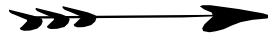


*Rattlesnake, bear, and owl show this man the center,
where their voices rise as smoke from blue mountain.¹*

~Gladys Cardiff



Captive

Bare feet in grass soggy with the earliest of spring rains can cause a chill in a body so fierce it can be hard even to move. As I peer into the first rays of the morning sun just breaking over the ridge, I do a silent battle with the morning shivers. Once I get busy with my chores I warm up a fair bit, but having risen from a warm spot in a corner of Old Woman's hut, gathering water from the stream first thing in the morning is always a sore trial for me. The trees look almost as cold as I do, me with steam coming out of my teeth-chattering mouth and them with steam rising off their rain soaked bark. I try not to think about having to step in the freezing cold river to fill my deerskin buckets, afraid that the shivers will just take me over completely. A vision of me, frozen solid just outside the hut's door, could have almost made me laugh out loud were it not for my *present circumstances*. I've been in this village a few weeks now. I'm many things.

I'm a white captive.

I'm a fourteen year old girl.

I'm alone.

I'm frightened.

I'm no better than a slave.

But I'm not a red savage.



My family lives on a homestead in the state of Virginia. There's my Pa, my little brother Eli, and my older brother Henry. Ma died when Eli was born. We settled there after the second Great War with Britain in the year of our Lord, 1817. I suspect the choice of where we settled was Pa's decision. I don't ever recall Ma saying a word about it one way or the other. Pa told me once that he was bound and determined to get as far away as possible once and for all from any body – Royalist, Colonist, British or French – who had war thoughts on his mind. Said he'd spent his whole life surrounded by war. He'd survived fighting in one, and he was damn certain he was not going to try his luck a second time. Furthermore, he didn't for one moment believe that any people who even had so many as ten rifles between them would be peaceful for long.

Our homestead is beautiful. Looking off the front porch, the sight of the mountains rising in their blue mist often causes a body to stop and stare at the wonder of it. But I suspect Pa chose it mostly cause it was the farthest piece of land he was able to get. Away from wars and hatred and killing and such. We were right happy there for a time. When I think of happy thoughts, I think of those early days building and planting and laughing. Then Ma died and much of the happiness went with her. I worry about Eli the most. I was the only Ma he knew and now I'm gone. It's a wonder to me how a life, as comfortable as an old shoe, can disappear in just the blink of an eye.

The red savages come one evening just before nightfall. They whoop and holler and sound terrible fierce. Pa grabs Eli and shouts to me, "Run, Elle!! RUN!!" I hear the great fear in his voice, and it's almost more frightening than the savages' screams. Then I see their black painted faces and I see their eyes that are so filled with hate and I change right quick what makes me scared. I try to run to the forest, but my skirts trip me and I fall. As I struggle to get up a savage grabs me by the back of my dress and hauls me across the front of him like I'm a sack of potatoes. I'm so frightened I wet myself. I'm so frightened that I can't move. I lie there across that horse certain my heart will beat right out of my chest and fall on the ground just like my pee does.

We ride and ride those first days and nights only taking time to rest the horses, I suspect. Riding face down on a horse is downright uncomfortable, but I'm not in a position to complain. My head and stomach ache something fierce. I look at a foot that's red, bare and filthy and my nose twitches at the smell of my captor. He's as close to naked as a body can be without showing the important parts.

By the start of the third day, I drag my feet some and struggle as I get hauled up once again onto the horse. I've had nothing to eat and only managed to drink some water from the stream. My stomach especially tells me enough is enough. My captors no longer have black painted faces, but red is just as terrifying as angry savage words are said, and I'm pulled roughly by my hair and dress back into place: face down, staring at that same dirty, red foot. I can't help it as my stomach empties in one great gush. *There, I think, at least I gave your foot a wash.*

I end up flat on my back trying to catch my breath. As I struggle to sit up Dirty Feet gives me a hard kick in the side, and I lie back down. I stare at the eyes of my captor as he ties a rope around my neck like a pet dog. I decide to keep my mouth shut and my head down. No need to court more trouble than I'm already in. As I walk alongside Dirty Feet it seems that my head and stomach will get a rest, but that might not make my bare feet so happy. Two times I end up face

down in the dirt because I don't move fast enough. Dirty Feet holds my rope and watches as I haul myself up to standing. He doesn't even give me time to catch my breath or spit out the dirt in my mouth. I try real hard to pay a bit more attention to things so that I don't give Dirty Feet another chance to have fun with my rope.

The days that I travel with the savages are full of darkness and worry. We travel up into the misty blue mountains, up and over and then past some even bigger mountains still. Even in my fearful state there are times that I just have to catch my breath at the beauty of it all. I'm pretty sure we travel mostly south because I watch the sun. Maybe west a bit, too, I can't exactly say. I walk all that day and for the first time we rest for the night. Good thing my feet are tough and strong. Being barefoot is something I'm used to. I spend most of my time working to keep my mind as blank as the faces of the savages I travel with. Whoever would have thought that it's nigh onto impossible to think of nothing instead of something?

Those worry thoughts are like a jigger under my skin. I think about running away back home which will be a might difficult as I seem to have become Dirty Feet's newest pet. There's not one moment when my rope is free. Besides, how would I manage to get away? How can I out run the savages in their own woods when I couldn't manage it in my own yard? And which way would I go? I decide running is not something I should forget, but something I need to wait a bit on.

I wish I knew if Pa and Eli were safe. My heart says they must be safe while my head says, *Can Pa run faster than an angry red savage on a horse?* I make my head be quiet and let my heart sing its song. I'm fair certain that Henry is all right. He'd driven the wagon into town the day before the savages came to get seed for early spring planting and was not expected back for another day or so. Being almost eighteen, Pa said he could handle such a grown up chore, although I think he was a bit scared to be going off by himself like that for the first time.

I think and think about where they are taking me. And why me? Would they not have taken Eli, a strong boy of six, if they took me? Could they have killed a six-year-old boy? Could Pa have stopped them? Will someone come for me? Is there even a body that will miss me? When my head gets to aching from asking all these questions, I work hard on thinking of nothing again.

Three days of walking finds me limping something fierce and eating more dirt than I care to mention. Finally, even Dirty Feet loses interest in his rope game, and I find myself staring at his bare back, more than a might scared that I'm going to be dragged by my neck rope the rest of the way if I fall from the savage's horse. When we break into a gallop I'm forced to hold on to Dirty Feet, my face pressed to his body. Even with my eyes tight shut, my nose will not let me forget where I am and who I'm with. I'd rather eat dirt again.



The savage's village we finally arrive at is twelve full days from my homestead. There are more than thirty huts, some shaped round and squat and some shaped long and tall. Some are big enough to house large families and some seem to be for just one person. As we ride down into the clearing, I think the village looks a little like a wagon wheel with the biggest hut in the center and the others stretching out in all directions.

Dirty Feet brings me to a hut almost right in the middle of the village and dumps me at an old woman's feet, rope and all. There were so many sights and sounds that first day I can't remember them all. I remember seeing lots of naked children running around – boys and girls! – and thinking that maybe Eli would like it here. He always loved the summer because that was the only time Pa would let him run naked by the pond and go skinny-dipping. I remember lots and lots of barking dogs and was afraid I'd get bit. Dogs don't like strangers, do they? And I sure look strange compared to everyone else as far as the eye could see.

These are not the first red savages I've seen. I've seen pictures drawn in a newsprint once. Twice on the trail when we moved to our homestead we saw them watching us go by. Once at Cooper's General Store I saw one up close. And three times that I know of they passed through our homestead rather than go around as they should have, and Pa had to scare them off with the rifle. But each of those times it was always with my Pa close by, never by myself, lying in the dirt filled with too many feelings for one body to figure out in a lifetime. I look for something familiar to help me stop this spinning terror that's slowly pulling me under. But there's nothing I recognize. Not even the thoughts inside my head.

I'm not sure that anyone is happy with Dirty Feet's gift of me. There's not one smile or even a nod. No one gives him a pat on the back or shakes his hand. In fact, no one says much at all. Do savages even smile or laugh or sing or hug? I sure have never seen such. They all gather around and look silently at my sorry self sitting in a heap, lost and alone. I try hard not to be rude and stare, even if they don't seem inclined to follow the same example. Finally, even the dogs stop barking.

