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TRAIL OF TEARS

WALKING THE NARROW PATH



by Leslie Stall Widener

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Trail of Tears

Walking the Narrow Path

by

Leslie Stall Widener

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Characters

Nita [ni-ta]	bear	A twelve-year-old Choctaw girl
Ishki [ish-ki]	mother	Nita and Taloa’s mother
Pokni [pók-ni]	grandmother	Inki’s mother and Nita, Taloa, and Champuli’s grandmother
Inki [i ⁿ -ki]*	father	Nita and Taloa’s father
Taloe [ta-ló:-wa]	song	Nita’s sister
Hattak [hat-tak]	man	Töli and Nowa’s father
Champuli [cha ⁿ -po-lih]*	sweet	Nita and Taloa’s cousin
Föni [fá-ni]	squirrel	A storyteller in Nita’s village
Töli [ta-li]	stone	Son of Eplil and Hattak
Nowa [no:-wah]	to walk	Son of Eplil and Hattak
Eplil [í:p-lil]	April	Töli and Nowa’s mother

NOTE: The author chose the spelling for “Inki” because it is closer to the pronunciation of the word, as the original spelling (iki) may not be intuitive to readers.

*n indicates a nasal sound

Choctaw Words & Phrases

akak chaha [a-káⁿk chá:-ha]*.....literally, “tall chicken”;
turkey

Aki, svshki, yvt iksho!

[ah-ki, sash-ki, yót ík-shoh].....My father, my mother,
they’re gone!

biskinik [bis-kí-nik].....woodpecker

chukfi [chók-fi].....rabbit

chula [chó-la]fox

Halito! [ha-li:-tô].....Hello!

ishtaboli [isht-a-bó:-li].....stickball

issi [is-si].....deer

iti fabvssa [i-ti fa-bás-sa].....a long pole

kapucha [ka-póch-cha].....sticks used in stickball

koni [ko-nih].....skunk

luksi [lok-si].....terrapin

miko [miⁿ-ko]*chief, leader

Misha Sipokni [mi-sha si-pok-ni].....literally, “beyond age”
(misha, prep.: beyond;
sipokni, adj.: old);
Choctaw name for the
Mississippi River

*n indicates a nasal sound

nashoba [na-shó:-ba].....	wolf
Nv̄nih Waiya [na-nih wáy-ya].....	literally, “leaning hill” (n̄v̄nih, n.: hill; waiya, v.: to be leaning or bent over); an ancient mound that is the sacred origin of the Choctaw people
Ome. [o:-mî:].....	Good; Yes; OK (acknowledgment or agreement)
palv̄ska [pal-lás-ka].....	bread
shukha anumpa [shok-ha an-nó ⁿ -pa]*.....	literally, “pig’s talk”; a trickster tale
tanchi lv̄bona [ta ⁿ -chi la-bó:-na]*.....	literally, “stirred corn”; a dish of boiled whole- kernel corn and meat
towa [tó-wa].....	ball used in stickball
Tushpa! [to ⁿ sh-pah]*.....	Hurry up!

*n indicates a nasal sound

1

Holabi (To Tell a Lie)

The scent of cooking wafted around Nita as she sat with her mother and grandmother near the fire. They were cooking a big meal of tanchi labona, one of Nita's favorite dishes.

"Yum. That smells good," Nita said.

Ishki smiled at her oldest daughter. "Thanks to the big corn harvest, food will be plentiful all winter long."

"And if hunting season keeps us supplied with game," Pokni added, "we should have a good winter."

Pokni looked up and saw her son, Nita's father, walking toward them. "Why are you wearing that sad face? Sit down. This meal will make you smile."

Inki lowered himself next to Nita. "Where is your little sister?"

Nita pointed at Taloa, who was creeping up behind their father.

holabi [ho-la:-bih]: to tell a lie



“Ah-ee!” Taloa cried out as she threw her arms around Inki. A grin broke through his worry, and he tickled Taloa until she squealed.

After the two settled down, Inki’s gaze drifted to the fire. “I just spoke to Hattak,” he said eventually. “He has heard rumors that our chiefs signed a treaty with the U.S. government.”

“No! Miko said that would never happen!” Ishki cried. “He said the U.S. government promised us we would stay here!”

“He lied,” Inki said angrily. “Hattak has heard soldiers are raiding towns and villages, burning them down.”

treaty: an official agreement between two or more political entities, such as nations or rulers

The rumors say that more of our people are being rounded up and herded away.”

“They can’t make us leave our homes.” Ishki grabbed her daughters’ hands. “Can they?”

Inki shook his head and looked past them. “Chief said that’s the only way we can keep our tribe together. Leaving our homes and going west is the only way to keep our traditions and our way of life.”

Pokni covered her face with her hands. “We have been here for generations,” she sobbed. “We can’t leave our ancestors behind. This is our homeland.”

For a long while, the people of Nita’s village talked of little else, but nothing happened. It began to feel as though the threat of removal was only a rumor. Until that awful morning.

It began when Ishki screamed, “Fire!”

Soldiers galloped through their village, waving torches and setting fire to everything. The flames turned the sky red-orange. Choctaw homes, built from cane, popped and hissed as they burned. Smoke blinded the people as they ran. Dust kicked up by the horses choked their lungs.

Nita's family escaped their burning home with blankets, a few pieces of pottery, and as much of the dried vegetables and meat jerky as they could grab while they fled. Some families escaped with much less. Everywhere, there were cries of pain and terror.

Nita and Taloa screamed when they saw their dog, and many of the other village dogs, lying dead.

In the end, the families of the village stood along the edge of the forest and watched as everything familiar to them burned to the ground. Their homeland was a sacred place, where generations of Choctaw people had lived and died and were buried. With nothing left, they were forced to leave.

2

Kucha Okpulo (Bad Storm)

“**K**ee up, sister!” twelve-year-old Nita called back to Taloa. “What if a nashoba creeps out of the woods along the trail? It might jump out and grab you!”

“Nita! Stop frightening your sister with scary stories of wolves!” Pokni glared at her oldest granddaughter.

“I’m sorry, Pokni,” Nita muttered. At twelve, she knew better than to scare Taloa. Her sister was only eight years old and needed watching. Nita reached for Taloa’s hand. “I am only afraid of you getting separated from us,” she said to her sister.

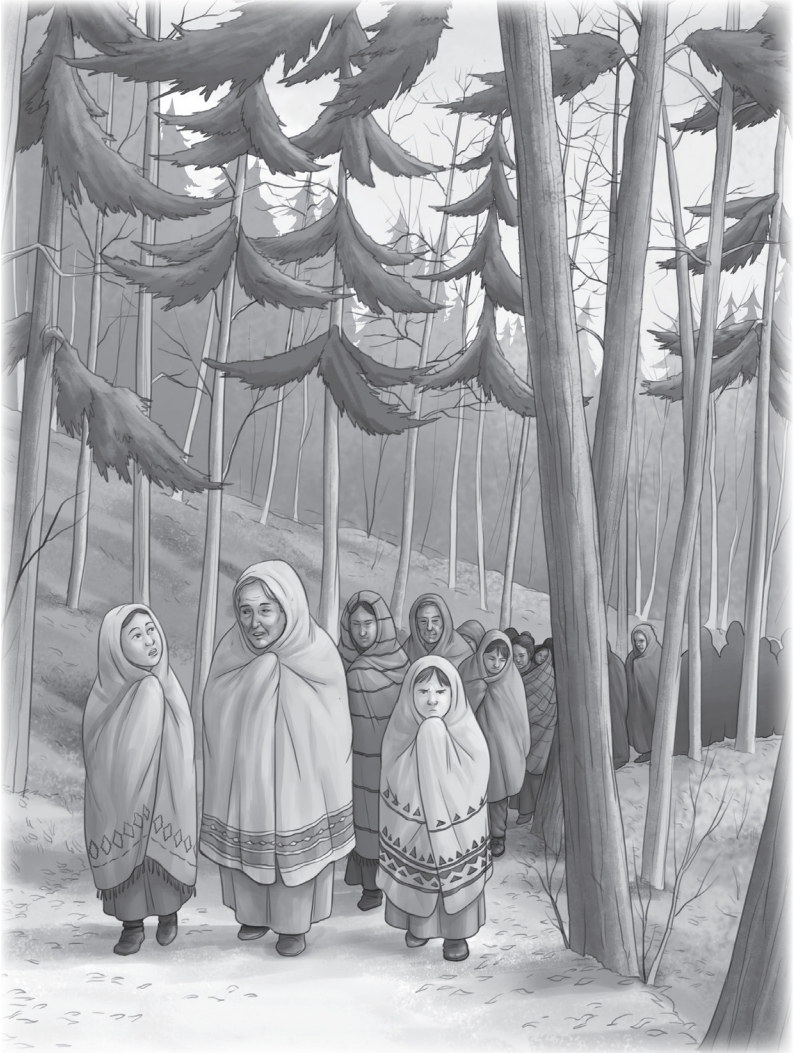
Taloa pulled her hand away from Nita’s. Her lower lip quivered, and she said, “I’m cold. Pokni, are we going to stop soon?”

Each day of the journey, their parents went to the front of the group to walk near Inki’s friend Hattak, who

kucha okpulo [ko-cha ok-pó-lo]: bad storm

KUCHA OKPULO (BAD STORM)

understood English and could also speak some. He let the others know when they would stop for the night. Every afternoon, Nita looked for her parents to return, peering between the blanketed Choctaw people as they trudged along the rough trail.



