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The Last Words

By James M. Fire

Billy was an alcoholic and a Cheyenne Sundance ceremonial traditionalist in the most determined manner. He and rest of the local alcoholic tribesmen lived under the "tree"; the "tree" was a stunted elm near the railroad tracts on the outer city-limits, and it offered both refuge from the hot western Oklahoma sun and seclusion from the dominant society which had become too difficult to deal with. During the summer months, Billy and his friends lived under the tree; but when the cold season arrived, they moved into an empty railroad boxcar near the tree.

Billy had been ambitious as a young man and had attended a state university, but dropped out after two semesters. He had wanted to study Indian art or to become a social worker to his proud Cheyenne people, but found that Indian men fared better if they were not proud. Since he could become none of the things he wanted to be, he turned to the most immediate way to cope with his failure—getting drunk and reminiscing about the times his people had lived proudly on the Southwest plains.

Billy was a stocky, bare-chested Indian with thick black hair that was parted in the middle and hung loosely to his shoulders. His eyes were squinted and nearly the color of his hair. He was constantly on the verge

of being drunk; and when he walked, he stumbled, raising his right leg and foot as if climbing a stairway. He was always sad and melancholy; but when he was feeling good, he would dance around the tree beating a cardboard box with a stick, his substitute for the traditional drum, singing the songs of his people.

Toward all people, Billy was kind and courteous and had the uncanny skill to joke with others and laugh at himself, which is unusual to the personality of the young Cheyenne male. He would call me "apple-preacher," and at first I didn't understand until I was told that an "apple" is an Indian who is red on the outside but White (Anglo) on the inside.

When he first came to our Mission Church, he was drunk and stumbling, and the members of the congregation stopped whatever they were doing and turned to look at him. He was from a family of Cheyenne orators, and he would stand to speak words that were sad and wonderful; sometimes he would cry and talk freely of death and the art of suffering.

I remember during one of our Mission revivals that Billy had come to church; it was after one of his week-long binges that had landed him in the hospital. He was very sad, physically ill, and also, typically, very drunk. He sat on the back-row pew

and began to weep. After the service, I hurried to the last pew and depleted all efforts in witnessing my faith to him. I could see raging in his chest, but his spirit and will were like granite. He left the Mission with his war yet raging.

On one hot July evening, I was summoned to the tree by a panting Cheyenne youth who had run several blocks to my home. When I arrived at the tree, Billy's eyes were rolled half-closed, his body was jerking uncontrollably, and his speech was unintelligible. Delirium tremors were not unusual to Billy, and this time was no exception.

Billy was rushed to the hospital; when I was allowed to see him, the doctor was bending over Billy's bed and was bringing him around to consciousness. As soon as I saw that he was struggling to open his eyes, I knew that he was going to be all right, and I would convert him to my Christian faith this time. Once his eyes were open, he began to joke. Then in earnest, I began to speak to him of Christ, the Son of God. I was determined and knew that nothing would get in the way of the Christian concepts I was speaking, although once he shook violently for a short moment.

I was sure that Billy would listen when I asked him why he was in his present condition. His eyes would get misty, and sometime he would weep

aloud. Indian men never embrace, so I grasped Billy's hand and pleaded that he take the God of the "Ve' hoits." "Ve' hoits" is the Cheyenne word for the White person, the Anglo.

Silence filled the hospital room, and finally Billy turned to his side and turned his back on me. He related that I was no longer his Cheyenne brother and that he would not talk face to face to me and not to speak to the Ve' hoits God. Quietly and determined, he stated that he would live as a Cheyenne and die as a Cheyenne and that no "apple preacher" would ever say the last words over his grave if he should die.

Months passed before I heard that Billy was in the north country, on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana, visiting with his relatives. The memory of Billy would fade in and out of my thoughts, and there were moments that compassion was mixed with frustration.

I was completing my final appointment year in the Western Oklahoma Indian Parish when I received word from Billy's mother that he had been killed by a blow to the head in a drunken fight while he was in Montana. She requested that I

Illustration by Cindy Koehn



officiate Billy's funeral.

As I stepped behind the pulpit to say the last words over Billy, the air was heavy and deep sense of sadness surrounded me. I remembered the lonely tree, the forced-laughter of the lost ones, the tears that words could not stop, and the Cheyenne songs

that the lost ones could not remember to sing correctly. I had always felt strange in Billy's world.

I saw that Billy's eyes were closed and his hands were crossed over his chest with a beaded feather-fan in his right hand, and his face had been painted red by the Cheyenne and peyote priests. Wrapped around this shoulders was the blue and red blanket of his tribal clan, and Indian shawls of different colors were placed carefully over the bronze casket. These shawls were later to be given away to Billy's relatives and friends. The smell of wine and tobacco was gone. The war was no longer raging in Billy's chest.

My sadness became immense as I remembered the many conversations that I had had with Billy and the thought of my failure to convert him to my Christian faith. Suddenly, there was a loud commotion at the rear of the church, and all the people turned and looked as a young, intoxicated Cheyenne man stumbled through the door, fell against the pew, sat down, and began to weep and cry. ●

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