The old woman of the hut has a face more wrinkled than a winter's dried apple. She dresses entirely in deerskin, with decorated moccasins on her feet. At first I think she has paint on her face, like the savages did the day they took me. Old Woman has lines and dots between her eyes and up across her forehead. But after a week or so I'm sure it isn't paint; it doesn't wash off, and I never see her redraw it. Somehow it's on her face for good. She isn't mean to me, but she isn't what you'd call kind either. She shows me what chores I'm expected to do, and if I don't do them fast enough or the right way she gives me a fair slap or kick. I learn right quick I'm never to touch the herbs and things she has hanging and stored all around her hut. I think she might be a healer. She puts a funny smelling salve on my neck when the rope is finally taken off. But once I get the rhythm of the work, she almost pretends that I don't even exist. She feeds me funny gruel made with grains and a bit of meat. It fills my stomach, which always seems to be growling and unhappy. I sleep in the corner of her hut and even have a few furs to keep me warm on these cold early spring nights.

Twelve days away from Pa, Henry, and Eli, I think over and over. Twelve days, and only three of them I walked. I can't get my head to figure how I'd manage to get back home. I'd get lost. I'd be hungry. I'd be frightened. I'd not be able to defend myself against dangerous animals or furious red savages coming after me ready to teach me a powerful lesson. I get angry at myself when I realize that the person I am is what makes me a prisoner more than the place where I stand. With that thought I feel like I've finally lost a big fight that I hadn't even realized I was in. Even though I'm no longer tied up, I'm a prisoner just the same, and there's nothing I can do about it. Running, I now know, is something I need to forget.

I think I take to most things quick. I watch and learn. Pa always said I'd have been a fast learner at school had I ever gone. Ma taught me my letters, and I took to reading and writing right swift. I don't have so much a memory of how I did the learning; it seemed to just make sense and flow into my head like learning a song. I do remember Henry being angry at how I could keep up with him in most of the lessons. Pa made sure all of us practiced our reading from the big Bible each night even after Ma died. Already Eli at six can spell his name and do some easy figuring. I could keep house by the time I was eight, which was when my Ma died. I cooked and cleaned and sewed and cared for Pa, Henry, and Eli from the moment it was clear Ma never would again. *Who cares for them now?*

I struggle most with the quandary that I can't understand a word anyone says. It just sounds like foolishness to me. On the trail, traveling with the savages when they first took me, they made hand motions when they said something to me. Sometimes I understood, like when I was to sit against the tree and get tied at night or mount up on the horse to ride the next day. Sometimes I didn't though, and they'd give me a hard cuff to the head letting me know just how stupid they thought I was. I'm not stupid though, I just don't understand their talking, that's all.

If I were forced to choose, I'd have to say that I like days better than nights. Days I can keep so busy I scarce have time to think of Pa, Henry, and Eli. Each and every day is the same, filled with chores for Old Woman or any one else who might be inclined to take the trouble to get me to understand what they want done. I gather sticks for firewood, I grind corn, I fetch water, I stir the cooking pot. Old Woman only notices me if I'm too slow. I work very hard not to be slow.

Nights, lying in my corner, I try real hard to fall asleep quick. But it seems no matter how hard I try and no matter how tired I am, I can't get my head to shut down fast enough and just think of nothing. Sometimes the ache to see Pa, Henry, or Eli is so great I fear that I'll just shatter into a million sobbing pieces and mess up Old Woman's hut something fierce.

Even though Ma died more than six years ago, I remember some things. She told me that to pray was to talk to God personal like, just as if He was close enough to whisper to. One of my strongest memories of Ma was nighttime prayers and me whispering in God's ear about all manner of things. When she died, I wondered whether the whispering had done any good. I did not whisper in God's ear about Ma's dying or living; was it my fault she died? Those late nights as I sat up with Pa helping to care for screaming baby Eli, I found myself thinking did Ma take God's ear with her? Can He still hear me or has He moved on? Pa still does prayers each night, but there's a different feeling to them, almost like seeing the maple syrup jug but knowing it's finally empty. Not until the savages came to take me do I try to whisper in God's ear again. Lying in my corner trying to sleep, I make deals with God. "If You let Pa and Eli get away then I'll stay here in this village and not ask for one thing else, God." Or, how about, "I'll bide my time quiet like and wait until Pa comes to get me from here." I even try, "I'll never complain or ask for anything else if I can just go home, soon. Please."

But sometimes the strangeness of it all, the worry of who I am and the terror of where I am gets so big I can't catch a breath. There are some nights that nothing – not weariness or prayers – can make my head be quiet or get my heart to sing, and I'm bone weary when the sun comes up. For

the truth is this: I'm a captive of the savages. I'm a white and they are red. It makes no matter how hard I work, how fast I move, how small I try to make myself; the difference will always be right there on the skin of my hands and face.



Another week passes and I find myself thinking more and more about skin and the colors it comes in. I remember when Pa caught me trying to get a look at myself one time in the water trough and teased me for a day or two. Told me about a poem he had read one time that said, '*And all the carnal beauty of my wife, is but skin-deep.*' But not until I was the only one with different color skin did I really start to think about what is *underneath* it all. Does the color on the outside make a body different on the inside? I always thought that was so. Black skin makes a nigger slave, red skin makes a savage, and white skin makes a person like a farmer or a soldier. Ain't that the way it is always so? Never once, until my sorry situation, did it occur to me that maybe, *just maybe*, skin color's got nothing to do with it.

Squatting outside Old Woman's hut, stirring the venison stew for dinner, I look at my white hands and realize I have to puzzle this through a bit more. For the only one with white skin in this village is a slave. And those with red skin are the farmers and the soldiers and the healers and the children. The only real savages I've met so far are Dirty Feet and his three companions. But something tells me it has nothing to do with red skin and everything to do with heart. *Maybe*, my head thinks, *it's what's underneath it all that's the only thing that counts.* I'll have to ponder this some more.

The little ones in the village are the only ones that make me smile sometimes. The babies don't care who I am or what color my skin is; they just want to see a friendly face and I'm happy to oblige. Mothers wrap their babies in blankets around a board that they either strap to their backs or hang from a tree branch. Each babyboard looks different, and I find I remember the babies more by how the carrier looks than the baby! Some are decorated with embroidery and porcupine quills, some have shades built over the top, and others have some of the funniest objects dangling in front for the baby to look at: bird skulls, feathers, and animal claws. Those babies go all over with their mothers, when they're tending the gardens, washing by the stream, foraging in the woods or preparing meals. There's something peaceful about watching the babies swinging in the branches fast asleep. Watching all this, I learn that savages do laugh, cry, and love. I find it mighty surprising.

The older boys, eleven or twelve or so, the ones that wear clothes, are the meanest. Scuttling down to the river to fetch the day's first water I look down at myself. They must have a good chuckle over my clothes, since the way they look now deserves a good laugh; torn, dirty, with all manner of smells and stains on them! They throw rocks and sticks at me like I'm a moving target. They try to trip me when I'm hauling wood and think nothing's more funny than seeing me sprawl in the dirt covered in sticks and dust. They spy on me when I'm trying to have a private moment in the woods. They make me tired. They make me mad. Were I to have the right words and were I to be in a different place, I'd tell them a thing or two. But I work to stay small. It's easier. It's safer.

The older girls, around my age I suspect, work almost as hard as me but stay away from me. I'm so different. I feel their stares all the time. Pa always taught us it was rude to stare. It made no

matter how interesting the sight was you were wishing to see. There was red savage girl at Cooper's General Store one time. She was tied by the waist and roped to a trapper's belt, more dirty and worse for wear than I ever saw a body to be. Even at my worst time with the savages so far I don't think I've ever had the look she had in her eyes. She was a dead body that just hadn't laid down yet. But I did not stare. No sir. I waited to ask questions until we were in our wagon and on our way back home. That was when Pa explained the way of things to me before I even had a chance to open my mouth.

"Mind your own business, Elle. Worry about your own troubles. Keep your head down and your mouth shut. Most battles in this world come about when people stop following that rule."

I pondered that for a while and then felt obliged to ask. "Doesn't that mean that the strongest always get their way?"

Pa took so long to answer that Eli had time to crawl into the back of the wagon and fall asleep leaning against a sack of grain. But finally he said, "There are a pile of things in this life that are stronger than you, Elle. Always will be, too. War is stronger. Hatred is stronger. Death is stronger. Some you can avoid ... hide from." I remember the look on Pa's face that day and the shadow of sorrow that settled there like a dark cloud as he thought of Ma. *"And some things will find you no matter what you do to hide from them."*

"So that savage girl ..." I'd tried to ask.

