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Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer
By Allison Adelle Hedge Coke
University of Nebraska Press

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Of Seeds

I descend from mobile and village peoples, interracial, ingenious, adventurous, and bold. None famous, none of any more than humble means, though in this great ancestral river thoroughly bloodstreamed true, I am born from those so devoted to their beliefs and way of living they would eagerly choose to be memorialized through songs or stories of honorable doings, or maybe through sharing a bit of tobacco on special occasions, rather than by accumulating material legacies in life.

Before me and around me were warriors, fighters, hunters, fishers, gatherers, growers, traders, midwives, runners, avid horse people, weavers, seamstresses, artists, craftspeople, musicians, storytellers, singers, linguists, dreamers, philosophers; they were Huron, Tsa la gi (Cherokee), Muscogee, French-Canadian, Portuguese, English, Alsace-Lorraine, Irish, Welsh; and there was the insane.

I understood all of this by the age of three.

When I was a tiny child, my father would sit me up at the hardwood kitchen table near my older sister, Pumpkin, and give us seed and pony beads to string. I could barely reach the surface of what seemed then to be an enormous gate-leg table to work, so I propped myself up higher by sitting with my feet and knees tucked under me on the light-brown vinyl chair seat. Being included made me feel like a big girl, so I worked hard.

As I remember, this table was off to the side of our kitchen on the north side of the house. We lived on an unfinished road, speckled with small clusters of mixed-blood and Indian families, on East Eleventh Street in Amarillo, Texas. My family had settled there temporarily because of my father's work in the Department of Agriculture. Amarillo is supposed to be a dry place, but when I was young,

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sometimes in spring, the smell of rain would hang in the air for days. Mint lined our front porch; a mud puppy we called Sam and a box turtle the size of a small shaker lived under it. The grasshoppers were so fat back then we would hull them out and eat their meat for snacks, imitating my father's Depression stories, just to make an impression on other kids.

I was born August 4, 1958, just north of the area. Named Allison Adele, my first name acknowledging a character in a book who, though slightly crippled herself, helped people who had special needs, the second honoring my mother's aunt Ivy Adele. I was told that the two names together mean "back foot soldier (rear or tail fighter) for truth (honor)." My birth certificate reads "Hedge Coke," as two words, and that is how I spell my last name. My sister's certificate reads "Hedgecoke" as one word. It varies throughout my family. My father says the name was closer to Crow (male), or Bird in the Bush, or Bush Crow originally, and we think of it in that way today still. I have other names, but they are personal—mostly unspoken. All my names are good names, and I am thankful for them. A name creates life patterns, which form and shape a life; my life, like my name, must have been formed many times over then handed to me to realize.

My dad has a good sense of humor, so when the nicknames come, they are from him. My toddler nickname was Baby No. The movie *Doctor No* was released locally while I was beginning to get mobile. I was into everything. My dad says he couldn't resist. He calls my sister Pumpkin Head since her face is round and full. She smiles wide, too. These are the first names we knew each other by. We see Baby No and Pumpkin Head in each other's eyes still today.

In that kitchen my first clear memories begin. We are surrounded by cabinets, far above my reach, filled partially with flour, cornmeal, cereal, and macaroni and cheese, just as in every other house nearby. The windows are all open. Crossing the ceiling corners are cobwebs that my father saves for blood coagulants in case we get cut or step on nails barefoot. If a spider happens out onto the linoleum floor, he scoops it up with his bare hands and carries it outside, allowing it to be free to make webs elsewhere. He says the spider brought both

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pottery and weaving to The People and we should respect her for doing so.

Each time my father starts us beading, I try my best to get my stubby fingers to shape long, bright necklaces with corn and flower patterns. He sits across from us and works on nine- and twelve-row patterns of his own. I am still young enough to be limited to stringing ponies; I finish a pattern that actually resembles my intention. My father looks it over carefully, nods, and, without saying anything about the beadwork, smiles and says my face is beaming.

I ask him what a beam is, and he tells me it is the stroke of sunlight pouring through a clearing in the clouds.

I didn't know my face could do such a thing.