Ishki had insisted that Nita stay near Taloa and their grandmother. Pokni had a bad cough, and she shuffled along unsteadily. No one was allowed to fall behind. Soldiers on horseback rode behind the group of travelers. They did not allow stragglers.

Nita was impatient. She wanted to know what her parents had heard from those walking at the front of the group. She knew better than to push ahead and ask, but she found it difficult to wait. Nita sighed and turned her attention back to her job: keeping her sister and grandmother from tripping over roots and rocks on the uneven ground.

Even though her voice was hoarse, Pokni began to sing. With her words soothing their steps, they fell into a rhythm. She sang of their home and the stream near their village. She sang of messages told by the biskinik sitting at the top of the hollow chestnut tree and of issi flashing their white tails as they bounded into the forest shadows. Each word Pokni sang twisted Nita's heart. It was difficult not to think of the day her family was forced to leave their home.

Nita's long braids brushed her shoulders as she shook her head, trying to rid it of those terrible memories. Just then, those walking ahead of her came to a sudden halt. Soldiers rode alongside the trail, shouting something in English.

“I wish I understood what they’re saying,” Nita said in a hushed voice.

“I don’t care about their words,” Taloa hissed. “I hate them!”

Pokni interrupted to point ahead. Ishki and Inki were making their way back through the crowd. The sisters rushed to their parents, throwing their arms around them. Taloa clung to Ishki and refused to let go.

“We’re stopping here,” said their father.

“Inki, is this our new home?” Taloa asked.

“No,” Ishki said, hugging her daughter. “We will stay here for the night and leave in the morning.”

“I’m glad,” Taloa said. “I don’t like this place.”

Looking up at the tall trees that grew close together on both sides of the trail, Nita had to agree. The trees arched over them and blocked the night sky beginning to twinkle with stars. She shivered in the cold air. They were led to an area cleared of trees, and she saw circles of charred ground where previous travelers had built fires. She wondered if they had been Choctaw.

Everyone went about setting up another night’s

charred: partly burned

makeshift camp. Women and children began to gather firewood. Men cut saplings and gathered brush for their shelters, leaning the sturdiest branches against trees and piling the brush on top to keep out the cold breeze. Elders started the fires for cooking and watched over the little ones.

Meanwhile, the soldiers dismounted and tied their horses to trees. They unhitched the oxen from the two wagons and unloaded their supplies of food, cooking utensils, and blankets. After they set up their canvas tents, they built their own fire and cooked the food they'd packed for their journey.

Nita and Taloa carried a large clay container to a nearby stream. They filled it to the top with frigid spring water. As they lugged it back to the fire, they tried not to splash the water on their legs. When the water was nearly boiling, Pokni and Ishki stirred in ground corn and fat. Unless the soldiers allowed the men time to hunt, their only food was what they had saved from their burning homes and the roots, nuts, and berries they found near the trail. When Ishki had her back turned, Pokni dropped bits of dried meat into the pot. Taloa clapped her hands and licked her lips.

saplings: young trees

sturdiest: strongest or most solid

unhitched: freed from attachment

oxen: large animals similar to cows

When the shelter was ready for the night, Inki joined his family at the fire, and they ate their meal together. They had just finished when Pokni and Ishki glanced up at the same time. Speaking in unison, they said, “I smell rain.”

This wasn’t unusual. Nita and Taloa’s mother and grandmother often spoke as one, and usually this made them laugh. But instead of smiling, they looked at one another with concern.

“A bad storm is coming,” Pokni said.

“Ome,” Ishki agreed.

Moments later, the wind picked up. All the families extinguished their fires and packed their supplies. They ran to their shelters just as the first drops fell. Nita and Taloa snuggled under blankets, next to their mother and grandmother, while Inki kept watch on the sky. The two sisters relaxed, knowing their father was there to keep them safe.

“Lightning is moving closer,” he said. “The wind just changed directions.”

Overhead, treetops whipped back and forth as though the wind couldn’t make up its mind. Its roar sounded like the whoosh of a river rushing over boulders.

extinguished: caused to stop burning

Small sticks from the trees rattled down on top of their shelter. The noise unsettled Nita. She wrapped her arms tightly around her sister and worried that large tree branches would break and fall on them.

Taloa's small body trembled. "Ishki, are we going to die?"

"Shush, little one. We're safe," Ishki said. "Move closer to me."

But Nita heard worry in her mother's voice, and this frightened her more than the wind. She raised up to see Ishki's face, but Pokni pulled her back down.

Jagged bolts of lightning split the sky. Thunder boomed and made the ground shake. The tall tree that supported their shelter creaked and groaned. Rain fell steadily, and the wind increased.

Suddenly, all went still. The quiet felt eerie. A knot lodged inside Nita's middle, and she tried to make herself smaller, burying her head into Pokni's side.

"Heads down!" Inki shouted. He leaned over his family to shield them with his body.

A loud clap of thunder split the air, and wind rushed through the camp, sounding like a herd of stampeding bison. Branches from their shelter blew away as rain and

stampeding: running away in panic, usually in a group

sticks fell on the blankets that covered them. Nita heard muffled screams until the roar of the wind blocked out all the other sounds.

CRACK!

CRACK!

THUD!

3

I Tamoa (To Have Lost)

The wind continued to howl. Treetops whipped from side to side. Nita wished the howling would stop so they could hear the voices of the people in the other shelters. Inki scrambled out of their shelter. “Someone is hurt,” he called back to them as he went out into the night.

Nita sat up and could just make out the cries whirling in the wind. “I can help,” she called after her father. “Inki, let me go with you!”

Ishki untangled herself from her daughters to follow her husband. Nita tried to follow, but her mother gently pushed her back under their shelter. “You need to stay here and watch over Taloa.”

The screams and calls for help frightened Nita. She wanted to cover her ears and block them out, but she also wanted to go and help those who were hurt. She was torn, but she knew her younger sister would panic if she left. When Pokni crawled out of their shelter next, Taloa grabbed at her skirt.

i tamoa [iⁿ-ta-mo;-wah]: to have lost

“Pokni, don’t leave us!” Taloa screamed.

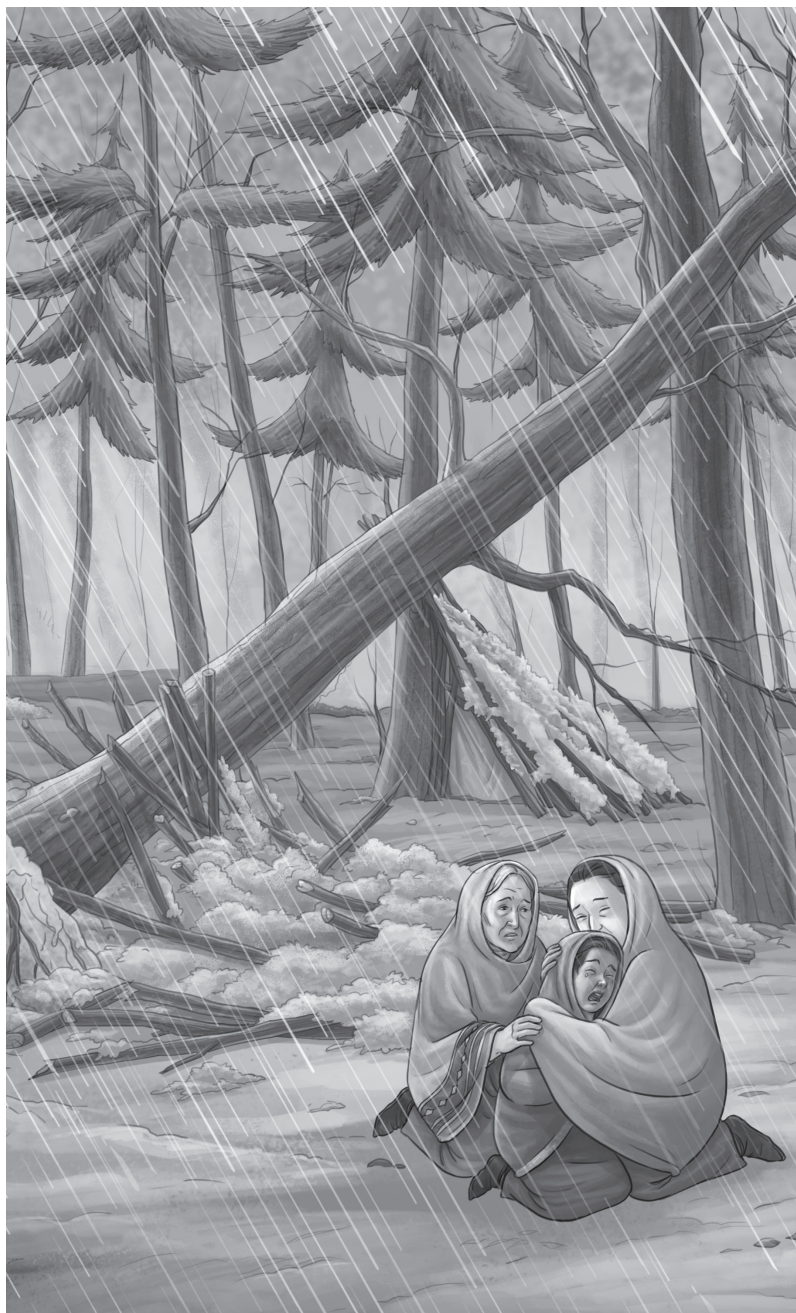
Pokni was firm. “You need to stay here with Nita until we come and get you.”

