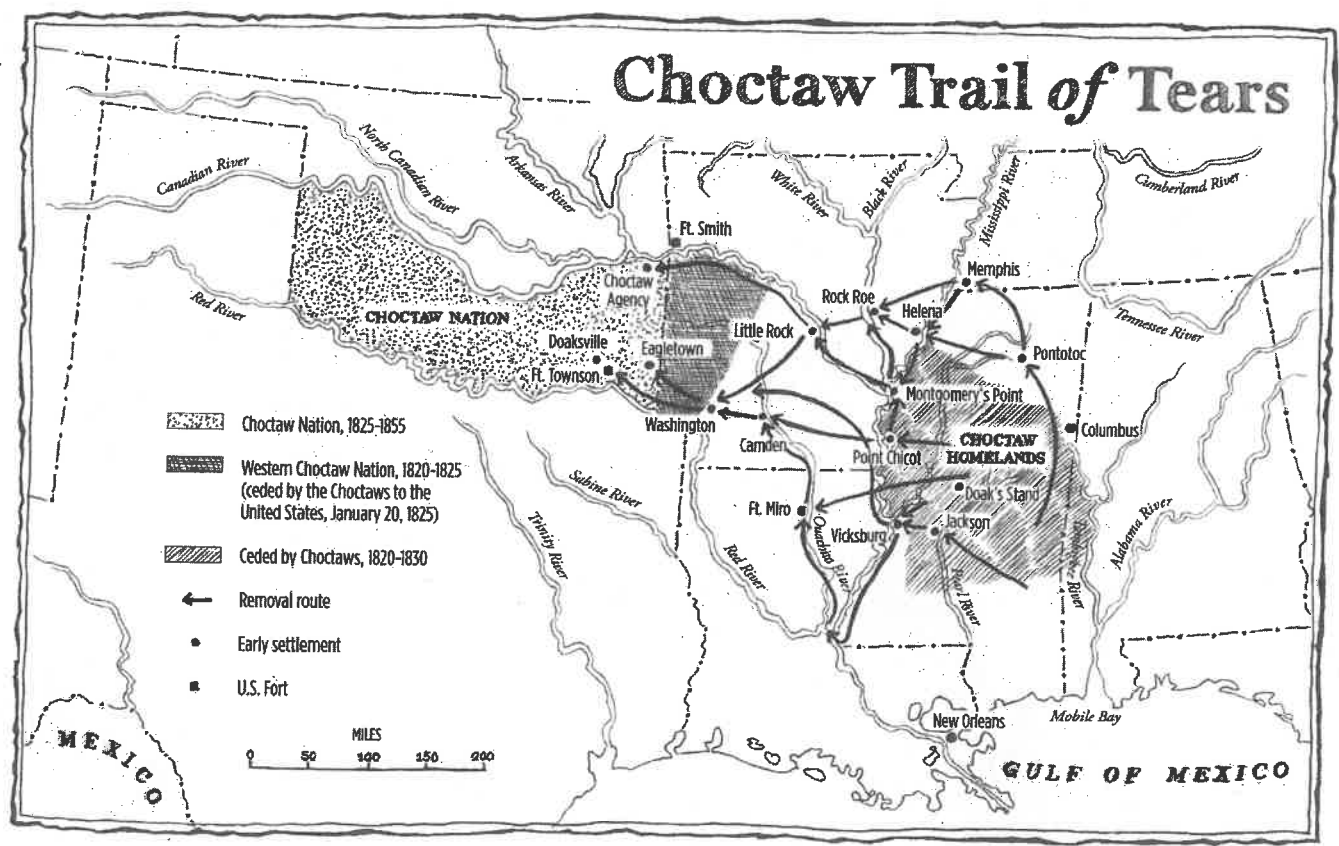
[Fic] 2013935579

*To my mentor Charley Jones,  
who taught me the power of humor  
in the Choctaw story*

# How I Became a Ghost

A CHOCTAW  
TRAIL OF TEARS STORY

# Choctaw Trail of Tears





## Chapter 1

### *Talking Ghost*

*Choctaw Nation, Mississippi, 1830*

*MAYBE YOU HAVE never read a book written by a ghost before. I am a ghost. I am not a ghost when this book begins, so you have to pay very close attention. I should tell you something else. I see things before they happen. You are probably thinking, "I wish I could see things before they happen."*

*Be careful what you wish for.*

I'm ten years old and I'm not a ghost yet. My name is Isaac and I have a mother and a father and a big brother, Luke. I have a dog, too. His name is Jumper and he is my best friend. We go everywhere together. We swim in the river together; we chase chickens together.

"Make sure Jumper does not catch any chickens!" My mother always yelled this from the back porch.

"Why can't Jumper catch chickens?" I asked my father one evening, as we sat on the porch watching the stars.

"That's your mother's rule," he said.

"But *why*?"

"Because Jumper won't wait for the chickens to be cooked," he said. "He'll chew the chickens and choke on the bones and bloody feathers. Would you want to eat bloody feathers?"

"No," I said. "Good rule."

"Then make sure Jumper follows it."

"*Hoke*," I said, which means "okay" in Choctaw.

Jumper and I, we take long walks in the woods together, we tug weeds from the corn stalks together, and we spend the day and night together.

"No dogs in your bed!" This was another rule of my mother's, but Jumper was smart. He waited until my mother fell asleep, then he climbed under the covers with me. In the morning, when he heard my mother making noise in the kitchen, he jumped out of bed.

Maybe she knew Jumper broke the rule. Maybe she smiled and let him get away with it. She was a good mother and we had a happy life, mostly. I had too many chores and too little free time, but I knew if I could just wait till I grew up, I'd have all the free time I wanted.

Then came the day that changed everything. Without any warning, I saw the ghosts. I also saw things before they happened.

My father rose early that morning, long before sunrise.

He left the house while it was still dark. He carried his shotgun and his bag of shotgun shells, so I knew he was going hunting.

I finished my chores and started tossing mudballs against the barn wall. Jumper barked and chased the mudballs, but only for a little while.

"I'm bored," Jumper said. "Let's chase chickens!"

