
JERRY ELLIS
Into the Storm

I'm soaked to the bone as I walk through a storm down a country road in western Arkansas. I don't mind the wind and rain so much, but I'm scared to death of lightning. If a bridge or barn were in sight, I'd run for shelter. But forget it. There's just me and trees, swaying in the wind. For the first time in my life, I imagine how a mouse might feel the moment he looks up to see a hawk shoot from the sky to drive claws into his tiny heart.

I wear a hat; a black crow feather sticks from it, while a rattlesnake rattler with eight buttons rides snug under the band at the back of my head. Jeans cover my aching legs.

Lightning flashes yellow once again, as if to see if I'll try to run under a rock. I'm tempted.

The road is flooded and small waterfalls shoot from the rock banks. My feet are blistered and on my back is a red and blue backpack weighing fifty pounds. I've walked one hundred miles in six days and I have eight hundred more miles and seven states to go. I promised myself I'd walk the whole way. But have I lied?

I'm forty-one now, but when I was four years old my house was struck by lightning. I was home with my mother and two sisters and we smelled smoke coming from the attic. I was sure the house would disappear in flames and we'd have nowhere to live. My father, a carpenter, came home from work minutes later. He climbed into the attic with a bucket of water and threw it onto the fire. That put out the flames, but he slipped and fell through the ceiling. He crashed atop a piano and onto the floor. I learned then and there that lightning, as beautiful as it is, doesn't give a damn about man.



I walk facing traffic and a truck, hauling horses, roars toward me. The driver leans forward and squints in disbelief. A cigarette dances from his mouth and he becomes a blur behind windshield wipers.

As the truck shoots past me I'm hit with a blast of wind and water; for a split second I can't see. My hand flies to my hat to grab it just as it jumps from my head. The snake rattler shakes and the smell of horses pierces my wet nose.

The lightning is much closer now, and I recall hiding behind a big chair in the corner of my house during a thunderstorm when I was in the fourth grade. A bolt of fire might get me, I reasoned, but it would have to find me first.

Boom! The thunder follows and a car stops. It's a station wagon with the front fender falling apart with rust. The back is loaded with lumber, plastic pipes, and a garden hose coiled like the snake from whom I got the rattler.

The driver motions for me to hop inside, but I hesitate. A little girl with a candy bar—there's chocolate on her chin—is propped against his shoulder. A Band-Aid is stretched across her temple. The driver rolls down his window.

Get in, he shouts.

The little girl smiles and it's so cozy and dry inside. Water runs down my nose.

I can't, I say. I'm walking the Trail of Tears.



In 1838, the Cherokee Nation thrived in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina. The eighteen thousand Indians had their own newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, published in both English and Cherokee. They raised corn, cotton, hogs, and cattle. They lived in log houses and had long ago put away their scalping knives. They hoped to live in peace where their ancestors had lived for over five hundred years.

But in 1838, President Martin Van Buren, pressured by Georgia, ordered seven thousand soldiers to round up the Indians at gunpoint. Their homes burned before their eyes, while soldiers dug into the family graves in search of gold and silver.

The Indians were thrown into thirteen forts newly built to act as concentration camps. I was born and raised in Fort Payne (Willstown), Alabama, between Lookout and Sand mountains, which was the site of one of those thirteen camps. All that remains of the fort today is its chimney, crumbling among oaks behind a burger joint and a tire company.

The eighteen thousand Indians were forced to march from their homes in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and North Carolina to Oklahoma, then Indian Territory, in the heart of winter. Many had to walk, and their shoeless feet left tracks of blood on the earth and in the snow. Four thousand Cherokee, mostly children and old people, died along that route which has become known as the Trail of Tears.



You can't walk in this rain, says the driver. Swim, maybe.

I'll be okay, I say.

I N S H O R T

I hope you make it, he says.

He rolls up his window and the little girl waves good-bye with the hand holding the candy. They disappear into the storm and I walk on. I feel alone, naked with lightning. Where is my faith? Indeed, where is the strength and courage of my ancestors?