Before either of the girls could argue, Pokni was gone.

Nita and Taloa clung to each other until the lightning, rain, and wind diminished around them. Then they crawled from the tangle of branches that had been their shelter. Nita wrapped a blanket around Taloa’s shaking shoulders and another around herself. They’d been told to stay put, but it was agony to lie there and hear anguish all around them. They wanted to help. Following the sound of voices, they moved a little farther forward with each flash of lightning. Nita caught glimpses of people huddling together.

An enormous tree had toppled over, pulling the roots from the ground. Its fall had been cut short when its top branches caught in the top of another tree. Barely visible at the base of the trunk was a crushed shelter. Not far away, Pokni and Ishki hugged Champuli, Nita’s cousin. Not only her cousin—her best friend. They’d been born only a few days apart. When they were small, they had looked alike until Nita had passed her petite cousin in height. They could still pass for sisters.

diminished: lessened or slowly disappeared



“Champuli!” Nita called out, running with her arms outstretched.

Her cousin fell into her, crying out over and over, “Aki, sushki, yut iksho!”

Nita looked at her mother and whispered, “Both Auntie and Uncle?”

Ishki nodded, covering her face with both hands.

Pokni’s stooped shoulders shook with sorrow. Inki embraced his grief-stricken mother. Her oldest son and his wife had perished. Inki had lost his brother, and Champuli was now an orphan.

When the storm moved on and dawn lightened the sky, they found that Champuli’s parents were not the only people who were lost. A young woman and two little children had not survived the night either. Cries of grief filled the forest.

Nita watched as Inki joined a group of men. They walked solemnly into the forest to dig deep holes in the mud.

No soldiers helped, but they waited until the dead were buried. Many voices came together in mourning for lost family and friends. Choctaw songs and prayers echoed through the trees as water fell from their branches like teardrops.

mourning: feeling sadness over somebody who died

It was midmorning before they were ready to continue on the trail, but no one hurried. The slippery mud was deep and sticky, making their walk difficult, even dangerous. In places, fallen trees lay across the trail. Those who could help dragged them away while the soldiers yelled words Nita assumed meant “Hurry up!” Their loud voices were ignored.

The day went on, and the air grew colder and colder. Nita followed close to her parents with one arm wrapped around Champuli’s waist, loosely holding her cousin’s long single braid. Champuli walked slowly, staring at the ground. Tears ran down her cheeks, and sometimes she’d shudder or sob aloud.

Taloa and their grandmother walked behind them. Pokni sang hymns until her coughing forced her to stop. Other voices chimed in for her:

Hatak yoshoba pia hv̄t

Pin Chis̄vs achukma ka

Il ĩ nukkillā hinla cho?

Anukfillit ke pisa.

The hymn, for times of deep sorrow, comforted them as they lifted up joy and praise to God. Enduring the cold

hymns: songs of praise, usually praise for God

and damp, they continued to sing until they stopped for the night.

Days passed. Nights passed. It was impossible to know how long they had been walking. Nita thought she remembered two full moons, but she couldn't be certain. There might have been another. Occasionally, the soldiers allowed them to stop early for the night. They rarely stayed a second night in the same place; when they did, the extra rest felt like a gift.

Men built roaring fires. Women and children searched for springs where they could fill containers with fresh water. Families shared food. A few families still had dried fruit from the previous summer, when women and children had spent the season picking berries and making enough fruit leather to last during the lean winter months. But every day, supplies dwindled.

Because food supplies were low, some of the men were allowed to hunt when they stopped for the night. A few soldiers usually accompanied them. Sometimes, the hunters returned with a few squirrels and rabbits to share, but it was never enough to remove their hunger pains.

springs: bodies of water that come from the ground

fruit leather: fruit that has been mashed up, dried in flat sheets, and then cut into strips

dwindled: became less over time

On those few occasions when their meals included meat, the Choctaw people celebrated with stories. As they huddled under blankets around the fire, storytellers took turns telling their versions of traditional stories passed down through their families.

Nita's favorite storyteller, old Fvni, acted out the stories he told and danced crazily around the fire. Everyone laughed. One evening, he told a trickster story of how rabbits once had long tails, just like squirrels:

One day, ol' Chula tricked Chukfi into using his long tail to catch fish, even though the pond was frozen solid. "Make a hole in the ice, and dip your tail in the water," Chula told Chukfi. "When a fish grabs your tail, pull it out!"

Chukfi sat for a long time, but the hole in the ice froze back and trapped his tail. Worried that he would be Chula's next meal, he pulled and pulled until his tail broke off. When Chula returned, Chukfi was long gone. That was a long time ago, but ever since then, rabbits have had short tails. And they never trust a fox!

When his story ended, everyone chuckled, and the children clapped. Even though Champuli stayed quiet, Nita could tell that her cousin had listened to every word.

Nita woke early the morning after Fūni's fireside storytelling, thinking about the trickster tale they'd listened to the previous evening. By the time she and everyone else had warmed themselves and swallowed their bowls of warm, thin broth, it was time to go. Nita and Taloa helped extinguish their fire with handfuls of dirt before following their family onto the trail with the rest of the Choctaw people.

As Taloa did every morning, she asked, "Where are we going today?" And as Inki did every morning, he replied, "We're headed west." Taloa hung her head at the familiar response. They walked on, the silence peppered with tiny snuffles escaping from Taloa.

Nita had no desire to listen to her little sister's quiet tears all day. Taloa would need a distraction. Pokni was too tired to lead them in song today, so they would have to keep themselves entertained.

"Taloa." Nita turned toward her sister with a smile, and Taloa looked up with damp cheeks. "Who should tell a story this morning?"

Surprised, Taloa hopped up and down. "Champuli!"

broth: liquid in which food has been cooked

Nita sucked in her breath. She wasn't sure Champuli was up for storytelling just yet.

At first, Champuli, who was walking ahead of them beside Pokni, gave no sign that she had heard. But after a few moments, she dropped back beside them and reached for Taloa's hand.

"Ome. Today, I will tell you my favorite shukha anumpa," Champuli said. Nita exhaled in grateful relief. Champuli turned and beckoned to a few other children who were walking behind them with their own families. "You, too. Do you like the story about Akak Chaha and Luksi?" They crowded around Champuli to listen to the story of the turkey and the terrapin as they walked.

Long ago, there was a very vain akak chaha with a long, flowing beard and bright, shiny feathers. One day, Akak Chaha met Luksi, bumping along in his brown-and-gold-patterned shell. Akak Chaha looked down at Luksi and said in a rude voice, "What are you good for?"

Luksi replied in his soft, humble voice, "Many things."

"Name one," Akak Chaha demanded.

vain: too proud of one's appearance or abilities

“I can beat you at running,” Luksi said.

Akak Chaha said, “Ha! I thought you looked like a fool, and now I know you are!”

Luksi repeated, “I can beat you at running a distance of, hmm . . . a half a mile.”

And Akak Chaha said, “Then I will run the race with you and prove that you really are a fool!”

Soon, more children joined them. Champuli’s voice grew stronger, and her face relaxed into a smile.

Akak Chaha and Luksi marked the distance and agreed the race would happen in two days’ time. Luksi would carry a white feather in his mouth so that Akak Chaha could distinguish him from other luksis in the area. Akak Chaha was so sure of himself that he agreed to give Luksi a head start!

Before the day of the race, Luksi gave a white feather to one of his luksis friends. This luksis friend agreed to hide near the finish line and make his appearance just before Akak Chaha reached the end.

The day of the race arrived. Akak Chaha and Luksi stood next to each other while their friends watched,

ready to shout encouragement. An old akak chaha made a loud “Gobble, gobble,” and the race began.

Luksi had barely taken a step when Akak Chaha quickly passed him, calling out, “Luksi, you are a big fool!”

“Not as big as you imagine,” Luksi replied calmly, walking at his own slow and steady pace. But Akak Chaha was long gone and didn’t hear him.

After running for a while, Akak Chaha felt he had plenty of time to spare, so he stopped for some breakfast. He kept his eye out for Luksi, but he never saw him pass. When he was full, the confident akak chaha sped toward the finish line.

Champuli looked around at the crowd of children and asked, “Do you think Akak Chaha was surprised at what he saw?”

“Ome!” answered all the children at once, clapping their hands together.

“Ome,” she repeated. “Yes, he was! Akak Chaha was shocked to see Luksi waiting at the finish line with a white feather in his mouth. And never forget . . .” Champuli looked at each of the children before she continued,

“The scornful are often outwitted by those whom they look down on.”

After that, Champuli was the children’s favorite storyteller. Storytime helped make the mornings fly by, and not just for the three girls. Each day, they were joined by people of all ages wanting to hear the stories Champuli told.

And every night, Nita noticed that her cousin cried fewer tears before she fell asleep.

4

Ilbusha (To Suffer)

As another day's walking came to an end, news spread that the soldiers had decided the following day would be for rest. Everyone went about setting up camp. After many cloudy days of traveling, the night sky cleared to reveal a full moon. Champuli said it was the third full moon since the beginning of their journey.