Pa interrupted me, hoping to end things quick like. "Is none of our business, Elle. The savages had their time. Their present circumstances are not our concern. Our homestead is on what used to be the red savage's land. Bought by the government with cash money and signed away by the savages free and clear. Made available to families like ours. Those savages have made choices how to live just like we have made choices. My choice was to live separate. Apart. Where no one could bother us or interfere or force us to fight a battle or choose a side." He'd looked at me. "I will not choose sides anymore, Elle. I just want to be left in peace! No more wars for me, no more debates. I have moved my whole family – everyone I care about – far, far away. I am an honest, law abiding, and God – fearing man. If I see something I don't agree with and it has nothing directly to do with me and mine then I just keep my head down, my mouth shut, and I mind my own business! It is the right path to take. The only path to take! You hear me?" He was fair shouting at me. Eli stirred at the sound of Pa's raised voice.

"I heard you, Pa," I say out loud to myself and my memories. But now I know something else that can be stronger than hatred or death or war: fear. I think about that savage girl tied to the trapper's belt, and I touch my neck that still has a healing rope burn. I suspect Pa never thought I'd be a captive in a red savage village. Would he have wanted someone who saw me tripping and stumbling and eating dirt with a rope tied 'round my neck to 'keep his head down and mind his own business'? It would appear to me that life tends to change a body's way of viewing the world, that's for darn sure.



It takes me almost two weeks in the savages' village before I notice that there are not too many men around. Young men I should say. There are lots of mothers and children and old ladies. There are many old men, too. But there seems to be only a few fathers. I think to myself that Pa would be disappointed in my slowness. He used to say to me, "*Elle Girl, you make a body more tired with your questions than a full day's plowing does!*" But I really just haven't been myself. It took a long time to notice the lack of men, but less time to figure out why. They must be raiding, attacking other places, just like the savages who took me. Or hunting, I guess. Even Dirty Feet and his companions were gone the very next day.

I sense a change in the village just a few days after I figure out the men are gone. Maybe it's just me seeing something new, like when you walk the same path in the woods everyday and then one day spot an owl's nest. Each time after that you always check to see if you can see the owl; the walk is just different. Old Woman works me close to death these days. I carry wood, grind grain, gather herbs and plants in the woods with her sometimes, work in the big garden doing all manner of things, and prepare fish the young boys catch. I just never seem to stop! By the second day, I'm stumbling around stupid with tiredness. Old Woman slaps me three times that day. She didn't hit me that much even in the first days. When I spill an entire bowl of ground corn I'd just finished she looks mad enough to kill me. She does almost worse, she sends me to my bed corner without dinner.

I lay there in the dark with my stomach cursing me and my clumsiness. I think about Pa, Henry and Eli. I think about our dinners together, sitting inside if the weather's poor or outside on the porch if the weather's warm and the bugs are cooperative. I think about me making dumplings and venison stew. I can almost smell it cooking. I can see Eli grinning at me because he just loved my dumplings and venison stew. I see Henry hunched over his bowl shoveling it in almost faster than an eye can see. I hear Pa saying, "*Why don't you just swallow the whole thing, bowl and all, Henry?*" and us laughing and laughing at the thought. I feel myself finally drifting off to sleep just when the screams and whoops and shouts erupt. It could almost be funny; here I am in a red savage village being terrified by the same sounds that terrified me at home with Pa, Henry and Eli!

I creep to the opening of Old Woman's hut and see a sight that chills my blood almost to a stop. Red savage men, more than I can count, mounted on horses, painted and armed, galloping and whooping through camp. I hear a strange whimpering in the tent and look around surprised because I think I'm alone. It takes a moment to realize that *I am alone*; the sound's coming from my own throat. And then I see a sight still stranger, a savage woman, long dark hair loose and blowing out behind her, running fast as lightning, not *away* from the fierce savages but *towards* them. One savage separates himself out from the terrifying band and lets out a piercing yell, one that sends goose skin up my arms. I watch, unable to look away, knowing that the woman is seconds from death. In one quick move the savage leans low over to one side of his horse, reaches down, and hauls the woman up behind him. It's almost like a dance to watch the two of them; her yipping and screaming and laughing holding on to the back of him while he wheels his horse around and charges back into the chaotic mass. And then I know. The village men are home.

Celebrations go on all night: shouts and screams, laughter and shrieks. The smell of roasting meat makes me weak with hunger while the sounds make me weak with fear. The world outside, which had only begun to feel safe, is strange again. I look down at my torn and ragged clothes, filthy bare feet, and cracked and broken nails. I touch my hair, knotted and tangled and limp with dirt and grease. I know how horrible I look, yet I know I'm no longer as safe as I'd been yesterday. I'm unfamiliar with the ways of men and women but not stupid. The enemy is here now, right outside my door, and I'm all alone. *Keep your head down. Keep your mouth shut. Mind your own business. Worry about your own troubles. Prisoner, captive, slave. White ... red ... savage ...* Somehow, Pa's advice doesn't seem to work so well anymore. Why does that make me feel even more alone?

Towards dawn, as the sounds quiet, I drift off to sleep only to be roughly kicked awake by Old Woman before the sun has even fully lit the sky. She makes a motion with her hand, *Get on with your chores as usual*, and stumbles to her pallet exhausted from a night of celebrating. Weakness from hunger and tiredness is not the only reason I hesitate leaving Old Woman's hut. I'll never be able to make myself small enough or red enough not to be seen.

Had Old Woman stayed awake I'd have received a hard kick for taking so long to get busy. But she's already snoring on her pallet, twitching in her dreams. Can I hide in the hut all day? At last, I finally ask myself just who do I fear more, the Old Woman or the unknown men outside? I step outside the hut and head to the creek to get water, shivering *this* morning with the cold, as well as fear, tiredness and hunger. You don't need to be a red savage with a painted black face to cause a body to tremble, just a face as wrinkled as a dry apple with a nasty temper to match.

My fears are without cause in these early morning hours. The entire village including many of the children is exhausted from a night of celebrating, and I go about my chores with less bother than usual. I even manage to eat a hearty bowl of leftover stew that I find from the night before. My stomach at last is happy ... for the moment. During the later part of the day the village begins to stir to life, but it's slow and I'm able to go largely unnoticed until dinner.

By dinner, Old Woman has stirred and grunted her approval at me for having done all my chores without her watching. I'm fixing the evening meal when I hear footsteps coming. My head is down, but I'm able to recognize the visitor right quick: Dirty Feet. I hear his voice and his companions' laughter. He grabs me by the hair and roughly pulls me to my feet. I struggle to stay on my feet and not cry out with the pain. He points to the stain on the front of my skirt and the laughter gets louder. Part of me wants to curl up in a ball and disappear, but part of me wants to put them in their place. *Is it my fault that I'm in this state?* Angry thoughts growl in my head. *Have I done something to deserve all this?* My hatred boils up like a cook pot.

When he lets go of my hair, I find myself raising my head. I'm fair certain that there's nothing I can do that can keep this unwanted attention off me. I look into Dirty Feet's mocking eyes and let my eyes say what my slow tongue can't. I feel my fear alive and kicking, tightening my chest, stopping my breath. But then I feel something else. It's hatred. *I hate you, red savage, for who you are and what you've done to me and mine.* I understand now why Pa said hatred could be strong as I feel it fill me and push aside a bit of my fear, making room for me to draw a shaky breath. I work hard to hate Dirty Feet more than I fear him.

Even though I can't speak I'm fair certain that Dirty Feet gets my message loud and clear. Pa often used to say, "*Why waste your breath over something unworthy?*" After a moment or two one of his companions mutters something under his breath and shoves Dirty Feet who stumbles. Everyone laughs but the mood has changed. Old Woman chooses this time to make an appearance, and she speaks to the men in the same tone she uses with the big boys when their teasing of me gets in the way of her needs. As Dirty Feet and his companions leave, I'm still standing staring at their backs. I turn to look at Old Woman, and she looks at me for a long moment and seems to *see* me for the first time since I've been there. *You watch yourself, Old Woman*, I think to myself, *I suspect I can find enough hate for you, too, should I be so inclined.* She says something to me and then snorts with laughter and walks into her hut. It takes me a moment to realize that she's not cuffed me for standing still for such a long time.

