

## The Nail Dream

On the way out of Albuquerque, a golden oldies radio station started playing Bob Dylan's *With God On Our Side*. Teresa, her mind zoned far away, was resting her head against her hand, her elbow propped against the open window of our old Ford Truck. The wind streamed and whipped her long hair making it look like black fire. From the corner of my eye, I saw her slowly turn and stare toward Dylan's sarcastic, atonal lyrics. After awhile she said, "Do they? Do the whites have God on their side?"

We rattled down the two-lane a few more miles before I said, "Let me tell you a story.

"You know great grandfather's stories of his life in the Indian School. Whites ripped him from the arms of his parents and held him against his will. He was forbidden to speak our language, his hair was cut short, his clothes were chosen for him, he wasn't allowed home visits – even for summer vacations, and he was beaten for breaking rules. When I heard those stories, I was outraged, just as you were.

"The Indian Schools have been closed for over three generations. Charlie Lummis battled the BIA for our people to make them change. The one in Albuquerque, it changed a lot – for the better. Still, when I was a young man, I believed a debt of justice was owed great grandfather who was *educated* before Lummis came. I schemed and dreamed, with no success, about how to right the wrongs done to him. One dream came many times. I didn't see how it had anything to do with great grandfather, but I decided to ask his interpretation anyway.

"He was nearly a hundred and blind. We talked together often, and drank grandmother's strong black coffee. One day I said, 'Grandfather, I have a dream. It comes many times. There is a wooden stair step with a nail sticking up through it, and a big black boot is about to step on it. But I always wake up before the boot hits the nail. I don't understand this dream. Somehow, I feel, it is about your Indian School days. Can you explain it?'

"He nodded slowly, thinking, his head bowed. Then, looking straight at me with his sightless eyes, he said, 'Old Braddock was the meanest man I ever knowed. He had many years. His bald head, big hooked nose, and big empty eyes made him look like a

buzzard. He used an ol' fishin' cane stick on the hand of any us that crossed him. Every mornin' when the wall clock pointed to seven, he was at the door of our classroom on the second floor. First, he made us answer questions about what he showed us the day before. If a boy give a wrong answer, Braddock whacked his hand with the cane while he told him the right answer, and, then, made him repeat it.

'One Saturday, Braddock caned Charlie Rope's hand to bloody meat. Charlie give the wrong answer three times in two days. Charlie, two other friends, and me, we sat out behind the shop building next day to figure out how we was gonna stop old Braddock from beatin' us. Charlie, he wanted payback. He was wantin' to stick'm with somethin' sharp. Hurt him good, but he didn't want to go to jail neither. It got late and we still didn't have no good ideas about it. We decided we'd talk the next Sunday after we thought about it some more.

'Monday, old Braddock come stompin' down the second floor steps leadin' us to the dinning hall for lunch. He got about five steps down, yelled, *Damn!*, and rolled down the steps all the way to the bottom. His arms and legs was a flyin' ever which a way.'

"There was a big smile on grandfather's face. He was wind-milling his arms about like he remembered Braddock as he fell down the stairs."

'When Braddock hit the bottom, his neck was broke, and he was dead. We was all glad. Life was better at the school after he fell.'

"What made him fall grandfather?"

"He shook his head. 'Don't know for sure. I think it was the nail, it tripped him up. I seen a big shiny one stickin' out when we was comin' down the stairs. I was careful not to step on it. When the Superintendent and the doctor looked at the steps they didn't find no nail like I seen. I looked at the step the next day. There was no nail, not even a nail hole. Your dream says there was one.'

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. 'Don't know where it went. The white man's God, sometimes he's on the side of the Indians, too. That's what the padres say. Maybe God, he tripped up old Braddock with the nail, and then hid it. I don't know.'

"Grandfather, who put the nail there? Was it Charlie Rope? Did one of his friends stick old Braddock like Charlie wanted?"

‘I don’t know my son. Maybe Charlie did it. I never heard him say. Maybe Charlie’s boy, Joe Foot, knows. That’s all I have to say.’

‘I knew when great grandfather said that, it was the end of the story.’

‘Joe Foot was in his late seventies, clear-eyed, and very active. I stopped by his fifty-percent off Indian jewelry store in Old Town. He knew who I was and talked freely.’

‘Do you remember Charlie talking about a man named Braddock who taught at the Indian School?’

‘Old Braddock? Sure! Real mean. Charlie said he looked like a buzzard flapping his arms when he went flyin’ off them steps and broke his neck.’

‘Yeah, that’s the man. Did he ever say anything about Braddock stepping on a nail just before he fell?’

‘Why?’

‘Joe squinted at me, his mouth drawn in a tight, straight line.’

‘You ain’t plannin’ to get nobody in trouble are you. It wasn’t Charlie’s fault.’

‘No! Look, I’ve dreamed many times about a boot about to step on a nail. Great grandfather says that maybe the dream is about Braddock stepping on the nail. The nail’s what made him fall. He said when he looked at the step the next day there wasn’t even a nail hole in the wood! Curiosity’s eatin’ me alive. I gotta know what happened.’

‘Joe smiled. ‘Yeah, there was a nail. Charlie saw it, too. He didn’t do it though! Wished he had. He liked to say, *Fifth step’ll get you ever time.*’

‘Fifth step?’

‘Yeah, there was fifteen steps in them stairs and the nail was on the fifth step down. Old Braddock just wasn’t limber enough to roll down ten steps without killin’ himself. Charlie said that he fell down the entire fifteen steps a couple of weeks before Braddock, and that he only got a few bruises and a twisted knee. He had to use a walking stick for about month though. Guess that’s the breaks – no pun intended.’

‘I laughed. Yeah, that’s the breaks. Is there anyone else who might know something about that nail?’

