

Excerpts from *A Caddo's Way*, An Historical Novel of the Camino Real

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The Wife

In 1824, the group of six wagons and their accompanying outriders, new land-grant recipients as members of the Dewitt's Colony, had taken most of the morning to cross the Sabine River at Gaines Ferry, so they made an early camp before moving further west into Texas along the Camino Real. Not alone in this position, they had found a ready clearing near a clear creek.

Still, tired as he was, sixteen year old Peter Hays stole a long glance at Eudice Carpentier, John's wife, as she helped her small children down from the wagon to begin collecting wood for a fire. Not for the first time, Hayes noticed the sensual swing of her heavy braid of chestnut brown hair across her back, and as she raised her leg to help down their three-year-old daughter Patricia, she of necessity pulled up her full skirt and petticoat to give her leg more freedom of movement.

Peter's breath caught as he saw for only a moment the inside of her soft white leg just past the knee.

Eudice Carpentier glanced back over her shoulder, Patricia in her hands, and caught Peter looking. Embarrassed and blushing, he quickly looked over at the team still in harness. But did she turn back around with the faintest of smiles? Though not yet twenty-five, she must know what effects her full woman's figure had on a man. Did she really feel it necessary to raise her leg so high onto the wagon wheel's hub to catch her daughter under the arms, or was that for him? He was becoming increasingly tormented by his feelings toward Eudice, and by what those feelings caused to his body as he lay under his muslin mosquito drape each night.

These thoughts were not new to Peter, though he shamefully admitted that to him the arousal by another man's wife made him question his own strength of character. He knew this was simply wrong, Eudice was wrong to encourage what he could only call a dalliance—but then his memory of her inner thigh, leading to, well...he was lost in his blood's feelings and cared nothing about where such feelings might lead.

This seemed so much older, more mature, than the previous relationships and the consequent feelings he had shared, as well as he could, with other women, girls really, more his own age.

But none of them, or his friends back in Natchitoches really had any questions about, well, the mechanics of the thing. Surrounded by livestock, even in town, any child older than six had seen dogs, horses, cattle, coupling in order to reproduce, and it was difficult not to notice the fierce energy exerted by the male and the relatively passive acceptance of the female. Peter thought about the first time he had seen a pair of mallard ducks, or at least the first pairing. The boy had been very upset watching the male finally catch up with the female, seeing the mallard climb onto her back, pushing her completely under the water, pecking, grabbing, seizing the back of her soft-feathered head and driving it, too, under the water.

That duck is killing the other one, he had thought—he's drowning her, and he had shouted for the duck to "stop—stop hurting that duck," but the male was soon finished and swam away. Peter's friend Jack had laughed at him as the female doused herself a few times by digging her head under water and bringing the water over onto her back, after which she raised herself, flapped her wings a few times, tucked them down and swam away, unconcerned and obviously unharmed, though she was soon joined by another suitor.

"They're doing it," Jack had said. "Don't you know that's how they do it?"

Well, he did after that, though the cats were the most disturbing, still. He had not wondered or even noticed that, unlike dogs, cats had never shown themselves doing it. He had of course heard cats fighting—the warm spring nights were filled with the sounds of their vicious fighting, screeching at each other, growling, the rising tempo of their abandon, until they obviously pounced and tumbled in a screaming encounter, often punctuated, followed, by a long silence.

And he had seen the results of those midnight encounters, or at least the results of the fights. One tom in particular he would never forget—Peter named him Smoke, though the boy came to understand that cat needed no name or anything else from human beings.

Smoke had belonged only to himself, and to the night. Obviously long abandoned or ignored by any human care or feeding, the tom was lean as a wild animal, long and low-slung, with short grey hair of a consistent length and deep smoke color over every inch of his frame. If I were to be an animal, this would be it: an inhabitant of civilization but not a part—supremely independent, supremely confident and physical, with no show or braggadocio, well, or at least not often, like that English poet he had read at the schoolteacher's house.

On some summer nights, the air hot and still, cicadas ringing in the trees, Peter would find refuge from his sweat-dampened sheets in going out onto the porch that faced Duchamp Street in Natchitoches, sitting in one of the wooden chairs under a wispy open-

weave drape for the mosquitoes, and walking, well, pacing panther-like down the absolute middle of the street would come Smoke, yeowling low every thirty seconds, announcing his presence to any cat that cared to know.