There are more celebrations that night. This time, I'm expected to serve and fetch and carry and *work*. At least there's plenty to eat even if my bones ache with tiredness and lack of sleep. I fear I'll not last the night. Finally, late in the evening, I know that no one is paying me any mind and creep toward Old Woman's hut to collapse. The risk of a beating for leaving seems worth a bit of sleep. For once I believe that I'll fall asleep without thoughts of Pa, Henry and Eli.

In the darkness outside Old Woman's hut, I'm roughly grabbed from behind. Tiredness makes me slow and weak but I kick and struggle anyway. I'm slapped hard across the side of my mouth when I begin to scream, and I taste blood. Instructions are hissed in my ear. Meaningless as they are to me, I know what they mean, *Shut up*. I continue to struggle but feel the last of my strength seeping out of me. *Maybe*, a small voice says in my head quite clear like, *maybe you will die now*. I'm so terrible tired that the idea is no longer something to be scared of, it's a relief. I stop struggling and just go limp. My attacker is not prepared for this and we both end up tumbling to the ground. As he scrambles to stand and I lay in the dirt, my tired mind is not surprised to realize who my attacker is: Dirty Feet.

Grabbing my arm, Dirty Feet pulls with all his might to get me to stand, causing me to cry out. A white-hot pain burns through my shoulder and my arm falls useless to my side. Furious, he bends down, scoops me up, and throws me over his shoulder. A loud scream is ripped from my throat as my arm and shoulder are again moved; then everything goes black.

I awake in an unfamiliar hut. It's one of the larger huts that contains a large family group. Bigger than Old Woman's hut and shaped like a rectangle, its sides are open to let summer heat out and cool evening breezes in. I lay there for a moment and take stock of my hurts. My shoulder and arm are right painful and tightly wrapped against my body making it awkward to sit up, but I finally manage. The side of my face is swollen, and I still taste blood in my mouth. I can feel a tooth loose as my tongue wanders. My head aches. My stomach growls. I roll my eyes. It seems some things never change. I make my way out of the tent to find some privacy and deal with the awkwardness of being one armed when two are needed.

It's near night, and I assume I've slept the night and day away. Do I feel better for sleep? I shake my head "No" to myself and then groan at the pain of it. No, I don't feel better at all. I begin to make my way back to Old Woman's hut, worried to have missed a full day of chores. What will

she do to me? I head toward the center of the camp knowing that I can get my bearings once I'm near the great main meeting area. My head aches as I try to concentrate on the layout of the village as I remember it. As I get close, I begin to have second thoughts. It seems the whole village is present. Murmurs run through the crowd as all eyes seem to notice me. I wish for a hole to hide in. Before I can disappear, hands roughly grab hold of me, and I'm brought to the center near the great fire. There stands Dirty Feet, Old Woman, and the man I have always thought to be the Chief. He wears necklaces of animal claws; bear and cougar are two I recognize. He's naked aside from his breechcloth as all men in camp are. Across his face and chest are patterns in stripes and dots. On his shoulders is a cape made of glorious feathers of every color a head can imagine. The first time I saw it, I wondered how it would feel to touch it, but he's terrifying to look at. Beside him, wearing the pieces of a bright red coat of a British officer, sits a woman. Strung around her neck are buttons of gold, more than one army coat could ever have. She, too, wears marks on her face that I suspect won't wash off. Tied in her hair is one dark feather that seems as much a part of her as her dark black eyes. She looks as peaceful and calm as a fully alert rattlesnake, and in many ways Red Coat is more frightening than the man I call Chief. I'm seated next to Red Coat.

The Chief is talking back and forth with Dirty Feet and Old Woman. Dirty Feet seems to be angry when he speaks. Old Woman seems to be put out. Both look often at me. There's no doubt that I'm the topic of discussion. I hear a sound often. Is that their name for me? At last the Chief speaks, and another young woman steps forward. Although she's a red savage, she's a slave I'm certain, but puzzle over how I know for a time. I finally decide it's because she has the same fearful look in her eyes as I know mine have. Her clothes are a mixture of savage and white; tattered cloth skirt and dirty buckskin top. The Chief speaks without emotion although he makes an effort to be persuasive and respectful I think. He motions to me and touches his right arm, the same arm that I've hurt. He runs his hand down his arm lightly touching his skin and touches the captive savage girl's skin. The meaning is obvious even to me. Why would Old Woman want a broken white girl when she can have a whole savage? No one would be so foolish as to turn down such an offer. Old Woman is no fool. With a brief comment and a nod of her head the red savage captive's ownership is transferred. Dirty Feet's look to me says, *You are mine!*

The Chief turns to address Dirty Feet. He speaks in the same tone he has addressed Old Woman, without emotion. I close my eyes and listen to the sound of his voice flow up and down in a calm, rhythmic flow. Dirty Feet's voice is angry and loud. I open my eyes to see him shouting and waving his hands, spittle flying from his mouth. The Chief does not respond to Dirty Feet's speech; clearly his decision had been made. He has spoken. Dirty Feet stalks away into the dark night. I take a deep breath. Now what?

The Chief turns and looks at me and seems to have the same thought. *Now what do I do with you?* It's an obvious question. I stare back at him, aching all over, inside and out. I'm tired. I'm hurting. At least I'm no longer afraid. That makes me sit up straight and think. *When did I stop being afraid,* I wonder? I try to think but my head hurts too much. And then I remember: it was the moment I thought that death would be a relief. That's when the fear left me.

At last the Chief speaks. A red savage man steps forward. His long dark hair is decorated to one side with bright feathers in the colors of yellow, red, and blue, and he too has permanent marks on his face. Beside the feathers in his hair, the marks on his face, and the knife at his waist, the savage wears no other decorations. The Chief speaks in short, clipped, phrases to the savage who stands tall and quiet before him. His face does not let you know any of his feelings. The savage never speaks to the Chief, but he does speak directly to me before turning and disappearing into the dark night. Although I don't understand a word he says, I know what he means. *Follow me.*

I scramble to stand and follow after this savage I'll call Bright Feather. He never once looks back to see if I follow; he never once slows his pace. When he finally stops outside a single hut like Old Woman's on the edge of the village, I'm winded from the pace and from all of my hurts. Bright Feather motions to the hut and speaks briefly to me and then turns and leaves me alone in the dark. What should I do? With no place else to go, I crawl into the hut, which is similar in many ways to Old Woman's without the herbs and the smells that go with them. There are furs neatly piled in the corner. I fall into an exhausted sleep in the same corner where I've always slept in Old Woman's hut. Still a captive. Still alone. Still lost. I sigh. But maybe not so much afraid anymore.

I wake before dawn at the time I usually start chores with Old Woman, and Bright Feather is nowhere to be seen. I get up and step outside to greet the morning. All my aches and pains sing hello, some more loudly than others. I've noticed most men are part of a larger family unit: being sons, husbands or fathers. From what I've seen few live alone, but those that do seem to receive a share of the crops and are cared for by neighboring women or distant relatives. A majority of the huts in the village are large enough to sleep mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, aunts, and even uncles as best as I can tell. Old Woman has received the same kind of care from one nearby hut, and I often did work for those people as well as for Old Woman. As I stand in the cold dawn a savage woman with a babyboard on her back appears out of the morning mists. I think she's very pretty with her hair loose and her deerskin dress decorated with small fringed edges at the sleeve and hem. The straps of the babyboard show detailed stitches of decoration, too.

She seems surprised to see me, although she makes great effort not to let me know. It's something about her kind eyes I think that give away her shock. She holds a basket in her hand; Bright Feather's breakfast? For a moment we stare at each other and then she motions to my arm. I touch it protectively. *No, you can't touch it, it hurts too much,* I will her to understand.

She places the basket down near the fire and then approaches me slowly. I back away just as slow. Then Bright Feather appears and a long talk starts. He looks at me without speaking. *Sit down,* his look says. *Let her look at your shoulder.* I sit. She unwraps the bandage and the ache makes me just about swoon. I look into the eyes of the baby peeking at me from the babyboard as it leans against a tree. She wraps my shoulder up again. There's a lot more talking between Bright Feather and Kind Eyes.

