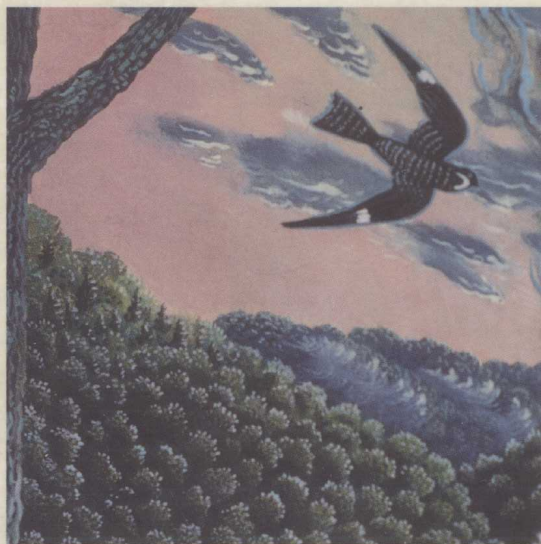


THE WAY OF
THE PRIESTS

THE DARK WAY

THE WHITE PATH



ROBERT J. CONLEY

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THREE NOVELS OF THE REAL PEOPLE

ROBERT J. CONLEY



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KEEPERS

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The Way of the Priests

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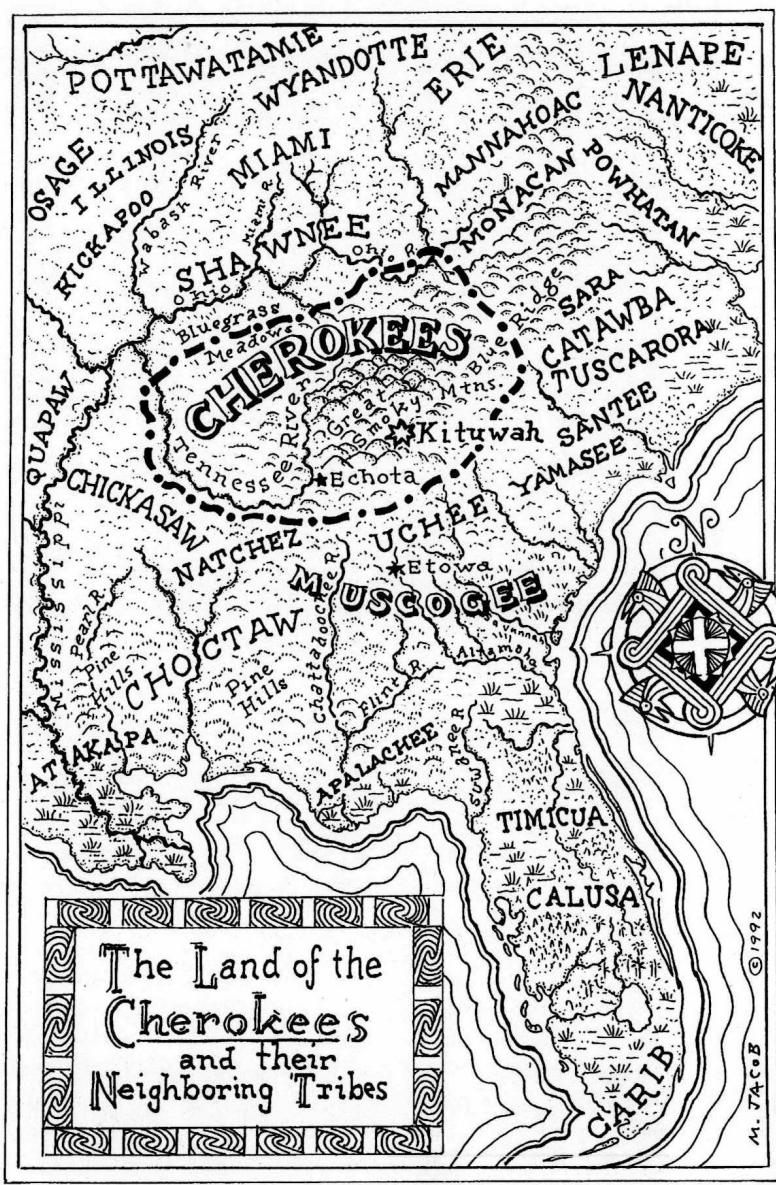
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The Land of the
Cherokees
and their
Neighboring Tribes