Nestled into a blanket of stars, the moon glowed against the blue-black sky. Most families settled into brush shelters for the night, but Nita's family planned to sleep next to the fire. This night was threatening to be one of the coldest, and Inki wanted to keep the fire burning for the sake of his mother's health. Her cough continued to grow worse, and at times, she couldn't catch her breath.

Taloa helped Ishki gather more wood while Nita and Champuli made a watery soup using ground corn and bits of dried squash. They also added water to a small

ilbusha [il-básh-shah]: to suffer

amount of cornmeal and made dumplings. It was the same meal they'd eaten for many days. Nita missed the variety of food they'd eaten back home, but neither she nor anyone else complained.

Champuli poured broth into Pokni's bowl, and Nita guided their grandmother's gnarled fingers around the warm bowl.

"Pokni, please drink this," Nita begged. "It will soothe your throat."

Pokni sipped a little of the broth while Champuli held her blanket so it wouldn't slip from her shoulders. Then Pokni pushed the full bowl back into Nita's hands.

"You must have food," Champuli insisted. "It's not much, but it's warm."

Ishki wrapped a cloth around a hot rock and tucked it between Pokni's feet. Nita, Champuli, and Taloa sat on either side of their grandmother. Inki kept the fire blazing. Whenever the rock between Pokni's feet cooled, Ishki replaced it with another one. The children nodded off, only to wake again to Pokni's coughing. All they could do was keep her covered with blankets and encourage her to sip a little broth.

Ishki leaned close and whispered to her husband, "Your mother is not well."

gnarled: rough, twisted, or misshapen

Nita overheard and squeezed her eyes closed, trying not to cry. “We can’t lose Pokni. We can’t lose Pokni,” she mouthed silently to herself. Champuli took her hand, and they stayed that way until they fell back asleep.

Just as the sun crested the treetops, Pokni passed on. Nita, Taloa, and Champuli wrapped their arms around each other and sobbed. Two other Choctaw elders had gone with Pokni in the frigid night. Men were already at work digging graves.

The ground was frozen. The men worked hard, chipping away at the rocky, ice-encrusted soil. They needed to dig deep enough to keep animals from disturbing the grave sites. Meanwhile, the women and children gathered stones to place atop the graves. But the soldiers grew impatient. The weather was so cold that the soldier in charge had changed his mind: They would not rest today. They were to stop digging. Everyone was to pack up immediately and keep walking.

But the group would not be rushed in their goodbyes. They gathered around the shallow graves to mourn their loved ones and slowly stack rocks over the three mounds. As they worked, they lifted their traditional songs into the morning air. With each stone she placed, Nita imagined leaving a little part of her with Pokni.

frigid: extremely cold



It broke her heart to think of leaving her grandmother in this place.

When the stones had been placed and the songs came to their end, the Choctaw people silently retrieved their belongings and resumed their journey westward.

Another thick blanket of gray clouds rolled in and filled the sky as a sharp wind cut through the forest and icy drops stung their cheeks. Around midday, it began to sleet. Ice crystals hit upon their heads and backs and crunched under their freezing feet. Ishki and Inki walked close behind the girls to make sure their heads stayed covered.

retrieved: picked up again

Nita's thin moccasins were soaked. Taloa tripped several times because her feet were numb. Ishki was afraid Taloa would lose toes and be crippled, so Inki scooped up his youngest and carried her on his back. Nita and Champuli had numb feet too, but Inki could only carry one.

"Champuli, look, blood!" Nita cried out, pointing to red drops in the icy footprints ahead. "The ice must have cut someone's feet!"

Horrified, Champuli began to cry.

"No! Don't cry," Nita said. "Your tears will freeze to your eyelashes!"

"Why are they doing this to us?" Champuli said through chattering teeth. "Why do the soldiers hate us?"

"I don't understand, either. But we can't give up." Nita spoke with force behind her words.

She realized that saying this out loud made her feel more angry than sad. The anger warmed her blood and gave her new strength. "We won't quit, Champuli. We will get to wherever they are taking us." Nita lifted her chin and said, loud and clear, "We will survive."

Thick forests gave way to meadows of tall grass bent over with ice. Freezing wind came at them, but the sleet

finally stopped. The soldiers shouted a command, and they came to a halt. Everyone sat down where they were and huddled together.

At the edge of the trail, an old white man with long whiskers waited. He stood next to a sway-back horse harnessed to a tarp-covered wagon. He and a soldier talked for a moment, and then the old man pulled back the tarp to reveal a pile of what seemed to be large vegetables.

The women sitting near the wagon groaned. Several covered their noses. The soldier shook his head and yelled at the old man. The man answered him angrily.

Nita stood up to get a better look. “Everyone is mad. The old man is shaking his fist.”

“Daughter, don’t stare!” Ishki told her. “Sit down! You’ll get us in trouble.”

But soon a whispered message went from person to person, making its way back to Nita’s family.

The U.S. government commissioned the farmer to grow a field of turnips for Native people traveling along this trail, the whispers said. He wants his pay. The soldiers say that the turnips are rotten and they’re not going to pay him.

tarp: a piece of material, usually waterproof, used to protect exposed objects

commissioned: asked to produce something in exchange for payment

The farmer says it's not his fault that a big rain flooded his field. He did the job, and now he wants his money. One soldier screamed at him to leave or he'd be sorry.

They watched as the farmer shoveled the rotten vegetables onto the ground and drove away. Soldiers gestured at the women nearby and then toward the heap of vegetables. They were to take what they wanted.

A few women moved forward to see if there was anything to salvage. Ishki and some other women joined them. When Ishki returned, her apron was full of turnips, mostly rotten. Nita and Champuli grimaced.

“I don't want to eat those,” Taloa said. “They stink!”

There was grumbling throughout the camp. People began carving out the rotten parts of the turnips. Most of every turnip was discarded, and the rest was boiled over hastily built fires. Ishki added a tiny amount of dried meat to theirs. Although the meal tasted bitter, everyone ate it.

“At least it's warm,” Champuli said. “Taste it, Taloa. It's not so horrible.”

Taloa glared at her but finished her meal.

grimaced: made a facial expression showing disgust or disapproval

discarded: got rid of

5

Nukhako (To Mourn)

“Ouch! Ouch!” Champuli cried out. She lifted her foot, exposing a big rip across the middle of her moccasin. The pair had worn out early; now, the soles were nearly gone.

“The farther we go, the rockier the trail gets,” Nita said. “Here, let me help you.” Champuli balanced on one foot while Nita knelt and slipped a large strip of bark into her moccasin, then switched feet so Nita could do the other one. Nita had done the same with her own pair that morning. Their feet were covered with bruises and blisters, but there was no leather for new moccasins.

Champuli groaned as she put her foot back down. “I guess it’s this or nothing.”

Ishki put her hands on their shoulders. “I know it’s painful, but we can’t stop. I’ll try to do something about it tonight.”

nukhako [nok-ha^hk-loh]: to mourn

Nita blew out her breath and reached for her cousin's hand. But when Champuli looked up, her expression changed from pain to excitement.

"Tuli! Nowa!" Champuli waved to Hattak's two sons. "I didn't know you were behind us."

As the boys got closer, Nita could see that Tuli's eyes were red, and his mouth was a tight line. Nowa, his younger brother, was crying.

"We were told to find your mother," Tuli said to Nita.

"What's wrong?" Nita asked.

"Our mother is in pain," Tuli said.

"She can't walk, and the soldiers are trying to make us leave her behind!" Nowa sobbed.

Ishki spun around. "Taloa, you stay with Inki. You too, Champuli. Nita, you come with me."

In their village, those who were sick or in need had always come to Ishki for help. Nita wasn't sure what was wrong with the boys' mother, Eplil, but she knew Ishki was the best person to help. They hurried after Tuli and Nowa, who led them to their parents.

Hattak and Eplil were near the trail, sheltered under

a large, snow-laden pine tree. When Hattak saw them, his shoulders sagged with relief. He cried out, "Help her! Please!"

Eplil was wrapped in a blanket, lying in her husband's arms. She looked up at their arrival, her eyes wide and unfocused.

Fat snowflakes swirled all around them. Nita clutched her blanket tightly and watched as Ishki tended to Eplil. Ishki wrapped the weakened woman tightly in her blanket and spoke quietly to her and Hattak. She walked back to Nita.

"Go tell your father that I will catch up with you soon. Take Tuli and Nowa with you," Ishki said. Then she put her arms around Tuli and Nowa. "Go with Nita and get something to eat. You look hungry. Your father will stay with your mother."

Nita saw the tears in her mother's eyes. As she and the brothers turned to leave, Nita heard Ishki speak quietly to Hattak.

"Eplil is very weak. She can't walk for several days. Since you speak some English, you must tell the soldiers this: Your wife will die unless she can ride in one of their supply wagons."

Ishki returned with Hattak's good news. The soldiers would allow Eplil to ride on the wagon until they stopped for the night. Hattak would walk alongside the wagon, next to her. Hattak and Eplil would find them when they made camp so Ishki could continue tending to Eplil. "She needs to stay off her feet and rest for a few days, but I don't know if the soldiers will agree," Ishki explained. "Hopefully, she will improve by tomorrow."

The snow had ceased, but an icy wind grew strong. Nita trudged along with Tuli and Nowa through the powdery white snow until late in the afternoon when they were told to stop. Because most of the food supplies were depleted, the soldiers agreed that several Choctaw men should hunt. They also declared that if the hunt was successful, they would spend the following day preparing the meat and stay an extra night. Saplings and brush were cut for shelters to protect them from the snow. But nothing could keep the cold away.

