

The Grieving Indian

Chapter One

A Promise Made

MY OJIBWE INDIAN name is Shingwauk, which means “a tall white pine,” but I have not always lived up to this name. There were many years when mine was a sick and shattered world. My life was totally broken to pieces. In those days, I stood tall only in body. My soul was mired in the deadly depths of alcoholism and spiritual deadness. It is only by the grace of God and the wise actions of a loving wife that I am alive today. Because they stepped in, I was spared from being another Indian statistic. Without them, I would have died the victim of acute alcoholism, brought on in part by the lingering effects of grief over a neglected childhood.

I am an American Indian, enrolled in the agency at Ashland, Wisconsin. My family and I were members of the St. Croix Band, sometimes referred to as the “Lost Tribe” because we had no reservation. This had a strong effect on us. For one thing, without a land-base to call home, we found ourselves moving around a great deal. Over the years, we lived in a number of different towns for periods ranging from several months to three or four years. Having no reservation home also meant no financial help, which most Indians normally receive. Trying to make ends meet, we left Wisconsin in 1940 and migrated into Minnesota to work in the woods. I have been a Minnesotan ever since.

Ours was a hand-to-mouth existence. We lived in poverty. Each spring, we were given a fishing line, hooks and sinkers for the season.

The fish we caught were our main source of food, along with what squirrels we were able to kill with slingshots.

One day when I was six years old, my mother packed several of us children up. She then took us down to the railroad station and put us on the train. Ma gave us a basket of food and told us we were going on a picnic. After talking real friendly to the conductor and telling us to behave, she waved goodbye. It sounded like fun, so we left in high spirits.

We rode for what seemed like a very long time, before the conductor finally came by. He opened up the basket and told us to eat. After a while, we came to a large city and were moved to another train. By this time I was tired of our adventure. I hoped this train would take us home, but it didn't. Instead, it took us on down to the Federal Government Indian School at Tomah, Wisconsin. We were there for three years without seeing our parents. Then after a brief time at home one summer, we spent another three years away at Indian schools. The timing of this separation could not have been worse. Right during the time from ages six to twelve when we were shaping our values and our conscience and really needed them, our parents were not there to give us their support.

When we finally returned home to stay after six years away at school, we found our mother had divorced our dad and was already re-married. We heard there was some sort of problem, but we really did not understand what it was all about until we saw the new man in our home. It was a shattering experience that soon got worse.

We were only home for a short while when we found we could not get along with our step-father and were forced to move to our

grandmother's place. This meant that not only was our dad gone, but so was our home. We were never to live with our mother again after that, except for brief visits.

Grandmother welcomed us to her home and that is where we stayed until we were old enough to leave. Our basic needs were met except for one thing—the necessary correction and influence of parents. This made us double losers. We missed out on our parents' input as children, and we missed out again during the difficult teenage years. Between living with our grandparents and staying in homes of farmers where we would work for our board through the summer months, we were raised without any kind of parental guidance. There was no one to help us with the structure of our conscience or in the development of any kind of spiritual values by which to live. As a result, a few of my cousins, my brothers and I became some of the biggest thieves in the two-county area surrounding our home. Fortunately for me, I was never sent off to one of the reformatories as most of the rest of them were.

During these years, we had no communication with our father. We really did not know where he was or what he was doing. We only saw him on rare occasion when he came out of the woods to visit his parents. He would be there for perhaps a week and then suddenly one day he would be gone again, and we would not see him for another six months or perhaps a year. I respected my dad and loved him. Even though he drank periodically when he came out of the woods, he still had a lot of good characteristics.

I was introduced to alcohol at a very early age. My mother made home brew and sold it. This was the way she made a living for us,

and so there was always a lot of drinking going on in the home while we were there.

Later, when I was at my grandparents, my father also introduced me to hard liquor. He bought moonshine (illegal) whiskey by the gallon on some occasions and would pour it into a lot of pint bottles. Then he stashed these around under haystacks and brush piles in the community. On one occasion while we were walking over to visit a neighbor, he gave me a pint. I was not sure what he wanted me to do with it, so I just carried it. After a while, he asked me why I wasn't drinking. Then as if to show me how it was done, he pulled out his bottle and took several big gulps. Following his example, I lifted my bottle and did the same. This was the pattern that was set for me.

When I was a teenager, the U.S. Army began testing the war-time use of planes for bombing enemy targets. From the day I heard about it, I wanted to be involved. But it wasn't flying planes that caught my interest; I wanted to be the bombardier who dropped the bombs that could destroy.