One night Peter saw the cat angle over across the road to a four-foot lattice fence thickly wrapped with scuppernong grapes. Smoke stood momentarily and then calmly leapt up to the top brace that held the white fence, yeowled once, and disappeared on the other side as if the feat were just another step.

And after Smoke had one night walked calmly over to Peter's house, walked up the porch steps as though he owned them, walked over to the boy's chair, turned and shot two quick streams of urine on the chair leg in possession, Peter was furious, but just for a moment, before grinning and shaking his head in admiration. "You bastard," the boy had said aloud, and wished he had that kind of nerve.

Another night, determined to make Smoke his friend, Peter had smuggled out some scraps of stewed chicken skin to bribe the cat. Down the street Smoke came, and Peter hissed to get his attention, then dangling the pieces of skin to entice him over.

Oh, Smoke walked over—the boy had never seen the cat trot in haste, much less run—and calmly ate the chicken, after which he lay down on his side, head back, on the porch planks and closed his eyes.

Wanting the cat to play, Peter found a short twig, squatted down, and began to flick the cat's forepaws with it, first raising one and then tapping the pads of the other, growing a bit impatient, wanting to see the cat's claws.

The paw struck. Without rising, Smoke's front paw flashed out, caught the tip of Peter's thumb with a single claw, held it, and the cat raised his head calmly from the porch plank. He looked at the captured thumb, not even at Peter, found the prey uninteresting, released it, and put his head back down.

It was one of the most beautiful things the boy had ever seen. Admonished—admonished by an alley cat! "A paltry thing, this thumb," he imagined Smoke thinking, sending his message clear as carving it on a tree: "Don't play with me, boy! I don't play."

That was how he wished he could be with Eudice Carpentier, imagining that one day he would be down by the creek, cleaning a brace of geese he had shot on the wing, when down would stroll Eudice, bucket in hand, to get some water for supper. She would walk over the sand and stones, leaving her shoes on the bank, barefoot, lift her skirts to keep them dry, very close to where he sat on his hams, baring a breath-taking expanse of white calf and thigh, and, bending over to dip up a bucket of water, give him a sight of her full breasts filling the front of her shift.

She would straighten, still holding her skirts in her left hand, and he would rise as well, cast the geese up onto the rocks, and look into her hazel eyes. She would flush, the blush moving down to her long throat, and he would reach out, calmly, confidently, place

his hand full on the side of her neck, and say nothing, but think, and she would know his thought, "I could have you, take you, here, or not. And like Smoke, with his thumb caught with one claw, transmit with his eyes, "I do not play."

And she would touch him.

But not today.

Making the Bow

Resting across his knees, the blank for the bow had a natural curvature that was pleasing to the eye, appearing already bent to the string. Cut from a late spring branch of bois d'arc, Osage orange tree, the limb was almost two fingers thick and tall as a man, held onto to season slowly at the back of the Caddo dwelling in the dry smoke.

Such Caddo bows, Two Hawks knew, were still prized among his people and by other tribes as well, the wood tough, hard, but resilient enough to bear the weight of those heavy lobes of green fruit at summer's end. The branch would lose two hands' length before he was finished.

His heavy trade knife, polished from use, lay in his hand, and he relished the weight of potential power, testing the edge before bringing out his Washita stone and drawing the blade in an arch back across the stone, over and over, as though trying to take thin slices of it before replacing the stone in his pouch. He leaned the wood upright against a tree and began to peel and shave, first the stubs from the outgrowth of smaller twigs, then cutting away the short thorns concealing themselves along the length. Careful not to gouge or chop, he was patient with his task, understanding that what he wrought was not simply a weapon but might one day save a life, take a life, feed and clothe, and, yes, bring a quiet pleasure to a discerning eye. He was proud of his work.

The bright yellow inner wood appeared as the upper skin of bark was shaved away, as though a light were shining from within the wood, a lightning that would strike out with the arrow, speeding it on its way. He felt power moving in his hands, into the bow.