Later, Hattak helped Eplil over to Ishki. He and Inki then left for the hunt. Nita, Champuli, and Tuli helped gather kindling and branches for their fire. Most of the wood was wet, but Nita knew Ishki traveled with a pouch of dried moss, twigs, and pine needles that she had collected along the journey. Nita watched and waited as

depleted: reduced in amount due to being used

Ishki struck flint stones together to ignite the small pile of dried moss and twigs, then coaxed the small flames to slowly dry and catch on the bigger branches.

Long after Ishki had settled Epil and Taloa and Nowa had crawled under the shelter to sleep near their mothers, Nita, Champuli, and Tuli sat by the fire.

“I’m worried,” Tuli said, fussing with a stick to shuffle the hot coals around. “My mother isn’t much better. She’s been different since the day our homes were burned. I don’t think she has smiled once on this journey. I wonder if she’ll ever be like she was before.”

Nita looked at Champuli, and they scooted closer to Tuli. Sitting in silence, they stared into the flames, listening to the crackling and popping of the burning wood. Tuli continued to jab at the hot coals with his stick. Nearby, a man began to sing softly, and soon, others joined in.

They sang of the Choctaw creation story, passed down from their ancestors. They sang of their homelands left behind. The words made Nita want to cry. She wished they would sing about happier times, but that wouldn’t make sense. Her Pokni was gone. Champuli’s parents,

flint stones: pieces of rock that produce sparks when struck with certain materials

too. And Nita worried about Tuli's mother. It felt like there was nothing to feel happy about.



Or was there? She still had her parents and sister. She was with Champuli and Tuli. They all had each other, and this made them a family. Was there something she could say to make everyone feel better? Nita took deep breaths. After several times doing this, she felt courage enough to speak.

“Maybe the hunters will bring back a buck,” she said. “And we can eat until our stomachs are full. And maybe we will get to stay here one more day. And maybe . . .” she paused. “We could have a ball game?”

Tuli and Champuli looked at her, their eyes wide. Then Tuli blinked, and slowly, the corners of his mouth turned up just a little.

“Maybe,” he said, and tossed the stick he held into the fire.

Nita looked at Champuli, and they smiled.

6

Foha (To Rest)

Whoops and yells woke the camp as the sun rose. The hunting party had returned. Nita and Champuli were among the first to see two men burst from the forest carrying a pole between them. A buck hung from the pole. The other hunters followed, holding rabbits, squirrels, and other small game. Nita's father handed two squirrels and a skunk to her mother.

"The hunt was better than we hoped! Here, you can start with these. I'm going to help clean the buck."

"Inki, did you kill the issi?" Taloa asked.

He scooped her up as if pulling her into the memory. "We all saw the buck at the same time. One soldier had his gun trained on it." Inki stretched out his arm and shut one eye, pretending to aim. "I was afraid he'd shoot and there wouldn't be as much meat to eat. Luckily, one of our hunters shot his arrow first—" He used one hand to demonstrate loosing an arrow. "And the issi fell."

foha [fo-hah]: to rest

Taloea clapped her hands in excitement.

There was much rejoicing and singing. No one would go hungry! The morning went quickly with everyone busy. Men butchered, dressed, and prepared the buck for cooking. Women built fires and cleaned the small game.

“Do you think the soldiers will take the meat from us?” Champuli whispered.

“I don’t think so,” Nita said, but she looked over her shoulder. Most of the soldiers were standing near the edge of the clearing, watching the activity. “I’m sure we’ll share with them. After all, a few of the soldiers went on the hunt. And I saw others help gather wood and haul buckets of water from the spring.”

“There should be enough for everyone,” Champuli said, but she sounded unsure.

Ishki kept Nita and Champuli busy cleaning the squirrels and the skunk. Taloea watched, giving them advice as they worked.

“Don’t poke the scent pouch in that koni—there’d be some awful stink! You missed some meat on that bone! Don’t make holes in the pelts—they could be made into moccasins! And those fluffy tails could make hats!”

Finally, Ishki sat back on her heels and turned to her youngest daughter. “Taloa, we need some more wood for the fire. Bring back an armful, please.”

“But—”

“Tushpa!” Ishki said.

Taloa stomped off while Nita and Champuli began dropping the squirrel and skunk meat into the boiling water. As soon as each piece was partially cooked, they used two sticks to pluck it from the pot and lay it on hot, flat rocks. Inki returned with the venison and began laying strips on the hot rocks as well. The sizzling meat made their empty stomachs rumble.

“Mmmm! That smells good,” came Tuli’s voice. Nita turned and saw him staring at the food.

“It didn’t take you long to follow your nose,” she said, laughing. “How is your mother today?”

“She is feeling better this morning,” he said with a small smile. “But we are going to travel with your family so your mother can keep an eye on her.”

Taloa came running back, carrying an armful of sticks, and dropped them next to Tuli’s feet. When she spotted the meat sizzling on the rock, she squealed in excitement.

venison: deer meat

“I hope you weren’t going to eat without me!” At that, everyone laughed. Everyone, that was, except for Taloa, who was quite serious.

Soon, all conversation stopped. The only sounds were families enjoying a hearty meal. Even the soldiers were quiet.

Ishki broke the silence. “We finally have enough food for a few days. Is there any word on how much farther we have to walk?”

“No one seems to know,” Inki said, shaking his head. “I’m not sure the soldiers know either.”

“I’ve asked them,” Hattak said. “But they don’t give an answer.”

“How did you know the hunters would bring back so much?” Champuli asked later as the girls warmed their hands near the fire.

“I didn’t know. I just hoped,” Nita replied. “This journey is so horrible, and we were all hungry. I just wanted something good to happen.”

“Do you think there will be an ishtaboli game?” Champuli asked.

Nita pointed toward another fire, where Tuli, Nowa, and two other boys were waving their arms and talking excitedly. Another boy ran toward them carrying kapucha in both hands.

“I wonder how many others were able to save their stickball sticks,” Champuli said. “Did you save yours?”

“I didn’t have any sticks of my own,” Nita said. “I borrowed them whenever I played. Inki was making a pair of sticks for me, but they got left behind.”

Champuli looked at her hands. “My father said he wanted to make sticks for me,” she said in a whisper. “Now that will never happen.”

“I’m sorry.” Nita put her arm around her cousin’s shoulder and squeezed. “From now on, you are no longer my cousin. You are my sister! Just like Taloa. When we reach our new home, Inki will make us each our own pair of sticks.”

Champuli smiled at the thought.

In the afternoon, the sun shone, the sky turned a brilliant blue, and the air felt warm. It didn’t take long for an ishtaboli game to get organized. Everyone who had sticks brought them to the clearing. The ground was lumpy and muddy, but no one cared. While Tuli and

Nowa ran onto the playing field with their sticks, Nita, Taloa, and Champuli joined the spectators on blankets to watch. Four men sat around a hollow log and sang while they beat their makeshift drums.

To mark the center of the playing field, two men dug a hole, and several boys carried a tall tree trunk to place in the hole. Various people supplied a towa, so having a ball to play with was not a problem. Men, women, boys, and girls—anyone who had sticks—ran to center field and divided into two teams. With loud yells and several whistles, the game began!



Mud flew in all directions as players, waving their sticks, fought to move the towa from one end of the field to the other. Nita wished she had sticks, but her heart filled with joy for those who got to play.

Everyone cheered. No matter who scored, the drummers beat harder and sang louder. Nita and Champuli looked around at the smiles and soaked up the laughter. There would be no losers that day.

Nita clapped and called out, "Ishtaboli is ours!" Then she leaned into her cousin, repeating the words she had heard all her life. "We will hold on to this game, to our language, to our songs, and to our stories. When we get to where we are going, these things will make it our home."

The game ended in a tie. After another hearty meal, everyone stayed around the fires, singing and telling stories. The next day would be another hard day of walking. But for now, it was still a day of issi and ishtaboli.

7

Bokushi Yuvlli (A Flowing Creek)

After a few mild and mostly sunny days, the rain returned. It didn't stop for three days and nights. A few of the soldiers rode ahead and came back with a message: A creek was ahead. They were expected to build a raft to cross over it.

Not long after, everyone stared down into the rushing waters. Because of all the rain, the creek was swollen beyond its banks. No one spoke. Nita, Champuli, and Tuli stood with a group of older children, watching the frothy boil of water as it rushed over banks slippery with mud. Nita pointed at a large chunk of ice bobbing in the water before it disappeared under the surface of debris rushing downstream.

"I can't watch this anymore," Nita said, her words barely audible. "A raft would capsize! We would drown!"

bokushi yuvlli [bo:-kó-shi ya-nál-li]: a flowing creek

raft: a flat structure used to travel over water

debris: the remains of something broken or destroyed

audible: able to be heard

Champuli's breathing was rapid as she gasped out her words. "I won't cross that deep water! Not on a raft or any other way."

They hurried away from the creek to go help set up camp for the night.

All afternoon and until dark, Tuli and his friends helped the men and older boys collect the materials needed to build a large raft. They chopped down dead trees and dragged the trunks close to the river. They stripped the bark from the logs and cut vines to use as rope to lash them together.