While we were busy working on the beadwork, my father would tell us about our ancestors and relatives, about their joys, struggles, and great and terrible survivals. I loved his stories so much I taught myself to read by the time I was four, so I would never be without stories. My father's voice was gentle and strong, rhythmically patterned, like a song, somehow making it easy to remember things he said. The ancestors we came from seemed to me like beads strung together, patterned, woven into a whole people. Even the old heart beads, one color layered over another, represented individuals with more than one side or purpose in life. And what he didn't say—details about certain character traits and personal losses—was carried across to us by a raised eyebrow or sad expression on his deep brown face. This outright avoidance was just as important to our education as what he did say out loud. Maybe even more so.

At the kitchen table, we learned about our universe, our world, and ourselves, about being Cherokee, Real People, relatives of deer, and carriers of an Eternal Flame. We heard stories of our beautiful home in North Carolina and how this home full of gorgeous mountains, hills, valleys, rivers, and streams also spread throughout what is now Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, and other surrounding areas in the southeastern United States. This land had life and spirit just as we do. My father told stories of deer, otter, bear, and birds; of corn, squash, beans, and berries; of ball games and Little People; of sky vault and the world beneath the water.

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He talked of this great earth—the Great Smoky Mountains, the Appalachians, the land of the Blue Ridge (Oconoluftee)—and the many mountains and peaks physically marking our occurrence in the world. These were the lands of birth for First Man and Corn Mother, the lands Buzzard had created with a great flapping about of his wings in mud, and the lands of the great flood where a dog talked and saved man. Pumpkin and I heard of the greatness of the stars and the Dog Road to the Darkening Land. We learned of the rivers and streams where people exchanged clothes and made relations, of dance squares where celebrations took place to honor the seasons and life, of the mighty and many mounds my ancestors built for burial and prayer during a priesthood that sprang forth from the people and ended by the people's hands, where the ghosts were so strong that they even drove off enemy troops during the Civil War. My father recounted tales of rich black soil and luxuriant flora greening the topsoil quilled with lavish tree trunks and topped with a canopy of leaves and pine needles thickly spread about all over this great place we originated from. The bones of our Cherokee people furnished this soil with nutrients and fertilized all that we reaped from its bounty. We were as cyclic as the phases of the sun and the moon, as sequential as time.

We learned of the evils of Andrew Jackson, of his troops rendering grease from Indian captives they killed to cook their meats in, and of his all-out hatred for and forced removal of our people. We learned of the wretched Georgian settlers released from English prisons to take away our home, who sought the riches of our mountains and forced us away. Dad told us about some of our ancestors hiding out and remaining forever in the heart of the Smoky Mountains and never leaving, of how a man named Tsa li gave himself up to American troops so that those of us in hiding might remain where we had lived. The People were forcibly removed to Indian Territory (present Oklahoma) by these troops, with some four or five thousand people dying on the way—like our own Grandma Bessie Walker snatched away from us and passing away walking—on this Trail Where They Cried. Some other ancestors moved into Arkansas and the Red River area of Texas to avoid the forced internment onto reservations. We had ancestors on this paternal side of the family who followed all

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these different paths simultaneously. Divided. My father said his own dad, our Grandpa Vaughan (born in 1878), refused tribal enrollment for himself and his children, protesting the "evils of the Removal" and the ruins of the "diabolical Dawe's Act." Grandpa Vaughan stated flatly he wasn't going to be anyone's "PET INDIAN."

We also were taught about being Huron, the other part of my father's Native heritage. Pumpkin and I learned of ancestral lives in bark lodges and long-house villages, of the birch bark canoe peoples from Canada with all its seasonal glory. We were enchanted by stories of long winters and crisp air, of tree sap running, becoming sugars and sweets, of masks cut from live wood and worn for special occasion and purpose, and of the richness of these northeastern lands and the bounty they generously gave our people. Great trees sheltered the lands and the lives of our Huron ancestors entwined with woods and water. The waterways were roads to travel and trade upon; we never left the banks of the woodlands far behind when canoeing. The water was full of mystery and healing properties, and there was great advantage to fighting near the water's edge. My sister and I came to understand the significance of wind and the turtle and the importance of physically interweaving and lacing the edge of the wood line when hunting to appear without notice. My father went on to tell us about the immense abilities of the linguists among our direct Huron ancestors and the mingling of French traders and trappers who saw our grandmothers and fell in love. We learned of secret dreamers and storytellers in our grandma's family.