Such connections between the spirits of his world and the hard visible world always brought to the Caddo a feeling of wonder, and he thought about how few of his people spoke to him about sensing such impulses from the spirit world, other than an occasional fear of rousing bad spirits that might curse your hunt or wither your garden.

Only the shaman talked at length of communing with the spirit powers, him and the priests and missionaries telling his people about their god that somehow was really three spirits in one but none of them bad or even a trickster, and how the other god, Satan, had amazing powers but wasn't really a god, and that made no sense at all.

Not for the first time, Two Hawks wondered what he might have become had he followed a shaman's path, learned the medicine man's ways, knew how difficult that

would have been since he was not born into that cast, and Caddo did not welcome such shifting about.

And he was not at all sure he would have wanted to remain in one village and work such patterned ceremonies and healing potions the people required. Besides, while he felt and knew and feared the powers of the spirits, and they did frequently speak to him through birds and bears and once even a fish, he was no longer confident that the most powerful spirits listened to and protected the Caddo. Again he drew forth the images and ancestral memories that had washed over him upon visiting the overgrown mounds four days' walk to the west, in the lands of the Hasinai, the home of the ancient Caddo, whose powers were held tight in the huge pines that grew all around. Only that remained of a great people.

These feelings of foreboding were not new but were prodded forth by so many things around him. The heavy wood-handled knife he held between his hands to shave the bark, scraping the inner curve of the emerging bow, the hard bright steel of the blade, the endurance of the tool all argued against the lasting strength of his people. The knife had held to his side for more rounds of seasons than he had hands, the handle polished to a luster by blood and grease and sweat, by lives, but there was no sign the blade would break or wear away, but instead it mocked time and death, wood and stone, as nothing in the Caddo world could.

It was not magic; the blacksmith had shown him that as the man's heavy forearms beat out a horseshoe or a knife from the steel, softened orange-hot in the forge. He needed hammers and tongs and an anvil, true, but all of these things had come from across the water, in wondrous huge ships, and all of this had come from these Spanish and French and English who claimed their god, all had the same one, as their power. Their god, shown suffering, nailed to wood, gave them the power and knowledge to make these things and bring them here. It was strange.

He thought again about the bow being shaped in his crooked old hands, how it would last perhaps four rounds of seasons, perhaps a few more, before the power would weaken and the weapon would serve as a deadfall trip or a stick to prod the ashes of the cook fire. So short-lived compared to his fire-starting steel or French musket—still, there was something this bow shared with his world that the steel or even the glass did not.

But on thinking of the coming seasons, Two Hawks was reasonably sure that this becoming bow in his hands would not be passed on to other uses, other years, unless accidentally happened upon. He knew this was his last bow.

Not that the temporary nature of the weapon brought him to haste or carelessness, as he believed that the care and skill one imparted into an object dwelled in it, in the luster of the pot, the soft stretch of slowly scraped and chewed leggings, the quiet spring of consistent power in a well-shaped bow, By the hands, and yes, the spirit of the maker, the artifact became an extension of the mind. He wanted to complete every step with his eye on the arrow's shaft winging its way swifter than the drop of a falcon out of the morning sky, finding its driven rest in the fleeing spirit sent upon its way.

And thus he worked steadily, not filling each day with toil but setting aside the freshest part of the morning to turn again to his craft, smoothing and flattening the inside curve of the wood to facilitate the bend, leaving the grip in the center whole and round, gradually carving inward the arrow's rest on the left side, to be later supplemented by a section of the breastbone he had kept from a red-tailed hawk brought down whole and alive for her feathers, a crucial element in an arrow's flight. The breastbone would be held in place by a rawhide band wide as his hand, sewn in place wet, shrinking around the grip tight and hard as it dried.

That last hawk, at least this was what the Caddo believed, had come down fast and hard. Two Hawks remembered how in his younger years a red man from a people far to the west had shown him how to catch an eagle in his hands, to feel the life he was taking pass into his own body as the fierce beating of the wings slowed and were at last at rest across his arms.

