

Night at the Museum

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George W. Bush Presidential

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Introduction

The George W. Bush Presidential Museum opened May 1, 2013. But long before its cornerstone had been laid, before the Rangers had won their first American League Championship, or JFK had been assassinated in Dealey Plaza ...

Before the Second World War, the Great Depression, or the Spanish-American War ... really, really long ago, Caddo Indians lived on the land we call Texas.

People who know about such things say ancestors of the Caddo hunted and farmed here as far back as ten thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ. They hunted and farmed here while Egyptians quarried millions of tons of granite and limestone to build the Great Pyramid of Cheops.

Around 800 A.D., many started calling themselves Kaduhdaachu (Kah-DA-da DA-choo), which, over the years wore away to *Caddo*.

The Caddo hunted and farmed ...
while the Mayan Empire collapsed,
while William the Conqueror invaded England,
throughout the inglorious Crusades.

They planted corn and beans and squash and wove baskets out of strips of cane and made wooden tools. Caddo potters created beautiful bowls and bottles that looked as though they had been fashioned out of dark chocolate. They built beehive-shaped lodges that often stood fifty feet high and sixty feet wide, where as many as twenty men, women and children lived and gathered together around a central fire and slept snugly on their beds under buffalo robes and deerskins. They hunted and fished and loved one another and married one another and had children.

One of those children was a boy named Kaaytsi, which means Owl in our language. His parents named him Screech Owl because he screeched when he was a baby and he continued to screech as a boy at play. But the bighorn sheep and puma and peccary, the kangaroo rat, skink and hare, the alligator and the armadillo all called him Little Owl. And since everybody knows that animals can sometimes be wiser than people, everyone else began to call him Little Owl too. His mother only called him Kaaytsi when he was being particularly troublesome, which has been the way of mothers since Eve.

Little Owl lived with his parents, three brothers and two sisters in a village on the Red River. And that's where our story begins. On the Red River, really, really long ago ...

Chapter One

Little Owl was like you and me, except that he never had to dress up in uncomfortable clothes for special occasions. Also, he didn't go to school, because there was no such thing. But he still had to learn a lot of things, just as we do.

More than just about anything, Little Owl loved to hunt and fish. He also loved to eat. His favorite meal was porridge, because his mother sweetened it with fresh, ripe blackberries.

Porridge and berries were also a favorite of a mystical, magical, mischievous rascal named Coyote, who often stole Little Owl's porridge and disappeared before the boy could reach for his bow and arrows.

One day, Little Owl decided to pull a prank on Coyote. He picked a handful of green ground cherries, which are the color of butterscotch when they're ripe and ready to eat. But if you eat ground cherries before they're ripe, they will make your stomach churn like storm clouds.

At supper that evening, Little Owl's mother filled his bowl with porridge as usual. But when she gave him a handful of blackberries, Little Owl replaced them with the green ground cherries.

You can probably guess what happened next, and of course you'd be right.

Before Little Owl could even pick up his spoon, Coyote appeared out of thin air, grabbed the bowl, gobbled down the porridge and was gone. He had just disappeared, which was one of his mystical, magical powers.

Where the thief had stood, there was only the sound of spitting and groaning. Then, slowly, the doubled-over form of Coyote began to reappear.

“Arghhh!” He croaked, squeezing his stomach. “Kaaytsi!” He shouted. “You poisoned me!”

“You poisoned yourself,” laughed Little Owl. “But don't worry, Coyote, you're not going to die, even if that were possible. But you're going to be awfully, awfully sick!”

And Little Owl rolled on his back and laughed even harder, kicking his feet in the air like a puppy that wants its belly scratched.

Suddenly, Coyote stopped groaning as anger overcame his cramp.

Little owl looked up.

Coyote's eyes blazed. His fur bristled. His claws quivered. And his sharp teeth glistened in a terrifying snarl.

Little Owl's big, soft eyes grew even bigger.

Quick as summer lighting, the boy sprang to his feet and raced for his weapons, with Coyote at his heels.

Coyote howled something the boy could not understand. Sounds that rhymed, a little like a chant, but with the authority of a command.