‘He stared at the ceiling for a moment thinking, and then rattled off some names of the children or grandchildren of our fathers and grandfather’s friends. I talked with them all over the next few days. They remembered hearing stories about Braddock. They

all remembered hearing about the nail. Some saw it, some didn't, and if it was seen, it was gone when they looked for it later. Some said a nail hole was there others said it wasn't. The story was a pile of contradictions. It didn't make any sense.

“The nail stories chewed at my mind for a week. It was like trying to weave a blanket without knowing the design first. I thought about the threads that went into it. The nail was in the fifth step down. That meant, at eight inches per step, it was in a step eighty inches off the floor. The children in that class were only ten or twelve years old, which I took to mean they were less than five feet tall – sixty inches – they couldn't reach the fifth step to drive in the nail without standing on something. They'd surely have been caught if they'd tried. An adult must have put the nail there. Was it one of the teachers? I doubted that. Putting a nail in the stair and expecting Braddock to step on it sounded more like a childish prank than something an adult would do.

“Some claimed they saw the nail and walked around it and some said they didn't see it. How could it be there for some and not others? Then I thought, *What if someone pushed the nail down out of sight before they all saw it?* It couldn't be done with a shoe, the nail would just pass right through the sole like it had for Braddock. I chewed on that one for a few days before I had a head slap. I called Joe Foot. His old gravelly voice answered on the second ring.

“Joe, do you remember saying Charlie fell down the same steps just a couple of weeks before Braddock, and that he used a cane for about a month?”

‘Yeah?’

“Do you know what the cane looked like? Did it have a metal cap on its end?”

‘I don't know. Charlie never described it. Superintendent lent it to him, and Charlie returned it when he didn't need it no more. I remember him saying it was so long he used it more like a staff than a cane. It might be in the Indian School Superintendents exhibit over at the Pueblo Center, if you want to see it. I was just over there last week.

“I felt my heart beat a little faster.

“One more question, did Charlie ever mention any adult Indians living at the School?”

‘Naw, don’t think so. They was all kids... Wait... Yeah! There was one. He was the janitor and handy man. I know his youngest daughter, Clara Ruth. Nice lady. Must be close to eighty now. Lives over on Menaul.’

“My heart rate went up some more.

“Thanks Joe! You’ve been a great help!

‘Bueno! Adios!’

“I found the telephone number for a Ms. C. Ruth on Menaul. I was about to hang up when a yawn-filled voice answered. I explained who I was, and asked if I could visit in a couple of hours to talk with her about her father’s life at the Indian School. She said she’d be glad to have some company.

“At the Pueblo Center’s exhibit on Indian School Superintendents, great grandfather’s Superintendent stood in large free-standing photo blown up to life-size, cane in hand. The cane had a shiny metal cap on the end! I stared at it wondering how I could be so lucky to find its picture. Then I noticed it in the case at the foot of the picture along with a big gold watch and chain, and a few other personal effects. I had to get down on one knee and twist my head around a sign to look at the end of the metal cap. Right in the middle was an indent – just like someone had pushed it against a nail!

“Petite, white haired, a face that had seen hard times and good, a smile never far from her lips, and sparkling eyes, Ms. Ruth answered the door before I knocked a second time. She showed me into her kitchen, where we sat at her table; she poured us tea as I told her about Braddock and how I was trying to find out about the nail dream.

“She stared at my eyes through her round, silver-framed granny glasses, listening carefully. When I finished my story, she nodded.

‘Yes, my father was the janitor at the school in those days. He was trained at the school. When he went back to the pueblo, the people shunned him. They said the white man had tainted him. He had to leave. He was very angry with the people and the school, but the school took him back. He had to earn a living. He had suffered much to learn the white man’s ways. Old Braddock, he made them all suffer. I can’t tell you about the nail. If Braddock’s relatives find out, they’ll want my house, maybe even my life in payment for his.’

“I begged her to tell me what she knew. I had to know, and I promised I’d never breathe a word of what she told me.

“She studied my face, her eyes looking for a lie. ‘You promise not to speak of this to anyone?’

“Yes. I swear I’ll not say anything.

“She stared out the window for a moment, and then murmured, ‘It was an accident.’

“What! You mean your father didn’t deliberately put a nail there to stick Braddock?

“Yes, that’s what I mean. He stored his tools under the stairs and drove the nail into the stair step so he could string a piece of wire between the steps and the wall. He wanted to hang some wet rags up to dry. The wood was soft, just pine, and one hard hammer stroke sent it all the way through the step. He was just comin’ out from under the stairs to drive it back down, when old Braddock came stompin’ down the steps, stepped on it, and went crashin’ to the bottom. My father, he didn’t like old Braddock ‘cause he was so mean, but he’d never kill him. One of the boys followin’ Braddock, he saw the nail and figured out why Braddock tripped. He had this big cane, and quick as a snake he took the end and pushed the nail down out of sight. Father ran back under the stairs and pulled the nail all the way out, and then ran to get old Braddock help. It was too late. Braddock’s neck was broke. That night father replaced the step so there wasn’t even a nail hole to give away what happened. It was easy because several of the steps were replaced after the kid with the cane fell down the whole flight a couple of weeks before. Remember now, you promised not to speak of this to anyone.’

“I promised her I wouldn’t tell, and I never did. She passed away several years ago and none of her family is left so I guess it’s okay to tell you now. The dream never returned. But, once in a while, the words of great grandfather float through my mind, *The white man’s God, sometimes he’s on the side of the Indians, too.*”

Teresa twirled a piece of her hair around her finger as the vermilion haze on the horizon disappeared into the sun’s vanishing light. After awhile she smiled, and started humming, *With God On Our Side.*