And so he had gone to the sandy bluffs along the Rive Rouge to the north, trying as he often had the newer name, "Red River," in his mouth, but going back to the more liquid French "Rive Rouge" as more descriptive of the voluble currents threading between winding banks. While on some days he missed speaking entirely in Caddo, as he had when growing up, there was pleasure in picking and choosing between languages for those words that seemed to best suit the things they were attached to. "Assessino" was so much more sharp and violent than "killer" or "murderer," especially when he spoke aloud to himself.

He had chosen a part of the bluffs where run-off had dissolved the red sand-infused clay bank into a wide shaft an arm's length back and deep enough to admit a squatting man. Cottonwood branches had been cut and woven into a thick door and loose ceiling overhead, with accessible spaces between branches and leaves to admit upraised arms.

Finally prepared, he had snared a cottontail rabbit, keeping it trussed but quiet until the pre-dawn hours, when he made his way to the river.

As the day opened grey and misty along the banks, the broad green cottonwood leaves drenched with dew but still with the bitter scent of cut foliage, he entered the blind, pulling the makeshift door closed, and pulled the rabbit from beneath his deerskin shirt, where it had kept him warm with soft fur and a busy heart.

Cutting the sinew binding three of its legs, he held the rabbit's struggling form by one hind leg, welcoming its high-pitched squeaks rising into the morning air as he secured it above a central branch. Then he leaned his back on the clay wall of the blind, eyes searching intently upward, and waited, still as stone.

He watched the shadows move slowly across his folded arms as the sun rose and drifted up the cloudless sky, at intervals slowly reaching up through the leaves, to prod the rabbit into movement with a thorn branch he had brought for that purpose. And he waited.

Sometime later, beginning to ready himself for relinquishing his blind until another day, the sun high and bright at midmorning, Two Hawks froze, the high-pitched calling cries of a pair of raptors piercing his ears.

Slowly rotating his face upward, he scanned the sky between the leaves, catching the broad bodies and wide wings of two red-tailed hawks wagging their feathers in adjustment to the rabbit below, the frightened animal unmoving now as it recognized the sounds of death that drew near in the blue air.

One hawk flared its wings wide and then tight to its body, and dropped like a cast-down spear, Two Hawks losing sight of its form until he felt the impact on the woven canopy above his head, the hawk clutching the rabbit in its penetrating talons.

Using his crouching legs to spring upward, Two Hawks drove both arms up through the canopy of cut branches, one hand gathering and seizing the hawk's legs above the talons buried in the rabbit's fur, the other hand shooting further up to enfold the knife-sharp beak and penetrating eye, feeling the thrashing of the great bird subside and at last rest still in his arms, the bleeding rabbit released and bouncing off his chest to the floor of the blind.

Burrowing his head up through the branches, he saw that he had been successful, the darkness of the covered eyes calming the bird, though at some cost. Two Hawks saw that the legs were firmly and safely pinned together but in the heat of the moment he had not felt the sharp hook of the hawk's beak lay open his hand before he enclosed it, the Caddo's blood meandering down his arm in two rivulets through the sweat and broken leaves. But the flow ceased as he watched her mate circle and call up in the mid-day sky.

He quickly gathered the bird's neck into his fingers' embrace, bringing head and neck beside each other until he felt the bones and cartilage crunch and the hawk shuddered into death.

The hawk was then quickly skinned, wings cut off and folded, finally the heart removed and eaten, bitter and tough, out of respect and perhaps hope that some of her young power would guide his arrows around deflecting trees or rocks.

Later, he had made his selections of tail and wing feathers to best serve as fletching for his arrows, carefully slit along their central veins and fixed to the arrow shafts by bone glue and fine sinew in three vanes that would glide smoothly across the bone bridge when sent upon their ways.

Several days after, Two Hawks began his final preparations, Margaret Trudeau having given him use of a corner of her little-used storage shed behind her house to rest for a few days. He knew that she and her son would not disturb his small pile of covered travelling kit. The bow he gave a final smoothing with sand on the creek nearby and thoroughly rubbed the wood down with the contents of a blackened pouch, the remaining globules of fat from the tail of an otter he had found dead in a beaver trap, the otter's dense yellow fat darkening the bright bare wood of the bow and imparting a strong enough scent to mask his own.

“Madame, you are going on this journey, your mind is convinced?” Two Hawks began.