M. JACOBE © 1992

THE WAY OF THE PRIESTS

One



SALOLI, THE GRAY SQUIRREL, must have heard the approach of the children, for he stopped his chattering and sat still on the oak tree branch. He was watching, a picture of total caution. On the ground, maybe thirty paces away, the three children stopped. They were big children, of an age when their childhood was almost over. They would not be children much longer, and probably they knew that, and that knowledge made them play all the more and all the harder at being children while they were still able. Of course they looked forward with eagerness to the responsibilities and the respect of adulthood, to the imagined pleasures of maturity, but they were at the ambiguous time of life when the forward-looking eagerness was balanced with a tenacious clinging to the joys of childish irresponsibility.

The one in the lead was a girl, *agebyuja*. Her name was Selu Ajiluhsgi, or Corn Flower, and she was not only physically ahead of the two boys, her companions, but she was also clearly the leader of the trio. It was she who had

seen the squirrel, had signaled a halt to the march and had called for silence. Two paces behind and to her right, Tsis-quaya, Real Bird or Sparrow, watched with unconcealed admiration as Corn Flower slipped a thistledown tufted honey locust dart into one end of her long cane pole blowgun. Already one squirrel had fallen to her deadly aim, and it was hanging limp from a cord around her waist. Sparrow had two, and the third member of the party, Gule, Acorn, standing on a line with Sparrow but to Corn Flower's left, had one.

As Corn Flower slowly raised the gun toward her lips, Sparrow saw out of the corner of his eye Acorn quickly load his own gun and take a too fast shot. The squirrel screamed out in anger, surprise and pain as the sharp dart buried itself in his thigh. He jumped and twisted on the branch, biting at the dart, and then Corn Flower fired a clean shot to the head, and the squirrel dropped.

"Good shot," said Sparrow. He ran toward the prize only a stride behind Corn Flower. Acorn sauntered along at a pouty pace.

"Now everyone but me has two," he said. His chin was practically on his chest, and his lower lip protruded. Sparrow glanced back and noticed how Acorn's hips were swinging heavily from side to side as he walked. He had only recently observed his friend's effeminate characteristics, and he was worried about him. One day he had gone home after play, and he had told his mother.

"Gule acts like a girl sometimes," he had said.

Gatuhnlati, Wild Hemp, his mother, had looked thoughtful for a moment before answering.

"I hadn't thought about it before," she had said, "but since you mentioned it, I guess I have noticed. He has no father, you know, and even worse, his mother has no

brothers, only sisters. He's been around women and girls most of his life. I guess he doesn't know how else to act."

"He plays with me," Sparrow had said, "and I don't act like that."

"Of course you don't," she had said, "but the biggest influence is at home."

So Sparrow had decided to spend as much time with Acorn as he could, and anytime he was around Acorn, he exaggerated his masculine manners. He intended to show Acorn by example how young men should behave. Of course, Corn Flower was almost always along, but even her manners were less effeminate than were Acorn's. Sparrow worried about Acorn. There was not much childhood left. He didn't like to think of Acorn as a grown man with the characteristics of a woman. If Acorn was going to change, it would have to be soon. But pouting there over the dead squirrel, Acorn did not show much promise.

"Even the girl's got two," said Acorn. "But not me. Oh, no. I have just one."

Corn Flower had just plucked the second dart out of the warm, soft body. She gave Sparrow a quick glance, and he thought that she read in that instant on his face all that he was thinking.

