

Tim Tingle

how i became a ghost

A Choctaw Trail of Tears Story



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Contents

- Chapter 1 Talking Ghost
- Chapter 2 Treaty Talk
- Chapter 3 Dancing on the Stones
- Chapter 4 Fire in the Hair
- Chapter 5 Swamp Choctaws
- Chapter 6 Men with Blankets
- Chapter 7 Snow Monsters
- Chapter 8 Walking People
- Chapter 9 Nita and the Ghost Walkers
- Chapter 10 Bloody Footprints
- Chapter 11 Nita's Walk
- Chapter 12 Disappearing Daughter
- Chapter 13 The Coming of My Final Day
- Chapter 14 Joseph's Story
- Chapter 15 The Bending Branch of Treaty Talk
- Chapter 16 Seeking Naomi
- Chapter 17 Good-bye to My Family
- Chapter 18 Trail of Tears
- Chapter 19 Naomi Meets the Ghost
- Chapter 20 Naomi the Strong
- Chapter 21 The Panther and the Fire
- Chapter 22 Buried with the Bones
- Chapter 23 Naomi and the Bonepickers
- Chapter 24 A Soldier's Vow
- Chapter 25 A Day of Death
- Chapter 26 Choctaw Rattlesnake
- Chapter 27 Wagon of the Bonepickers

Chapter 28 Panther and the Wolf

Chapter 29 Pushmataha and the Choctaw Four

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Discussion Questions



Chapter 1

Talking Ghost

Choctaw Nation, Mississippi, 1830

MAYBE YOU HAVE never read a book written by a ghost before. I am a ghost. I am not a ghost when this book begins, so you have to pay very close attention. I should tell you something else. I see things before they happen. You are probably thinking, “I wish I could see things before they happen.”

Be careful what you wish for.

I’m ten years old and I’m not a ghost yet. My name is Isaac and I have a mother and a father and a big brother, Luke. I have a dog, too. His name is Jumper and he is my best friend. We go everywhere together. We swim in the river together; we chase chickens together.

“Make sure Jumper does not catch any chickens!” My mother always yelled this from the back porch.

“Why can’t Jumper catch chickens?” I asked my father one evening, as we sat on the porch watching the stars.

“That’s your mother’s rule,” he said.

“But *why*?”

“Because Jumper won’t wait for the chickens to be cooked,” he said. “He’ll chew the chickens and choke on the bones and bloody feathers. Would you want to eat bloody feathers?”

“No,” I said. “Good rule.”

“Then make sure Jumper follows it.”

“*Hoke*,” I said, which means “okay” in Choctaw.

Jumper and I, we take long walks in the woods together, we tug weeds from the corn stalks together, and we spend the day and night together.

“No dogs in your bed!” This was another rule of my mother’s, but Jumper was smart. He waited until my mother fell asleep, then he climbed under the covers with me. In the morning, when he heard my mother making noise in the kitchen, he jumped out of bed.

Maybe she knew Jumper broke the rule. Maybe she smiled and let him get away with it. She was a good mother and we had a happy life, mostly. I had too many chores and too little free time, but I knew if I could just wait till I grew up, I’d have all the free time I wanted.

Then came the day that changed everything. Without any warning, I saw the ghosts. I also saw things before they happened.

My father rose early that morning, long before sunrise. He left the house while it was still dark. He carried his shotgun and his bag of shotgun shells, so I knew he was going hunting.

I finished my chores and started tossing mudballs against the barn wall. Jumper barked and chased the mudballs, but only for a little while.

“I’m bored,” Jumper said. “Let’s chase chickens!”

We were on our way to the chicken pen when I saw my father coming home from the woods. He was carrying only his shell bag and his shotgun, so I knew something was wrong.

Usually he returned with a wild turkey or sometimes a deer. He never returned from a hunting trip with nothing. He walked through the back door and I followed him. He didn’t say a word to me, just held up his hand to let me know I should stay outside.