We were on our way to the chicken pen when I saw my father coming home from the woods. He was carrying only his shell bag and his shotgun, so I knew something was wrong.

Usually he returned with a wild turkey or sometimes a deer. He never returned from a hunting trip with nothing. He walked through the back door and I followed him. He didn't say a word to me, just held up his hand to let me know I should stay outside.

I listened through the door.

"We must move," my father told my mother.

"What do you mean 'we must move'?" my mother asked. "You better move! Go back to the woods and catch us something to eat!" She was laughing.

"No," said my father, and he was not laughing. "There is Treaty Talk in town. We must move."

I was only ten, but I knew what Treaty Talk meant. It meant the *Nabullos* wanted something. *Nabullos* were people that lived a few miles away. They were not Choctaws, like us. We were nice to them and they were nice to us. But Treaty Talk always meant something else, and that something else was never nice.

Tim Tingle

My father took my mother by the hand and she gave him a strange look. He led her to their room, closing the door behind them. I was afraid of Treaty Talk and I didn't want to listen, not anymore.

*Maybe it will all go away*, I thought. You never know when your life is about to change. Treaty Talk is why I became a ghost.



## Chapter 2

### *Treaty Talk*

THE SUN ROSE HIGH in the sky, and I knew mother would have lunch ready soon. I was wrong. Everything about this day was wrong.

My father and mother kept talking, and I even thought I heard my mother crying. I waited on the front porch till Luke came home for lunch. He was twelve years old and never helped around the house. I had to do everything.

*Hoke*, sometimes he helped, but never enough.

"What's going on?" Luke asked.

"Mom and Dad are talking. Dad said there is Treaty Talk."

"Oh no," said Luke. "That means lunch will be late today. I'm not waiting around." He left to play stickball with his friends. *See what I mean?*

I circled the house and sat beneath the window of my parents' room, so I could hear what they were saying. My mother was crying, and she never cried.

"We have to be ready to go," my father said.

"Where will we go?" my mother asked.

"A long way from here. The Treaty has already been signed. We have till spring. But we should get ready to move."

We had no lunch that day. I fell asleep on the porch and Jumper rolled into a ball against my belly. When my mother finally stepped outside, the sun was peeking over the pine trees, ready for the moon to take over.

"Come with me," she said, taking my hand. Jumper trotted beside us.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

My mother said nothing. We walked through our garden of tomatoes and winding bean vines. We crossed the cornfield, where all the stalks were brown and dying. The evening air was already crispy cold and winter was coming. As we entered the woods, we met Luke walking from the river. He seemed upset.

"Luke, take Jumper home," my mother said. "Tell your father we will be home soon."

Luke nodded without saying a word.

*He already knows what this is about,* I thought.

We stepped from the woods and came upon a gathering of twenty old Choctaw men, scattered up and down the riverbank. I knew these men. They were the oldest men in town and they were our friends. We had supper

at their homes and we knew their families.

One of the old men was Mister Jonah. He lived with his wife not far from us. As we watched, Mister Jonah took off his shirt and rubbed his back against a tree trunk. The tree was old, older than he was, and the bark was sharp and cracked.

Mister Jonah moved up and down, rubbing his back against the tree bark. His skin was dry and wrinkled. The bark cut into his skin and he started bleeding. Blood dripped from his back and covered the ground at his feet. His face was still as a stone, as if he didn't feel the pain, but I knew it had to hurt!

"Mother," I asked, "what is he doing?"

"Shhh," my mother whispered. "Don't talk. Just watch."

Soon all of the old men started rubbing their backs against the trees. When their backs were ripped open and bleeding, they sat in a puddle of their own blood. One man patted dirt on a friend's back to stop the bleeding. But the bleeding never stopped.

*Hoke. I should tell you this. Do not be afraid. This is how things are. When you will soon be a ghost, sometimes you see people before they are ghosts. You see how they will die. I didn't know it yet, but whenever I felt a warm shiver, I was about to see something no one else could see.*

I felt the warm shiver. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, Mister Jonah was sitting by the tree.

Suddenly, his hair burst into flames! He screamed and



waved his arms. He fell rolling to the ground. His arms were skinny logs and flames shot from his fingers.

No one moved to put the fire out.

I tried to run to him, but my mother held me tight. I jerked my arm free, took two steps, and stopped.

Mister Jonah sat with his back against the tree. His back was bleeding, like before, but his white hair fell over his shoulders. No burns on his arms. No burns anywhere.

The flames were gone. I looked at my mother. I was the only one to see the flames. They were flames for another day, a day that soon would come. If I was already a ghost, I might expect to see something like this. But I was not a ghost. Not yet.

"Mother, please tell me what is happening," I said.

"These men are saying good-bye to their home."

"They live in town. Their homes are in town."

My mother gripped my hand tight. "Come on," she said. "There is more to see."



## Chapter 3

### *Dancing on the Stones*

MY MOTHER LED ME to another spot on the river, where old Choctaw women were sitting on a pier. Some were the wives of the old men and some were widows.

I knew this pier. It was a long wooden pier with shallow water all around it. I fished from this pier, but very carefully, for the bottom of the river was covered with sharp stones. When I was only six, I went fishing by myself with my new cane fishing pole. I walked to the end of the pier and flung my line into the river. My cane pole slipped from my hand and I jumped in after it.

When I hit the river bottom I exploded in pain. The stones cut deep into the soles of my feet. I started jumping up and down, a stupid move, as every step I took meant more cuts.

I swam to the shore, leaving a bloody trail in the water behind me. I lost my first fishing pole that day and limped home in pain.

Yes, I knew this pier. While my mother and I watched, the old women sat on the edge of the pier, with their feet hanging over the water. Ten women sat on one side of the pier and ten sat on the other side. Four of the oldest women sat on the very end of the pier.

"They better be careful," I said.

"They know what they are doing," said my mother.

The sun peeked over the hills for one last look. Night was near. I leaned against my mother. The women started singing an old Choctaw song, rocking back and forth to the rhythm of the song. My mother joined them, singing in a whispery voice.

When the song was over, one woman shouted, "To the water!"