Pumpkin and I heard how our Huron relations traveled with their French-Canadian men south for many years, following the great wars of the north, where Englishmen and Americans took scalps and skins off of bodies of captive Indian people and cured them for leggings and decorations of the frontiersmen. Our Huron/French-Canadian grandmas and grandpas traded and traveled by canoe and by foot, smoking tobacco to chase away hunger, finally ending up in Indian Territory as well. Our grandmother, Maria Louise, eventually met and married Grandpa Vaughan in a place so many miles from the original Eastern Woodlands homeland of both sides of the family.

My father spoke many times of Granny, Maria Louise (born in 1882). Grandfather Vaughan had passed on from emphysema ten

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years before I was born, and Granny had joined her husband while I was a couple of months on the way, so I never saw my first grandmother. Pumpkin, the older one, remembered Granny and had similarly colored hair, dark with one spot of red in it. She would grab my hands and show me how Granny danced with her before I was born, adding excited affirmations of how "great" Granny was. For me Granny was story, and story was part of everything I knew.

She was a traditional midwife, bringing hundreds of children into the world for many, many families. Granny was a strong woman who knew all the plants for midwifery and for curing common sicknesses. My father used to make us teas from some of those plants when we were young. He sang children's songs for us, in Indian, that she had sung to him when he was little. Granny continued to help and heal even after she was gone. Once my father dreamed of her pointing toward me as I lay in my crib, her hair long and unbraided. He told us that he awoke suddenly with a feeling of electricity running through him and suddenly found himself in our room. I had suffered an asthma attack and had become still. Even though I wasn't breathing, he had woken up in time for him and my mother to bring me back to life.

We learned from Granny's example what was expected of girls and women. Bringing children into the world was important and should be honored. Once a woman had children of her own it gave her standing among the people as a mother, just as bravery or an important action would give her additional status. Traditionally, our father said, all children would typically stay with the mother until they were past early childhood.

Women's natures developed character early on. We girls were told to be strong—"steadfast like a stone if need be." My father told us girls to be careful how we moved (used) our hands when we were angry because we were "our grandmother's girls" and that anger, while useful for appropriate situations, also was dangerous. We should never be vengeful, no matter how we were treated by anybody; unfounded or unnecessary bad thoughts and wishes, as well as needless violence, are no good. Bold fierceness, though, is proper and justified when defending what is good in the world, what is innocent, pure—life and justice. Pumpkin and I would sometimes marvel at our pudgy little

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hands after hearing our dad tell us about Granny. We wondered just what they were capable of that we should be careful with them.

At the kitchen table, my sister and I also became aware of my mother's family. Our maternal grandpa, Herbert, was mixed-blood himself. His Portuguese grandfather (an Enos) had been shanghaied in the Mediterranean by Spaniards and narrowly escaped a life of slavery by jumping boat near New York City. This Portuguese grandpa married in with people (Muscogee) in Missouri, and together they migrated back and forth into Canada, their offspring eventually marrying and settling from Minnesota to Alberta, at the base of the Rockies. We also heard stories of his daughter, who gave birth to my mother's father near the shoreline of the Big Stone Lake on the border of what would later become Minnesota and South Dakota. There is Alsace-Lorraine and bits and drops of other European blood in this line as well. My father explained that our maternal grandmother, Sabina (nicknamed Sybil), felt it important to abrogate her husband's lineage in order to flaunt her supposed all-English heritage. She had arrived here as a girl around 1912. One of her English ancestors apparently had no history noted before arriving through Ireland to marry into her family. The name scrawled on his picture was Butcher; he looked very Chinese to us (though we understood clearly we were never to share that opinion with Sabina). Our grandmother had been born and raised in Nottingham and had played in Sherwood Forest; Dad related all he knew of Robin Hood and of the Knights of the Round Table.

Although our father tried his best to engage us in my mother's family, we never felt the same intensity and depth of connection with her ancestors and relatives. This grandma treated us like strangers, and we felt the same about her and her people. And she had allowed our mother to be sent away to boarding school at age five (where we were told she became a prodigy in classic piano). Dad explained that Grandmother Sabina's ancestors were from the same people who had colonized a great part of the hemisphere. Huron fought the Brits, though Cherokee at one time preferred Brits to Americans due to the Brits' acknowledging us as sovereign people, but the colonization had caused long-term hardship and grief for The People—our people.