While the men worked by the creek, Ishki and Taloa joined the women and children in collecting wood and building fires. Nita and Champuli went with the older children to collect water from springs on the hillside. Inki and Hattak took a break from raft building to quickly assemble a sapling shelter. Nita, Taloa, and Champuli gathered brush to pile on the roof. All the while, Nita thought about the turbulent water and worried how a raft could be sturdy enough to take them to the other side.

"If we stay here long enough, maybe the creek will calm down before we have to cross," Champuli said, as if she could hear Nita's thoughts. "Surely the soldiers won't make us get on a raft in such a swift current!"



“What if it’s a plan to get rid of us?” Nita mumbled under her breath.

Champuli grabbed Nita’s arm. “No!” She was looking at Taloa, whose eyes grew wide.

“I’m sorry,” Nita said quickly. “I didn’t mean it, Taloa. Please don’t cry!”

“I’m scared.” Taloa clenched her fists over her eyes.

Kneeling next to her, Nita said quietly, “It will be alright. Inki and Ishki won’t let anything happen to us!”

“Why are you crying, Taloa?” Ishki placed the kindling she carried on the ground and sat down next to the girls.

“They won’t make us cross the creek if it’s dangerous, will they?” Taloa asked.

Ishki pursed her lips. “No. I will not allow anyone to put my children in danger.”

Nita chewed on her bottom lip. It didn’t seem to her that the soldiers cared if Choctaw people got hurt or even if they died.

As the sun set, the men and boys left the raft and hurried to warm themselves by the fires. The last of the meat simmered in stewpots on every fire. There was enough for each man, woman, and child to have a meal. After they ate, one uncle was coaxed into telling a story. Old and young gathered around his fire.

The uncle’s haggard face glowed in the firelight. Gray ash caught in his wild hair as it billowed around his head. In a deep, rich voice, he told the Choctaw creation story, acting it out as he spoke the words. Everyone there knew the story by heart, but that night, so far from everything familiar, Nita felt as though she were hearing it for the first time:

A long time ago, there were many, many Choctaw men, women, and children. They lived in a

coaxed: gently urged

haggard: very thin or tired-looking

warm place. Each day, the sun rose and stayed hot until the afternoon. Then rain fell for a short time. Because of this, plants grew tall with enormous leaves. Fruit hung heavily in the trees, and red, yellow, and brilliant pink flowers bloomed everywhere. But even in a place of abundance, there was never enough food. There were too many people living there. The Choctaw people needed more room to grow and multiply, so they started on a journey to the north and east.

Their guide was a very long pole called an *iti fabussa*. Each night, men would dig a hole. In that hole, the chief medicine man would place the long pole upright. In the morning, when they awoke, the *iti fabussa* leaned toward the east. That is the direction they went.

Two full moons came and went. The Choctaw people were tired of walking every day and never reaching their destination. At last, they came to a wide body of water, and they named this water *Misha Sipokni*. Our ancestors felt this must be their new home.

But the next morning, the *iti fabussa* again leaned toward the east. So they built canoes and rafts and

sailed across the Misha Sipokni to the far bank. Once again, they rejoiced, thinking they had at last come to their homeland.

But at dawn the next day, they were discouraged. Once more, the *iti fabussa* leaned to the east. They gathered their belongings and continued the journey until they reached the western bank of the Yazoo River, where they rested.

The next morning, when the *iti fabussa* stood straight, they held a celebration. At last, the Choctaw people had finally reached their homeland. They called their new home *Nvnihi Waiya*. And they celebrated their new home by building a large mound.

Everyone was quiet when the uncle reached the end. Nita's eyes were wet, and she saw tears glistening on the faces around her. Would their new home be as precious to them as *Nvnihi Waiya* had been to their ancestors?

8

Ubanvbli (To Go Across)

It was early the next morning when the women tending the fires saw soldiers harnessing the oxen to the supply wagons. Ishki told her husband the news. He asked Hattak to go and speak to the soldiers in English.

Hattak took a few other men with him to ask the soldiers where they were going. They learned that one soldier on horseback and two others driving the wagons were leaving to find a place where the water was low enough for the wagons to cross. The rest of the group would cross on the raft, and the wagons would catch up with them in a few days.

When Hattak informed the others of the soldiers' plans, everyone was angry. They wanted to know why they weren't allowed to walk to shallower water instead of being forced to make the dangerous trip across on a raft. The soldiers had dismissed their concerns and waved them away, telling them to get back to work and finish the raft.

ubanvbli [a-ba:-nab-lih]: to go across

While the men worked, young boys fished in the side pools near the creek. Unaware of the rising sense of fear, little children ran around squealing and playing tag or hiding from each other. The women stayed busy and cooked another meal with what food was left. Nita, Taloa, and Champuli sat near the fire and drank warm broth, listening to the women's conversations.

"The soldiers need to let the men stop working on the raft and wait for the creek to get lower," said an elderly woman. "Instead of building a raft, our men need to hunt and build up our food supply." Heads nodded in agreement.

"My children brought me a handful of pecans yesterday," an auntie called over from the next fire. "I cracked them and found that most are still good."

"Ome," said Ishki. "I'll have Nita help collect nuts. We'll grind the nut meat and make palvska. Taloa, you go with her. You might have some fun with the other children."

"I'll help!" said Champuli, jumping up.

As the three of them walked away, Nita said, "Before we pick nuts, let's go look to see if the water is down."

When they reached the bank, they groaned.

The water had gone down some, but it was still muddy and moving fast.

Champuli shut her eyes and sucked in her breath. “I don’t want to go across.”

“I’m sure we will be all right,” Nita said. “Our family and friends are building the raft, not the soldiers, so we know it will be sturdy.” She turned away from the creek, motioning for Taloa and Champuli to follow. “Come. We should go collect those nuts. It will be good to have Ishki’s fresh paluska.” And a distraction, she thought.

That evening, the men finished the raft. Inki and a few other men went with Hattak to tell the soldiers’ leader. In English, Hattak told them that the rafts were ready but they shouldn’t cross yet. The creek was getting lower. If they could wait a few more days, the water would be safe enough to wade across. Once again, the soldiers did not listen. If the raft was ready, they said, they would cross the next day. If anyone refused to cross, they would be punished.

The next morning, when Nita and her family circled around the fire, Inki explained the plan. “Last night by the light of torches, we finished the raft. It is fastened to a rope tied around a large tree on this side of the creek.

sturdy: strong and well-built

Right now, two men are swimming across with the other end of the rope to secure it to a big tree on the other side. Once they do, they'll start taking people across."

"We should just stay here until we can wade across," Ishki said, looking concerned. "Those soldiers shouldn't be in such a hurry to risk lives getting to the other side."

Squatting down next to his wife, Inki said, "The soldiers said they can't wait any longer."

"Can't or won't?" Ishki's voice was hard. "And what about the children and the elders? Those devils don't care who might perish! That is as clear as this morning's sky."

It was upsetting to hear Inki and Ishki arguing, so Nita, Taloa, and Champuli went in search of Tuli. They found him with Nowa and their friends, heading toward the creek.

Tuli waved. "Come with us! We're going to watch the men on the other side."

Taloa ran ahead. Nita started to join, but she hesitated and turned around. "Champuli, are you coming?"

Champuli leaned against a large oak tree, her feet firmly on the ground. Her arms were crossed, and she glared at the sky. Between gritted teeth, she said, "I'm not going!"

Nita sighed and waved to the others. "Tuli, go on. And Taloa, stay close to Tuli and Nowa. We'll catch up with you." When the others were out of sight, she went back to Champuli. "I'm scared, too, but we will have to go across."

"I can't!" Champuli began to sob into her hands.

Nita put an arm around her. "I know. It's scary for everyone. But we must. We don't have a choice."

As she comforted her cousin, Nita blinked to hold back her own tears. She was just as terrified of crossing that creek, but she had to be strong for Champuli and Taloa. Once they were on the other side, perhaps it wouldn't be long before they reached their new home.

"I'm not going," Champuli huffed.

"Then wait here. I'll be right back," Nita said.

As she ran toward the creek, she could smell smoke as it rose up into the air. She found Taloa and Nowa standing partway down the bank while Tuli and the other boys stood near the water's edge. She was relieved to see that the current wasn't as strong as the day before.

"Taloa!" Nita called.

Her sister waved and pointed across to the other side.

“Look! They built a fire!”

When Nita followed her sister’s gaze, she saw that a fire burned bright, as if beckoning them to cross. The raft was on the opposite creek bank, pulled partway out of the water.

Tvli ran over to her. “The men swam over earlier and tied the ropes to the tree. Then they pulled the raft across to make sure it worked.”

“How will it get back here?” Nita asked.



“With the guide ropes attached to the raft,” answered Tuli.

While Nita watched, the empty raft was pulled back across by the men standing on their side of the creek.

The returning raft bounced up and down in the strong current, and Nita began to shake all over. “It’s going to throw everyone into the water,” she gasped.

“Once everyone gets on the raft, their weight will hold it down,” Tuli said.

This plan didn’t sound safe to Nita. She glanced at her friend. Was it her imagination, or had she seen a shadow of doubt cross Tuli’s face? Nita could look no more.

“Champuli is worried,” she said and grabbed Taloa’s hand. “I told her we’d go back to camp with her. Let’s go.”