"This one is really yours, Acorn," she said. "You shot it first."

She held the squirrel by its tail out at arm's length toward Acorn. He took it without a word and tied it to his belt. Sparrow was ashamed for his friend.

"I think we should go back to Ijodi," he said. "We should take these squirrels to our mothers."

"Yes," said Acorn. "I'm tired anyway. This isn't fun anymore."

They turned and started back toward Ijodi, the town where they all lived, and they walked slowly and in si-

lence. Acorn's poutiness had dampened the spirit of fun that had previously dominated their day. Sparrow did not really want the day to come to an end, even though he had made the suggestion. This problem with Acorn was a frustrating one. His example did not seem to be having any effect. He walked slowly and fell behind his two friends. They were all growing up. He was afraid that he would not like the way in which Acorn would mature. But Corn Flower. It suddenly struck him that Corn Flower was already beginning to look like a woman, and she was going to be a very beautiful woman. Just then she stopped and lifted a hand.

"Listen," she said.

Acorn stopped still, his eyes wide.

"What is it?" he said.

"Shh. Someone's coming."

The lane they were on wound its way through thick woods, so they could not see very far ahead. They were well within the vast domain of their own people, *Ani-yunwi-ya*, the Real People, and, in fact, they were not far from their own town of Ijodi, so there was no real reason for fear. Rather, it was a childish game they played.

"Come on," said Corn Flower in a loud whisper. "Let's hide and see who it is."

She led the way off the road and into the woods, where the three of them crouched low behind some thick brush. They waited in silence, their hearts pounding almost as if they had been deep in enemy territory. The footsteps came closer. They were heavy footsteps of a big man with a long stride. Then he came in view, and they saw the long, colorful feather cloak flapping behind him as he moved along. They saw the feather crown on his shaven head. And they knew who he was. They crouched still, their fear becoming a bit more real, the play taking on at

last a slight element of real danger. He was the single most powerful authority among all of the towns of the Real People. He was a figure who inspired awe and dread among all, wherever he went. And he was seldom seen. Soon he had walked on by. The three companions stood up and moved uneasily back out into the road.

"That was Astugataga, wasn't it?" said Sparrow.

"Yes," said Corn Flower. "That was Standing-in-the-Doorway, the Real Priest, the headman of *Ani-Kutani*, the priests of Anisgayayi."

"I wonder where he's going?" said Acorn.

"He's headed back to Anisgayayi, Men's Town," said Corn Flower. "It's back that way."

"He might be going somewhere else," said Acorn. "You don't know for sure that he's going to Men's Town."

"All right," said Corn Flower. "Let's find out."

"How?" said Acorn.

"You mean follow him?" said Sparrow.

"Yes," said Corn Flower. "Well, not exactly. We'll cut through the woods and get ahead of him. I know some high rocks where we can sit and watch him. Come on."

Again she led the way. It was just habit. She made the decisions. She led and they followed. It had been that way for about as long as Sparrow could remember. He didn't object. It was just the nature of their personalities that caused the behavior. He liked her company, and he liked the adventures into which she led them. He wasn't sure about Acorn's reasons for following along. Perhaps Acorn simply didn't have any other real friends. But Corn Flower plunged into the woods, and Sparrow and Acorn followed without question or comment. For a while all they had to do was dodge around trees and make their way through or around underbrush, but soon they were climbing as well. The going got rougher and steeper. Still

Corn Flower kept up a rapid and steady pace. Sparrow was just behind her, but Acorn was falling farther behind with each stride.

They splashed across a swift-flowing mountain stream, and Acorn slipped and fell, skinning his elbow. He started to grow angry, but he scrambled to his feet and ran after his friends, the wet, dead squirrels flapping against his thigh. Then the way grew steeper yet, and they were no longer running uphill, they were climbing. At last, panting and still angry, Acorn was startled when he came right up on Corn Flower and Sparrow sitting behind a large boulder. He scowled, but he pulled himself on up beside them and sat down.