All at the same time, the old women jumped from the pier to the water. The stones must have cut their feet, but the women didn't seem to notice. They lifted their feet up and down and turned in circles in the water.

I could not believe what I was seeing. I gripped my mother's hand and looked up at her. Blood rose from the bottom of the river, and still the women danced. Their faces were the strangest thing of all.

The water was blood red, but the women showed no pain. They didn't squeeze their faces tight, like people do when they step on a sharp stone or stub their toe against a rock. The old women stared ahead like they

were blind, like they saw nothing and felt nothing.

Missus Jonah was there. Her hair didn't turn to fire, like her husband's, not at first. I watched her dance with the others, till I felt the warm shiver again and closed my eyes.

"No," I whispered to myself. I shook my head. I didn't want to open my eyes, but I did.

Missus Jonah stopped dancing. The flames started at her feet, under the water. She screamed and tried to stomp out the flames. The fire climbed above the water and soon she was covered in flames.

The other women kept dancing on the stones. No one moved to help her.

Suddenly, just like before, the flames were gone. A few women limped to the shore. I looked to my mother. I knew she didn't see the flames.

As we left the pier, I looked over my shoulder at these tired old Choctaw women. Some were still dancing in the water.

"Mother, please tell me what is happening," I said.

"These old women are saying good-bye to their home," she said. "There is one more thing I want you to see. Then we can go. I will cook a good supper for you tonight."

We followed the river around a curve. The hills were lower here and the sun snuck through the trees. We came to my favorite swimming spot, where the river bottom was soft sand. A weeping willow tree hung over the water. My father once told me this tree was more than a hundred years old.

"It is the oldest willow in Choctaw country," he said.

The branches of the tree were long and thin and the leaves were light green. They hung over the river, like lime green walls of a small room.

In the center of this river room sat a Choctaw woman and her husband. They were the two oldest people in our town. Old Man and Old Woman, that is what we called them. They were both almost a hundred years old, and people spoke to them with respect.

My mother and I stood in the shadows and watched.

They sat in the shallow water, facing each other. Old Man dipped his hands in the river and lifted a double handful of wet, dripping sand. He smiled at his wife. She laughed and shook her head.

"No," she said, but she was smiling, too. He nodded his head up and down, then clapped his sandy hands to her face!

"Oh!" she squealed. She laughed and wiped the sand from her face. Then she scooped up two handfuls of sand and smacked him. These two old people acted like children. They laughed and played. They sat in the river and splashed and threw sand all over each other.

I knew what would happen next. The warm shiver came and I closed my eyes. After what I had already seen, I was afraid to look. I didn't want to see Old Man and Old Woman covered in flames.

What I saw was even worse.

When I opened my eyes, Old Man was covered in sores. His face was swollen and his eyes were closed. He shook as if he were freezing to death.

He turned to me, begging me to help him.

Old Woman had ugly yellow sores on her neck and face. She fell into the river and bubbles floated from her nose. She kicked and trembled, rolling her head from side to side.

Old Woman looked at me and tried to speak. A stream of bubbles rose from her lips. Then she stopped moving.

I closed my eyes again. When I looked up, everything was like before. Old Man and Old Woman were laughing and playing, like children in the river.

I did not have to look at my mother. I knew she hadn't seen the sores on Old Man and Old Woman. On our way home, I asked her again, "Mother, what were the old people doing?"

"They are saying good-bye to their home," she said.

"Their homes are in town."

"No," said my mother. "Their houses are in town. This river, this dirt, this is their home. This is our home. Your father was right. There is Treaty Talk and we must move. It is time to say good-bye to our home."



## Chapter 4

### *Fire in the Hair*

WE RETURNED FROM the river. While Luke and Jumper and I played in the backyard, Mother cooked supper. Everybody was quiet while we ate. No one said anything about the old men and women at the river. No one said anything about Treaty Talk, but the silence spoke louder than words. Soon after supper we went to bed.

It happened after midnight.

I felt no shiver. This was real.

I smelled smoke and jumped out of bed. The room was dark, but I could smell the smoke. It was behind me so I turned around. The smoke was still behind me. I turned around again. The smoke was still behind me. I turned around and around. I was scared now.

*Why couldn't I see the smoke?* I wanted to scream.

## How I Became a Ghost

I felt the skin of my neck burning. My long hair was in flames! I heard a loud *crack* and fire fell from the ceiling. I grabbed my blanket and wrapped it around my shoulders, smothering the flames.

When I opened the door, a cloud of fire hit me in the face. I ran through the flames and out the front door. My mother and father and Luke stood in the yard. Jumper was there, too. He leapt in my arms.

"We thought you ran out back," my mother said. "We called for you. The smoke was so thick."

The roof of our house was burning. Bright specks of fire floated in the night sky.

"Run next door and wake the neighbors!" my father said. "They can help us put the fire out."

Luke and I ran to the neighbor's house, but it was burning, too. We flung open the door and ran inside. Everybody was still sleeping.

"Wake up!" Luke shouted. With squeals and screams our neighbors jumped out of bed and fled their burning house.

"Run to the church and ring the bell!" said my father. "Wake everybody up!"

Luke and I started for the church, but my father stopped us.

"Wait! Look there." He was pointing to the river. Men rode horses from the river, *Nabullo* men, and they carried burning torches. While we watched, they rode to the church. They leapt from their horses and threw the torches high, aiming for the house where the missionaries lived.

We stood in the street watching, my family and our neighbors. The torches made slow circles, turning over and over, followed by a trail of sparks. Like fiery comets, twenty flaming torches fell from the sky. They landed on the roof of the house and the dry cedar boards burst into flames.

The missionaries were visiting another Choctaw town that week, but the *Nabullos* didn't know that. They would have burned the house down with the missionaries inside asleep.

A *Nabullo* man ran into the church and climbed the ladder to the bell tower. He dropped his torch on the roof and soon the church was a swirling mass of flames.

*What about the Bibles?* I thought. *And the songbooks?*

The men shouted and pointed to us. One man took his shotgun from his horse and aimed it at my family. My father threw himself over us and we fell to the ground.

Pow! The noise from the shot was loud.

"Ohhhh," a neighbor shouted.

