

*Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn!*

*Robert Burns*

## *Introduction*

My name is Mokee'eso, which means Little Woman in the language of the Cheyenne Indians. I was given my name by my aunt, Anovao'o, which means Falcon Woman. I think my parents hoped I would someday have the strength and grace of a falcon, so they gave the honor to my aunt to name me, hoping her attributes would rub off on me.

The problem was I was as scrawny and shriveled as a prairie chicken when I was born, and I barely survived. I've often thought how awful it would have been if my aunt had actually named me Prairie Chicken or even Chicken Legs. I get teased enough for my abbreviated size, so that would have made life even more difficult. It also doesn't help that instead of the beautiful, coppery bronzed skin of my people, I have the light tan skin of a desert lizard. I must have had an ancestor way back that was white, because here I am, not red or white, just kind of a dreary, splotchy sand color.

My other less than desirable attribute is my hair, or lack of it. Although my hair is black like my people, it has the texture of a brittle heap of tumbleweed. I keep cutting it shorter and shorter with my hunting knife, because it sticks out like angry, unruly pokes of buffalo twine in what used to be my braids. Pretty soon, my hair will be so short it will resemble a mound of stiff, black vegetation atop my tiny, tan head, which actually, if the truth is known, looks like the shape of a small prairie turnip.

Needless to say, I'm not a beauty, and I've often wondered what the Great Spirit had in mind when He created me so unlike the others. In a way, it's good to be unusual, a word I definitely prefer to a less complimentary one like mousy or homely. I never have to take the time to try to be pretty like the other maidens, which for me I know is an impossible feat. Instead of trying to make myself marriageable (which seems as distant as the white man's ocean I once heard about), I focus on having a good sense of humor about my obvious physical flaws and living a life filled with sometimes strange, unconventional behavior. After all, it's best to be what I am, and there must be a reason I'm so different, although I haven't been able to figure it out.

So, I've decided I like my name, even though it reminds my Cheyenne people how small I am. I also like myself most of the time. I have many friends as no one is ever intimidated by me. Be serious now. Would you feel threatened by a skinny chicken with a prairie turnip for a head and vegetation growing in

a mound on top of it? My friends all call me Mokee for short, no pun intended, and this is my story.

The oral history of my Cheyenne people reveals we have been in the place known as America for thousands of years. We originally lived in what is known as Minnesota around the white man's year of 1500. From there, we migrated west into the Dakota and Montana territories. We were the first Plains tribe in the Black Hills and Powder River Country until the Sioux took over much of our territory. As we were pushed westward by the Sioux, it resulted in us pushing the Kiowa south. I've always found it rather sad how people continually push people out of the way instead of getting along with them. Most recently, we have been allies with both the Sioux and the Arapaho, and the Crow Indians have always been our traditional enemy.

Although the Cheyenne began as an agricultural tribe staying in one location, we abandoned that lifestyle for the nomadic way of life of the Plains Indians. This change was brought about by the acquisition of horses. We began using tepees made of buffalo skins that were easily moved to new locations, and our diet changed from mainly fish to buffalo meat, wild fruits, and vegetables. We came to depend on the buffalo for our survival and over the years, we lived in many hunting places from the upper Missouri River to the Wyoming, Montana, Colorado, and Dakota territories.

Woven into the lifestyle of all Plains Indian tribes is an unbreakable thread of spirituality and belief in the Great Spirit and the sacredness of the earth. A common belief in seeking the supernatural in the ordinary occurrences of daily life has created many similar ritualistic ceremonies among all the Plains tribes. Some of these observances include the Sun Dance, purification in a sweat lodge, vision quests, and smoking a sacred peace pipe. It is not uncommon for one tribe to share these rituals with another tribe.

The thing that makes my tribe unique from the others is our highly developed organizational structure. Whereas the other Indian tribes are divided into autonomous and self-governing bands, which don't always yield to a central authority, the Cheyenne bands are politically unified in a central government system. The Cheyenne have ten bands or tribal units which, when added together, make up the Cheyenne tribe. Each of these ten bands has four elected leaders or chiefs.