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My father raised us to believe being Indian was what made us who we are—what *shaped* us. We were proud of our ancestors. No matter if we were mixed-blood—we were from people who lived with purpose, with humbleness and personal integrity; and proud we were from truly independent people who had not compromised. The events in my father's stories seemed only a separate part of the same day of the telling. We believed there was no real separation between our lives and those of our ancestors. We knew we would always belong to the wet, green, Eastern Woodlands. We also knew we were travelers, nomadic peoples resulting from and adapting to changes of life upon the earth.

Our paternal aunties and uncles were great sources of story as well. We visited all our extended family, and some of them came to visit us when I was very small. Mom got sick when I was a baby, and when Mom was sick we would sometimes live with these relatives. Velma, Willis, Sid, Sam, John, Tom, Lucy, and Rose were my dad's siblings. It was fascinating to spend so much time with them because of their creative minds and creating hands—all of my father's brothers and sisters were good singers or musicians and were artistic in some way.

Velma, a storyteller and seamstress, was the oldest; born in 1902, she was twenty years older than Dad (amazing to us because we believed Dad to be the oldest father anyone our age had ever known). We particularly loved Auntie Velma. She knew all kinds of stories, how to garden, and how to make all kinds of things, including good food. Everyone loved her fresh bread and soup, mincemeat and raisin pie, and hand-wrung chicken stew with rice simmering in blue-speckled pots and pans. And, of course, she always had a big pot of coffee on the stove for guests and family. She was like a grandma for us kids, a hero, and I liked visiting with older women when I was young. They knew everything.

Velma had an old-woman voice and deep-set lines in her skin to go along with it. Her hair was always pulled back, and she mostly wore cotton print dresses. Though she was a small woman, her lap always proved soft, a feeling of comfort and safety surrounding us whenever we were near her, with breezes sweeping through her open house like soft invitations waiting outdoors. When we went outside

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with my auntie, she would show us wild plants and foods we could eat. Everyone loved her. She was absolutely my favorite person in the world.

Auntie Velma used to sit us tiny kids up on her lap and tell us funny stories about our family and animals and scary stories of ghosts bothering people. She always told us to listen carefully and would laugh out loud if one of us got too involved in the story and questioned her about it afterward. All my cousins would gather around her. Velma told us that when she wanted us to give her company she would spend time thinking it and we would all come.

Uncle Willis would share with anyone who would listen his expert knowledge on carving, woodworking, rocks, rivers, and earth. His place was surrounded by every kind of rock that could be found within a hundred miles and by wood he had carved or built things with. Sid, John, and Tom were excellent craftsmen. Sid lived off in Colorado, where the family had for decades migrated from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas following the iron rail and crop work during my father's youth. My uncle John was the easy-going, knowledgeable uncle whom my dad favored closely. Tom was known mostly by letters since he had moved far away to the Pacific Northwest and rarely came down to visit, but his letters were welcoming and generous. Lucy was an expert horsewoman and World War II pilot. The lightest complexioned sibling, she was born less than twenty years after the turn of the century, three months premature. My father's childhood hero, Lucy—by her competence, deeds, and fairness—established herself as the authority among the children. Rose painted and wrote poetry. She settled in Oklahoma, having left North Carolina because of racial tensions.

Sam and my father had strained relations. We could feel the tension—sinewy, like tendons ready to snap. This uncle was naturally suspect to us because of my father's feelings. Dad admitted that Sam had once taken him, Rose, and Lucy down into a Plains town (Kim, Colorado) on a wagon, in 1923 or 1924, tied a sign to them, and tried to sell them for "CHEAP INDIAN LABOR." He later tried to trade Auntie Rose for a button hook, and he beat my father regularly while he was growing up. At Sam's place (which we saw only once), he made beautiful silver and stone jewelry and handcrafted musical instruments,

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so his cabin was filled with the beauty of his handiwork, the scent of fresh wood, stain, and rosin, and tones as soulful as you would expect from the Cherokee talent we were raised to know.