My face was covered in blood, the blood of our next-door neighbor. His shoulder was bleeding. My father took off his shirt and wrapped it around him.

"Run," my father said, "and stay together." We hurried to the deep woods at the end of town. The *Nabullo* men jumped on their horses and followed us.

When we entered the woods, my father pushed us into a clump of bushes. We knelt and huddled close together. My father whispered in my ear.

"Take a deep breath and do not move." I nodded and sucked in the cold night air. Jumper climbed under my

shirt. My father put his hand behind my head and pushed my face to the ground. He did this to protect me.

I lay with my face on the wet ground. A man rode his horse into the woods. He was so close. I could have reached out and touched the hoof of his horse. Even Jumper knew to be quiet. I felt him warm against my belly.

"I don't see them!" the man yelled.

"Let them go," said another man. "They will wander around in the swamps till we find 'em. No place else for them to go. Their homes are burning."

"We should have done this a long time ago," he whispered to himself, but we were close enough to hear him.

We stayed in the bushes all night and watched the houses burn. The flames made a crackling sound and by morning every house had fallen to the ground.

I learned something about houses that night. This will sound strange. On the night I almost became a ghost, I learned something about houses.

Houses are alive.

Every house shook before it fell. Like Jumper shaking water after a swim, every house shook. Every house shouted, too. As loud as the thunder, every house also shouted. One by one, every house shouted and fell.

I lay on the ground with my father, my mother, my brother Luke, and Jumper. Our neighbors crouched on the ground nearby. We watched our houses shout and shake and fall.

"I wonder if anyone burned in their house," Luke said.

Tim Tingle

"The Jonahs," I told him. "Mister Jonah and Missus Jonah."

"How do you know that?" Luke asked.

I did not answer him.

My mother looked at me. Of course, she knew. She knew everything.

"There is nothing we can do," my father said.

"We can stay together," said my mother.



## Chapter 5

### *Swamp Choctaws*

"WE SHOULD GO NOW," my father said. "If we wait till morning they could find us."

We walked deeper into the woods, far away from town. We knew where we were going. For Choctaws, the safest place was the swamp. *Nahullos* never came to the swamp. We hunted there. We fished there. Whenever we wanted to be safe we always went to the swamp.

All night we walked the muddy ground. The trees were thick and covered with vines and thorny bushes grew everywhere. We arrived at the swamp as the sun was rising.

We were not alone. Every Choctaw from our town, those who were still alive, had come to the swamp. The old women were limping as they walked, and I remembered their dance on the stony river bottom.

The swamp water was green and sticky. I carried Jumper, and we crossed the swamp on logs and old wooden planks.

"Let me swim!" Jumper said.

"No," I told him. "The water is dirty green. You can't shake swamp water off."

By morning, a hundred Choctaws gathered on the island in the middle of the swamp. My father led us to a thick pine tree. Old Man and Old Woman from the sandy river bottom sat at the base of the tree. Old Man stood up and everybody hushed.

"We can talk about last night later. Now we go to work. Young men will get the meat. Deer and squirrels are all around us. The swamp is full of fish.

"Young women will look for wild onions and berries. Older men will build houses, lean-tos. Winter is coming. We will spend the day working and have our first meal tonight."

"What will the older women do?" a young man asked. Everyone grew very quiet. No one looked at him. They were too embarrassed. Old Man smiled.

"The older women do not need me to tell them what to do," he said.

When the gathering was over, my father spoke to Luke and me. "I'll build us a lean-to. You two see what you can catch for supper."

I was only ten years old, but I could catch a squirrel with a blowgun. Luke and I hollowed out two long stalks of river cane. Using a sharp stone for a knife, we carved

darts from tree limbs and tied bird feathers to one end.

"I think we're ready," Luke said. "Let's see if they work. You go first."

I stuck a dart in my blowgun and lifted it to my mouth. Aiming at a skinny pine tree twenty feet away, I took a deep breath and blew. The dart stuck in the tree trunk!

"Good shot," Luke said.

"See how close you can get to my dart," I challenged him.

Luke got a serious look on his face. He loaded his dart, took his breath, and blew. The dart missed the tree, didn't even come close, but I didn't fall for it. I knew Luke was a better shot than that.

"You did that on purpose," I said. Luke laughed and slapped my shoulder.

"*Hoke*," he said. "You're a smart little brother, Isaac. Let's go hunting."

"I've been waiting for this," Jumper said.

Jumper dashed to a clump of trees on the far end of the swamp island. Luke and I hurried after him. Jumper circled a tall pine and jumped up and down, growling and scratching the tree trunk.

"Good boy, Jumper," said Luke. We heard a scattering of leaves and the chirping of squirrels.

By suppertime we had enough squirrels to feed the family.

While we were hunting, my father and his friends had built the lean-tos. They cut pine limbs, tied the limbs together with vines, and leaned them against the giant

cypress trees. By nightfall, every Choctaw family had a home. Not real homes, not like before, but when it rained we could stay dry.

With blowguns we caught our food. With lean-tos we had a place to sleep. Young women found wild onions and leafy green vegetables while the older women dug cooking holes. They covered the holes with green branches so the *Nahullos* couldn't see our cooking fires.

That is how we lived. A week later, winter came. Night and day we shivered from the cold wind and icy rainfall.

And every day I grew closer to being a ghost.



## Chapter 6

### *Men with Blankets*

WE WERE NOT AFRAID of the *Nahullos* in the swamp. *Nahullos* didn't know the swamp. Snakes and alligators lived in the swamp, and it was hard to tell the ground from a mudhole. We Choctaws knew to be careful, with every step, but the *Nahullos* didn't know the swamp.

But winter changed everything. The swamp froze in the winter. Snakes slept underground and even the deepest mudholes turned to ice. The *Nahullos* could ride their horses over the frozen swamp.

One morning I woke up and the world was white.

Even before I opened my eyes I felt the white. Everything was quiet, and I peeped through the branches of our lean-to. Ice hung from the trees and mounds of snow covered the ground.



This was a warning. On this white day, many people would become ghosts. Many of the old men and women would become ghosts, and many children, too.