An additional four chiefs make up a higher body, and they are principal advisers to the other forty delegates. These four have the power to elect one of their four to be head chief of the entire tribe. The total assembly of forty-four men, which is called the Council of Forty-four, meets regularly to discuss any problems facing the tribe as a whole. It also regulates the Cheyenne military

societies, enforces tribal rules, and conducts ceremonies. The meeting of the council usually occurs around the Sun Dance at the summer solstice.

There's also another ceremony of Sacred Arrows, which is very special to my Cheyenne people. A bundle of forty-four, red-painted invitation sticks, which symbolize the Council of Forty-four, is kept with the sacred medicine arrows of the tribe. This set of medicine arrows is sent around the assembly of our leaders when it is convened. The medicine arrows are also carried into battle when a tribal level war is waged. Each arrow has a different color, which is said to have come from the beginning of the world. Because the arrows are so sacred, no woman, white man, or mixed blood of the tribe has ever been permitted to come near them.

In the middle of what the white man calls the 1800s, my people divided into the Northern Cheyenne, with some bands choosing to remain part of the year near the Black Hills in the Dakota territory, and the Southern Cheyenne, who remain year round near the Platte River in the central Colorado territory. Although I am a member of a Northern Cheyenne band, we choose to spend the cold part of the year in the south with our Southern Cheyenne brothers. Our common heritage means we are unified as Cheyenne no matter where we are, and it is not uncommon for a band, if threatened in one area, to rejoin other bands in a different area.

One of the earliest peace treaties with the Cheyenne was signed in the white man's year of 1825, and the United States promised unending friendship, along with its right to regulate trade with the six tribes of the upper Missouri River. As time went on, more and more white emigrants traveled the Oregon, Mormon, and California trails. Many headed to the California gold rush in the time period known as the 1840s.

I was born in what the white man calls the month of December in 1849. The Cheyenne lost almost two thousand members in a cholera epidemic in 1849, so I guess I'm lucky to have survived at all. The disease was believed to have been brought by emigrants heading to the gold rush, and the theory was it spread in mining camps and waterways because of poor sanitation. Nearly a tenth of the emigrants also died of the disease.

Many unfortunate events have happened recently, which are beginning to threaten our way of life. It's sad to say, but I have known nothing but the threat of war since my birth, and my Cheyenne band must move around frequently to avoid hostilities. In the year of 1851, the Treaty of Fort Laramie, which was between the United States and seven Indian nations, including the Cheyenne and Arapaho, was signed.

This treaty was very important to my people. In it, the United States accepted that the Cheyenne and Arapaho held a vast territory of all the lands between the

North Platte and Arkansas Rivers and eastward from the Rocky Mountains to the western Kansas territory. This area included the southeastern Wyoming and southwestern Nebraska territories, most of the eastern Colorado territory, and the westernmost portions of the Kansas territory.

Between the years of 1855 and 1857 in what was considered Indian land, there were several skirmishes between the Cheyenne and the increasing number of emigrants to the western territories. Colonel Edwin Sumner of the United States was ordered to go against the Cheyenne in the year of 1857, and it was the first battle which my people fought against the United States Army.

The real trouble for my people began a year later in 1858. Gold was discovered in the Rocky Mountains in the Colorado territory and in part of the Kansas territory, bringing on what was called the Pike's Peak Gold Rush. There was a flood of European and American emigrants, and the Colorado territorial officials pressured the federal United States government to redefine the extent of Indian lands in the Colorado territory and to negotiate a new treaty. In what was to become a pattern for peace treaties, a previously existing treaty, which had been accepted by my people, was overturned by another more constrictive treaty.

The new treaty was signed in the year of 1861, just ten years after the previous treaty, and it was called the Treaty of Fort Wise with the United States. The treaty was signed by four Arapaho chiefs and six chiefs of the Southern Cheyenne, one of whom was Mocketavato (Black Kettle). At the time, he was on the Council of Forty-four as one of the additional four chiefs. These four chiefs had elected him head chief of the Cheyenne tribe.

Many of the other Cheyenne bands, especially the Northern Cheyenne, believed the new treaty was signed without the consent of the remaining chiefs represented on the Council of Forty-four. They protested, saying the signers had not understood the concessions they had made.