Their cousin was still standing next to the tree where Nita had left her. They both took Champuli’s hands in theirs. Nita felt her tremble, but there was nothing she could say that would help. They walked in silence and returned to help Ishki prepare. Then they all made their way down to the creek.

Soon, it was time for the first group to cross. Six Choctaw men and women sat as close to the raft’s center

as possible, their few possessions tucked around them. A soldier sat near the pilot. Everyone on the raft and onshore sat quietly as they waited for their passage to begin.

Nita noticed that most families had divided up and weren't crossing together. Did they fear the raft might flip and their entire family would disappear? If people fell in, would the soldiers save them? Nita knew that if she fell in, she'd never make it to the other side. She had only ever gone swimming in warm, shallow water, not cold, muddy water coursing down a swollen creek.

Hand over hand, the men on the other bank pulled the ropes. The pilot kept the long oar steady as he steered the raft, and the passengers held on to loops tied along the logs. Those onshore watched in fear as their loved ones made the crossing.

Cold water sprayed the passengers. Several times, a portion of the raft dipped under the water and then popped up again. No one moved or cried out. On the shore, everyone held their breath. Taloa and Champuli hid their faces in the blanket covering Nita's shoulders.

Fast currents pulled the raft downstream until it seemed in danger of breaking away, but then the slack in the overhead guideline pulled back against the current.

When the raft reached the shore on the other side, cheering erupted.

“They made it!” Nita exclaimed as she and Taloa jumped up, full of joy at the sound. But Champuli remained glum, her eyes fixed on her mud-covered feet.

The first passengers headed up the bank toward the fire. They waved back at those who still had to make the trip. Nita and the others clapped for their successful crossing while dreading their own trip.

Again and again, men on both sides heaved the ropes hand over hand, pulling the raft across the water to the far bank. Every trip had a new pilot whose job was to help the passengers onto the raft and then guide it across the water to the far side. Taloa and Eplil made the crossing with Inki. But when it was Champuli’s turn, it took effort to get her onto the raft with Nowa and Ishki. The other passengers grew impatient. When a soldier finally yelled at her, she stepped on and buried her face in Ishki’s side. By that time, the other children on the raft were crying. Their crossing was the smoothest so far, but Nita held her breath. She didn’t let it out until she saw Champuli’s feet touch the far bank.

Nita waited to cross with Tuli and his father, Hattak. Their trip was the next to last to cross. The final trip

would carry the last soldier and the men who'd pulled the raft back to the starting point each time. Hattak was piloting this trip. Tuli sat next to his father, and Nita sat on a damp coil of rope near her friend.

Her stomach churned, but she kept her eyes focused—not on the water but on where they were going. They'd reached the middle of the creek when Tuli looked at Nita.

“We’re almost there!” he called over the sound of the rushing water.

At the same time, a woman on their raft screamed. Nita turned in time to see a tree trunk rolling over and over in the water. With each rotation, broken limbs disappeared then reappeared. The tree was headed straight for the raft.

Tuli was on his feet, crouched as though he were about to spring into the air.

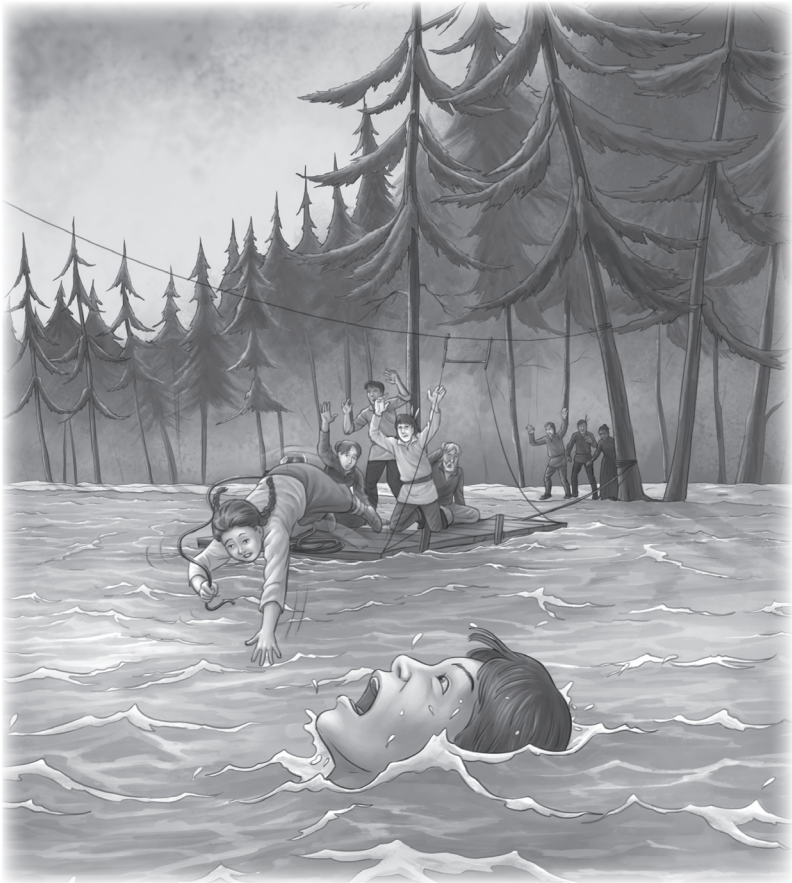
“Sit down!” Tuli’s father yelled as Nita tried to grab her friend’s arm.

At that moment, the tree hit the front corner of the raft, spinning it to one side. Tuli lost his balance and plunged into the water.

Everyone on the raft and the bank began yelling, but Nita heard nothing. All she saw was her friend's head bobbing above the rushing water as it carried him downstream.

“Tuli!”

Without hesitating, Nita grabbed the end of the rope she was sitting on and jumped in after him.



9

Ont Aivhli (The End)

The roar of the creek filled Nita's ears. Her instinct was to swim, but she had little control of her direction. The current swept her downstream. She fought to keep her head up and look for Tuli, but the waves pressed her under the surface. The tumbling force of the water pushed her up long enough to suck in a breath of air before she was dragged under again. Just as she thought she would drown, the rope she had forgotten she was clinging to went taut and yanked her back to the surface.

Her knees scraped against a rock, and just ahead, she saw a small island. Nita let go of the rope and put both hands down until she felt rough gravel between her fingers. She tried to stand, but the current knocked her over. Digging her fingers and feet into the gravel, she crawled through the torrent. Finally, she dragged herself onto the small, rocky island.

ont aivhli [o't a:-yath-thi]: the end

taut: pulled tight

torrent: a violent or forceful flow of water

She clambered over rocks, screaming her friend's name, until she heard shouting from the far bank of the creek. Everyone was yelling and pointing. Following their gestures, she ran until she found Tuli. He was face down in the gravel, still halfway in the water, the strong current threatening to pull him back in.

Nita tugged him farther onto the shore and turned him on his side. Kneeling next to him, she raised his head to her knee and beat her hand on his back.

"Don't be dead, Tuli!" she cried. "Please, please don't be dead!" She pounded, sobbed, and begged until finally she collapsed beside him.

That was when she heard him cough. Then he coughed again. And again!

"Tuli!" She lifted him to a sitting position and started hitting his back.

"Stop. Hitting," Tuli coughed out.

Nita threw her arms around him. Then she jumped up and waved to everyone to let them know he was safe. She heard Inki shout, "Nita, stay there! The last raft will come back to get you!"

Nita and Tuli waited as the rest of their group made it safely across and the raft was pulled back to the beginning. Then the men on the destination side of the

creek tied the guide rope to a tree farther downstream, across from their small island.

As the last group was pulled across the creek toward Nita and Tuli, an elder began to sing. Soon, everyone joined in singing as they waited for the raft. Nita sang as loud as she could. Tuli tried, but he started to cough.

“Just listen,” Nita whispered. “And try to rest. It’s almost over.”

For Nita and Tuli, the wait seemed to take longer than all the other trips combined. They were wet and shivering. The sun had already dipped behind the treetops, covering the entire creek in purple shadow. Nita helped Tuli stand, and they made their way slowly along the rocks to the tip of the island. There, they waited for the raft to approach their little island.

Once the raft passed the halfway point, the ropes were loosened to allow the raft to continue downstream until it ran aground on the gravel bar. As they were helped on, Nita squeezed Tuli’s hand and focused on the image of stepping off the raft to the safety of the shore.

The ropes were drawn taut again, and they crossed the short distance from the gravel bar to the muddy bank. When they stepped off the raft, Nita and Tuli were wrapped in blankets and led up the hill to the warmth of the fire.

The sun was already high when Nita squinted, awakening to the smell of food cooking. Champuli handed her a bowl of warm broth and sat down next to her as Nita sipped. When Taloa saw that her sister was awake, she ran over to them.

“Have you heard?” Taloa was practically bouncing on her toes with her news. Not waiting for an answer, she said, “The soldiers are gone!”

“What do you mean, gone?” Nita asked, shaking her head in confusion. “Gone where?”

“No one is sure. They left during the night. Inki and Hattak watched them leave.” Taloa shrugged. “Maybe they were going to find the other soldiers with the wagons.”

“Listen,” Champuli said, getting to her feet. She bent forward and stared into the dense woods.

In the distance, they heard the rustle of the underbrush and the rhythmic beat of horse hooves coming toward them. Everyone stopped what they were doing to watch and listen.

Champuli grabbed Nita’s arm. “Are the soldiers coming back?”