“Old friend, the house is sold. The new owners will take possession next week. Peter and I have loaded the wagons, and we depart with the others for San Augustine tomorrow. I do wish you would consider again and come with us. We could all begin a new life, with promise and—.”

“Ah,” the Caddo said, and inwardly smiled at his acquisition of old Blue Heron’s mannerism. “My one life is enough and my path lies elsewhere. Peter Hays—.”

“Yes, old one?” Peter shot back. He was more than a little peeved at the old Indian for coming back into their lives and then stubbornly refusing to continue with them. Peter was also more than a bit frightened of the long journey that lay ahead, knowing that he would be responsible for his mother’s safety and the safety of their possessions. While confident, perhaps unreasonably so, that he was capable of handling daily situations in Natchitoches, that long unknown road was daunting, and he had always felt, well, secure whenever the old man had been around. “If you will not come with us, what have you to say?”

“Bon chance, Mr. Hays,” Two Hawks said, in a formal tone and expression.

A Visit to Dr. Sibley

Madame Trudeau had told him that in fact Dr. Sibley was very much still breathing, that the doctor had been in politics and had gone to Texas and recently returned to live in his old house on the hill near the big bend in the bayou.

Always approaching a situation obliquely whenever possible, having in that method frequently a route to either retreat or change direction, Two Hawks sat under a large water oak behind the doctor’s house in Natchitoches for only a short time before a house servant coming to hang the morning wash out to dry and sun approached with suspicion.

Rachael, an Ebo slave, having grown up in New Orleans until Dr. Sibley brought her to Natchitoches as a late teen, had had little experience with Indians, but she had heard stories. Some said that the Indians were always looking to carry off women, white or black, to serve the natives in their horrible rituals until the women perished. Others said the Indians loved the black people and offered freedom from the hardships of slavery, welcoming runaways into the tribes. She did not know what to think, but she knew that the doctor and his aging wife had treated her reasonably well, not really like a slave at all but like a servant who lived there, even giving her a few coins now and again to buy ribbons or candy. Miz Eudalie had also begun to teach her to read the bible.

This old man squatting in the yard had some fearsome tattoos, his skin shining with unwashed skin oil, or something worse. Yet, when he slowly turned his head in her direction and raised his eyes, she felt no trepidation, nor any sorrow either, as he looked at her in some way, she thought, as another person, as understood and accepted. Still, she had learned at a very young age that there were an infinite number of tricky men.

“What you doing here?” she said, in a challenging tone.

The man creased his eyes in amusement. “Tell Dr. Sibley an old Caddo man has come—.”

“I do not *tell* Dr. Sibley nothing, old man.”

“Say old Two Hawks is dying behind his house,” he said, and dropped his chin onto his chest.

Alarmed, Rachael set the basket of wash down in the leaves and acorns under the tree, gathered her skirt and rushed back to the house.

Scarce minutes later, the aging doctor emerged through the back door, clambered down the steps and strode quickly to the seated Caddo, who raised his eyes and grinned: “Ah, Dr. Sibley—you do not want dead Indians behind your house?”

“Two Hawks, you old Caddo dog!” The doctor laughed, putting his hands on his hips. “I should have known. You’ll not die behind some white man’s house but alone on a hill somewhere, like a ragged old wolf...”

“We are all always dying, doctor, maybe we two closer to the ground than many,” he responded, but still his heart was gladdened to hear this man salt his talk with old Caddo expressions.

“But come in, man,” Sibley said, and then noting how Two Hawks drew back away from the door. “I know, you old hound, you do not like to enter white men’s dwellings, feels like you’re an old fox climbing into a trap, but come—I have things to show you in my study, and I want to hear about your adventures, I might even say ‘cases,’ in the cool of the house.”

And so the two men sat in the doctor’s study and wiled away most of the day, their low voices occasionally interrupted by brief interruptions when, at the direction of the doctor’s wife, Rachael brought in smoked passenger pigeon and a refilled pitcher of cold wellwater.

Initially, Sibley, excited, showed his old friend the brass tubes of a microscope, Two Hawks gratified but not genuinely surprised at the wriggling life a few drops of stagnant water held. They both had long understood the plenitude with which the seemingly invisible spaces of this world contained, though there was pleasure in seeing the myriad shapes and designs.