Basically, the new treaty ceded most of the lands designated to my people by the earlier Fort Laramie treaty. The new reservation was less than one-thirteenth the size of the previous 1851 reservation, and it was located on a small parcel of land in the eastern Colorado territory between the Arkansas River and Sand Creek. This new, smaller allotment of land was not suitable for growing crops and did not have buffalo to hunt, which threatened to create famine and poor living conditions for my people.

Because it had not been ratified by the entire Council of Forty-four, many of the Cheyenne bands refused to follow what they considered to be a false treaty. To the Cheyenne, the Council of Forty-four is a governing body similar to the Congress of the United States. These bands, including my own, continued to follow the previous Treaty of Fort Laramie and to live and hunt on our traditional

lands between the Arkansas and South Platte Rivers and near the Smoky Hill and Republican Rivers.

Angered the United States was trying to take away traditional hunting lands, radical and militaristic bands of Cheyenne and Sioux, called the Dog Soldiers, began making random attacks on the white settlers. These independent, renegade bands had been evolving since the 1830s, and they were growing very powerful, though they did not represent the peaceful intentions of a large majority of Cheyenne. The Colorado territorial government officials, however, said any Indians who refused to abide by the new Treaty of Fort Wise of 1861 were hostile and planning war. Suddenly, even peaceful Cheyenne bands, who were hunting on the lands previously given them, were now considered enemy combatants.

The year of 1861 was made more complex by the beginning of the Civil War, and military forces were organized in the Colorado territory to fight for the Union Army. After the Coloradans defeated the Texas Confederate Army in 1862, they returned home and were mounted as a home guard and militia under the command of Colonel John Chivington.

Chivington and the Colorado territorial governor, John Evans, adopted a hard line against all Indians. Without a formal declaration of war, they began attacking and destroying a number of Cheyenne camps in the spring of 1864. They initiated what was known as the Colorado War, their goal being to kill any Indian in sight. General warfare broke out. In retribution, the Indians began making raids on the trail along the South Platte River, which the city of Denver depended on for supplies.

When the state army later crossed into Kansas, which had become a state by that time, the policy of killing any Indian in sight continued. Two well-known Cheyenne chiefs approached the soldiers to greet them in peace, only to be gunned down. This action set off a war of retaliation by the Cheyenne bands in Kansas.

It is an awful thing to be young and to think constantly of war, though I try to hide my anxious thoughts from the others. I should be thinking of the joys of having few responsibilities yet, and the eager anticipation of girls my age to marry one day and have children of their own. I try very hard to remain cheerful and optimistic, and I try to act as fun-loving as people expect me to act.

When I am alone, however, there are times I contemplate my future death. I often wonder whether I will live to see another sunrise. Every noise I hear in the night makes me flinch and in my fear, I think we are being ambushed and the end is near.

I frequently think of my cousin, Ešeeva'e (Day Woman). While she was hunting with her brother and his friends, their Cheyenne camp, maybe three days from mine, was attacked, and any women and children who did not escape

were slaughtered. Ešeeva'e lost her baby sister and mother that day, and now she is struggling to be her father's squaw, although she is only ten years old.

Life in a time of war can be cruel for a Cheyenne child. Whenever I think of my cousin, I inevitably look into my mother's worried eyes and lined face. I wonder what horrors she has seen in her young life, and how many of her friends and family have been killed. I think of a future time when I might be without my mother's love and comfort, or when she might lose me to death at the hands of a soldier. Would either of us be able to endure life without the other, or would we be overwhelmed with grief and living in constant fear? I often wonder whether white women love their children as much as my mother loves me. I think it must be so, because I can't imagine it any other way.

I can't seem to understand why life is so violent, especially when there is such beauty and peacefulness all around us in nature. Can it be innocent women, children, and others who want peace are being killed because their skin is red? Do white people believe the Great Spirit has made it their destiny to remove the Indians from the land they have lived on for thousands of years? I once heard our elders say the white men see themselves as superior to a people they view as primitive and inferior. Is there not enough land for all people to share in peace?