“Why are we waiting here?” he said.

“Look down there,” said Corn Flower, pointing around the boulder. Acorn pulled himself up with a groan and moved to look. They were high up above the road, and from their vantage point, they could see a good long stretch of the way below. “We’ll see him when he comes along here,” Corn Flower concluded. Acorn sat back down.

“If we’re just going to wait,” he said, “you didn’t have to try to run off and leave me behind.”

“I didn’t mean to run off and leave you,” said Corn Flower. “I thought you could keep up. You’re a good runner.”

“Besides,” said Sparrow, “I was in between. I could see you the whole time. And here we are. All three of us.”

“Well,” said Acorn, “where is Standing-in-the-Doorway?”

“He’ll be coming along soon,” said Corn Flower.

“Unless he’s already gone by,” said Acorn.

“We took a shortcut,” said Corn Flower, “and we ran. He hasn’t been by here yet.”

"Maybe he's invisible," said Acorn. "A *kutuani* can do that. He can do that and lots of other things. Maybe he turned into an owl, and he's flying back to Men's Town. We could wait here all night and never see him again."

"He's coming now," said Sparrow, and the other two jumped up to watch around the boulder. Standing-in-the-Doorway had not slowed his pace. He moved in long, quick strides, not looking anywhere except straight ahead. The youngsters stared in awe at the figure of dread moving along there below them.

"Let's go home," said Acorn.

"You go if you want to," said Corn Flower. "I'm going to follow him and watch him go into Men's Town."

"What if he catches us?"

"He'll cook us and eat us if he catches us," said Corn Flower, "but he won't catch us. We'll be careful."

"She's just saying that," said Sparrow. "Come on. He won't do anything to us."

They started down the mountainside toward the road again. Standing-in-the-Doorway had already passed beyond the range of vision from up by the boulder. From that, Corn Flower reasoned, he would be far enough ahead of them by the time they got back down on the road that he wouldn't know he was being followed.

"Just before he gets to Men's Town," she said, "there's another bend in the road. From there the road is straight. We can get to that bend, and then we can watch him go into the town."

"Is there some special ceremony when Standing-in-the-Doorway returns?" asked Sparrow.

"I don't know," she answered, "but we'll find out, won't we?"

They hurried down the mountainside, and although the way was steep, even Acorn managed to make it to the road

without taking another tumble, but by the time he got there, Corn Flower was well ahead of him. He trotted along to catch up. At last, at a place where the road curved sharply to their right, she called a halt again. Coming up not far behind her, the boys could tell, even though they couldn't see the road beyond the curve, that up ahead was a deep valley. Down in that valley was Men's Town. They ran up to stand beside her, and just as they arrived, he appeared. They would talk about it later, and they would all agree that they had not seen him walk around the bend or out of the woods. He had simply appeared, standing there before them. His hands were on his hips, and he was looking down at them with a stern, even fierce, expression on his tattooed face. He was easily the tallest man any of them had ever seen—Standing-in-the-Doorway.

"You've been following me," he said, and his voice was deep and resonant. "Why have you been following me?"

If Corn Flower was afraid, she didn't let it show. She stepped boldly toward Standing-in-the-Doorway.

"We have a gift for you," she said. "We brought you these five squirrels."

She pulled the squirrel loose from the cord at her waist, and she turned toward her companions, holding out her hand. The boys jerked loose their squirrels, and Corn Flower took them. Turning back to face Standing-in-the-Doorway, she held out the offering. The big man looked at one young face after the other. One half of his mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"What are your names?" he said.

"I'm called Corn Flower. I'm one of *Ani-Kawi*, the Deer People, and these are my friends, Acorn and Sparrow. They're both *Ani-Tsisqua*, Bird People."

"And where do you live?"

"We live in Ijodi," she said.

Standing-in-the-Doorway reached out to take the squirrels.

"You had better go home," he said. "It will be late now by the time you get back, and your mother will be wondering about you."