This discussion naturally led to their reminiscing about that dysentery outbreak those many years ago, the glass pitcher of water sweating with condensation on the table between them, Two Hawks thinking that the opportunity had arisen for seeking the

doctor's opinion and advice about that territory west of the Neutral Ground that was increasingly being called "Texas" by those people whose aspirations looked west.

Sibley related experiences of his own excursion with James Long into Spanish Texas not too many years earlier, saying that perhaps if he were a younger man, the opportunities seemed to be ripe, though he mentioned that he himself had soon returned to the relative comfort and ease of Natchitoches, noting as well that he had no doubt that everything east of the Sabine River would become U.S. Louisiana. "That Spanish Texas—" he said. "Years of trouble are coming to that land, mark my words."

"Madame Trudeau and her son Peter Hayes," Two Hawks began, "are planning to join DeWitt's Colony. They speak of open lands, cattle for the gathering...." He and Dr. Sibley consciously avoided discussion of the idea that *that* land was obviously inhabited by *someone*, as the Orleans Territory had been.

"You have been there, have you not, old boy?" Sibley interrupted, smirking. "You see any of those 'free' cows?"

"Bears are free, too," Two Hawks said. "But you must stop them from killing you. I saw one bull gut a charging horse with those horns wider than a man is tall. I never thought cows were intelligent, but looking into the eyes of those things I could see hatred, a coyote eye but with a motive...." The doctor nodded, serious.

Two Hawks then related to the doctor his none too distant contact with the Karankawa he had shared with Margaret and Peter, seeing Sibley's eyes light up at the details of his friend's investigation and findings. After Two Hawks showed his friend the puckered scar where his captors had "taken a share" of the Caddo under his last rib, the doctor jotted down a sketch and description of the aloe plant the former had helped stave off infection with.

"Two Hawks, you are living too soon. Had you received more medical and scientific training, you might have discovered great things...."

"Too late, doctor—we both know I am too late," said the old Caddo, shaking his head. "Trapped as we are here between our memories and the last, well, nothing."

"But what of God, old son?"

"What a god, yes, doctor. But enough of this—there may yet be something I may accomplish...."

"Well, why not go with them, Two Hawks? You would be of great value on their journey, even when they begin to settle—."

"And then I might become the tame old Indian on the back porch...."

“You are not speaking to me,” said Sibley.”

“And to be secure, Madame Trudeau should find another husband, and he would see me as....” Two Hawks’ voice trailed off into the thicket of his musing, though it was clear to the doctor that his friend had already run down these trails and knew what lurked there, so he changed tack.

“I went to the blacksmith’s yesterday,” he said to Two Hawks, “to get the lock on my new fowling piece smoothed out—he told me you were having that old Charleville converted—a good idea—and he told me about some other work you had asked him to do, gave him a Spanish gold piece—don’t look like that—Corey and I have known each other so many years now, but he would tell no one else....”

Two Hawks recalled Samuel Corey’s interest tempered with concern as the design of the steel arrow points the Indian had requested became clear, heavy-bodied but narrow, with four shallow blades instead of the conventional two, a shape obviously aimed at penetration of multiple layers of clothing, leather, perhaps even thin wood. “These are man-killing points,” the smith had said. “I would not want to be on the bad side of you, old man.” But Corey trusted his friend’s instincts and asked no questions but began forging the five points Two Hawks had requested.

He had tried to refuse the Spanish coin that was proffered for the work but the Indian had responded, “I have use for such things as these only to purchase what I need, and I am pleased to purchase from my friends.”

“...and Peter Hays,” said the doctor loudly, bringing his friend’s eyes back into focus. “often gets himself into trouble just with his youth, but I expect you know that, too?”

“In former days, we Caddo travelled many days in the Spring, to where the buffalo still grazed in great numbers, and we would follow alongside a herd, patient, watching like wolves to see which animals should be removed, would be best to bring down, not wanting to kill more than we needed, and the buffalo did not even know we were there....”

“You going to trail them, aren’t you, Two Hawks?”