"Be very quiet," my mother said. "*Nahullos* are coming." I looked for my father, but he was gone. I held Jumper close.

I heard the horses first. They snorted and wheezed, and soon I heard the wagons. The wooden wagon wheels crunched and cracked the ice. I was afraid. Everyone was afraid. My father came into the lean-to.

"Stay here," he said.

The wagons slowly crossed the swamp and came into our lean-to town. Everyone hid. We were so quiet. We looked through the branches.

The men on the wagons were *Nahullo* soldiers. They wore uniforms. They jumped to the ground and reached for something in the wagons.

"Guns," Luke said. "They will shoot us."

"Shhhh," my mother whispered.

When the men turned around, they didn't have guns. They had blankets and they smiled. We were all freezing from the cold and the *Nahullo* soldiers had blankets.

"The blankets are for you!" a soldier shouted.

At first no one moved.

"Come and get the blankets!" another soldier yelled.

Old Man was the first Choctaw to leave his lean-to. Old Woman followed after him. The soldier smiled and gave Old Man a blue blanket. Old Man wrapped himself in the blanket and turned around for everyone to see.

"Nice and warm. *Yakoke*," said Old Man.

Old Woman took the second blanket and threw it over her shoulders.

"*Yakoke*," she said. She buried her head in the blanket and shook with joy.

Many Choctaws ran for the blankets. Mothers and children took the blankets. Fathers took enough blankets for everyone in their lean-to.

"*Yakoke!*" they told the soldiers. "Thank you!"

When I tried to leave our lean-to, my mother grabbed my arm and pulled me back inside.

"Sit down," she told me.

"I want a blanket," I said.

My mother held my head on her shoulder. She ran her hand through my hair, and I felt warm next to her. "We do not need their blankets," she whispered in my ear.

Luke tried to run for a blanket, but my mother pulled him back, too. She drew him inside the lean-to.

"Sit next to me," she said.

Luke sat on one side of my mother and I sat on the other. My father stood over us and watched. No one left our lean-to that morning.

"We do not need their blankets." My mother whispered this. Over and over she whispered, "We do not need their blankets."

After the soldiers left, everyone was happy. For a few days, everyone was happy.

"We don't have to be afraid anymore," Old Man shouted.

"We can build our fires high!" said Old Woman.

Our neighbors left their lean-tos and visited and laughed. Jumper barked and played with the other dogs. But my father and mother were not happy, not like the others. We were still freezing cold.

"Luke and Isaac, stay in the lean-to," my father said. "Do not go near anybody. Stay here."

While everybody else slept that night, my father and Luke went hunting. They returned with two small squirrels, and we cooked them over the fire for breakfast.

Old Man saw the smoke from our cooking fire and stuck his head under our lean-to.

"Come outside," he said. "I'll share my blanket."

I looked at his face. I felt the warm shiver from inside, like before. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, Old Man was not smiling. His face was red and swollen and a red sore lay next to his nose. Then another sore appeared, on his lip. Soon his cheeks were covered in sores.

Old Man fell to the ground. He rolled out of his blanket and buried his face in the snow.

"I don't want to see this!" I shouted. I covered my face with my hands.

"What is wrong with you?" Luke said. He pulled my hands apart. When I looked up, Old Man was staring at me. The sores were gone.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I am sorry. I am cold, that's all." I didn't want to lie, but I couldn't tell him what I knew. I knew that Old Man and Old Woman would soon be ghosts.

I almost became a ghost that day. If my mother hadn't pulled me back, I would have become a ghost.

How could my mother have known?

Years later, after I did become a ghost, I asked myself.

*How did she know?*



## Chapter 7

### *Snow Monsters*

HOKE. *EVERYTHING WAS sad, rotten sad. I was ten years old. This was no way to live! In many ways, when you are ten years old, you are smarter than grown-ups. But sometimes your parents are smart, too.*

The very next day, my father and mother were smart. After breakfast (more squirrel), they looked at each other for a long time. I knew they had something planned.

"Luke, Isaac, we are going for a walk, without your mother," my father said. "Isaac, carry Jumper. Hold him tight and don't let him go."

We climbed out of the lean-to and walked away from the camp. We crossed the icy swamp, on the far side of the island.

### How I Became a Ghost

"Careful," my father warned. "Do not fall through the ice!"

Jumper wiggled, trying to get free.

"I want to run," Jumper said. "Let me go!"

"Not yet," I told him.

We walked for almost an hour.

"Now," my father said, "let Jumper go. He's ready to run."

"You heard your father," Jumper said. "Let me down!"

I dropped him and Jumper took off running.

"I am faster than you are," Jumper called over his shoulder. I had to laugh. Of course, he was faster than me! I ran after him anyway. I tripped over a log covered in snow and rolled and tumbled.

"Be careful!" my father shouted.

When I came to my feet, my face was covered in snow. Luke laughed and pointed at me.

"You are a snow monster!" he said.

I didn't know what a snow monster was. I just knew I didn't like being called one. I grabbed a handful of snow and rolled a snowball.

*Hoke.* You are smart enough to know what I did next. I threw the snowball at Luke. He ducked and the snowball hit my father — in the face!

This was bad, real bad. I had never hit my father with a snowball. I stood and waited.

"Uh-oh," Luke said.

"Uh-oh," Jumper said.

We waited to see what my father would do. First he

stepped behind a tree. Luke and I looked at each other.

"This is strange," Jumper said.

The tree was covered in icicles and we heard cracking sounds. My father was breaking icicles from the branches. We stood still for a long time. What happened next was scary, really scary.

"Grrrr!" A low growling sound came from behind the tree.

"Grrrrrrrr!" The sound grew louder.

"I don't like this," Jumper said.

Without warning, something jumped from behind the tree!

"I am the real snow monster!" the thing yelled.

The snow monster wore my father's clothes. He had no hands. Icicles poked from his sleeves, where his fingers should be. And his head was made of snow.

The snow monster ran after us. He waved his arms and icicles flew all around us. He tackled Luke. They both rolled in the snow.

"Grrrr!" the thing yelled.

"Where is your father?" Jumper asked.

"No time for talking," I said. "Run!"

"Help!" Luke shouted.