Little Owl dove for his bow, reached for his arrows ... and found himself with a bow in one hand and a fistful of grass in the other. He looked up.

Then, he looked around.

Coyote was gone.

His mother and father and brothers and sisters were gone The lodge and the village we're gone.

Even his beautiful Red River was gone.

Little Owl was all alone.

He looked this way and that way. But all he could see in any direction was tall prairie grass, moving lazily in the wind like waves of an edgeless sea.

Have you ever visited a shopping mall and seen the big signs that show you where all the shops are, and there's a red arrow somewhere on the sign that says, "YOU ARE HERE"? The mall owners include the arrow because they know that, in order for us to get where we're *going*, we first need to know where we *are*. And Little Owl had no idea where he was.

Everywhere he looked, everything looked the same.

So, he started walking.

It was no use looking at the sun to see if he was walking in the right direction, because he didn't know whether he had landed (if that's the right word) north, south, east or west of his village on the Red River.

But it had occurred to him that, if he walked long enough in any direction, he was bound to reach the rim of the prairie and discover something familiar that would help him find his way home.

So he walked.

And he walked.

And he walked, for days. Then weeks. But he could never seem to get free of the Prairie.

After walking a whole month, Little Owl realized that Coyote had put a spell on him and that he really hadn't walked anywhere at all. He was right where he had started.

Coyote had magically banished Little Owl to a distant prairie, and here he would stay unless he could find a way to break the spell.

"I'll try until I die," he declared to no one in particular. And he thought about his mother and father and brothers and sisters and the bighorn sheep and puma and peccary, the kangaroo rat, skink and hare, the alligator and the armadillo.

And maybe he cried a little

I would have. Wouldn't you?

As moons grew full and waned, Little Owl tried everything he could think of to break Coyote's spell.

He tried, as seasons chased one another in circles.

He tried, as men came in ships from Europe, Spain and France. Missionaries and explorers. Trappers, traders and settlers.

He tried, as wars came and went, and more wars came. Wars between Indians. Wars between white men and Indians. Wars between white men. Endless, horrible wars.

Years became decades.

Decades became centuries.

But Little Owl just remained Little Owl. Never growing older. Never becoming a warrior. Never marrying and teaching sons to hunt and care for the land and become brave and honorable.

But he never stopped trying.

The prairie vanished. Farms and villages, towns and cities rose up out of the clay, fell to ruin, and blew away like tumbleweeds.

Amazing changes happened, faster and faster and closer together. Sometimes Little Owl found it hard to breathe, not just because the air was no longer pure and sweet, but because of the exhausting speed of change.

People moved fast. Machines that replaced horses moved fast. Air machines streaked across the skies like shooting stars.

Throughout centuries, Little Owl had many adventures as he continued to search for a way home. And as would be expected, many of those adventures involved unpleasant encounters with Coyote.

But he never stopped trying.

Someday, somewhere, he told himself again and again, he would find something that had the power to break the curse and return him to his family.

You see, Little Owl believed there is a spirit in everything—not just in people, but in animals, trees and even rocks. And spirits have power. Some have GREAT power. Others have so little power that it's almost as though they have none at all.

Coyote had great power. But surely, Little Owl thought, there must be something that has greater power. And he was determined to find it.

Coyote was just as determined that he wouldn't.

Many, many times, Little Owl discovered an object he thought might be strong enough to break the spell. But Coyote nearly always reached it first and hid it. Or, if Little Owl did manage to get his hands on it, Coyote stole it. Sometimes, they reached it at the same time and struggled over it. Then, Coyote would cheat with his mystical, magical powers.

What Coyote often seemed to forget, however, is that objects of great power are often objects of great virtue as well. And whenever

Coyote touched one of these, he had cause to regret it, because virtue and mischief do not mix. Sometimes, Coyote got zapped as if by lightning. Other times, the object burned his paws. One time, an object of power and virtue cause his bones to rattle when he moved, so, for the longest time, he found it almost impossible to sneak up on anybody, including deer and cottontails and ground squirrels. And, since coyotes eat deer and cottontails and ground squirrels, he grew very, very hungry.