From my aunties and uncles, I began to piece together a picture of my father. As a child in school, following a bedridden year of the terrible rheumatic fever, he had ridden the bus for miles upon the then typical long, uncomfortable wooden benches for seats, and his teachers beat his hands so badly he developed early childhood arthritis. Later my father followed his older sister Lucy's lead and put himself through college. He rode fence, worked as a janitor, and later used a GI Bill he earned from infantry service in World War II to pay his way. He started out by earning a bachelor of science degree in chemistry, worked a couple of years for Phillips Oil Company (then headed by a prominent Tsa la gi man from Oklahoma), but switched to physical therapy training during the polio epidemic before we were born. He ended up working as a physical therapist in Grand Forks, where he enrolled in medical school for a short time. He left North Dakota married to my mother (already a war widow at this time) to work as a physical therapist at Northwest Texas Hospital. After the epidemic was over, he worked a few years as a chemist for the Department of Agriculture, which brought us into the panhandle of Texas for his work. He and Lucy were the first people in our entire paternal family to ever obtain a higher education and to earn bachelor's degrees.

We were proud our father fought in World War II in the South Pacific. He was engaged to a Cheyenne girl when he left for the war, taking off for the fighting with her brother, Russell Fisher. He made friends with other Native people (rather than the other army guys) because there was common ground between them. When in the Philippines, my father noticed the Filipinos were more like Indians than whites. One time he made friends with a Filipino native, who invited him to eat at his hut. A dog loose in the man's yard became supper by nightfall. My father would laugh and admit that Filipino dog tasted pretty good.

Though he never spoke about it much, these war stories also had special impact upon us. His old uniform still hung in the bedroom closet, and we used his military helmets to play in hailstorms, lying in

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ditches and pretending we were being shelled. My sister was in school at this time, and in those days they spent some school time practicing for air raids and such, so she didn't like to play war as much as my younger brother and I did.

One of Dad's strongest philosophies was his opposition to alcohol of any kind. He always told us never to drink, believing it dulled people and made them inhumane. Being mixed Huron and Cherokee meant that we were of The Real People, and to be real people meant being humane. He spoke openly and honestly about these things to us so that we understood his beliefs and reason. To use alcohol risked this humanity; it was difficult enough to be humane in an often inhumane modern world. Unlike some of the surrounding community, my father's family didn't drink. He claimed that most Indians didn't have the same congenital tolerance to alcohol as Europeans and Asians did because it hadn't always been available. Though he never criticized people who drank, he was very strongly opposed to our using alcohol of any kind.

I don't remember my father ever laying a hand on me during discipline. He didn't have to. Pumpkin and I respected him enough to respond to what he told us, and I knew what he expected of me.

Surrounded by stories, we learned to tell them ourselves. When we were small, my sister and I wrote little stories to each other in letters and pictures with small chunks of Sheetrock on the concrete slab outside our front porch. Because she was a few years older than me, Pumpkin knew more letters and words, so she taught me some of what she knew and I improvised the rest. Sometimes we would draw in dirt with sticks or use burned matches or coal to make black and gray pictures. My sister often mixed together food colors and other stuff from under the kitchen sink to make colors for our pictures.

I remember drawing symbols to represent my sister, my family, and me. All across the cracked up concrete step I drew birds hiding in bushes and clouds dripping with rain. We might stay outside drawing like this the whole day through. Sometimes we talked; sometimes we just let the pictures talk for us. I always placed the sun, flowers, and corn in these pictures, imitating designs we learned stringing beads with my father. These things spoke to me because I understood

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something about their properties. We created pictures mostly working off of what we knew of our family before, drawing on the stories my father took great amounts of time to tell.

True to our heredity, we did not stay in Amarillo an entire year through. We were always traveling, visiting relatives, following our Indian bloods—Cherokee, Creek, Huron—continually heading back north through Oklahoma, up the CanAm Highway across the Great Plains, and into our cherished Canada, the lands of my father's mother's people and where my mother's family had settled. Wherever we traveled or dwelled, we lived mostly on macaroni, bologna, bread, soup and always on prayer, story, and song. We prayed to greet each morning and to protect us through the night. We sang whenever the feeling moved us. And my father raised us with attention to story as a simple daily ritual, as regular as changing clothes or brushing hair. While I was still young, middle school age, we eventually moved back east to the western North Carolina home of Dad's Tsa la gi people, never to return to Amarillo again.

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