

The Promise

Caterpillar Candy for *ev'ryò-o-one!*
And follow your dreams of flight..."

That song is special to me. My dad taught it to us because my mom couldn't. She died in childbirth with my brother Jake when I was two. I don't really have any memories of her, only that she wasn't there. And I didn't learn much from my dad because he didn't wanta talk about it. I heard someone say once that my dad carried his love and his grief around where you couldn't see 'em, but they didn't know my dad. Because no one that asked about my mom could ever forget the darkness that clouded his eyes. So it didn't take long for us to learn not to.

That's why it's strange that we could sing her song without it causing him pain. In fact it was just the opposite. So as kids we sang it all the time we worked in the fields. And because it was one of the few things of hers we had, it seemed only natural that we came to believe there was something special in it—a part of her.

I figure my mom's death indirectly caused my dad to raise us on stories about the Legend. "Children need grounding and roots," he would say far too often, which seemed to help him deal with the pain of her not being there.

Friends of my dad said he believed in the Legend and the existence of the treasure more than anyone else they knew. It was his passionate interest in nature that led him to study the traditions of our people and almost simultaneously to his need to know their myths and rituals. But with my mother's passing, his hopes of finding the treasure faded into a fascination with its folklore. After all, raising us and running the farm came first.

Dad still found time to put some of his wild-eyed energies to good use. He was a talker and prided himself on the honesty of the ancient oral tradition. He said we were born into great times with great expectations. So it wasn't a surprise that he became

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the self-appointed town historian to chronicle the changes taking place around us.

By the time I was six a wave of modern and convenient practices was washing down our roads and corn rows, vaulting fences and windbreaks as easy as a peddler can find your back door. Dad called them the “new ways.” And no sooner would a family member or friend discard a practice or tradition that had served them well for generations, than he’d up and scribble an article in the local gazette. And more times than not he’d criticize them for being helpless in the face of change, or offend them by saying they didn’t know what was good for them. “Fast livin’ and fast food’ll give ya heartburn,” was his frequent lament to an assortment of ills.

And he was right. Because a world that sizes and packages things to fit on a shelf and fills our stores with indistinguishable goods quick for grabbing, soon won’t value the arcane and the old-fashioned, the time-honored ways. Like knowing the value of your work to your community, or caring for your tools because your livelihood depends on it. Dad said the day was coming when there wouldn’t be any elders to guide us through the changes and shoulder the keystones of our culture with their strength and dignity. “Shifting tides are silent,” he used to say. And indeed it already seemed to be happening. But whether it was the start of a new and positive era building like a wave, or the debris of our democracy left in its wake, he never did say.

We were poor as dirt and happy as field mice back then. Dad needed my help on the farm, so I never got a formal education. There were times I wanted to go to school like the other kids. But living with my dad was better than any school, and hardly a day passed without me learning something useful. By the time I was eight I could plow a straight row and shoe a horse (with a little help), recite the names of all forty-eight states and their capitols, and chart the constellations in the northern sky. I could also tell you

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all about the Legend, that it was performed only twice each year in the Hall of Columns—once after spring's first harvest and again after winter's first snow—and that it was forbidden to write it down. I was a willing student, and my dad was a good teacher.

But it wasn't until my thirteenth birthday that the knowledge I worked so hard to acquire became its own reward and my life was changed forever. That was the day my dad took me to the elders' chambers and I got to touch the ancient relics and rocks filled with golden light. And all at once I *knew* deep down inside that the mysterious dancing and chanting and all the things the elders knew were true. I felt an affinity, a natural attraction the way a magnet draws iron, to be in the Hall of Columns. And I wanted—no, I *needed* to know more, to know *everything* there was to know about the Legend.

Looking back now, I realize that it was my first glimpse into the mirror of my faith. It was also the first time I believed in a force greater than my dad.

The lure of the Hall of Columns became a constant in my life like clockwork. If my chores and studies were done, my dad always knew where to find me. If I ran it took twenty minutes, forty if I walked. And while my friends were flattening pennies on the train tracks and aching to ride that fiery throne high above the plains, I sat with my cheek pressed against a column, in fear and in awe, watching from the shadows.

....The Hall of Columns is basically an old barn but I never could see anything humble in its origins. Mind you, its footprint is as straightforward as its form is unremarkable, except for an opening in the center of the roof and the elders' living quarters enclosing a garden at the rear. But it's the columns that make it so special.

About a hundred years ago someone donated a lot of pole timber and the elders decided to raise up a congregation hall. They settled on a design with the altar at the center of a pattern of radiating

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poles and got started. Folks came from far and wide to help, and the timber was difficult to work, they say. Still, it finished up smooth and uniform to everyone's liking.

The hall was completed soon after the poles were erected and then it was time to celebrate. A great crowd turned out for the consecration, and everyone with family from around these parts can tell the tale. That night the whole town crowded into the hall. Spirits were high and the ceremonial fires burned bright. Some folks said it was toward the end of the evening that the columns started to glow with the color of fire. Others remembered it was the next day when the elders noticed a radiance coming from the columns. Everyone agreed that the beautiful paint added a distinctive quality to the hall, but no one came forward to take credit for it.

Then an argument erupted when someone suggested that maybe it wasn't paint after all. Several people immediately began scraping and chipping away at the columns to prove their point. And to everyone's surprise the plain wood had turned golden through and through.

Word spread quickly and the townspeople came to see for themselves. And everyone proclaimed it a miracle.

Everyone, that is, except the elders. They believed it was the deliverance of a plain and simple truth to their congregation. The columns, they said, represent the members of the community who can be counted on in times of need to support its values. And gold, everyone knows, is a form of wealth and power but also the color of all creation. No, the golden color that filled the hall and turned the columns to gold didn't come from the fire; it came from the hearts and minds of the people united in spirit that night. Yep, it was the truest validation of the Legend they had ever seen.

And the elders asked to name the hall, and the people called it the Hall of Columns to stand as a reminder of the power inside each of us.

Now if anyone doubts this story, you can visit the Hall on any

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dark winter's day, and with the roof open at the center and a cold wind outside, go and touch the columns. For unlike the metal gold, which no one ever said it was, the columns will always be warm to the touch....