

# The Stone Owl

*September 1609*

Staring intently at the flat round stone cupped in his hand, the boy called Dark Moon barely heard the shouts of his brother and younger sister as they splashed in the shallows of the river around the bend.

The Lenape children had spent a long morning helping their mother with the corn harvest and were glad to be released to play. Dark Moon had walked by himself to the edge of the great blue river, where he intended to streak down the bank into the cool water like Brother Otter. But he was distracted by the glint of something pale in the muddy bank.

Picking it up, he saw it was a piece of weathered limestone about the size of his palm. He turned the stone over, feeling the smoothness of its surface and tracing with his fingertip the indentations worn into the limestone by wind and water and sand. The stone looked almost like an owl, if he squinted his eyes and used his imagination.

Dark Moon felt a kinship with owls. They were

such wise creatures and, like him, they could see through the darkness of the night. Dark Moon was not afraid of the deepest forest, where light could not penetrate even at the height of day, and he was not afraid of the darkest nights, when the moon was new and not even a silver crescent was visible in the sky.

To move through the night without hesitation was his special skill. His bare feet knew the shape of Mother Earth, and the roots of the trees seemed to move out of his path so he never tripped. He was not afraid of the birds and bats who hunted at night. He loved the long whooo of the owl and the sudden rush of its wings as it sailed to earth.

Dark Moon was twelve, nearly old enough to go on his sacred vision quest, when he would live all alone in the forest for three or four days. He hoped that he would meet his Guardian Spirits and learn from them how his gift of night vision was meant to be used. Dark Moon wondered if this stone owl had a message for him. At least, the stone looked like an owl—with his father's awl he could make the curves around the owl's eyes deeper, and maybe scratch some lines to suggest its feathery wings.

Hearing the calls of the other children, he slipped the stone owl into the deerskin medicine pouch that he wore on a thong around his neck. It was heavy against his bare brown chest, but it made him feel somehow special. He was eager to use the carving tools to bring the owl out of the stone.

He might have time tonight, when the family was

sitting around the fire in the longhouse made of oak bark, enjoying the smoky warmth and the satisfaction of full bellies. His father had been blessed by Mesingw, the Hunter Spirit, and had brought home two buck deer from his last hunting trip. His mother had been busy all week, cutting the meat into long strips to dry, rubbing the strips with berries and herbs, so that they would have food during the long hungry winter when game was scarce. But she had also kept some of the best pieces for venison stew, and a large pot of vegetables and meat was simmering over the cooking fire even now. Dark Moon's mouth began to water in anticipation.

It was only in the harvest time that food was so plentiful. Many nights in the chill winter he would lie on his sleeping furs feeling pangs of hunger, praying to Mesingw to send a plump rabbit or squirrel through the snow near their village—one who was willing to become a stew. He would dream of early spring, when the first green shoots brightened the wetland, and his mother would ladle generous scoops of boiled greens with wild onions and dried corn into their gourd bowls.

The memory of how good the dried corn tasted after a hard winter—and how their work in the harvest time kept the People alive to rejoice in another spring—helped Dark Moon to forget how sore his fingers became when he had spent all day shucking the dried kernels from the ears of corn. Corn, beans, and squash were the most important foods for the People; his

mother called them “the Three Sisters” and planted their seeds together in the same mound of soil.

Soon, though, he would be old enough to hunt game with the men and leave the garden work to the women and younger children. That would be a great day. To practice, Dark Moon swiftly and silently crept up behind his little brother on the riverbank and, quick as a hunting owl, scooped the child off his feet. Laughing, he ran with his brother into the rippling water and together they hunted for clamshells on the sandy bottom.

Dark Moon worked hard that evening, and a few more evenings as well, to carve the owl’s likeness in the stone. At last it was done to his satisfaction. He showed it to his best friend, Blue Heron Boy, as they were watching the men of the village sharpen their spears and scrapers for the big hunt tomorrow.

“You made this yourself?” said Blue Heron Boy, as if he didn’t believe it.

“I found the stone in the river and it looked like an owl,” said Dark Moon. “So I tried to make it even more so.”

“It feels like it’s got good medicine—you know, sort of owl power,” said Blue Heron Boy, swooping with imaginary wings. “Have you shown it to Turtle Woman?”

Dark Moon shook his head. He was more than a little in awe of Turtle Woman, an elder who healed the People with herbs and singing and dreamed about what was causing their sickness and how to cure it. She was

a medicine woman and a storyteller. "Maybe sometime I'll show her," he said.

In truth, he wasn't sure that he wanted Turtle Woman to know about the owl. She often said that owls brought news of someone's death and she might not want an owl totem in the village. To change the subject, he sighed loudly. "Don't you wish we were going on the hunt? I'll bet I could get a black bear if they would only let us try."

Blue Heron Boy looked with longing at the sharp stone axes and quivers of arrows leaning against the longhouse where the men were working. Someday he would have his own deerskin quiver, decorated with dyed porcupine quills and beads made from mussel shells. He tried to wait patiently until it was his time to become a man, but it was awfully hard, especially on the eve of a big hunt. He practiced with his bow and arrows in every spare minute of the day.