Sometimes, I lay awake on my sleeping mat and pray to the Great Spirit. Although some of my friends make fun of me for my continued trust in the hearing ability of the Great Mystery Power, I've always told them it makes perfect sense. Why wouldn't the Creator of the beautiful stars and infinite skies be able hear the cries of His people? No matter what the others say, I believe my Creator loves me and listens to me, and I continue to pray for peace for my Cheyenne people.

Because there is so little I comprehend about my life and my purpose, I do have many more questions for Him. Why do some people find such pleasure in killing others who are different? Aren't we all your people, Great Spirit, and don't you love us all? Is the only choice we have to kill or be killed? I keep hoping there is a third path, a sacred path yet unseen we can choose, and every day I promise the Great Spirit I will choose that path if He shows me the way.

This, then, is the story of my life's very small and unimportant footprints trying to find the hidden path of peace, hope, and love in a world spinning out of control with violence. I would one day be blessed to read the words of the poet William Wordsworth, who said, "Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart," and so I have breathed my heartbeats upon this paper. My story begins quite ominously on the white man's date of November 28, 1864.

*In war, truth is the first casualty.*

*Aeschylus*

## PART ONE

### *Chapter One*

It had been a long, dusty trip, but my best friend and fellow mischief-maker, Tovôhkeso (Swift Fox), and I had an exciting time, especially racing our horses like a wild buffalo stampede through our camp last night. My mother was not amused by our unbridled exuberance.

Although Tovôhkeso is fifteen years old, he is only a half-year older than I am. I will be his age when the snows come, although I don't look that old. We have been inseparable since I was about eight years old. He is the handsomest young warrior I know, and I like to stare at his beautiful, bronzed face to get my mind off of my worries about war.

The only reason I think he likes to be with me is because I can be a troublemaker, in a nice way of course. I also make him laugh at the predicaments I get myself in, like the other night when I tried to spear a fish, but got my spear wedged between two rocks. I tried to yank it out and wasn't successful. Instead, I broke my spear in half and fell, with a huge splash, into the icy water. Tovee, which is my nickname for Tovôhkeso, quickly wrapped me in a warm blanket and carried me back to the tepee of my father and mother, who were not pleased at my carelessness. I'd fall in the river again if Tovee would carry me in his arms some more.

My older friends, who are all very pretty, are envious of the attention Tovee wastes on me. I'm always expecting him to tell me he is courting one of them, which wouldn't surprise me as many Cheyenne maidens marry when they become fifteen. But, he seems to pay them no notice. Because they'd be even more jealous, I didn't tell my friends Tovee braided me a necklace made of thin strips of elk skin, and I never take the necklace off except to bathe. The necklace probably meant nothing to him, but it is really special to me. I wish I would hurry and grow up before someone else snatches him away from me.

There were several bands of us, including the Arapaho, traveling south for the winter to join up with our Southern Cheyenne brothers near their new reservation land at Sand Creek in the Colorado territory. Cheyenne camps are very portable. Within minutes, the tepees can be dismantled, the central poles crisscrossed over the back of a horse, and the buffalo hide walls stretched between the poles behind the horse, forming a travois. The word for travois is from the French

word “travail,” and it is a frame for restraining horses. As the poles drag on the ground, the belongings of each tepee, even the most precious belongings of little children, are loaded on top of the hides.

On our buffalo hunts in summers past, I was one of the children balancing atop a travois with Tovee, and he and I used to figure out ways to shove the other one off onto the prairie grass. I was usually the one who ended up with burrs on my behind. On our current journey from the northern Plains to the south, Tovee was old enough to ride with a group of new warriors. Astride his appaloosa stallion, he strutted by so proudly, though it was very cold, and he had his poncho huddled around his shoulders.

It was my mother’s wish that I still ride on top of her travois. Her excuse was she couldn’t pay attention to me and concentrate on steering her travois over a maze of gopher holes at the same time. Although she didn’t realize it, I was freezing sitting in the crosswinds on the hides. So, I decided to make a pest of myself, which is one of my specialties, and I deliberately dumped one of my family’s parfleches, which is a storage place for clothes, on the well-traveled ground. There were buckskin garments everywhere, and my mother, Paveena’e (Good Feathers Woman), yanked her mare to an angry stop.

