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The Dawn of a New Day

Jacqueline Hainta

Dedicated to the memory of my late husband James W. Hainta

I heard a voice, very faint. I listened, and I could hear my grandmother's voice. She was outside in the very early morning, and I smelled the firewood. My grandpa had already started a fire to warm the house. My grandmother was praying. As I looked out my bedroom window, my breath made a fog on the window. I could not see Grandma clearly, but I heard her soft voice. The winter chill had set in, and the grass was covered with white frost. I listened to Grandma. Her prayers were always long, and her Kiowa language was beautiful. The sun was rising slowly; as it became visible, it made the frost glisten.

My mother was away from home, working. She would come home on the days she did not have to work. I looked forward to seeing her. Her hair was long and very black. Her face was a pretty brown, and her eyes said everything. She was happy all the time, laughing with me and Grandma and Grandpa. My father had died in a car accident, and she was recovering from losing him. I suffered with her, but I don't know if she knew that. Somehow, she must have known; I felt that she knew, especially when she hugged me. She hugged me so tight, like she never wanted to let me go.

I always looked to the east in the morning, wherever I was, because this is the way I remembered Grandma praying; she faced the east, toward the sun. The years had gone by so fast. I was out of high school and wanted to go to the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. I had heard that they had a good vocational school there. I would not be too far from home. My mom had really been an inspiration to me. She encouraged me to go out into the world and be successful.

I had been raised by my grandma and grandpa all these years, and I could not see how I could leave them behind, but I did want to go to this school. I would lie in bed at night and think how it was going to be when I was away from home. What would the three people who I loved so much do when I wasn't here? As it turned out, it was the other way around; I was the one who did not know what to do away from home. I did get to go to Haskell, and I met people from a lot of other tribes there. I was busy, and it was fun at first.

I would awake every morning around 5:00 a.m. I knew that Grandma was outside, at home with her warm, grayish shawl on, and she would be talking in Kiowa to the Creator, thanking Him for the new day. Grandpa would be building the fire to make it warm when Grandma came inside, out of the cold. I missed home.

The Vietnam War was going strong when I was 18 years old. I completed the two-year course at the Haskell Institute and had a degree in letter-press printing. I decided to go to work in Cleveland, Ohio. This is where the World Publishing

Company was located, and I wanted to work there. Two of my colleagues went with me to Ohio and shared living expenses. They, too, were printers. I kept busy and hardly thought of home during the time I was in Ohio. Then, one day, I received a letter from the United States Army. I had been drafted. I was shocked.

I had only a certain amount of time to report to my draft board. I had to say quick goodbyes to friends and people I worked with. My boss assured me that if I wanted my job back after serving my country, it would be waiting on me. I was grateful to him for that.

The loud sound of the train brought my attention back to what was really happening. My life had been interrupted. I thought of home.

The transit workers were going on strike at midnight, and I needed desperately to get the last train to Oklahoma City. I made it, running as fast as I could down the long cement walkway and jumped on the last train as it pulled out. This was an awful lot like *some* movie I'd seen before.

There had been a pow-wow in Oklahoma City the night I arrived on the train. I had to try and make it to Carnegie, my home town. I walked to the bus station and decided to make a couple of telephone calls to relatives, hoping they would be able to give me a lift. If I could get at least partway home, I could walk the rest of the way. As I walked into the bus station and put my bag down, I glanced toward the small cafeteria. It didn't seem to be too crowded at this time of night. I realized that I was hungry. I sat at the counter and ordered coffee. I looked around and caught a glimpse of a hat that looked ever so familiar to me. As I listened, I heard my grandma's voice. They were there! My mom, my grandma, and my grandpa were there. They had gone to the pow-wow and, before going home, had stopped for coffee. I asked myself over and over again, *how did this happen?*

I lay on the front porch that night, looking at the stars. I couldn't sleep. I stared hard at the Big Dipper and the Milky Way. My grandma would tell me stories about the stars. She would say, "Our elders are walking along the Milky Way, and the color is the dust from the buffalo." The story of the Big Dipper was my favorite. The brother had turned into a bear and chased his sisters. An eagle came and told them to jump on the tree stump. The tree stump grew, and the bear clawed at them, but the sisters ascended into the heavens and became the Big Dipper.