"You are on your own," said Jumper. "I do not fight snow monsters!"

I thought the snow monster *was* my father, but Jumper and I didn't wait to see. We hid behind a big rock and clung to each other. The snow monster dragged Luke behind the tree. We heard more cracking sounds.

"Grrrrrr!" That was the snow monster growling.

"Grrrrrrrr!" That sounded like Luke, growling *like* a snow monster.

"This has gone far enough," Jumper said.

I knew what was about to happen. Big Snow Monster jumped out: "Grrrr!"

When Little Snow Monster appeared, I laughed. It was scary, but I laughed anyway.

"Grrrrrr! I am Son of Snow Monster!" Little Snow Monster yelled.

Little Snow Monster was wearing Luke's clothes! His fingers were icicles and his head was a giant snowball.

"Hey, I want to be a snow monster!" I said.

Big Snow Monster looked at Little Snow Monster. I never knew snow monsters could shrug their shoulders. These two did.

"Come on," said Big Snow Monster.

We all went behind the tree, but Jumper stayed behind the rock. He was still scared and didn't want to be close to any snow monster.

My father (*hoke*, he was not a real snow monster) broke icicles from the tree. Luke (Little Snow Monster) scooped up enough snow to make me a snow monster head. I knew what we were about to do.

"Jumper likes to run," my father said. "We'll give him a good reason to run."

Jumper jumped on top of the rock.

"What's going on?" he asked.

We didn't answer. Soon I was ready, with icicle fingers and a snowy head.

Tim Tingle

"Grrrrr!" we growled from behind the tree.

"Go," my father whispered.

We jumped into the open.

"Grrrrrr!"

Jumper did not move. He was so afraid he just stared at us. Then he leapt from the rock and started running.

We waved our arms and flung icicles. We shook our heads and snow flew everywhere.

"Help!" shouted Jumper.

We chased Jumper through the trees and up a hill. I knew Jumper was fast, but he ran faster than ever! That's what happens when you're a dog being chased by three snow monsters.

Finally, Jumper stopped. Our icicle fingers were gone. Our snow heads were gone.

"Hey!" said Jumper. "That is not funny. You are not snow monsters. You are Luke, Isaac, and Father."

"I'm sorry, Jumper," I said. "We played a joke, that's all."

"Let's go home, now," my father said. "Jumper, we will make you something special for supper tonight."

"I think I deserve it," said Jumper. He was already wagging his tail. I knew he forgave us.

I learned something important that day. Hitting your father in the face with a snowball is not a good idea — unless you want to spend the rest of the day with real live Choctaw snow monsters.

I learned something else, too. Being a snow monster was better than being a ghost.



## Chapter 8

### *Walking People*

LUKE AND MY FATHER went hunting that afternoon. They returned with a deer! We roasted our first deer since leaving home. My mother gave Jumper the first piece of deer meat.

The next morning Old Man and Old Woman stayed in their lean-to. Most of our Choctaw friends stayed inside, too, curled up in their blankets. No one laughed.

By afternoon Choctaw people from every lean-to moaned and cried. Old people, young people, everyone cried. As day turned to darkness, a young girl shouted, "I am burning." Her mother ran to the swamp and brought her a cup of water.

"We should get a good night's sleep," my father said. "We will be leaving in the morning."

"Where will we go?" my mother asked.

"Away," my father answered. "Far away."

"I hate to leave our friends," Mother said.

"So do I," said my father. "But there is nothing we can do to help them."

I had a bad dream that night. I dreamed of what would happen in a few days. Old Man and Old Woman were covered in sores. They itched and burned and the sores never went away. Everyone with a blanket had the sores.

*How did my mother know? I asked myself. How did she know the blankets carried smallpox?*

Smallpox was a dark secret. It climbed from the blankets and carried the sores. I had already seen smallpox, but I didn't know it.

A week earlier, when I saw Old Man and Old Woman playing like children in the river, I saw smallpox. With my ghost eyes, I saw it.

Some Choctaws became ghosts from the shotguns. Some became ghosts from the burning houses. But the blankets made more ghosts than any guns or fires. The smallpox blankets were ghost-making blankets.

Our days in the swamp were over.

Early the next morning we gathered our belongings and left the camp. We walked all day and slept in the woods.

The next morning we came to a road. As far as we could see, Choctaw people were walking. Soldiers drove wagons and Choctaws walked. The roads were covered with snow and ice.

Most of the Choctaws had blankets wrapped around their shoulders. When my father saw the blankets he pulled us close. We followed this band of soldiers and walking Choctaws for three days, hiding in the tree shadows, unseen by anyone.

I carried Jumper so he couldn't chase the walking people. But he didn't even try to get away. After the *Nahullos* burned our town, Jumper knew when to be quiet. He seemed to understand about the ghosts, too, so I asked him.

"Do you see the ghosts, Jumper?"

"Do you promise not to tell?" he said.

"I won't tell anyone. I promise."

"Okay," said Jumper. "I see the ghosts. Maybe I will be a ghost soon."

"Jumper, no!"

Jumper just looked at me. I think he knew that I would soon be a ghost. We never spoke of it again.

On the morning of the fourth day, my father stepped out of the tree shadows and spoke to a friendly Choctaw man passing by.

"My family has no place to go," my father said. "Our town was burned and we have been living in the woods."

"You can come with us," the man said. "My name is Gabe. We are going to a new home, a home they will never take from us."

"The blankets?" my father asked. "Did the soldiers give you the blankets?" I knew what he was thinking. He was remembering the ghost-making blankets.

"Yes," Gabe said. "They are thick and warm."

My father nodded. "I am Zeke, and this is my wife, Ochi. These are my sons, Luke and Isaac."

"This is my wife, Ruth," said Gabe. "You are welcome to join us."

Ruth lifted her hand from under her blanket and waved. I couldn't see her face, but I could hear her laughing under her blanket.

"I am coooooold!" she said.

Ruth was short and round, and I knew she would be a funny friend. I saw something wiggling under her blanket.

"Momma!" a tiny voice said.

Ruth lifted her blanket and a little girl stood next to her.

"This is Nita," Ruth said.

Nita buried her face in the blanket.