I listened through the door.

“We must move,” my father told my mother. “What do you mean ‘we must move’?” my mother asked. “You better move! Go back to the woods and catch us something to eat!” She was laughing.

“No,” said my father, and he was not laughing. “There is Treaty Talk in town. We must move.”

I was only ten, but I knew what Treaty Talk meant. It meant the *Nahullos* wanted something. *Nahullos* were people that lived a few miles away. They were not Choctaws, like us. We were nice to them and they were nice to us. But Treaty Talk always meant something else, and that something else was never nice.

My father took my mother by the hand and she gave him a strange look. He led her to their room, closing the door behind them. I was afraid of Treaty Talk and I didn't want to listen, not anymore.

Maybe it will all go away, I thought. You never know when your life is about to change. Treaty Talk is why I became a ghost.



Chapter 2

Treaty Talk

THE SUN ROSE HIGH in the sky, and I knew mother would have lunch ready soon. I was wrong. Everything about this day was wrong.

My father and mother kept talking, and I even thought I heard my mother crying. I waited on the front porch till Luke came home for lunch. He was twelve years old and never helped around the house. I had to do everything.

Hoke, sometimes he helped, but never enough.

“What’s going on?” Luke asked.

“Mom and Dad are talking. Dad said there is Treaty Talk.”

“Oh no,” said Luke. “That means lunch will be late today. I’m not waiting around.” He left to play stickball with his friends. *See what I mean?*

I circled the house and sat beneath the window of my parents’ room, so I could hear what they were saying. My mother was crying, and she never cried.

“We have to be ready to go,” my father said.

“Where will we go?” my mother asked.

“A long way from here. The Treaty has already been signed. We have till spring. But we should get ready to move.”

We had no lunch that day. I fell asleep on the porch and Jumper rolled into a ball against my belly. When my mother finally stepped outside, the sun was peeking over the pine trees, ready for the moon to take over.

“Come with me,” she said, taking my hand. Jumper trotted beside us.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

My mother said nothing. We walked through our garden of tomatoes and winding bean vines. We crossed the cornfield, where all the stalks were

brown and dying. The evening air was already crispy cold and winter was coming. As we entered the woods, we met Luke walking from the river. He seemed upset.

“Luke, take Jumper home,” my mother said. “Tell your father we will be home soon.”

Luke nodded without saying a word.

He already knows what this is about, I thought.

We stepped from the woods and came upon a gathering of twenty old Choctaw men, scattered up and down the riverbank. I knew these men. They were the oldest men in town and they were our friends. We had supper at their homes and we knew their families.

One of the old men was Mister Jonah. He lived with his wife not far from us. As we watched, Mister Jonah took off his shirt and rubbed his back against a tree trunk. The tree was old, older than he was, and the bark was sharp and cracked.

Mister Jonah moved up and down, rubbing his back against the tree bark. His skin was dry and wrinkled. The bark cut into his skin and he started bleeding. Blood dripped from his back and covered the ground at his feet. His face was still as a stone, as if he didn't feel the pain, but I knew it had to hurt!

“Mother,” I asked, “what is he doing?”

“Shhh,” my mother whispered. “Don't talk. Just watch.”

Soon all of the old men started rubbing their backs against the trees. When their backs were ripped open and bleeding, they sat in a puddle of their own blood. One man patted dirt on a friend's back to stop the bleeding. But the bleeding never stopped.

Hoke. I should tell you this. Do not be afraid. This is how things are. When you will soon be a ghost, sometimes you see people before they are ghosts. You see how they will die. I didn't know it yet, but whenever I felt a warm shiver, I was about to see something no one else could see.

I felt the warm shiver. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, Mister Jonah was sitting by the tree.

Suddenly, his hair burst into flames! He screamed and waved his arms. He fell rolling to the ground. His arms were skinny logs and flames shot from his fingers.

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