

SOFT RAIN

A Story of the
Cherokee Trail of Tears



CORNELIA CORNELISSEN

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SOFT RAIN





SOFT RAIN'S
 Trail of Tears Route
 1838

S **O** **F** **T**
R **A** **I** **N**

A Story of the

Cherokee

Trail of Tears

CORNELIA CORNELISSEN

A Yearling Book

Special thanks to Barry O'Connell and Diane Glancy
—C.C.

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FOR MY GRANDPARENTS, MARY AND WATT SAM,
THEIR CHILDREN, KATIE, JOHN, SALLIE, AND GEORGE,
AND FOR LIZZIE, LUCY, AND NICK

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We had hoped that the white men would not be willing to travel beyond the mountains. . . . Finally the whole country, which the Cherokees and their fathers have so long occupied, will be demanded, and the remnant of Ani-Yun Wiya, the Real People, once so great and formidable, will be compelled to seek refuge in some distant wilderness.

—Chief Dragging Canoe, 1775

A SAD LETTER

"Hurry, Pet. Hurry!" Soft Rain called, running into the cabin with the puppy at her heels. "Grandmother, tell me a story before I go to school," she whispered. Picking up the small, wiggly dog, she knelt beside Grandmother's rocking chair.

"There is no time for your story this morning," Mother chided. "You know you stayed outside playing with Pet too long. You should have come at once when I called." She handed Soft Rain her deerskin pouch. "Here is your food."

Holding the pouch close to her nose, Soft Rain sniffed. "Ummm. Fresh corn bread."

"Father and I will have *our* corn bread in the

field," Hawk Boy said, bragging. "I am helping today."

Soft Rain laughed. "If that is true, my little brother, you had better stop talking and get to work."

Hawk Boy jumped up, nearly knocking over the kerosene lamp. Though three years younger, he stood tall beside his nine-year-old sister. Soft Rain was surprised to see that the top of his head was even with her shoulder. "All that food you eat makes you grow," she said, patting his plump stomach.

Still chewing, Hawk Boy nodded, swallowed, gave Grandmother a hug, took the cloth-wrapped package from Mother, and scurried out the door.

"Don't eat on the way," Soft Rain called after him. Hawk Boy waved as the sound of his laughter faded.

"After the New Moon Festival, Hawk Boy will go to school with you," Grandmother said. "I will miss his smiling face, just as I miss yours."

"You can't see his face, Grandmother," Soft Rain said, looking at the old woman's clouded eyes.

"I can hear his laughter and imagine the joy in him."

"I will like having my little brother walk the long way with me. I can tell him stories." Soft Rain



brushed a crumb off Grandmother's face and kissed her.

"But *you* must go *before* the New Moon Festival," Mother warned, and everybody laughed.

Soft Rain ran down the mountain road toward town and the teacher's house that was the school for the Tsalagi boys and girls. Along the narrow path she looked for early spring flowers, but she saw none. A squirrel ran up an oak tree, fussing at her for disturbing him.

The path grew wider as she neared the edge of town. When she walked past the schoolhouse of the white children, she heard singing. She was relieved to have missed seeing the white boys. The day before, they had taunted her, running in circles around her, making ugly faces, pulling on her braids, and yelling, "Cherokee, Cherokee," their strange way of saying Tsalagi.

Climbing the three steps to the porch of the teacher's house, Soft Rain called, "Siyu. Hello."

"Come in, Soft Rain. You are almost late again," the teacher said. "Were you listening to stories or looking for flowers?"

Before answering, Soft Rain stared at the teacher's beautiful beaded deerskin dress. Why was she wearing her festival dress to school?

"I played too long with Pet. There weren't any



flowers," Soft Rain said. She sat on the floor next to Little John, who was named for the principal chief of the Tsalagi.

She liked Little John because he reminded her of Hawk Boy—always trying to be taller. "I was named for John Ross, the chief of the Real People, but I will be much bigger," he always said, stretching himself as tall as possible.