Sparrow was frightened, but he had noticed something which was strange, and it was puzzling him. The *kutani* seemed only to look at Acorn, and it was a strange look, a look which Sparrow could not define. The three adventurers had not responded to the suggestion made by the high priest. They just stood seemingly mesmerized. Standing-in-the-Doorway spoke again, this time sharply.

"Go," he said.

They turned and ran. They ran as if their lives depended on their speed, and they ran until they could run no more. At last Corn Flower stopped running and stepped off the road to lean back panting against the trunk of a large oak tree. The boys stopped too. Sparrow sat on a large flat rock, and Acorn just dropped to the ground, falling over on his back. It was some time before they could catch their breath and speak again.

"Well," said Sparrow, "at least he didn't cook us and eat us."

"Corn Flower just made that up," said Acorn. "The *Ani-Kutani* don't do things like that."

"If we hadn't had squirrels to give him," said Corn Flower, "he might have taken us."

"You're just saying that," said Acorn. "You're always saying crazy things."

Sparrow glanced at Acorn. The pout was back on Acorn's face, and Sparrow thought again about the way Standing-in-the-Doorway had looked at Acorn. He wondered if Acorn had noticed that look and, if so, what he was thinking about it. Corn Flower stood up straight.

“Are you ready?” she said. “Let’s go.”

The boys followed her back onto the road, and they started moving again toward home, but this time they walked. Acorn kicked up puffs of dust deliberately as he walked.

“We didn’t even see Men’s Town,” he said.

Two



IJODI HAD BEEN BUILT beside the river they called Tanasi. When they spoke to it ceremonially, they called it Yunwi-Ganahida, or Long Person, and they knew him as a man with his head resting in the mountains and his feet reaching to the lowlands, and they said that to those who could understand his language he was constantly speaking. Up above Ijodi, not far, was the creek called Sudagi. Perhaps two hundred and fifty people, Real People, lived in Ijodi in houses made of sticks and plastered with mud. The houses were rectangular in shape, perhaps four paces by five paces, perhaps a little larger. Beside each house stood an *osi*, or hot house, much smaller and dome-shaped, also plastered with mud. The side of Ijodi away from the river was lined with small family plots owned, as were the houses, by women, and one large communal garden. In these gardens grew several varieties each of corn, squash, pumpkins, gourds and beans.

The town itself was constructed around a large plaza,

and the nearest buildings to the plaza were public, the largest of those being the townhouse. All of this, except the gardens, was enclosed by a palisade fence which, like the houses, was plastered with mud. There was no gate at the entrance; rather the two ends of the fence were deliberately constructed so that they did not meet but ran parallel to each other for several yards, forming a long and narrow passageway through which people could only pass comfortably in single file. As the three wandering youngsters returned home, Corn Flower was the first to enter the passageway. Sparrow followed her, and Acorn plodded along in the rear. He was still sullen.

The sounds of shouting and laughter filled the town, and they were coming from the plaza. Corn Flower picked up the pace and led her two loyal followers to the center of town. It seemed as if all of the men and children and some of the women were gathered there. The *gatayusti* game was in progress.

"Let's watch," said Corn Flower, and she ran to the edge of the playing field. Da-le-danigisgi, Hemp Carrier, Sparrow's mother's brother, was just about to make his toss. Bets were still being made by some of the bystanders. Hemp Carrier held in his left hand a polished stone disc, the diameter of which just about equaled the distance from Hemp Carrier's wrist to the tip of his middle finger. The rims of the stone were rounded, and it was concave on both sides. In his right hand he held an eight-foot-long pole, sharpened on one end like a spear. Standing next to Hemp Carrier was Yona-equa, Big Bear, the father of Sparrow. He held a pole in his right hand similar to the one Hemp Carrier held.

Then Hemp Carrier drew back his left arm, swung it forward and with a mighty toss released the stone disc. No sooner had he released it than he began to run after it,