“Mokee’eso,” she started shouting above the din of neighing horses and poles scraping the ground. “Pick up those clothes before they get dirty, and get back on the travois.” I knew she was annoyed because she used my full name, which is a mouthful.

I hid my smile. Everything went according to plan, and we began to fall behind the procession. Dawdling on purpose, I leisurely picked up each individual item and folded it ever so carefully, causing my mother to look nervously ahead at the trail dust and the backs of her friends getting smaller.

“Please, Mother, I’m so bored and cold,” I complained as only a fourteen-year-old can do and grate on a mother’s ears. “I just know I’ll have another accident again. Please let me ride with Tovee. I’ll be warmer, and I promise it will keep me out of trouble.” I gave her my most coaxing smile, which is probably my best attribute. My mother gazed at me with frustrated affection, and I knew she’d give in. She is usually very kind.

My mother always felt badly for me, because I wasn’t maturing or as shapely as the other girls my age. Instead, I was skinny, plain as a little wren, and flat as a tree stump. I knew it wasn’t fair to give her my poor Mokee look, which I had perfected. But I also knew she’d do anything to erase that look, even send me out on the overcrowded trail on my pony. I think she harbored a secret wish I would marry Tovee, even though I was young, so she and my father wouldn’t need to worry about me anymore. *Maybe next year*, I thought, my lifelong dream the same as my mother’s.

Moments later, I was off catching the brisk wind on my wiry mustang pony with its thick winter coat of honey-colored fur. I galloped as fast as I could toward the front of the caravan, leaving a cloud of trail dust swirling behind me. The wind went right through the seams of my buffalo skin clothing, and I pulled my poncho tighter. Like all Cheyenne, I was a skilled rider since practically my birth, and I wove expertly in and out of the crowd of animated warriors until I spotted Tovee and his friends, Haeohe'home (Fast Horse), and Ma'enetse (Red Eagle). I waved excitedly, almost needing to catch my breath at how Tovee's coppery skin shimmered in the sunlight and his black, braided hair glistened.

"Mokee," all three shouted gaily. They waved at my approach. Eagerly, I trotted into the center of their circle of mammoth horses, and I felt a bunch of hands robustly clap me on the back like I was one of the warriors, which was fine with me. I had given up trying to look like a girl long ago. The only hand I really noticed was Tovee's, which seemed to burn a hole through the shoulder of my outer garment as it rested there momentarily. I hoped he didn't see me grow flustered, as I didn't want him to think I had a crush on him, which, of course, I did.

"It looks like it might snow tonight," said Fast Horse, pulling his collar of buckskin even higher and pointing to a distant, darkening sky with rolling black clouds. "Maybe not, though. Those clouds are moving way too fast. It seems too early for snow anyway."

"Do any of you get to go on the buffalo hunt later today and tomorrow?" I asked with interest, wondering if I'd have to figure out ways to occupy my time after we set up camp. The older warriors sometimes selected a few of the younger ones to tag along on the first winter hunt. Fast Horse and Red Eagle chimed in they were going for sure, and I realized it was probably because they were closer to being sixteen than Tovee, who had just turned fifteen five full moons ago.

Tovee immediately changed the subject to something he found more appealing. "I thought I'd pick you up before dawn, Mokee, and we could go exploring for treasure in the hills," he said spiritedly, apparently not bothered by being excluded from the hunting expedition. "I thought we'd even try panning for gold, like the white man." His masculine face shone with anticipation. "I know a perfect spot just south of where we're going to be camped. How about it? Do you want to come?"

My heart leaped with joy and nearly burst out of my chest. It would be another adventure with my future husband, though, of course, he didn't know that yet, and I would have been absolutely mortified if he could have seen my thoughts. I nodded self-consciously, giving him my best smile of cooperation and hoping he couldn't read my constantly wandering mind. It was foolish of me to keep thinking about him, as I'm not pretty enough to end up with someone as

good-looking as Tovee. Worse yet, who knew how much time we all had left? We had been hearing rumors the white man was determined to kill us all.

While our slow procession of travois made its way south nearing its destination in the eastern Colorado and Kansas prairielands, one of our scouts came back and said Black Kettle, who was the chief, not only of a Southern Cheyenne band, but of the entire Cheyenne tribe, had reported to Fort Lyon in the Colorado territory. He wanted to confirm his intentions for peace before moving his band to its new reservation land at Sand Creek.