The teacher handed Soft Rain the pages from Sequoyah's writing. Talking leaves, her father called them. "When I was your age," he had often told her, "our language was only spoken. Then Sequoyah made the sounds into symbols that you can now read."

Together the boys and girls read Bible verses from Sequoyah's pages. Then Little John and Soft Rain, who were the oldest, each read a verse alone.

"Your reading is excellent, as . . . as usual," the teacher stammered. She wiped at her eyes.

The younger children looked at each other and began whispering, "The teacher is crying."

"We won't read the white man's book today because I have something I must tell you," the teacher said, holding up a piece of paper. Her hand trembled.



"You look sad. Will it make us cry?" Little John asked.

"It is very sad. It is a letter from the white man who calls himself the Superintendent of Cherokee Removal. *Friends*, he calls us. He tells us that the treaty signed two years ago by some of our people will soon be enforced in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama, as well as here in North Carolina. He says that on the twenty-third of May of this year, 1838, 'the Cherokees must . . . remove to the lands set apart for them in the West.' "

The teacher sighed, then continued. "My family has decided to leave before we are forced from our home. If it isn't too late, we will sell our house to a white family. Children, there will be no more school for you here. Maybe in the West."

Soft Rain saw tears fall onto the white man's letter. She felt her anger growing. If she were holding the letter, she would rip it into little pieces. No more school! The Tsalagi must move west. Why?

The teacher did not answer Soft Rain's unspoken question. She merely whispered a good-bye to each child. She handed the white man's word books to Soft Rain and Little John. "You must keep reading," she said.



As Soft Rain passed the white children's school, she began to cry. "It isn't fair that those mean boys can go to school and we can't," she said to Little John, sobbing. "Why is the teacher moving?"

"I don't know, but my father says only a few of our people signed that treaty. *They* are the ones who should move. We aren't moving; Father is getting ready to plant our *selu*, our corn. I'm going to help him. He never wanted me to learn the white man's ways or his words; now I'll stop. I won't need this old book."

"Aieeee!" Soft Rain screamed as Little John threw the word book toward the schoolhouse and ran away. She started to go after the book, but when she saw a face at the window, she hesitated. Then she tore after Little John, only stopping when she had no more breath. She looked all around, but Little John was nowhere in sight.

She was puzzled. The teacher, who knew the language of the white man, had said to keep reading. And she was going west because the letter said she must. But Little John's father didn't want him to learn of the white man's ways. He was *not* moving west; he was planting. Would Soft Rain's family have to move west? Then she thought about her father and Hawk Boy at work in their field. Relieved, she let out a deep breath. If Fa-



ther was planting, they wouldn't be moving west, either.

"I will help Father *and* I will continue my reading," she said to herself. Putting the word book into her pouch, she hurried home.



THE LITTLE PEOPLE

Before Soft Rain was through the gate, she called, "Mother! Grandmother! I'm home. Where are you? In the house or in the garden?"

Her mother rushed out the door. "Hush, Soft Rain. Grandmother is having her afternoon rest." She looked toward the sun, then back at Soft Rain. "We've only just eaten. Why are you home so early? Are you ill?" Mother touched Soft Rain's forehead. "You aren't warm."

"I'm not ill, just filled with sorrow," Soft Rain answered. "I have to tell you why."

They sat together, leaning against the great oak tree. Soft Rain told her mother about the morning



at school. "Everyone cried except Little John. He was angry, and he threw his book away. He said his father never wanted him to learn the white man's words." Soft Rain fingered her deerskin pouch, which held the word book. She wanted to keep on learning the white man's language. What would *her* father say? "The teacher is moving west. Will we have to move?" Tears streamed down her face.

Her mother wiped them away, then answered. "For years we have heard that the government of Georgia wants the Real People out of their state. Maybe they can move here, to North Carolina, where it is safe."

"But the letter said Tsalagi in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, *and* North Carolina must move west. Where is the West?"

"The West is far, far away. Some of the Real People have already moved there, and some have come back because they didn't like it. There were no beautiful mountains, and the trees and plants were unfamiliar. We will stay in our nation, in our mountains. This is our home, where we are happy."