Bright Feather goes into his hut. He comes out with his weapons and other things I don't know about. He hands Kind Eyes a bundle of furs, beautiful in their shades of brown and gold. He unhobbles his horse, mounts and rides off without looking back. Kind Eyes touches my arm, motions and smiles. *Follow me.*



I'm clean! I've washed my body! Kind Eyes has given me a soft leather dress that reaches to below my knees and leggings that lace up to the top of my calves. I've washed my hair. It's clean and combed and bound with pieces of leather. *I'm clean!!* Kind Eyes helped me wash myself, she was gentle with my shoulder, but even still I fairly died whenever it was moved. I think, though, if I had to do it all over again – pain and all – I'd do it just to feel this good about being clean! The savage women wash near a bend in the river. It's a place not chosen so much for privacy but for ease and speed. *Never is there so much white skin for all to see as bathing at the river,* I think as I strip and scrub. The water runs swift but is not too deep, and there's plenty of fine sand for scrubbing. Kind Eyes has herbs that she rubs in my hair that smell clean and make a kind of suds. Oh, it's heaven to be clean!

From that day on a pattern happens. I sleep every night in Bright Feather's hut, although it's many, many nights before I see him again. That first night I go to prepare a meal for Bright Feather, but Kind Eyes stills my hand and shakes her head. *He will not be here to eat dinner.* Every morning I rise before the sun and make my way to Kind Eyes' hut and it's there that I start my chores, helping her do things that need to be done. Most of the chores are the same I did for Old Woman with one exception: I get to help care for Kind Eyes' baby. In my head I call him "Owl", always peeking out from his babyboard with those big, wide, dark eyes. I find out right quick he's a boy. I try to take all my loneliness and miss-you feelings for Eli and give it to Owl. Beside Kind Eyes and Owl there's also Kind Eyes' husband who I call 'Coon. He's quiet and fierce looking, and I give him his name for the raccoon tail that swings from his hair.

I'm taught how to plant the savage way, it being spring. A huge garden is prepared by all the women that's for the entire village. There's the turning of the earth, preparing the soil, planting the seeds: corn, beans (that they will have grow up the cornstalks), squash, sunflowers, pumpkins, and others I'm not sure of. The small children and old women mind the birds, shooing them away should they be mistaken and think there's an easy meal nearby. Hampered with my arm, I spend a lot of time amusing and caring for the many small children who are always present wherever the women go. I still do all my other chores as well, such as hauling water, collecting wood for fires, grinding corn (that was tricky, but I manage to hold the bowl 'tween my legs), and helping prepare meals. I'm clumsier seeing it's my right arm that's hurt, and it's my right arm that I'm more inclined to use.

Kind Eyes always works to include me in everything and makes sure I'm doing what needs to be done the way it needs to be done. I'm right pleased that the women trust me with their children. Pa used to say, *"Don't always listen for the words, Elle, watch for the actions."* In fact, as the weeks pass, I take it as a downright compliment that so many of the women allow me to care for their children while they work in the garden doing the heavy work of hoeing, digging, and planting.

As the days and weeks progress, it's with Kind Eyes that I finally begin to understand my first few savage words. They come very slowly. Pa may have thought I was quick with some things, but not with this. I begin to hear sounds that I put with things; words like "fire", "wood", "grain", "corn", "sit", "go", and "baby", although I'm not sure if the word I think is "baby" is just Kind Eyes'

name for her child. I'll have to listen and see if the other mothers call their babies by the same sound. But mostly it all just sounds like a jumble of sounds to me, like a pile of mush on a plate. Every once in a while I recognize a sound that I hear and if I work real hard finally I seem to piece it together with what I know. I've never once tried to speak it though! That's nigh on impossible.

I have to be shown how to prepare the meat and the skins as it's not something I know how to do. It's also powerful hard work, and with my arm the way it is, I'm little use. Although it's better, it still pains me, especially if I do heavy lifting or hauling (which is often) but I no longer keep it wrapped, and I'm happy to say that the tooth that was loose from being hit is solid again in my mouth. So I watch careful as Kind Eyes works the hides so that when I'm able I can do it on my own. From start to finish it can take a full week of hard, hard work to do a hide proper. I look around me in the village at all the moccasins and pants and dresses and I see weeks and weeks of hard break-your-back work. *No wonder so many go around just about naked.*

I travel daily with the women to collect herbs and learn about many new ones. Kind Eyes always takes the time to try to explain what each plant does – for stomach ills, lady cramps, tooth aches, and skin rashes. If we are not working in the garden we are gathering in the forest. The men may do the hunting, but it's the women who seem to do everything else. I suspect Bright Feather notices the strings of herbs hanging to dry from the roof of the hut when he is in the village, but he says nothing as usual. I enjoy a treat of maple syrup drops one day, and I look forward to that chore in the fall!

From Kind Eyes I learn the rhythm of the camp. Some ways are powerful familiar, like the way they tend their clothes by the river and the way they love their children. The children near to Eli's age seem to spend their days full of laughter and fun and play. Little ones are well loved by the grown-ups here, spoiled and teased and cared for with as much attention as I cared for Eli. I watch two old men sitting outside their huts give a group of troublesome boys a dressing down and I remember Old Mr. Hobson sitting at Cooper's General Store in the corner by the checkerboard frowning and giving me the evil eye for something Eli had done. I puzzle over that. Savage and white the same? Until my time here I'd not have even thought to ponder such a thing, let alone believe it to be so.

I see the way two savage girls giggle and laugh and whisper like they are friends, and I'm stunned to realize that I wish to be a part of that. I smile at 'Coon as he teases and tickles little Owl, and I think of Pa singing to Eli at night as we all drift off to sleep, and I long for that closeness with a body, too. My head stretches and creaks a bit like an old house as it shifts to make room for this new way of thinking and looking at the people I'm living with. For the first time I'm not so sure that 'savage' is a word that fits them all. For maybe they are all more like me than I care to admit.

But then there are many things that are so downright strange it would be like if you were to try to go through your day walking on your hands instead of your feet. I still struggle mightily with this savage language which I suspect I never will fit in my thick head. And it seems to me that no one thinks much of possessions or ownership or property much like Ma did about her fancy china dishes and Pa did about his gold pocket watch. Then there's the fact that everyone here lives together so close, and all Pa wanted to be was away from *everyone*.



As the spring flows into summer, my life with the savages takes on a pattern as regular as my life at home. I cook, I clean, I work in the garden, and I care for children. Sometimes I laugh at the antics of the children. Sometimes I share a smile with Kind Eyes. I'm not so sad, I'm not so fearful, but I still struggle with the fact that I'm a stranger, still a captive white girl in a borrowed buckskin dress that can't even manage the simplest of talk.

I still miss Pa, Henry, and Eli but the ache's like my arm that's slowly healing. Even the worst of injuries, if it doesn't kill, finally begins to heal. Nights are not so hard for me anymore. It isn't that I don't think of my family, but it's more like I've decided to carefully put them to rest in my mind like some treasured item in Ma's chest.

Ma had a big cedar box that Pa called her Hope Chest. Sometimes he'd let me and Eli look through it, and it was full with all manner of treasured things: clothes, letters, locks of hair (Pa said they were Henry's), a beautiful colored quilt, and even some pieces of jewelry. My memories of Ma have been put away for a long time. There are so very few and they are shadowy like the way things look in the early morning mists that come down from the mountains. Pa told me I look like Ma with my long brown hair and green eyes. I suppose many of things I do around the house reminded him of her, but I can't remember what she looked like. It upset me at first that I could not remember her face clearly after a time, but I treasure the memories of her hands. They were good hands. I can see them more clearly in my memories than her face. I see them covered with flour kneading bread, and doing other chores that have to do with cooking. I feel her hands smoothing my back and stroking my face in comfort over something Henry has done to tease me. I remember her hands combing and braiding my hair each morning and teaching me how to lace up my shoes. I see her hands clasped in prayer at night by my bedside and listening to me whisper into God's ear. Looking through that chest and smelling the special smells, I can almost conjure up Ma's face in my head and almost hear her voice. Henry never wanted to look in the Hope Chest, I suspect for the same reason. Odd how that is, I think; I'd get comfort and Henry'd get upset from the same thing: memories. Eli couldn't remember Ma, of course, but I'd tell him what I remembered.

So my memories of Pa, and Henry and Eli and Ma I keep now neatly stored in a private place in my mind, 'cause I for certain have no Hope Chest. I take them out whenever I like, but they no longer tear at me like a festering wound. I let different things fill my head as I lay on my pallet at night waiting for sleep to come: new words I'm trying to remember, herbs I'm trying to recall, and the cute way Owl looks at me when I play peek-a-boo with him.