"She is shy," said Ruth. "She is five years old."

"*Halito*, Nita!" we all said. She didn't look at us, but she waved.

"Just like her mother," Gabe said, and everybody laughed.

My family joined the walkers that day. After the burning of our town, the days in the swamp, and the blankets with small pox, my family joined the walkers. We were on our way to a new home.

But we were not alone.

Mister Jonah came to me the first night.

After sundown, Gabe and my father built a campfire close to the road. We had dried corn for our first night's meal. I was so hungry that I would have eaten the corn

uncooked. But with wild onions, roasted over a log fire, it was delicious!

After supper we sat close to the fire.

"Do you want me to get you blankets?" Gabe asked my father. "The soldiers have blankets in the wagon."

"Not yet," my father said. "We will wait a few days."

We all slept close together. It was warmer that way. Sometime after midnight, when everyone else was asleep, I felt the warm shiver and sat up. The ghost of Mister Jonah sat next to me.

"We are waiting for you," he said.

"Did you die in the fire?"

"Yes, I did," he said. "But I am not alone. Missus Jonah is with me. Are you ready to come with us?"

"No," I told him. "I want to be with my family."

"You will be with us soon," he said, and stood to go.

"Wait," I said. "I want to ask you something."

"What?"

"Are the blankets safe?"

Mister Jonah smiled.

"Your mother was smart not to let you take a blanket in the swamp."

"But these new blankets," I asked, "are the new blankets safe?"

"Yes. The new blankets are safe."

"Thank you," I said. "I am glad you came."

After he was gone, I woke my father up.

"The blankets are safe," I whispered.

"How do you know?"

Tim Tingle

"I saw Mister Jonah. His ghost told me the new blankets are safe."

"I will ask for blankets in the morning," my father said.



## Chapter 9

### *Nita and the Ghost Walkers*

"HERE THEY ARE!" said Gabe. He plopped the blankets in front of my father. We still sat by the morning fire.

"*Yakoke*," said my mother. (*Yakoke* means "thank you" in Choctaw.) She unrolled the blankets and wrapped one around me.

"Here's one for you, too, Luke," she said, handing one to my brother. "And one for your father, and one for me!"

We sat looking at each other. My blanket itched, but I didn't care. I was with my family and we were warm. For the first time since our home burned, we were warm.

As we started the day's walk, the sun shone and the sky was clear and cloudless. The road was frozen and my feet were cold, but the sun felt good on my face.

We walked through a thick forest and melting icicles



fell all around us. A tree branch broke and fell to the ground. Nita squealed and jumped under my blanket!

"Can I walk with you?" she asked. Her tiny voice was so soft and muffled by the thick blanket.

"Yes, little Nita, you can walk with me," I said, giving her a big smile.

"I never had a big brother," she said. "Will you be my big brother?"

"Of course," I said. "I'd be happy to be your big brother."

That night at the campfire Nita suddenly stood. She walked close to the fire and turned to look at us.

"What are you doing?" her mother asked.

"I have something to say . . . to everybody," Nita said.

"What is it?" her mother asked.

"I have a big brother. Isaac is my new big brother."

I hung my head and hoped nobody would make fun of me. I thought this big-brother-thing would be a secret. I didn't look at Luke. If anybody laughed at me, it would be him.

I was wrong.

"Isaac will be a good big brother for you, Nita," Luke said. "I like being his big brother. He will like being yours."

I looked up. Luke was smiling at me.

"*Yakoke*," I said softly.

I looked around the circle. Everyone was staring at me, waiting for me to do something. This was a special time, but I didn't know what to do. I finally stood and walked over by Nita.

"I am proud to be your big brother, Nita," I said. "I will

take care of you." Everyone nodded and smiled, and Ruth started singing the Choctaw friendship song. We all joined in, and for the first time our two families felt like one.

I hoped I could keep my promise, my promise to take care of Nita. Later that night, just before I fell asleep, I had a funny thought.

*If I am a ghost, how can I take care of Nita?* I asked myself.

By morning, I knew what to do. I could take care of Nita, as best I could, while I was still alive. I ate my breakfast in a hurry, and while everyone else was eating, I found a sharp stone. I cut two small pieces from my blanket.

"Nita, let me see your feet," I said. Nita lay back on her mother's lap and lifted her feet high. I tied the blanket pieces on her feet.

"Now," I said, "your feet will be warm when you walk. No more walking on icy roads, not for *my* little sister!"

I was glad Nita now had warm blanket shoes. That afternoon the wind blew hard and the sky was covered with mean, icy clouds.

"We should find a tree to sleep under tonight," Gabe said. "I think bad weather is coming."

We built our campfire under an old oak tree with thick branches.

Gabe was right. The next morning a hard rain fell. A clap of thunder woke me up, but my blanket was already soaking wet. I stood under the tree and shivered. I tried shaking the water from my blanket.

A soldier rode his horse into our camp.

"No time to build a fire," he said. "Breakfast will have to wait. We need to move. Start walking. If the rain stops, you can build the cooking fires."

"Careful!" my father shouted. "The roads will be slippery!"

I could barely hear his voice above the pounding rain. Soon the rain turned to ice. By late morning, the world was covered in ice. We walked without stopping all day, with nothing to eat.

An hour before sunset the sleet stopped. The woods were thick on both sides of the road. Long icicles hung from every tree branch. The soldier rode up and down the line of Choctaw walkers, shouting, "Let's make camp here!"

We found a small clearing in a clump of trees and started building our evening fire. By now we were like one big family. Gabe, Ruth, and Nita were more than friends. They were family. We shared the work and then we shared the food.

A soldier dropped off a bag of corn for our supper.

"Milk will be here, soon," he said. In a few minutes, another soldier brought a jug of milk.

"Thank you," Gabe said. "Where did you get the milk?"

"We bought it from a nearby farmer," said the soldier.

"I hope that farmer has a lot of cows," Gabe said, after the soldier left. "We need milk for a thousand Choctaws!"

We had Choctaw corn soup for supper that night. *Pashofu*, we call it. Soft corn in milk chowder. Yummm!

The next morning I remembered what Gabe had said: "a thousand Choctaws."