"I'm *not* happy," Soft Rain said. "The teacher's house will be sold to white people. There will be no more school. That is why I'm home early. That is why I'll be staying home all the time."



"Your grandmother and brother will be glad. The whole family will be glad," Mother said, wiping away more of Soft Rain's tears.

Then Soft Rain heard her grandmother's voice. "With my granddaughter at home all day, the time will pass so much more pleasantly."

Soft Rain turned to see Grandmother standing in the doorway smiling. "Wait, let me be your eyes." She hurried to Grandmother's side, guiding her to the stump where she always sat to tell stories.

"Do you want a story now?"

Soft Rain never refused a story. "Oh, yes! Tell me about the Little People and how they take care of children." She sat on the ground next to Grandmother.

"No more tears?" Grandmother asked.

Soft Rain didn't know how Grandmother could "see" when she was crying, yet she always could. "No more tears," she promised.

"When I was a girl, this is what I was told about Nemehi, the Little People. . . ."

Soft Rain mouthed the words along with her. Grandmother always began her stories in the same way.

"The Little People were such wee folks, as small as children," Grandmother continued. "They were pleasing in appearance, with long hair—much



longer than yours, Soft Rain—and they liked music, dancing, and children. The Little People were kind to lost ones, especially children.

“Once a brother and sister wandered away from their parents while they were picking berries. It was after dark when the Little People found the children near their cave high on the mountainside. They brought the young ones inside the cave, warmed them, fed them *shule*, yellow acorn bread, dipped in bear oil, then took them back to their home in the village. For years afterward, whenever the children went berry picking, they could hear the drums of the Little People in the distance and they felt safe.”

Soft Rain laid her head on Grandmother's lap, where *she* felt safe. *Do the Little People still help children?* she asked herself. *When I am alone in the woods, she thought, I will look and listen for signs of them.*

“I believe in the Little People,” Grandmother said, as if she understood Soft Rain's thoughts.

Mother said, “Hawk Boy also believes. I'm sorry he missed your story.”

“I'll try to remember it well and tell it to him tonight,” Soft Rain answered. “Where is Hawk Boy? Is he still with Father?”

“Yes,” Mother said. “Your father is repairing the

fallen fences and burning the dry cornstalks he has been hoeing. Hawk Boy begged to help him. What a disappointment for your brother that the teacher is moving! He wants so much to learn to read." She laughed. "Soft Rain, sometimes when you are at school he makes marks in the sand, pretending to write words."

Soft Rain smiled. She had seen some of Hawk Boy's scribbles. They reminded her suddenly of her cousin Green Fern, who would be waiting for Soft Rain where the river runs narrow.

"I must go soon. Green Fern will be expecting me to tell her about school, as I always do."

Green Fern's parents did not allow their daughter to go to school. Soft Rain's mother had once explained this to her. "Aunt Kee and Uncle Swimming Bear, like many of our people, want nothing from the white man, not even his alphabet. Since your school teaches both the white man's writing and Sequoyah's, they have chosen that Green Fern learn neither."

Now Mother warned, "Soft Rain, you may tell Father and Hawk Boy about the letter, but don't tell Green Fern. Aunt Kee would not want her to worry."

Soft Rain put her hand over her mouth. For a



while she had forgotten the horrid letter and its command.

"I won't tell her about moving west," she said. But she *would* tell her cousin other things.

She and Green Fern had been keeping a secret from everyone, even Hawk Boy. Since school had begun, Soft Rain had been teaching Green Fern to read. Each day at the river's edge she wrote a word in the damp earth; first the white man's way, then Sequoyah's. Aunt Kee and Uncle Swimming Bear would be angry with them if they knew.

But I can teach Hawk Boy in the same way, Soft Rain suddenly realized. Jumping up from the ground, she shouted, "Mother, Grandmother, listen to my idea! I will be Hawk Boy's teacher. In the sand I can write words from Grandmother's stories, first the white man's way, then Sequoyah's. Hawk Boy can learn to read in my school and write *real* words in the sand. Do you think I can do it?"