Bright Feather is often gone three or four weeks at a time. He never stays in the village for long, no more than four or five nights. He returns with meat (deer, turkey, rabbit, and once even a goose) and furs in many rich shades. Does he set traps? Pa used to do that. I wonder how it's different and how it's the same. He makes no move to talk with me. It's just like living with Old Woman 'cept he doesn't hit or kick me. Not even once. A few times Kind Eyes takes time to show me how to do things that I suspect Bright Feather told her I'm doing wrong. He speaks with her just now and then. I cook for him and he eats it, so I suspect that's a victory. Once I learn the way of

using their birch bark containers I manage quite well. They are sturdy enough to boil water by dropping hot stones into them and can even be set directly on the fire, but once that's done I've discovered it's not much use to you after that! I don't fear him, I'm glad to say. Course I do my best to have everything just as I should, and even with my bad arm I try to be quick with my chores.

When Bright Feather is in the village, most evenings are spent at the main hut where the Chief and Red Coat can be found. Many of the men spend their evenings there, and some of the women, too. It's not a place for me, and I make every effort to avoid meeting times there. I'm happy to stay out of sight at Bright Feather's hut.

I continue to struggle mightily to learn the language and try to get more words each day. I make an effort to pick up two or three new words a day, but some days I can't even do that. Still, after nearly four months, I've yet to utter a single savage word fearful that I'll do it wrong. I now know the name for Kind Eyes and her baby, even the name for Bright Feather, but I don't understand the meaning so I continue to call them the names I know them by in my head. I know "fire" and "fish" and "stick" and "river" and "corn" and even "no", "yes", and what I imagine to be "Go! Get out of here!", which comes from spending so much time with the mothers and the young children. I know the word that you are supposed to yell at the birds when they try to steal the seed, like my "Shoo!" although they don't sound anything alike. Kind Eyes has taken to talking with me at night like we can really talk with each other. I concentrate so hard to understand and hear the different sounds that my head aches something fierce, and I've come to almost dread these times. I don't know if Kind Eyes ever gets fed up with me, but she's always patient and never gives up trying. I've no idea what Coon thinks about me.

I come to realize as I go about my days that the only thing that now keeps me apart from everyone in this village are just three things of my very own doing: my slow tongue, my white skin, and my thoughts of what is savage and what is not. For I'm almost always treated with kindness and respect, curiosity and teasing, and a regular dose of laughing wonder, none of which, as far as I can see, is that bad at all. Once again, being the only different one in a place has a powerful way of changing a body's thoughts about what is ... right and wrong ... *savage and not*. The more I ponder what truly makes a body a savage and what does not, the more tangled my thoughts become.



One hot summer day when we are all bathing at the river, I realize for the first time what everyone assumes about Bright Feather and me. As we wade into the wonderfully cool waters, splashing ourselves and rubbing our skin with the fine sand, one of the savage woman touches my flat, white stomach and the meaning is clear. *How come no baby?* I'm sure I blush right down to my ankles, and for long moments for once all of us are redskins. Kind Eyes looks at me for a moment then looks at the other women and shakes her head "no". There then begins a long conversation in which I hear Bright Feather's name mentioned many times. I would have done just about anything to understand what was being said. Even going back to being dirty.

When I say living with Bright Feather is just like living with Old Woman, I mean it. *That* aspect never even occurred to me, but it seems it has to others. Again, Pa, it seems I ain't so quick.

For many nights after that day I worry about this new idea in my head. My sleep is filled with dreams in which I'm chasing something just beyond my sight and just when I'm too tired to go any further I realize that I must run because something terrible is chasing *me*. I wake with my heart pounding and my breath coming out in gasps. I lie there on my fur pallet and think about the savage woman's red hand on my bare white belly and think, is this what is expected of me? Of us? There are many young women in the village, some not much older than me I'm sure, that seem to ... be ... with a man in more ways than I'm with Bright Feather. Has he just been polite? Have I been just plain stupid again? Is he waiting for a sign from me that I'm so inclined? My gut clenches in a wave of panic that I've not felt in many months. Again I feel an anger with myself. If I could learn this language, I'd at least know what people say and think and expect of me. But no, not only am I a prisoner here because I can't help myself to escape, I'm also powerful stupid because I still can't speak, or even seem to learn the words I need to talk with my captors. I decide I'll try to watch Bright Feather more closely the next time he's in the village. *And*, my head says to me, *what will you do if you see what you are afraid is expected of you?* I've no answer for myself.

I'm going on a hunting trip with a group from the village, and Bright Feather is back and will go along, too. I suspect I was chosen to go because I've no child and they know I work hard. Some women are going along on the hunt who do have very small children, but most are young men and older boys and girls. Kind Eyes has tried mightily to explain, but she has finally just gone around and begun to make a pile of things that I should bring. She smiles a lot and nods her head. I think I'm supposed to be excited about going, but I'm frightened. Strange as it seems, I feel safe in the village now. Will I have to be with others I don't know? Will others take the time to be patient to show me what needs to be done like Kind Eyes does for me? Then other thoughts creep into my head: Will I be days closer to my home? What if Pa comes for me while I'm away? Kind Eyes smiles while I worry.

There are five men, ten women, and fifteen older boys and girls. Most of the men, including Bright Feather, are mounted on horses carrying supplies, while the rest of us carry light packs of supplies on our backs. Two of the men carry infants in babyboards hooked to their saddles. I delight in the cute faces staring solemnly out at the world flowing by. I know things'll be much heavier coming back. It being late summer, I know whatever we can kill will be important to feed us in the winter. Pa and Henry would be busy hunting whenever they weren't tending to the crops, too.

Bright Feather keeps to himself even within a group of his own people. He responds to questions or conversations when needed, but otherwise is a man apart. Even when we settle in the temporary hunting site, the lean-to we erect is farthest from the rest of the group. The other men seem respectful of him and keep their distance as well. As they laugh and joke amongst themselves, Bright Feather watches just like I do. He's a man apart and when he sees me watching him, he goes off into the woods.

The hunting party divides, leaving the women and girls to prepare and wait. Some go in pairs, but I'm not surprised that Bright Feather shows every sign of going off by himself. I'm stunned when he hands me my pack and motions to follow. We head out on foot. He seems

familiar with these woods, and I'm not surprised when we stop at a ready-made lean-to where we set up our things. Bright Feather has been here before.

We sit almost all day silent and still in the forest. Even with me sitting just a small distance from Bright Feather, he blends in with the woods so well that I must concentrate to find him sometimes. It's the first opportunity in all these months for me to study him. The feathers I name him for belong to birds I'm familiar with: red for the cardinal, yellow for the goldfinch and blue for the bluejay. They are twined in his waist-length black hair that for this hunting trek is bound tightly with leather strips like a long tail down his back, just as I wear mine. I don't know how old he is nor can I even try to guess. His skin is smooth and unlined, but darkly tan from the sun like the polished wood of Pa's rifle. He wears permanent marks on his face like Old Woman, but of different designs, three lines across each cheek and down his chin. He's lean and muscular, but all savages seem to be. He never seems to smile, laugh, or show any feeling really. Maybe I should have called him Living Rock, I think, as I watch him sit unmoving hour after hour. Is this how he spends his days away from camp?

With a start I realize that Bright Feather is exactly like I expected all savages to be before being brought as a captive to this village. Unfeeling. Strong. Silent. Separate. Frightening. Not really a person. He fits the pictures I've seen in books, the glimpses I've seen with my own eyes. With Bright Feather I can still do what Pa told me to do: *keep my head down, keep my mouth shut, and mind my own business*. I study him in the dappled summer shade and ponder what would make a body wish to be so far removed from life. Bright Feather seems to want and need no one. Why, even 'Coon, for all his work to look and act fierce can make Kind Eyes blush with just a word and Owl giggle with a look.

The truth is I can no longer fit the people of the village to the picture of red savages I have in my head. They are mothers and fathers, grandmothers and toddlers. They laugh and cry, yell and sing, play games and give comfort when it's needed. Yes, they all have red skin, but I can't always fit together the words 'red' and 'savage' anymore. Those words must be kept separate and only joined if they're earned. Dirty Feet and those that traveled with him have earned them. And finally, I come to the conclusion as I sit and sit and sit that it's not Bright Feather's red skin that makes him savage. No, with great certainty I know that something else has made him this man who seems to enjoy no one's company ... not even his own.

