

The Artifact

by Robert Francis

© August 2010

The MRI clicked, popped and hummed. “Don’t move,” the technician had said. “Here, you’ll have to put your braids in this cap. Come on; that’s good enough. We haven’t got all day. Be sure you don’t move your head. Don’t cough. Don’t clear your throat. We don’t want to have to do it over. People are waiting.”

Frank wondered if it was alright to swallow or if he should just let the spit build up in his mouth until it drooled out the side or drowned him. Opening his eyes, Frank looked up through the tiny, square window in the helmet that encased his head. All he could see was white. What else was new? The machine was buzzing so loud he couldn’t even hear the elevator music the technician turned on just before he left. There was a Cherokee Stomp tape in his coat pocket in the dressing room. “We only have a CD player,” the technician had said.

“Why in the world am I here,” Frank wondered. “Oh yeah, to find out why I’m walking, talking, feeling like an old man even though I’m only 40, to find out why it’s so hard to get up in the morning, so hard to go to bed at night, so hard to put one foot in front of the other without falling down, to find out why I shake sometimes and have a hard time remembering.”

Deep down, Frank knew what it was but didn’t want to admit it, not out loud anyway. Frank thought to himself, “The weight of 500 years is on my back. I was there when Columbus came with his three pirate ships. He kidnapped me and demanded that I take him to see the king of Japan. I said, ‘Sure, he lives on the next island.’ When we got there, I jumped ship and swam for my life, until I felt a musket ball smash through my spine. I was there when De Soto marched into our town. All those strange creatures, aliens from another world, another planet, pale and hairy with course voices and shells on their bodies like dung beetles. They smelled like dung beetles too, as they pushed their way right into our homes, right into our houses, demanding food, violating our wives and daughters. ‘Where is El Dorado?’ De Soto shouted. ‘Where is the city of gold?’

“‘Oh that’s easy,’ I said. ‘Just go west, over the mountains. Keep going west.’ He didn’t know that was our way of saying, ‘Go to hell.’ I heard later someone put an arrow in De Soto’s guts, and I was glad.”

Frank’s train of thought continued, “I was there when the English came. We helped them get started – gave them food, shelter, education. They were so poor and ignorant; we never dreamed they’d turn out to be worse than the Spanish. I was there when some of the English started calling themselves ‘Americans’ and started calling us ‘Indians,’ like Columbus had, as if *we* were the aliens and *they* were the ones who belonged here. I fought alongside Metacomet, against the Puritan headhunters in Massachusetts. Later, I fought alongside Pontiac, Little Turtle, Dragging Canoe, Tecumseh. We never wanted to push anyone out of the land. We just hoped to live, to be free.

“Finally, I was among those who moved west, over the mountains, across the Mississippi, and the Americans kept coming. I moved with a man named Duwali down into Texas, but they came there too. So I moved back into the Ozark hills, and I hid. I cut my hair, and for 150 years I told my curious white neighbors I was ‘Black Dutch.’ No wonder my back is bent. No wonder I can hardly get out of a chair. 500 years of oppression is a lot of weight to carry.”

Frank could remember all of this, but he could not recall what he had done the day before. In the preceding weeks Frank had endured all sorts of tests with electrodes and needles and more electrodes and more needles. Frank forgot the names of most of the tests, except for

one: The Bleeding Time Test: “That’s where they stick a bayonet into your kidney, to see how long you bleed.”

In his spirit, Frank tried to fly out of the MRI tunnel, out of the building, out of the city, out into the woods, join with a herd of deer – walk as one of them. He had done it before, lots of times, a way of escape, so hard with all this mind-wracking noise.

“Are you still with us?” he heard the technician say. Frank’s spirit sailed back to the MRI center, even as his body was pulled from the tunnel. “You’ve done really well. We’re just gonna put some stuff in your vein now, something that will go into your brain and help your doctor see what’s there. A little stick and you’ll feel something cold go up your arm. Not so bad, huh? Alright, I’m gonna put you back in now.”

“Why is he being so nice this time?” Frank wondered. “He was sort of nasty before. When a white man treats you nice, watch out!”

Thirty minutes later, Frank and his wife Jeannie were waiting in the doctor’s office.

“How are you doing?” asked Dr. Ling, as she popped into the room. Dr. Ling was from China. Frank had high hopes when he first met her. He always had high hopes for non-white doctors, not they they’d be more intelligent or even better doctors, but just that they might be more inclined to listen. These high hopes had never failed to shatter upon first contact. “From day-one,” Frank pondered, “medical students are taught never to listen to a patient – ask lots of questions but never, ever listen.” Although he was quite sure this did not come naturally for most non-whites, Frank observed that non-white medical students learn the technique and even over-compensate, often becoming even better at not listening than white doctors are.

“I’m feeling great, Doc. That’s why I’m here” Frank quipped. “How are you?”

“I’ve looked at your MRIs,” Dr. Ling began. “Your neck is a mess. You have a herniated disc and several bulging discs. That’s why you have a stiff neck, but I don’t think it’s causing any of your other problems.”

“All that weight,” Frank thought.

“But look here in your brain,” Dr. Ling went on, showing him the picture. “You see this right here in the middle? That’s not right. I don’t know what that is, some sort of lesion maybe. I’ll have to talk to another doctor about this. It’s Friday now. I’ll get back with you on Monday.” She seemed so cheerful, just like the technician at the MRI center, when he was injecting the cold stuff into Frank’s arm.

“OK,” Frank said. He didn’t know what else to say. He had brought Jeannie along, so she could ask all the right questions, remember all the things he might forget, but Jeannie just sat there, staring through the image of Frank’s brain in front of them, staring into space, into eternity.

On their way out of the city, Frank and Jeannie stopped to eat at Perkins Family Restaurant, both ordering the big platter of seafood and caramel-apple pie. This was something new; their usual idea of going out to eat was picking something from the dollar menu at McDonalds. As they drove home, Frank noticed Jeannie’s face was wet. She slept on the couch that night. Frank lay in bed wondering whether he would make it through another powwow season, wondering if he would see the kids open their Christmas presents, wishing he could call and talk to his Momma.

In the morning, Frank was out to greet the sunrise and talk with Creator. “Good morning, Grandfather,” he said. “Thank you for today. Thank you for now. That’s all that I have,” and Frank began to cry.

Grandfather Creator smiled and said, “Now is all anyone has. Don’t ever forget to live now.”

“I’m only 40,” Frank sobbed.

“My boy Jesus was 33 when they killed him,” Creator said. “Just look at how much good he’s done since then. Crazy Horse was only 30. He’s done a lot too. Don’t forget to live, *now*.”

Jeannie came to their bed that night. It was like they were on their honeymoon, yet different. Both wondered how long they would have and hold the other; both savored every moment together. The whole weekend was like that, living *now*, savoring every precious moment. It didn’t matter so much anymore that Frank’s feet and fingertips were numb. He was alive.

On Monday, Frank called Dr. Ling’s office and left a message on her voice mail. “Have you talked with another doctor?” he asked. “I need to know what that thing is in my head. Will I need to cut my hair, or will my wife need to cut hers?”

Hours later, the phone rang. It was Dr. Ling’s nurse. “Nothing to worry about,” she said. “It’s not a lesion; it’s just an artifact.”

“OK,” Frank said, and hung up. “Just an artifact... Just an artifact? What in the world is an artifact? A piece of broken pottery?an arrowhead?a .45-70 slug?an Indian living in the 21st Century?”