

A Long String of White Men

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By Hal Bynum (May 2006)

There will come from the east a long string of white men and there will be no end to the string, no end to the white men. But there will be an end to the red man. I have seen it all in a dream. – Grey Hawk

Once General Eisenhower became President Eisenhower, he undertook, for the sake of national security, to build a highway system on the order of Hitler's autobahn, which would allow the fast transit of troops and weapons of war, should the United States be attacked by the Soviet Union.

In 1967, interstate 40 was crossing New Mexico from east to west, replacing Highway 66, for so many years, "the way west," and displacing the businesses sprinkled and clustered along the sides of the old two-lane black top.

It was the middle of the morning and already hot when Hal parked his little Plymouth Valiant in the shade underneath the elevated interstate. He walked toward the settlement of Laguna, a handful of little stores, a gas station, a bar, and a number of small adobe houses scattered along the old highway. Old pick-ups, cars and a few wagons hitched to horses helped clutter the crowded streets.

At the epicenter of the large crowd of Laguna, Acoma and Pagate Indians was a small, well cared for adobe house with a shed and a horse-lot in back. People were going in and out, grieving and preparing for the funeral.

Hal was a caseworker for the welfare department and Saturday

was not a workday: he was there for the funeral. He had driven his own car rather than the state car and he stood in the shade of the grocery store so as to be unobtrusive.

He didn't want the family to see him and become more disturbed. He felt certain they must blame him. Hal was ready to agree with them, if they felt that way. On that beautiful morning, guilt was all over him like mud on a hog. As he leaned against the building, he was examining over and over in his mind the role he had played in the little boy's death.

A headache was beginning behind his right eye. He had sat for hours the night before at a country music nightclub in Albuquerque, not talking and bragging, not trying to set up some young woman to take back to his apartment. He had been reliving in his mind an evening some months back when he had sat on a kitchen chair and talked the little boy's parents into taking him, one more time, to a hospital in Denver for yet another operation on his heart. The child had a condition requiring, as he grew, a series of operations that were necessary to keep him alive.

When it came time to arrange the trip through crippled children's services, the parents informed the welfare department that they would not be taking the boy to Denver. They felt he had barely lived through the preceding surgeries and that this time, it would be fatal.

Hal's supervisor had pointed out that without the correction, he would soon be gone. She said, "Of course they're afraid, that's natural and normal, but you've got to talk them into it. We can't let that little boy die because of their fear and ignorance."

It had not been an easy sell.

After about an hour of discussion, it came out; the

grandfather had had a vivid dream in which the boy had died during the operation.

The little boy was very intelligent and all the suffering had brought him to a place of maturity and wisdom far beyond childishness. The entire conversation was conducted at the eating table where he was doing his homework. He was friendly and calm as Hal asked him some questions about school.

The boy's mother said, "When he come home from school, he ride his pony till supper, so he have to do schoolwork at night. He need more sleep."

At one point in the discussion she asked her father to tell "the investigator" about his dream.

The old man talked to Hal in Spanish ending with, "I saw him laying dead."

The boy was leafing through a schoolbook, apparently paying no attention to the old man's story.

After the family all had their say, Hal began slowly and quietly to talk about the necessity for the operation and reminding them how much the prior operations had helped. It was long and difficult, but he finally talked the parents into compliance.

As Hal was leaving, he crossed the room and held out his hand to the old man whose hair was snow white and whose teeth were gone. The old man ignored the out-stretched hand and repeated, almost in a shout, "I saw him laying dead!"

The sun had moved over. Hal no longer had a shade to stand in and he was rapidly becoming wet with sweat as people began to shuffle around and chant. Tourists always called it a "dance," but the Indians referred to it as a "sing" and soon it began

to pervade and dominate the scene.

Hal studied the faces of the mourners as they slowly moved closer together and their voices blended in a non-musical sound that rolled down the hill in waves. The little boy was being buried near his home and Hal saw someone bring out a dog and after a few moments a rifle shot rang out causing Hal to jump-flinch. The chanting suddenly became louder and some of the women were adding shrill descant parts, emotional but non-melodic. He looked around the moving crowd, trying to find the women who were doing the high parts and was startled once more as the rifle cracked again and his eyes jerked back to the graveside in time to see the pony fall like a rock and lay beside the dog.

Hal turned suddenly and began weaving his way through the edge of the crowd, moving toward his car, feeling stunned and empty. They were sending the child's beloved animals to be with him in the hereafter.

Since his first year attending Texas Tech in Lubbock, Hal had been an atheist with a distaste for religion. He felt sorry for the poor benighted souls who needed to fantasize a benevolent God-parent in order to face a meaningless existence filled with pain and ending in death. As he neared his car, Hal felt pride that he didn't need a crutch to face the merciless hammer blows that fell without rhyme or reason upon innocent people.

He was fishing his car keys out of his pants pocket when over the top of the car, he spied the neon beer sign in the window of the saloon. He stood for a while with his left hand on the roof of the car and the keys in his right hand and then dropped them back into his pocket and walked quickly and directly to the bar.

Just before he opened the door to the dimly lit cool comfort

of the tavern, there came a great roaring of trucks and automobiles on the just opened interstate and a long line of traffic that must have been backed up halfway to Albuquerque, raced toward Gallup, toward Phoenix, toward the west coast.

Hal watched for a few seconds before he opened the door and entered the building.