Chief Strong Bear

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It seemed as though I had just drifted off to sleep when the phone began to ring. Startled awake, I jumped out of bed and raced to get it.

"Hello," I said, still groggy with sleep.

"Jen, is that you?"

"It's me, Dad. What time is it?"

"You mean you're still in bed? I forget you've become a city girl," he said.

"What is it, Dad? Is something wrong?" It was not like my thrifty father to call just to chat.

"It's Bob, Jen. He's got new orders. He goes to Viet Nam."

I felt the blood drain from my face as I groped for a chair to lean against.

Bob, my friend of how many years? 19, 20? I never pictured him anywhere but on my father's ranch, handling everything as his father had done before him. It was where he belonged.

"When, Dad? When does he report?" I asked.

"Day after tomorrow. He said he sent you a letter. I knew he wouldn't call you now that you got yourself settled in this new job and all, so I thought I had better butt in."

"You were right to call, Daddy. Thank you. I'll talk to you later."

As I hung up the phone, I felt a familiar feeling of loss. Another place, another time--I'd been there before. I sat down. The faint smell of fresh chopped onions came to me. A red and white checkered oilcloth danced before my eyes.

I was 8 years old that summer. It was the year of the grasshopper plague in the Dakotas. Crops were devastated in hours as the waves of gnawing insects moved from field to field. It was also the summer of record setting high temperatures. Water was rationed so what the grasshoppers spared was left to shrivel up and die. It was the year of Korea--that distant country whose war seemed very far away. It was not a happy summer around our ranch. To escape my parent's preoccupation with crops and water, I began riding my pony out to the foothills beyond our fields. I took a book or a favorite doll and played by myself. It was here that William Strong Bear found me that summer of '51.

I was stalking a lizard, trying to capture him in my hands when I heard a deep laugh behind me.  

"You'll never be a hunter that way, young one. Are you hurt?"

"Noo. No sir." I replied.

continued
"Well, come here and let Strong Bear show you how to trap."

Never had I seen such a magnificent man. He was the tallest, strongest, handsomest Indian in the world. He had long shining black hair bound in a single braid that hung down his back. Three eagle feathers were fastened to the end, almost touching his waist. He wore faded bluejeans and no shirt. Around his neck was a pendant, a beautiful turquoise eagle set in silver. He had a wonderful face—high cheekbones and a clear complexion.

I followed him to the top of the hill and watched, fascinated, as he approached and calmly snatched a lizard who was sunning on a rock. He opened his huge hands to let me peek in at the frightened animal.

"You take him," he said.

I put out my hands and he gently transferred the jumping body.

"Talk to him now," he ordered.

"HELLO LIZARD!"

"No, no, softly. Like this. Oh, green creature of the desert, I mean you no harm." He spoke in a voice so low I had to bend down closer to hear him. The lizard was still! I opened my hands and began to stroke it.

"Let's put him back now," Strong Bear said.

"No, I want to take him home to keep."

"Why? He means nothing to you. He belongs here in the desert. It is the way it must be."

I dared not defy the authority in that voice. I put the lizard back on the rock. When I turned around, the Indian was gone.

He found me many times that summer, always appearing suddenly as if dropping from the sky. Later, he would melt away when my back was turned.

Strong Bear taught me how to ride my pony Indian style—bare back, using only my heels to signal him. We would race across the flats creating our own wind to whip back my hair. I learned to lay a trail and to make jewelry from insects the Plains. I wished I had been born a Dakota Squaw instead of a rancher's daughter. I dreamed of the days when all of the Indians were as free and proud as Strong Bear.

Sometimes we talked of his family.

"Why are you called Strong Bear?" I asked.

"It is my family name now. My Grandfather was the chief of all the Dakota Indians. They say he had the wisdom and strength of a bear."

"What will you call me?" I asked.

"I have thought about it. You shall be Still Water because you are as deep as Blue Lake and your eyes are as dark and clear as still water."

How hard I tried to live up to that wonderful name!
Toward the end of August, we saw a spectacular sight. We were resting our ponies in the shade of a pine grove. Strong Bear touched my shoulder and pointed up above the tree line. There, flying as though he owned the Black Hills, was an eagle.

"We have been blessed, young one. The eagle shows himself to only those who are worthy."

"Why is he so important?" I wanted to know.

"Because he is Chief of the birds and he is free. Without freedom, the eagle dies. I am much like him. I need to be free to live. Do you understand?"

I did.

The weather was still hot when school started. Everyone was talking about the heat, the crops and especially the war now. My Dad read the newspaper articles about the war out loud every night as my mother worked in the kitchen before dinner. He sat at the kitchen table with the paper spread out on the red and white checkered oilcloth. My mother would stop working, spoon or knife in hand, when he read something interesting to her.

"The Korean conflict has reached into the heart of Pennington County. Notification from the Selective Service Department that 13 young men will report to Pierre on September 18, 1951, for induction into the United States Armed Forces has arrived today via express telegraph from Washington."

He read the list. Time seemed to stop when I heard him say "William Strong Bear." I can still see my mother's knife poised in mid-air above the pile of onions she was chopping.

I knew all about the army and this war now. We talked about it in school. I was sick with fear. Strong Bear hated war. He had told me about the wars so long ago when his people lost their land and their pride. War was against nature. He could not fight.

For three days I went into the hills, but he did not come to me. When I went to get my pony to ride out on the fourth day, I found hanging on my bridle rack the leather thong with the glittering turquoise eagle. I knew it meant goodbye.

I opened my eyes and tried to concentrate on today. I had to say this goodbye myself. As I dialed the airport, I tried to remember where I had put the carefully wrapped eagle. I'd wear it today to remind me of the other place, the other time.