"If you could get one black bear, I could get three! I would make a necklace of bear claws so heavy I couldn't stand up straight when I wore it!" replied Blue Heron Boy in a big voice. He loved to boast and never expected anyone to take it seriously.

One of the men heard him and laughed. "Are you sure you're strong enough, little brother, to shake even a deer claw rattle in the dance tonight?"

Blue Heron Boy ducked his head in embarrassment and the others chuckled.

The men of the Wolf Clan planned to travel into the far hills to hunt for several days, but before they

left they held a sacred ceremonial dance to ask the Creator to send plentiful game to the hunters, so the People would be fed. Blue Heron Boy and Dark Moon were both looking forward to dressing in their best deerskins and leggings to be part of the ceremony. Dark Moon had a rattle made from the shell of a box turtle, which he had filled with dried cherry pits and mounted on a peeled stick. It was his favorite possession, until the day he found the stone owl.

Slapping his friend playfully on the shoulder, Dark Moon said, "Let's take our spears out for some practice throws in the cornfield." He knew it would cheer Blue Heron Boy to score a few direct hits on ferocious tree-stump targets.



It was the night of the new moon, when the sky was completely black except for a sprinkling of stars. The elders said that the trail of stars were the footprints of the People's ancestors on their way to heaven.

The hunters had been gone for five days, and in their absence Dark Moon and Blue Heron Boy were proudly playing their roles as the oldest males in the village—if you didn't count the grandfathers, whose time for hunting was past. The two boys circled around the longhouses after dusk, on the lookout for any hungry mountain lions who might be bold enough to snatch a puppy from the safety of the village. They didn't see any big cats, but the rustle of animals in the darkening woods gave them satisfying goosebumps as they shook their spears in the air.

From inside one of the longhouses they passed, the boys heard voices raised in alarm. A woman thrust open the door flap and rushed to the edge of the clearing, calling anxiously for her daughter. "Little Willow! Little Willow! Daughter, where are you?"

The three-year-old had been underfoot near the central cooking fire, so her mother had sent her to play outside until her supper of cornmeal mush was ready. Somehow the hours had gone by without anyone noticing that the little girl had never returned. She had wandered off alone into the forest.

The young mother and her sisters ran to Turtle Woman, who was sitting quietly near the fire in her own family's longhouse. Frantically they explained what had happened and asked for the medicine

woman's help. Dark Moon and Blue Heron Boy listened from a respectful distance.

"Do not worry," said Turtle Woman, closing her eyes briefly and drawing a long breath. The shell necklace and copper bracelets that she wore gleamed dully in the firelight.

She tossed a small handful of dried leaves into the center of the fire and stared steadily at it, as if she could see pictures in the flickering orange and blue flames.

"A brave will go into the forest and bring back the child unharmed," she said. "The child is calling for her parents because she is caught between a slippery log and a great rocky wall. There is no light in the forest tonight."

The mother covered her face with her hands in anguish. "Our men are not coming back until tomorrow!" she cried. "My daughter is lost and she will not survive the night alone. She is only a baby!"

Turtle Woman looked at her with sympathy and understanding, but also with a little annoyance, because the young woman did not seem to believe the vision that Turtle Woman saw in the flames.

"A young man will find her and bring her back through the night," repeated Turtle Woman. "It is true. He is waiting here, behind us."

The old medicine woman rose from her blanket and slowly turned around until she was standing face-to-face with Dark Moon. Suddenly he realized that he had grown taller this summer, taller than Turtle

Woman, who used to tower above him when she shook her prayer rattles and sang her songs in ceremonies. He swallowed hard and tried to stand straight without looking nervous.

“You are the one we call Dark Moon,” said Turtle Woman in a deep strong voice. “The Creator has blessed you with the ability to see through the night, and now you are being given a chance to use that gift to help this woman and her daughter, Little Willow. Are you brave enough to go into the deep forest, to the edge of the rock where the water falls, and carry back your little sister?”

Dark Moon had a flash of memory—the happy giggling of the child Little Willow as she played in the river shallows with his own small brother, splashing and pretending to be giant fish. Of course he was brave enough to rescue her!

“I will go immediately, asking the Creator to light my way there and back,” said Dark Moon aloud, in as grown-up a voice as he could muster. Silently he prayed that he really would be able to find Little Willow and find his way home again in the dark night.

He looked over at Blue Heron Boy, whose eyes were open wide with surprise, and gently touched the deer-skin medicine bag hanging on a thong around his neck. In the bag was the stone owl. The owl would help him.

Without delay Dark Moon prepared to leave. His own mother gave him a small bag of berries and bean cakes to share with Little Willow as soon as he found

her, and a soft handful of spider web wrapped in a leaf, in case the little girl had been scratched or cut by the rocks. His mother ruffled the hair on top of his head as he said goodbye.

Blue Heron Boy accompanied him to the first turn into the dark forest. "You really know where you're going?" he asked, a little anxiously.

"If Turtle Woman's vision is true, then it's about two hours' walk to the waterfall. In the daytime, that is," he added. "It might take longer tonight."