At the time, I was not aware of a build-up of anger inside me, but looking back I can see it was there. I resented my mother for divorcing my dad and also for remarrying. I resented the two stepfathers that followed. I also was very bitter towards mother for sending us off to the government school and for the manner in which she did it. I resented the schools, the teachers, the government and especially the Bureau of Indian Affairs. I am sure now that all this rage gave rise to my growing desire to be a bombardier. It was one way I could strike back at the world for all the hurts I had suffered.

World War II brought further separation to our family. I was drafted in 1943. The government asked me to choose which branch of the service I wanted to join, and I picked the Army Air Corps. I figured this was my chance to fulfill my boyhood dream of being a bombardier, but they turned me down because of my weight and height. Instead they sent me to Georgia for training in communications. I learned to work with teletype machines and later became a control tower operator.

In December 1943 we left for twenty-eight months of service in North Africa, on the island of Corsica and in Italy. From the start we found ourselves actively engaged in war. I was on tower control duty on many of the mornings when our B-25 bombers took off. As I gave them clearance and watched them taxi out and line up for takeoff, my gut was filled with a jungle of mixed emotions. I envied those men and the wings they wore. I would have done almost anything to be one of them. And I hated myself for being too big for combat duty as a bombardier. My whole tour of duty was turning into a major disappointment.

As the days and weeks went by, my job in the control tower fanned the flame of my desire to be a bombardier. I longed to be in the air where the action was. My body and soul remained on duty in the tower, but in spirit I was with our squadron. I followed their progress through whatever radio transmission I could pick up. At times, bits and pieces of their conversation came in, especially when they were under attack from enemy fighters. Then, when silence followed, it was almost unbearable. Were they hit or did they get away?

It was always a relief when at last the returning planes made

contact. We quickly cleared the field for their landing. Fire trucks and ambulances lined up along the runway ready for action. Then suddenly the B-25s were back. Those carrying wounded men came directly in, while the rest circled the air strip. I counted those planes. And I followed with my eyes as the ambulances raced away to the group medical facilities.

When that day's shift ended, my first stop was the squadron bulletin board. I studied the bomb strikes that had just been made. Then I looked up the crew members who had gone on the mission to hear about it firsthand. What happened when the radio was silent? How many fighters attacked them? How many did they hit? Did they get any help from our own fighter support?

At last, when the questions were all asked and answered, I returned to my tent. We had made it through that raid, but I knew another one was coming tomorrow.

As the war progressed, we lost many bombardiers, and a call went out for anyone wishing to volunteer for flight duty. I jumped at the chance. After passing the test, I was summoned to Cape Bon in Tunisia for three months of training. I was then assigned to a bomber crew. My buddies thought it was good luck to have an Indian on their team, but I felt I was the lucky one. At long last, I was a bombardier.

I went into my new mission feeling pretty brave. We were supposed to wear protective gear and a helmet, but I figured I didn't need it. Then, our plane got hit, and I sure changed my mind in a hurry. These were not the pleasure trips I thought they would be, and I started wearing every kind of protection they gave us.

On about our twenty-fifth bombing mission, we had a particularly rough time. We lost two of our six planes and the rest got shot up pretty badly. I was wounded, but we made it back to the air strip. It was at this point that I felt luck had deserted me and for the first time a real fear set in. It is still vivid in my mind today. From then on, each mission was a battle with terror, but I still stuck with it. I suppose it was my boyhood dream that kept me there.

After one mission where we missed our target, our commander told us we were going to keep going back until we got it. As we left the briefing room, I knew I was not able to handle the fear that was welling up inside me. As soon as I had changed into my street clothes, I headed for a nearby village and began to drink with a vengeance. I ended up so thoroughly drunk I do not remember how I got home. The rest of my tour of duty followed the same pattern. I could not handle my fear unless I spent almost all my time on the ground drinking. I would sober up just enough to be able to fly the next day, then as soon as we landed, I would be back at the booze. This went on day after day and resulted in me becoming a confirmed, chronic alcoholic.

There were a lot of desperation prayers during those days of terror. I did not know for sure if God existed, but in case He did, I pleaded with Him to bring me home safely from those bombing raids. If He held up His end of the bargain, I promised I would be anything He wanted me to be, even a preacher. That was a real concession on my part. My brother, Frank, was a minister and I thought that was the lowest job on the totem pole, but I was desperate. I prayed like this each time we headed toward our targets on the rest of the seventy missions we flew. By the time the war was over, these promises were

very real to me, but so was alcohol's hold on my life. The day I got out of the army, I was so drunk I couldn't even sign my discharge papers.

When I was released in June 1945, I returned to Superior, Wisconsin to do what I knew best—drink. For the next year, I went from one drinking party to another, celebrating with friends and relatives who were also just getting out of service. I knew I had made promises to God, but for the moment I was marching to the orders of alcohol.