None of the objects, though, had enough power to set Little Owl free.

Then, one day, he found himself in the lodge of a very great chief.

“Surely,” he thought, “my exile is about to end.”

Chapter Two

The limestone was cool under Little Owl's bare feet. The museum was quiet at night, except for the muted sounds of uniformed security officers keeping watch and the occasional crackle of a walkie talkie. High-definition monitors revealed anything that moved.

Just then, as an officer stared at the monitors, a shadow—really more like the shadow of a shadow—drifted across one of the screens. But the officer saw nothing.

Nor did Little Owl.

He had no idea that Coyote was stalking the museum gallery in search of anything that threatened to break his hold over Little Owl.

Like bullies everywhere, Coyote believed that force was the only real power. So it was little wonder that he paused in front of a display case that featured a nasty-looking black gun.

“This,” he thought, *“might be just the thing that will enable that wretched boy to break my spell.”*

A label read:

9mm Glock Model 18C Automatic Pistol, confiscated from Saddam Hussein during his capture on December 13, 2003. Members of the U.S. Army's 1st Brigade Combat Team from the 4th Infantry Division presented the framed gun to President Bush on March 1, 2004.

Coyote couldn't help himself. He just had to touch it. He needed to feel the cold steel, thrill at the weight of it in his hand ... and he had to hide it where Little Owl could never find it.

Coyote reached into the display case and touched the pistol, petting it like a child with a gerbil.

Suddenly, as though he had rubbed a magic lamp, there was a loud CRACK! and a belch of oily, black smoke. And before him stood a rat. Not a little rat, like the ones you see in New York City or Paris. This rat was BIG! Its skin was scaly where patches of hair were missing. The fur on its head was bushy. And it had a bushy beard, not at all like New York or Paris rats. And there were baggy, saggy bags under its beady black eyes.

"Sssaddam," hissed the rat, "at your ssservice."

Coyote had heard snakes hiss in the desert, but the rats he had eaten had only squeaked or squealed. None had ever hissed. Nevertheless, I am assured by the most reliable sources that rats do indeed hiss on occasion.

This rat, however, seemed to do it habitually, and Coyote immediately found it annoying.

Saddam stood on his hind legs and rocked back and forth on his heels, steadying himself with his tail, like a kangaroo.

This annoyed Coyote, too.

The rat smiled. A wicked, distasteful smile. And when it smiled, a gap appeared where a long sharp front tooth should have been.

“Well,” Coyote thought, *“no wonder it hisses.”*

“Why did you pet the gun?” Saddam asked, as he groomed himself with a greasy, grey tongue.

“That’s none of your concern,” said Coyote, growing even more annoyed. “Go back to where you came from.”

“I can’t,” said the rat, “because you summoned me. I was stuck in my pistol until someone came who would gaze at the gun with fondness instead of disgust. Command me.”

“Command you to do what?”

“Whatever you wish. You could start by telling me why you’re here. Perhaps I can be of assistance.”

Coyote saw no reason not to. Perhaps this vermin could actually be of help. But he resolved that, in the future, he would try to avoid questions that the rat would have to answer with words that had s’s in them.

“I’m here to find an object of power.”

“What kind of power?”

“Power strong enough to break a curse that I put on a prankster of an Indian boy more than a thousand years ago.”

“Why do you want to break your curssse?”

“I don’t want to break my curse, you fool! I want to make sure the *boy* can’t break it.”

The rat whistled shrilly through the gap.

“A thousand yearss, you ssay! And he hasn’t found an object of power in all that time?”

“No, and I’m going to make sure he never finds it.”

Saddam rocked forward onto all fours and sidled up to Coyote.

“I can save you a lot of time,” the rat hissed into his ear. “I know the artifactss as well as every millimeter of that pistol. Follow me.”

And Saddam led Coyote into a hallway that opened into the Oval Office.

“The boy will come here firsst, mosst likely,” said Saddam, “believing it to be the actual office of the Pressident. But issn’t. It’s a replica. There’s no power here.”

“Then, show me where it is,” said Coyote.

Saddam led him back out.