Facing toward Soft Rain, Grandmother said, "Of course you can teach your young brother. Just like the Little People, you are patient and kind."

The Little People. Soft Rain wanted to believe. All the way to the river she looked and listened, stopping often. The wind sang through the trees, but she heard no drums.



Green Fern, with her back to Soft Rain, sat on the riverbank, peering down the path. Jumping at the sound of footsteps behind her, she turned toward Soft Rain. "Why do you come from the direction of your home instead of town?" she asked.

Soft Rain stopped in her tracks. How should she answer?

GREEN FERN

Green Fern and I have never had secrets from each other, Soft Rain thought. How can I not tell her about the letter? She took a deep breath and said, "Green Fern, we're going to have more time together, more time to practice writing. There will be no more school. The teacher is moving away."

"Where is she moving?" Green Fern asked.

"She is moving west."

"West! No one moves west."

"The teacher is."

Green Fern frowned. "Father says that's the land of blackness. The souls of the dead go there and are always miserable because they can never return home. I would be afraid to move there."



Soft Rain sighed inside. She wouldn't have to choose between lying and telling about the letter, because Green Fern hadn't asked her *why* the teacher was moving.

"I would be afraid, too," she said. "But look at the book of words the teacher gave me. It is called a spelling book." Slipping the pouch off her shoulder, she untied it, opened the book, and leafed through its pages. "We can both learn new words, because there are many I don't know. And I'm going to teach words to . . ."

Soft Rain stopped talking. Green Fern was not looking at the book. Her face was gloomy; her shoulders sagged.

Gently Soft Rain asked, "Don't you want to read and write more words? Or hear more stories? If I can keep telling Grandmother's stories to you and Hawk Boy, one day I will be as good a storyteller as she is."

Green Fern stopped staring at her moccasins; her dark eyes met Soft Rain's. "Oh, yes, I like the words and stories! But there is work to do. Mother and Father insist that I help them plant the seeds. They say we are wasting time talking and telling stories."

Is Green Fern in trouble because of my stories? Soft Rain wondered. She hadn't told her cousin any



scary stories about the West and the souls of the dead; Uncle Swimming Bear had done that. For the second time that day, Soft Rain was puzzled. But she wanted to make Green Fern feel better.

In a deep voice like Uncle Swimming Bear's, she growled, "*We must stop wasting time!*"

Although Green Fern laughed, her eyes were sad. "When will we meet again?" she asked.

"I have decided to help Father in the field," Soft Rain said. Even though Hawk Boy was there, she knew he wasn't as much help as he thought he was. "There will be lots of time for words and stories after the seeds are in the ground," she promised.

Green Fern nodded, then turned away quickly without a word. Stepping lightly on the flat stones, she crossed the river and disappeared into the woods.

Soft Rain followed the narrow path home under low overhanging branches, and soon she smelled Father's fire. She heard him and Hawk Boy laughing before they saw her.

"This is a surprise!" Father exclaimed. "Why are you home so early?"

Soft Rain told them about the letter and about the teacher's moving. Hesitating, she asked, "Will we have to move west?"



"We're busy cultivating our land. It's the planting season. We don't even have time to think of it," Father answered.

Then Soft Rain knew she had been right. If they planted their crops, they could not move west. She was joyful inside.

When she told Hawk Boy about *her* school, his eyes danced. "Let's start now," he begged.

"There will be time for learning after the New Moon Festival," Father told them.

They knew that he meant they must first help with the planting and weeding. They spent the rest of the afternoon carrying last year's cornstalks to the fire Father tended. By the time they left, the fire had burned out; the field was cleared, ready for the plow.



PLANTING SELU

We will not move west! We didn't sign the treaty."

Soft Rain awoke with a start. Her father's voice was louder than she had ever heard it.

"Let those who signed the treaty move west. We will not leave our beloved mountains or this home we built. It's the time of the first new moon; the field is ready. Tomorrow I plow."