I heard an owl in the distance; a cool breeze had begun to blow from the north, and dawn was approaching. I had a vision of my grandma even before she came out for her morning prayer. On this particular morning, she had over her shoulders a beautiful turquoise shawl, adorned with the colors of the rainbow. I had never really looked at Grandma in the way I saw her that morning. She was tall and had blackish-gray hair woven in two braids. Her forehead had wrinkles, and her face was heavy, like something was bothering her. She used her walking cane, which I had never seen her use before. I lay still and listened. I heard the wooden screen door shut; Grandpa had gone out to the woodpile to bring in wood to start the fire. I heard an ax hit the tree stump that he used to split wood. He coughed and groaned a little. He was getting old and tired.

I went to war in Vietnam. It was cold and rainy the morning I left home. It was Indian summer! Grandpa said, "That's when I was born." I thought of him,

I thought of Grandma, and I thought of Mom. The airplane was packed with different nationalities, but somehow, we were all the same for a moment. I wondered if I would ever see home again. The one year I was at war, it seemed like everything was taken from me. I missed a year of my life.

During the war, I remembered one trip I took with my grandma before I left back home. She took me to see one of my grandpas named Henry. He was a medicine man in our Kiowa tribe. He prayed over me that evening and told me about life. He also said, "I might not be here when you come back, but you will come back a strong warrior; nothing will happen to you." The sun was seeping down in the west. It was a color of burnt orange, almost red. It looked hot, like fire. Where was I going?

A year later, I was on an airplane going up, leaving Vietnam and the people who lived there, so much different from where I was going, home! Everyone was singing Christmas carols, but it was springtime in "the world," as we soldiers called it. I turned 21 years old in Vietnam. My grandpa who had prayed over me was true to his word; I was on my way home without being harmed. We would be landing in Oakland, California, soon. It was nighttime. I could not see anything. It was dark. I felt like crying. Was I really back in the world? Would my grandpa and grandma and mom be there to greet me? I wondered how my mom looked. Had they been okay while I was gone? I felt sick.

When I got home, there was a feast of food and laughter. My mom looked beautiful. Her dark hair had become a little gray, but it was becoming attractive. Her teeth were straight and white, and her smile was from ear to ear. She was strikingly beautiful. Had she met someone to be with, I thought? If she had, then I was happy for her. Evening came all too soon. Visitors left, giving one last hug and wishes for a good evening. I sat on the same porch that I had slept on before I left for war. Grandma had become ill and would not be coming out to pray in the morning. Grandpa had suffered a stroke, and some hired hand was there to get the fire going for them. There were so many things to do for my grandparents. I was ever so grateful that I still had them in my life.

I was able to take care of my grandparents in their last few months on earth. I told them stories this time. To see smiles cross their faces was a beautiful sight, and to hear their laughter was emotional to me, because I knew, somehow I knew, they would not be with me too much longer. My grandparents both died a few months after I returned home from the war.

I had been through a cycle of life in such a short time. I found a verse on my grandparents' night stand, and Grandma had written my name on it. I cried silently. I was home, and I was alive. Had they been waiting for me? Had they been waiting for the dawn of a new day? "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

The sage will grow again in the summer months to come. The say-own-gaaw (Indian perfume) will blossom in the heat of the summer; the tobacco will fill our homes with a smell of herbs and earth. The cedar from Longhorn Mountain will be picked by another generation of grandsons for traditional ceremonies. My grandparents will be there, at the top of Longhorn Mountain looking down on us, their life complete on Mother earth. Their legacy will grow within me, for their teachings have shown me the way of what a unique Kiowa man should be.