The reservation was near a northern branch of the Arkansas River, which was located south of the westernmost headwaters of the Smoky Hill River. Many other Cheyenne bands, mine included, were unsure about the newest treaty, and we still set up our regular encampments on the land previously allotted us.

The rivers all flowed eastward from the High Plains region of the northeastern Colorado territory. Both the main course and the north fork of the Smoky Hill River, which according to the white man's measurement was more than five hundred miles long, flowed through the Smoky Hill region of north central Kansas. The region got its name from the hazy smoke, which often surrounded the isolated buttes and foothills in the area. Two main tributaries, the Saline and Solomon Rivers, joined up with the main part of the Smoky Hill River near a settlement called Salina, just before it merged with the Republican River.

The Republican River was further north and flowed along the southern border of the Nebraska territory and eventually curved southward, meeting up with the Smoky Hill River to form the Kansas River. The settlement where the two rivers joined would eventually be called Junction City. Because of the plentiful buffalo, the entire area was the traditional hunting grounds for many Indian tribes. Winter encampments were scattered all along the entire basin as far south as the Arkansas River, which also flowed eastward from the Colorado territory through the middle of Kansas until it turned southward into the state of Arkansas.

Much later, I found out Black Kettle, who was one of the main advocates of the peace process and one of ten chiefs who signed the new treaty at Fort Wise, was confident the promises of peace he had received from the soldiers at Fort Lyon would keep his band safe from any attack. When he returned to his new encampment at the Sand Creek reservation, which was less than forty miles north of the fort, he flew both an American flag as well as a white flag over his tepee. It was his way of showing he was a friend of the white man. He then accompanied most of his warriors to hunt, leaving the older men, women, children, and the infirm in the village.

I also found out the date of our arrival, according to the white man's calendar,

was November 28, 1864. It was a beautiful sunny, but frigid day as my band of Cheyenne set up our encampment about twenty miles north of Sand Creek. Of course, I wasn't aware of the date or the distance until recently. I only knew it was late fall and bitterly cold. The weather was typical for our annual fall trek to spend the winter with our southern brothers. The colorful leaves, which had painted the isolated forests with dazzling colors along our journey, had begun to wither and turn brown as winter approached.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, the beautiful prairieland where we set up camp had been almost entirely claimed by the white man. Mixed in among the tall prairie grasses were patches of deciduous forests, buttes, and canyons. The plains state of Kansas and the Nebraska territory, which both bordered the Colorado territory, were also claimed by the white man, and vast prairies overlapped any boundary lines to the east and northeast.

After we arrived, it was an afternoon of strenuous work. Indian women were responsible for setting up the new temporary encampment, while the men secured the area. It was cold enough to freeze the twine fasteners on what was left of my chopped braids. Many of the warriors, including my father, Vohpeanohe (White Hawk), had already left to scout the area. Others went on a quick buffalo hunt, as our food supplies needed to be replenished after the long trip. Because I was getting older, I helped my mother situate our tepee and fasten the buffalo hide walls in place. After several hours of tedious work, my mother and I collapsed on our leanbacks, which were comfortable folding chairs sitting on the ground, and we rubbed our hands together for warmth by our central fire, which we had just gotten started.

Both of us were starving and wondering what we should make for dinner. We really didn't have many supplies left. Suddenly, Tovee came strolling through the tepee flap with two skinned rabbits in hand, and we were both effusive with our thanks, as we were so tired. Tovee's sudden appearance was no surprise. He was a frequent visitor to our tepee, and I knew my parents liked him. My mother eagerly took the rabbits from his hands, and she began to prepare a rabbit stew, browning the meat and chopping a few prairie turnips we had carried along on the trip.

"Mokee, I just wanted to remind you of our search for gold in the morning." Tovee wiggled his eyebrows comically, and I saw my mother smile. "Dress warmly, and I'll bring the horses and food for the day. Don't forget, I'll be here before dawn." With a pleasant wave and nod at my mother, he left.

Had I known what was in store for the next morning, I might have jumped on my horse that night and ridden away.