A forest is a noisy place, but I never notice it until I sit that day with Bright Feather. First there's silence as every living creature with any sense scatters at your appearance. Then, if you sit still enough, long enough, gradually you are forgotten and the creatures with their noises return: birds and mice, rabbits and deer, squirrels and foxes. I sit and study the animal village we visit that day and wait and wonder just who Bright Feather is expecting. Just before dusk an elk of enormous size wanders into the clearing. I don't see him move, but all of a sudden Bright Feather has an arrow notched and ready and sits motionless again. I hold my breath as the elk moves closer, closer and closer still to us. ZING! The arrow flies through the air, the elk drops to the ground, and I hear Bright Feather say words quietly under his breath. We have just enough time before dark to quickly

gut the animal and string the carcass up high to keep other interested predators away. We share a meal of fresh roasted meat in the light of the almost full moon.

A sound wakes us both late in the night. Bright Feather reaches out, and for the first time ever touches me, placing his hand on my bare arm. *Be silent. Be still*, the hand says. Soundlessly, knife drawn, Bright Feather creeps out from our sleeping spot. I can't resist and shift ever so slightly so that I can see who wants our elk. It's a bear! A large black bear, so intent on our elk hanging just out of reach that he pays no mind to the promise of death that's creeping up silently behind him. The bear is almost as big as Bright Feather, standing on its hind legs and grunting in frustration as he swipes at the dangling hoof of the elk. In one silent leap, Bright Feather jumps on the bear's back and reaches around and slits the bear's throat. The bear has only time to grunt in surprise and lower itself to all fours before it begins to stagger. I've time to think, *Can a bear be afraid?* as I hear Bright Feather again repeating words quietly under his breath.

If I could speak to Bright Feather, I might suggest we just sit here for a week or two and collect enough meat to feed the entire village for the whole winter! When I make motions to begin helping him deal with the bear he grunts and shakes his head no. So much meat, we can be careless it seems. The work can wait until morning. He goes and washes briefly at the stream down the slope and then returns to the lean-to. In moments we are both asleep. I dream of a great bear who comes and sits beside me. He talks in the savage language, and I tell him that I'm sorry but I can't understand him. "It's no matter," he says right conversationally, and gets up and lumbers away.

We work hard the next day; skinning, wrapping, and packaging the carcasses. It's hot, dirty, messy work. It seems funny to me that we spend all one whole day sitting doing nothing and then fair kill ourselves the next day doing enough work for five days. As we kneel exhausted at the stream at the end of the day and wash as best we can, I must chuckle out loud at the thought of it, for all of a sudden Bright Feather stops what he's doing to look at me. I look back, not sure what to do and certain with nothing to say. We are close enough to touch, and he reaches across to me. I'm motionless, not knowing what to expect, as he reaches up to my head, hands dripping water, and delicately takes something from my tangled mess of hair. I see it's a feather, a robin's I think, long and dark gray brown. He hands it to me as he stands to go back to the lean-to. I look at the feather resting in my clean, wet hand.

Thoughts of Eli, Henry and Pa no longer keep me awake at night, but sometimes, on nights when I'm tired to the bone, they invade my dreams. I never can remember the dreams, but they must be sad, for I almost always wake up knowing I've been crying. In the lean-to that night with Bright Feather I must be having one of those dreams and awaken him with my crying. I open my eyes to find him leaning over me and the bright moon shining behind his head. I know right away where I am, but can't understand what's wrong. He reaches out and touches my cheeks, and his fingertips glisten in the moonlight with wetness. *Oh*, I think, *a sad dream*. I sit up and scrub my face with the hem of my tunic. "It's no matter," I hear myself saying, startling us both with the sound of my voice. Nothing compares with the look of stunned surprise on Bright Feather's face. I've spoken to him in his own language.



We go back to the camp for strong backs to help carry out all the meat. The other hunters have been successful, too, but not as much as us. Great exclamations are said over the elk and the bear. Bright Feather stands stoic and silent; I stand dumb and stupid. What a pair we are.

Back in the village, Kind Eyes and I set to work to cure the bearskin and the elk hide. My arm reminds me how hard the work is and how much it still must heal. We spend days and days working, but I sense that Kind Eyes is glad for the help and the company even if I'm still as silent as a stone. Bright Feather has told Kind Eyes of my sad dream and my speaking to him, I can tell. I can see it in Kind Eyes' expressions when she talks to me and I concentrate hard to understand. I find that I feel more comfortable trying out some savage words and phrases with the little ones. "No." "Sit." "Stay." "Come here!" "Stop!" I know these words are clear because they work. I whisper endearing terms in the ears of the babies. Words that I hear the mothers' say with a tone of love and guess them to be "You'll be fine," "My sweet baby," "Don't cry," and "I'm here."

Fall is just beginning to add a smell to the air the morning I wake and make my way to Kind Eyes' hut as usual. Bright Feather has been gone for more than two weeks again, but not before giving me the bear pelt from the hunt for my own. Aside from the clothes on my back, the moccasins on my feet, and the robin's feather in my hair, it's the only thing I can call mine. I listen to the sounds of the forest and the village as I make my way - sounds of different families, dogs, horses, the sounds through the trees when the wind is rising up, and the sound of the summer bugs - some get louder with the heat and some get softer. The noise I hear as I walk to Kind Eyes hut that morning is different, and at first I don't notice. But gradually, it's the silence of the forest that makes me turn and squint into the dim dawn light and the cool morning mists.

For those brief few moments I think that perhaps I'm really just asleep curled up on my furs in Bright Feather's hut having another funny bear dream. My eyes say, now can you really, truly be seeing a bear sitting on a horse? I stop in my tracks, bare toes curling in the cool wet grass and work hard to focus my eyes through the haze. And as I stand there, the bear and his horse move forward. It's the smell that makes me realize that it's no dream. I was very close to a bear a few weeks back, and a real one doesn't smell so bad. The vision grins at me then, a wide toothless grin through his tangled mass of dirty beard. It isn't a bear, my mind finally understands, but a man! Not a savage man, my head says to me, what's different about him? How long has it been since I've seen one? For he's a white man, wearing a filthy matted cape of an old bearskin and a fur cap stuck on his head. Two more white men slowly come out of the forest and rein in their horses.

My heart begins to pound as I squint closely through the mist at the three white faces before me. Could it be Pa or someone who has come looking for me at last?!

"It's a white woman," I hear one drawl in absolute wonder, and the words sound just as strange in my ears as the sights do to my eyes.

I take two steps back and the bear one starts to move his horse toward me with purpose. "Need some rescuing, girly?" he grins toothlessly at me.

Suddenly I hear Pa's voice in my head clear as if he was standing right next to me and we were still in Cooper's General Store more than three years back, "*That be Bear John, Elle. Don't look at him or talk to him. He's trouble wherever he turns up. As bad as he smells is as bad as he is.*" Then I remember the bite of Dirty Feet's rope around my neck and the red savage girl I last saw tied to Bear John's belt more dead than alive.

White skin. Red skin.

Savage. Man.

Fear. Safety.

Good. Bad.

Right. Wrong.

Home...

My world is tilting and changing, making no sense. Who am I? Where am I? What do I want? What do I do? Who do I ask for help? Who do I need? My feet don't move while my head sees one thing and my heart feels another. A prickling rush of fear starts in my belly and begins to travel through my body and finally reaches my stuck feet. I step backwards one step. Then two. Bear John is close enough to me that he begins to lean down out of his saddle and reach toward me. My mind, fair to bursting already, notices the bits of food stuck in his filthy matted beard as he smiles at me. The bulge of his belly peeks out from underneath his bearskin cape as he stretches out to grab me. "Ain't you just a pretty bit of a thing?" he says with absolute hunger in his voice.

I turn and run. I scream savage words I know that mean danger but don't necessarily fit the picture: DANGER! FIRE! STOP! BEAR! HORSE! NO! COME! FIRE!

It's natural for me to run towards Kind Eyes' hut, but too late I realize I've brought danger right to her. I turn towards the center of the camp, yelling my savage words. But Kind Eyes has already stepped from her hut at my noise. She has a puzzled expression as if to say, *What foolishness are you saying girl, the first time you decide to speak to us?* The change of her expression tells me how close the danger is. She starts to run toward the forest, stopping first to scoop up Owl in his babyboard resting against the hut.

Bear John's companions are laughing and shouting to each other, "Head west!"

"Don't go too far into the village!"

"Don't see no men! You were right, John!"