“I don’t know,” Nita whispered.

“Maybe they went to find the others, and they’re coming to take us somewhere bad,” Champuli said, lifting her hand to her mouth.

“They already did that,” Nita said, clenching her fists.

But there were no soldiers. Instead, three Choctaw men rode through the trees on horseback. They came to a halt and looked around at the bedraggled group staring back at them. A man with feathers in his hair and a medallion around his neck, who appeared to be their leader, raised his hand in greeting. “Halito!”

Hattak stepped forward. “Halito, miko!” And every man, woman, and child shouted after him.

“Halito!”

“Halito!”

“Halito!”

The three men dismounted their horses and were immediately surrounded. Many reached out to pat their backs, shake their hands, and call out questions.

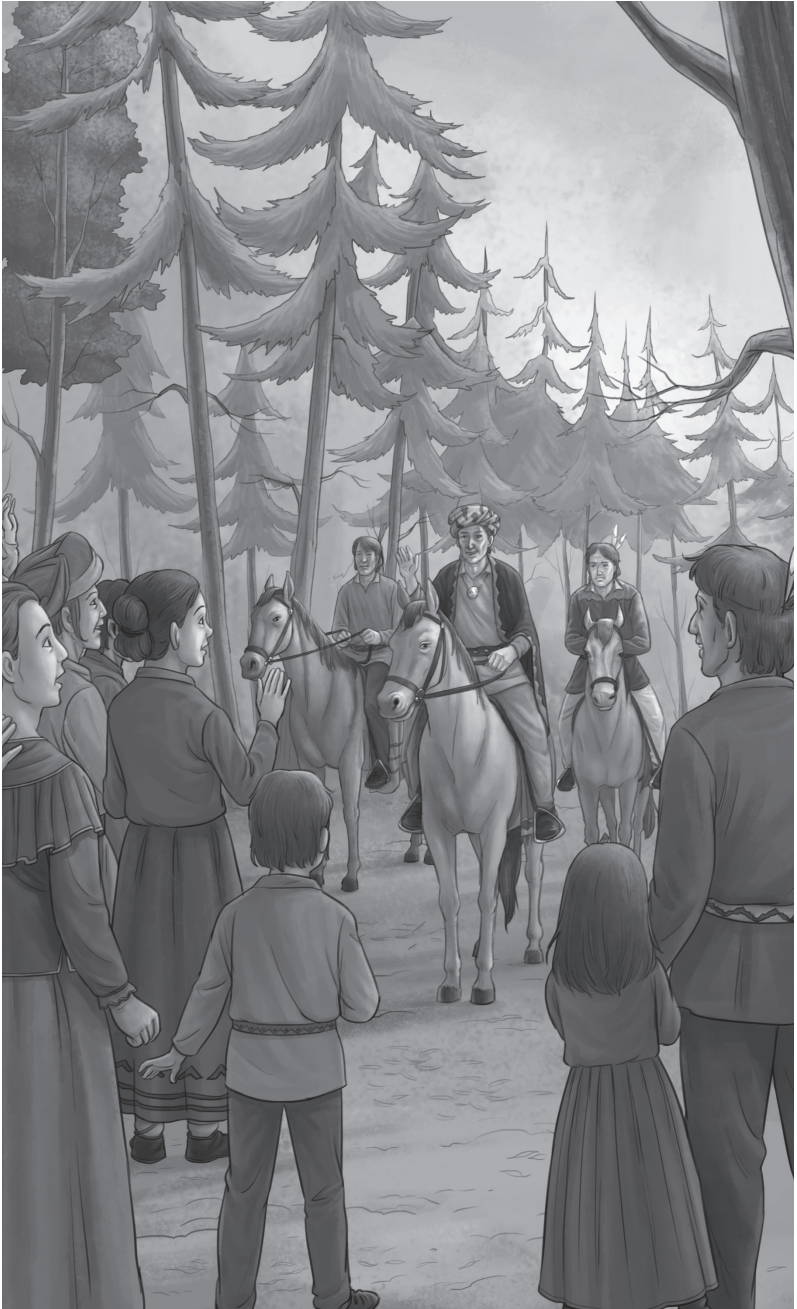
“Are you taking us to our new home?”

“How much farther do we have to walk?”

“Is it close?”

“What is it like?”

ONT AIVHLI (THE END)



Nita watched as Inki joined Hattak in greeting the chief and the men with him.

“Did you pass any soldiers on your way?” Inki asked.

The chief placed his hand on Inki’s shoulder. “The soldiers aren’t coming back,” he said. “We know you’ve suffered on this trip, as so many others have before you. We’ll take you to your new home. It’s not far. We can get there before night falls.”

Families hugged and cried. Children jumped up and down. Nita, Taloa, and Champuli held each other as tears streamed down their cheeks. Tuli and Nowa ran toward the three sobbing girls and threw their arms around them.

It was nearly sunset when, with renewed energy, the group of Choctaw people descended the last hill into the valley. Thin columns of campfire smoke floated over the treetops, disappearing into the lengthening purple shadows of the hills. They heard the sound of a biskinik hammering a tree to welcome them. They breathed in the fragrance of early wild roses and tall grass, mixed with the smell of food cooking over fires.

Nita looked in wonder around the beautiful hillside. This was their new home. After all they’d lost, it was difficult to believe they were here to stay. She thought of

Pokni and the others lost along the journey. It made her sad, but she knew they would always be in her heart. The Choctaw people who had survived the journey would never forget those who had not. A feeling of peace came over her as she remembered what she'd told Champuli.

They *had* survived.

Afterword

Before 1830, the original Choctaw homelands were in Mississippi. After Andrew Jackson became president in 1829, he pressured Native tribes to sell their lands to the government. But the Choctaw people did not wish to leave their ancestral homelands. Non-Natives, including American settlers, had already moved onto Choctaw lands without their permission. This caused hard feelings between Choctaw people and the settlers.

Jackson presented a treaty to the Choctaw chiefs. This treaty said that Choctaw people would trade their homelands for unknown land hundreds of miles to the west. Jackson promised the Choctaw chiefs that they could keep their tribal sovereignty if they signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. There was resistance among tribal members, but in the end, the Choctaw chiefs signed the treaty on September 27, 1830. Within a year, soldiers began the forced removal of approximately fifteen thousand Choctaw people.

The Choctaw Nation was the first of the Five Tribes to be removed from their homelands. Although the removal lasted seventy years, most Choctaw people made

ancestral homelands: the lands where a person's ancestors used to live
tribal sovereignty: a tribe's right to govern themselves and their land

the approximately seven-hundred-mile journey between 1830 and 1834, after their homes and villages were destroyed. Most often, there was no time to prepare, and they were forced to leave with few or no supplies. They suffered horrible hardships during the removal. Close to one-third of Choctaw people on the trail perished from disease, starvation, and extreme weather conditions. One Choctaw chief who was interviewed for an Arkansas newspaper described it as a “trail of tears and death.” Other newspapers picked up the quote, and the name soon stuck. Over the years, many other Native peoples adopted the phrase “trail of tears” to refer to their own forced removals.

When the Choctaw people reached Indian Territory, now called Oklahoma, they began a new life. They held on to their traditional values. They built new communities, educated their children, and set up a strong tribal government. The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma continues to thrive today as a sovereign nation.

Meet the Author



Leslie Stall Widener is an author and illustrator who is passionate about drawing, painting, and writing stories for children. She enjoys reading and writing about historical events, places, and people. Leslie finds that researching one subject often takes her in unexpected directions, giving her new ideas for stories.

Leslie has researched and written many stories about Choctaw people, focusing in particular on the 1830s. These stories highlight the hardships of their removal from their ancestral homelands. As a Choctaw tribal member, it is a subject that is close to her heart.

Much has been recorded about the Trail of Tears and the Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes who made the journey. However, similar removals touched all Indigenous Nations in the United States and First Nations in Canada.

Leslie's nonfiction picture book, *Kindred Spirits: Shilombish Ittibachvffa*, was published in 2024 by Charlesbridge Publishing. She has also illustrated numerous books, including five Choctaw "why stories." These types of stories help explain how things came to be. They are the basis for oral storytelling and are found in most Native American tribes.

Leslie lives in McKinney, Texas, with her artist husband, Terry Widener. She serves as the Native Fund Chair for We Need Diverse Books (diversebooks.org) and belongs to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and a registered Choctaw artist. Find her at www.lesliestallwidener.com.

Meet the Illustrator



Kailien Singson. A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.

Credits

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Kailien Singson & Ivan Pesic

Title Page Illustration by

Kailien Singson

Text Illustrations by

Courtesy of Kailien Singson / 78

Courtesy of Leslie Stall Widener / 76

Kailien Singson / 5, 9, 18, 31, 40, 47, 51, 60, 65, 71

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Core Knowledge® Adventures in History™

One step. Then another and another. They have to keep walking through the snow, the rain, the mud, and the bitterly cold winds that blow. No one has a choice. Not Nita's father or mother, nor her younger sister, Taloa, nor her cousins and friends. A man named Jackson said they had to move, and so they did. Their chief urges them forward, saying that once they reach their new home, the children will play again. The men and boys will spend their days hunting and fishing, and the mothers and girls will tend to the homes. Each evening, they will gather beneath the stars. Warmed by their campfires, they will once again tell the stories of their ancestors. And so Nita keeps walking. One step. And then another.

These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.

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