"Travel safely," called Blue Heron Boy as Dark Moon's bare feet sped along through the brush.

He stopped before he had gone much farther and pulled the stone owl out of its hiding place. He clasped it tightly in his hand, feeling the warmth of the stone. Having the owl with him, hunting through the night for the little lost girl, was comforting.

Several hours passed in silent running, sometimes slowly through dense woods and sometimes faster, particularly when he heard noises in the undergrowth that were not made by the People. There was no sign of the child, and Dark Moon desperately hoped that she was still waiting by the waterfall. He didn't want to think of what would happen if she had freed herself and wandered forward to the edge of the cliff.

At last he saw her. Just as Turtle Woman had envisioned, Little Willow was lying with her leg caught in a hollow under a heavy tree. She was whimpering unhappily and her face was smudged with dirt. Dark Moon called softly to her, and she raised her head and

smiled. After a few minutes he was able to free her by rolling the log away. It thundered over the cliff with a loud crash when it hit bottom far below. Dark Moon shuddered when he heard the sound.

The tired, thirsty child ate only a few of the berries from Dark Moon's pouch and then put her arms around the boy's neck. Dark Moon realized that she wanted to be carried home. Her leg was bruised and swollen from being trapped under the log for so many hours. Although it didn't look broken, he doubted whether Little Willow could walk all the way back to the village. Well, he would just have to carry her. She couldn't weigh more than a basket of dried corn.

The forest seemed even darker and the trail even longer on the way home, but Dark Moon felt the ground with his feet and peered through the night with his owl-like eyes. Once they heard a low deep growl behind them and Little Willow began to cry in fear. "Probably Brother Mountain Lion," said Dark Moon to himself and picked up his pace even more. He pressed the stone owl into the little girl's hand and told her to hold onto it because it brought good luck. The owl would guide them through the darkness safely home.

By the time Dark Moon reached the edge of the village, the dawn was breaking and Little Willow weighed at least as much as twenty bags of beans. The muscles in his arms and legs were aching and weary.

But when the little girl was reunited with her mother and Turtle Woman nodded to Dark Moon with

approval, the smile on his face was hard to conceal.

Maybe he would show Turtle Woman the stone owl, after all, he thought sleepily. He might like to learn how to see the visions in the fire, if she would teach him the way.

He slept for a few hours, until the hunting party returned, laden with game bags and full of tales about the enormous bear that got away. When Dark Moon's father was told the news of his son's brave rescue, the hunter was clearly pleased. "Perhaps you are grown enough now to join us on the next hunting trip," he said, resting his hand on his son's shoulder.

"Blue Heron Boy too?" asked Dark Moon quietly, glancing at his friend standing near the circle of men.

"We'll see," said his father with a promising smile.

Later that afternoon, Dark Moon and Blue Heron Boy were lying on their stomachs on the high bank that overlooked the great river, chewing grass stems and telling stories about the great hunting expeditions that they would lead in a year or two.

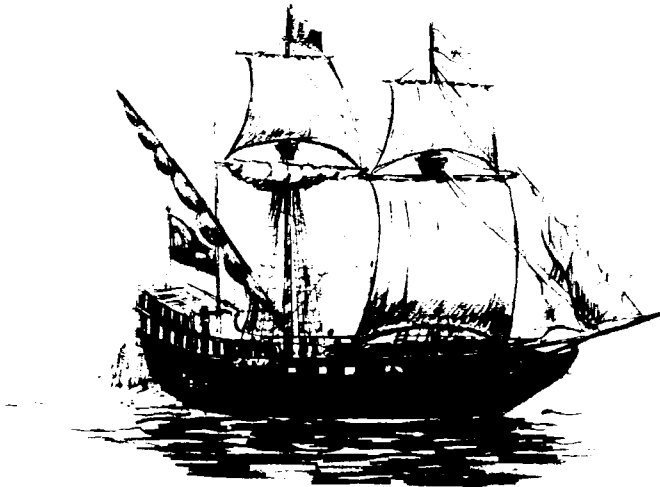
Dark Moon was the first to spot the strange canoe rounding the curve of the river. It was larger than any dugout canoe he had ever seen and rode high above the blue water. What looked like great white clouds billowed above it and seemed to propel it forward in the stiff autumn breeze.

The craft was too far away for him to see what tribe of people were aboard, but he was sure it wasn't any of the Lenape clans.

"I wonder what it brings?" he murmured to himself

as he and Blue Heron Boy tore down the bank to tell the village about the huge canoe coming up the river.

The stone owl, tucked in his medicine bag, couldn't tell him.



*In 1609, an Englishman named Henry Hudson sailed a Dutch ship called the Half Moon all the way from Amsterdam across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. He was searching for a northwest trading passage to the East, which was rich in treasures of spices, silk, and gold. Instead he found a great river, which now bears his name, and a population of gentle natives who welcomed him with food and gifts. He sailed as far north as Albany and returned to tell his employers of the treasure of furs, timber, and fertile soil that awaited the traders and settlers who came to America.*