I can smell Bear John behind me. Kind Eyes begins to sob as Owl's babyboard sticks on a root. I turn to run to help and hear horse hooves slow and his raspy voice laugh, "Here, let me help you get that loosed." NO! Not Owl!

Kind Eyes screams as he leans down to grab the babyboard. My head doesn't think, I just grab a burning stick from the fire and swing. I miss, but the pass of the flame startles the horse, and it whinnies and screams and rears up. Bear John, leaning out of the saddle is unseated and falls hard on the ground winded and stunned. I step forward and hit him hard with the burning stick, once, twice, three times. His great bear cape and beard catch on fire, and he begins to scream.

The smell of burning hair and skin and fur mix with the stink Bear John has already brought with him. He rolls on the ground, screaming and swatting at the flames, but in his panic he rolls

right into the fire that I've gotten the stick from. I turn and run after Kind Eyes and Owl who are almost to the woods now, with the screams of Bear John, the other white men, and the village rising up behind us. Owl's screams are the loudest of all. As soon as we stop, Kind Eyes puts Owl to her breast to hush his cries and keep him silent. Bear John and the other men are wrong; though a large party has gone out hunting just the day before there are men in the village. We can hear whoops and shouts and then silence.

I don't know how long we hide in the woods. My stomach knows the time better than me cause it starts complaining pretty loudly after a while. When we finally hear the sounds of hooves approaching, the sun is well in the sky. It's a savage pony that's for sure, as there's no sound of metal or creak of leather. Kind Eyes sobs with relief to see her husband 'Coon. He takes the sleeping Owl up before him and hoists her up on the horse behind him. I walk quiet beside as Kind Eyes talks and talks. Coon answers questions and asks some himself. Three times I can feel his eyes on me. Bear John is gone, but you can see which way he's been dragged, and his smell is still with us some when we get back.

There's much talking the rest of the day. Runners are sent out to find the hunting parties and Kind Eyes is questioned by the Chief. They talk to me, too, or try to. They show me Bear John's body and two of his men who've also been killed. All of their possessions are spread out on the ground, each having been touched and studied. Standing there looking at the bodies and smelling the awful smells my knees get to shaking so much that I finally just have to sit down in the dust.

Many in the village come to stare at me over the rest of the day while I try my best to act like nothing much has changed. The day is just the same as any other.

Except for the fact that I've killed a man.

A white man.

Men, women, boys, girls, and even a few curious dogs all troop by to have a look-see at the murderous captive white girl grinding corn and keeping watch over her birch bark bowl stewing over the fire calm as you please. I try my best to ignore the stares and whispers just like I always have. And it's impossible, just like always.

They give me Bear John's horse! What will Bright Feather think when he comes back and sees a white man's horse hobbled next to his hut? I hope Kind Eyes is nearby to explain, since all I can probably say is "Bear, John, fire, hot, no, run!" Too bad I can't say "stink." I'll just hold my nose. The poor horse appears to be better cared for than Bear John cared for himself, and certainly that savage girl I saw him with so long ago. *Life is sure strange me being in this savage village now and so far away from Pa, Henry and Eli*, I think to myself more than once.

Many of the men are back, and more than a few have come by to stare at me and Bear Johns' horse. Maybe I'll get used to all this attention after all, I think. I decide to call the horse Willow because her dark brown mane and tail flow like the willow tree's branches near the stream. I like the bright white socks on her legs. She seems like a gentle mare, although I haven't ridden her yet. I don't have much practice riding astride a saddle, let alone bareback. They didn't give me the saddle. I've brushed and fed her, and she seems happy with all the care.

Kind Eyes is in a state, brushing my hair and checking my clothes. I keep trying to do the usual chores that need to be done, and she keeps shooing me back and looking impatient. She finally takes my face in her hands and says words real slow like, willing them to seep into my thick skull. I concentrate hard and repeat the ones I understand: “Night”, “Fire”, “Chief”, and the word that means me.

We eat no evening meal at the hut, but as night falls make our way to the center of the village. I’m not happy to be seated next to the Chief where all eyes are able to see me. Kind Eyes does not have kind eyes when I make a move to go someplace else. Her look is plain. *You sit right there and don’t you move.* I sigh. I sit.

My head aches with the strain of trying to listen and understand. The Chief, Red Coat, and even Old Woman speak for a time. *When will I understand this speaking?* I think to myself, angry like. Most of the men and all of the women and children from the village are gathered. I don’t see Bright Feather, but that’s not a surprise. He has only been gone two weeks. We eat dinner, and my stomach is happy. Sweet venison, corn, squash, late strawberries and blackberries; my lips and fingers are shiny and bright with my eating. No wonder the men meet here each night when they are home, I think!

Someone begins to play a drum, and there’s dancing and shouting and singing. Someone acts out a bear hunt, another acts out a battle with an enemy. I see a flash of color, and I recognize Bright Feather’s red, yellow and blue colors in the dark on the edge of the circle. Had a log not slipped and exploded into a short bright flame I’d never have known he was there. I feel eyes on me as the drums play, but no one else steps forward, and then from the shadows I can see a shape emerging, a bear. I gasp in fear and the Chief reaches and touches my arm. He looks at me and back at the shape, then back at me and out to the crowd. *Tell your story,* his look says, *They want to hear your story.* How do I tell him that telling my story in front of all these faces is almost more terrifying than facing the real Bear John? How do I tell him that I can still smell him in my nose and hear his screams in my head?

I stand up and smooth my tunic; I’m barefoot and my hair is tied back like it was that morning. I realize I look just like I did on my way to Kind Eyes’ hut: just like I’m supposed to. I try to ignore the fire and the crowd, shut my eyes and let the drums creep into my head and my heart and through my blood. It’s calming because the drumbeat is slower than my scared heart is pounding, and I feel things inside me start to slow, start to quiet. I open my eyes and imagine walking to Kind Eyes’ hut. I turn my head; what’s that change in the forest’s sounds?

I feel the terror and a sob of sheer remembry rips through me. I make them laugh shouting the savage words I know in warning. They slap their thighs, hold their sides, and wipe away tears from laughing so hard. Kind Eyes joins me in front of the fire and we do a dance almost remembering how things went. We even have Owl’s babyboard – with a cornhusk doll inside instead. At the end, I break the tension again by holding my nose; remembering the stink of the burning bear man. Then with Owl’s babyboard, Kind Eyes and I run off into the dark edges of the firelight.

They like my show. I want to wander off to Bright Feather's hut and curl up on my pallet and go to sleep, but that isn't how it's to be. Kind Eyes fair drags me back to the light and then, instead of letting me sit down and do my best to disappear, the Chief stands and begins to talk to me and the village. I hear Bright Feather's name, and Kind Eyes, even Owl's and Old Woman's. I hear "bear", "fire", and I'm fair certain I hear the name they call me which I don't know what it means. Then the Chief speaks just to me. He places his two big, warm hands on my shoulders and speaks like he talked to Dirty Feet, Old Woman, and Bright Feather that night so long ago - respectful and without emotion. He takes a necklace strung with bear claws and shells from around his neck and places it around mine. Old Woman stands and speaks quick like. She does not look at me once but speaks only to the Chief. I see others look at me though, as she speaks and I think, *Now what?*, but I don't know the answer for I can't understand her words. Red Coat steps forward, her gold button necklace flashing in the firelight, and ties a belt with a knife sheath around my waist. I'm handed Bear John's knife, and even I knew its value, for it's real metal and not flint. Then the Chief turns me to face the village and says one last thing. He calls me 'Bear'. And the village cheers.

As the cheering quiets, the crowd parts and makes room for a man I immediately recognize to be Bright Feather. He leads Willow, who whinnies nervously from all the unfamiliar sights, smells and sounds. She's no longer bareback but has a beautiful thick woven savage blanket thrown over her back and a savage rope harness around her head. I recognize my very few possessions: moccasins, bear skin, plus some splendid pelts I know Bright Feather has kept carefully aside from all the others he has used and traded. He walks through the firelight to stand in front of me and reaches for my hand, in which he places Willow's reins. He bows his head every so slightly and says simply, "Bear," and turns and walks away.

I'm not sure of anything. But I think I'm a member of this tribe now, no longer a slave. I think I'm called Bear. And I think I'm without a place to sleep.

ⁱ *The Cherokees, A First Americans Book*, By Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, Holiday House, New York, 1996, p. 4

ⁱⁱ Sir Thomas Overby, *The Wife*, December, 1613, Stationers' Register