Quiet followed Father's outburst. Then Soft Rain heard her mother say, "After the plowing, we'll all help plant the beans and *selu*. Sleep now before we disturb the children."

Next to Soft Rain, Hawk Boy's bed creaked as he stirred in his sleep. Soft Rain curled herself into a ball, pulling the blanket tightly over her head.



Move west—there were those hated words again. Little John had thrown his book away after he heard them. Green Fern had called the West the land of blackness, where the souls of the dead go. The teacher had cried when she told the class about moving. Why would any Tsalagi go there?

Father had said they had no time to think about it, yet he was using his sleeping hours to discuss it. Did he mean they should not think about it during the day? Soft Rain fell into a restless sleep trying to untangle her confused thoughts.

In the morning Father was gone. Soft Rain smelled the freshly baked bread that Mother had prepared for the noon meal. "I can take Father his food today," she volunteered.

"Wash yourself first," Mother said.

Pet, the puppy, followed Soft Rain to the creek. The moss on the bank was cool, but not so cool as the water. Soft Rain waded in cautiously. Taking a deep breath, she bent over, splashing water on her face. Pet splashed too. "Aieeee!" she screamed at the puppy. "I didn't need any more water on me!" She jumped out of the creek, dried herself quickly, and ran home, chasing Pet.

When Hawk Boy passed her on his way to wash, Pet ran after him.

"She'll splash you!" Soft Rain warned.



"Water can't hurt me," Hawk Boy shouted.

It did, though. From inside the house, Soft Rain and Mother laughed at his screeches, but Grandmother laughed loudest.

"Hawk Boy is not as brave as he thinks he is," she said.

When her brother came inside the cabin, Soft Rain giggled. "You look cold. Did Pet splash you?"

"That Pet is trouble, but I splashed her, too. Is it time to learn words yet?"

"We haven't heard a story this morning," Soft Rain said.

After Grandmother's story, the children and Pet took Father's food to the field. Then Soft Rain wrote words in the newly plowed earth until Hawk Boy grew more interested in gathering worms. "For fishing," he said.

Soft Rain shook her head. "No fishing until the planting is done," she reminded him. "We could play a short game of *chungke*, though." She picked up a rounded stone and tossed it nearly into the grass.

Hawk Boy found two sticks, which they threw at the stone, trying to be closest to it, or to hit the other stick. They could do neither. "How do the *chungke* players hit the rolling stone?" Hawk Boy asked.



Father joined them. "I'll show you," he answered. He tossed the stone so that it rolled along the ground, then quickly threw the stick after it, hitting the stone before it stopped moving. Astonished, Soft Rain and Hawk Boy laughed all the way home.

The next morning Soft Rain said, "Time for a story, Grandmother."

But Father announced, "The plowing is done; the field is ready. Soft Rain, we must all help. Stories can come later."

Without protesting once, Soft Rain picked up her pouch and began filling it with corn bread. Father didn't know that she *already* felt she must help with the planting this year. She looked at Grandmother. *Does she understand how important it is to plant our crops immediately?* Soft Rain wondered.

"There will be time for stories tonight," Grandmother said.

Of course she understands, thought Soft Rain. She hugged Grandmother. "Think of a good one for me," she whispered.

"And me," Hawk Boy added.

Father carried the baskets filled with corn. Soft Rain walked behind him, now and then picking up a kernel that spilled out. Hawk Boy walked beside





SOFT RAIN IS NINE YEARS OLD when her life changes. Without warning, white soldiers arrive at her house. They command Soft Rain and her mother to go with them, taking only the possessions they can instantly pack and carry. They are forced to leave behind Soft Rain's blind grandmother, her father and brother, and even her puppy. No one will answer Soft Rain's questions: Where are they going? What will become of her family?

It is 1838, the year of the enforced relocation of the Cherokee people from their southern homes to the unknown West. The long and dangerous journey there, across rivers and over mountains, through rain and snow, is an unwelcome adventure for Soft Rain and her people. Soft Rain's inspiring story of strength and hope is a testament to all those who lived through the Trail of Tears.

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