As we started to walk, I felt the warm shiver. I was afraid to open my eyes. My two families surrounded me, and I didn't want to see anybody die.

"I do not want to know," I whispered to myself. Then I felt a warm hand on my cheek.

"It is me, Isaac." It was Mister Jonah's voice. I opened my eyes.

"I was scared," I told him. "Sometimes I know too much."

"I understand," said Mister Jonah. "I want this to be easy for you."

"How can dying be easy?" I asked.

"I cannot give you a good answer," he said. "But there is something you should see. Go ahead, look all around."

I pulled back my blanket and stretched my neck high. As far as I could see, Choctaws were beginning their walk for the day.

"I see this every day," I said.

Mister Jonah laughed. "You are not looking close enough."

I squinted my eyes. The shiver was so warm I felt as if I was sitting close to a fire. I saw the Choctaw walkers, like before. But now I saw hundreds more Choctaws. Choctaw ghost walkers.

"Where did these people come from?" I asked.

"They came from all over Choctaw country," he said. "They died from the fires. They died from sickness and

they died from hunger. But they will never leave."

"They are like you?" I asked him.

"Yes, son. They are like me. We are here to help you. Our lives are over, but we can still help the living."

"Can I ever call for your help?" I asked.

"Isaac, I will be there when you need me." As soft and quiet as the moon rising, Missus Jonah appeared at his side.

"I am here for you, too," she said.

"Now," said Mister Jonah, "we should be going. Today will be hard for you. Know that we are here." I closed my eyes and they were gone.

"Isaac!" my father shouted. "Catch up!"

This day was the coldest day of our walk, colder even than our days in the swamp. Freezing rain fell all day long, and I could not forget what Mister Jonah had said.

"Today will be hard for you."

I wondered what he meant.

I soon had my answer.



## Chapter 10

### *Bloody Footprints*

WHEN WE STOPPED for our noon meal, everyone huddled close to the fire. Everyone but me. I wasn't hungry and I was so cold I couldn't stop shaking. I stood under a tree, away from the icy rain.

"You should warm yourself by the fire," my mother said. I was too cold to move.

"It is dry here," I said.

"Lift your feet," my father said. "You should move. You will never get warm standing there."

I covered my head with my blanket and leaned against the tree. I was standing in a pool of ice. I looked up and the snow was so thick I could not see the tree limbs. Nothing but white falling snowflakes.

"Come on!" my father shouted. "Time to walk."

I didn't move. *Maybe now is my time*, I thought. *Maybe that is what Mister Jonah was telling me. Maybe today I will become a ghost.*

I felt a tug on my hand.

"Come with us," Nita said.

"You better walk with your mother," I said. If I was about to be a ghost, I didn't want Nita to see.

I wiped the snow from my eyes. The camp was empty and everyone was gone. I took a step. I had been standing for an hour. My father had warned me.

"Lift your feet!" he had said.

I should have listened.

Mister Jonah had warned me, too.

"Today will be hard for you."

I tried to walk, but my feet were frozen to the ground. I pulled and tugged, and when I finally lifted my right foot, the skin tore away.

"Owwww!" I hollered. Pain shot up my leg and hot tears filled my eyes. I rocked back and forth, but the pain wouldn't go away.

"Come on, Isaac," Luke called to me. "You are falling behind!"

I clenched my jaw and raised my left foot, as gently as I could. I had sunk so deep in the ice, the skin of that foot ripped away, too. I jumped from one foot to the other. My feet were freezing cold and burning hot at the same time. I never knew pain could hurt this bad.

"Please make this be over," I said out loud. I felt the warm shiver.

"If you are ready," Mister Jonah said.

"You are welcome with us," Old Man said.

"It is warm here," Old Woman said.

I closed my eyes and wished everything to go away.

When I opened them, I saw everyone who had taken a blanket: Choctaw children, boys and girls, and men and women, too. They all stood before me, floating in a puffy white cloud. No one wore any blankets and their sores were gone. The sun shone on a beautiful blue sky. I knew I was seeing a ghost world.

"You will like it with us," said a young man.

"No!" I shouted. "No! I am not ready!"

I shook my head and they were gone. One step at a time I started walking. The snow was thick and my feet stung with every step. I looked behind me.

I was leaving bloody footprints in the snow. Mounds of snow covered the road. The snow fell in soft white flakes, but now the snow behind me was dotted red. I walked ahead, but I could not stop myself from looking over my shoulder.

Ten steps, ten bloody footprints. A hundred steps, a hundred bloody footprints trailing after me. I wanted to run, to leave the footprints behind me.

I did run, but the footprints followed me. The faster I ran, the more footprints.

"Make them go away!" I shouted.

"It is time," said Mister Jonah.

"No! I don't want to go with you!" I shouted. My voice was hoarse from shouting.

Then another voice cut through the snow.

"Son!" It was my father's voice.

The Choctaw ghosts vanished. Far ahead my father waited. I stumbled and fell and my father ran to meet me. He picked me up and held me close.

"Isaac," he said, "take one last look behind you."

I turned my head and saw my footprints in the snow.

"Son," he said, "you cannot keep your eyes on the bloody footprints you have left behind you. You must keep your eyes on where you are going."

I took a deep breath. I nodded. From that moment on, even though my feet burned, I refused to look behind me. I looked where I was going and forgot about the pain. I was stronger than the pain.

Three days later my feet healed. But the healing began when I heard my father say those words.

"You cannot keep your eyes on the bloody footprints you have left behind you. You must keep your eyes on where you are going."



## Chapter 11

### *Nita's Walk*

THE NEXT MORNING Nita woke me up, while the rest of the camp was still asleep.

"I have a gift for you," she said. She took her blanket shoes off and tied them to my feet.

"You need the shoes," she said. I had learned long ago never to refuse a gift.

"*Yakoke*, Nita," I said, smiling at my little sister. "You are sweet." Nita ran to the campfire and hid behind her mother.

"Nita, where are your shoes?" her mother asked.

Nita pointed to me.

"She wanted me to have these," I said. Her mother beamed with pride. I ate my breakfast quickly, then I cut Nita another pair of shoes.