

The Road Chief

by Robert B. Slocum

You can get the best pizza on the reservation at Marge's Diner, and that's where the tribal council was meeting. It was late, and the plastic green table cloth was littered with left-over drinks and food. The meeting was not going well. Several of the council members had pulled their chairs away from the table and turned away from the others. Their faces were glum. Johnny was fingering his red flannel shirt as he spoke: "It's just not enough. The government money isn't enough. Not enough for our school. Not enough for a medical clinic. Not enough for what we need." Everyone seemed to agree, but no one knew what to do. Before long they were rehearsing the same list of troubles and complaints.

After everyone had spoken, Sid brought the discussion to a close. Looking around the table, he said, "I have an idea." Sid was the tribal elder and recently retired from his superintendent's job at the factory in town. "I'll go. I read about it. There's a place down South where I can get paid just for dressing up in a funny suit. Tourists love it. They have money. They pay." His friends stared at him in disbelief. They couldn't imagine what he meant. He said he would be a Road Chief.

The next morning Sid was driving to North Carolina in his old Toyota Corolla. But first he made a stop. On the passenger's seat beside him were directions to the Star Light Costume Shop in St. Paul. Inside the store he faced an assortment of outfits—a Viking, an astronaut, a football player. He kept looking through the store until he found what he wanted. The costume he chose was bright and ridiculous. Colored beads on the shirt made a checkered pattern that seemed to shine with reflected light. The leather pants and jacket were accented with darker strips of leather that dangled at odd angles. And the feathers of the headdress made a weird cascade of orange, red, and blue that reached to the floor. Sid's lips were drawn together tightly as he reached for the costume. It fit. He walked out of the shop with the costume in a white box under his arm.

In a few days he found a room in Waynesville, North Carolina, not too far from the entrance to the national park. The morning before his first day as a Road Chief he called Marge on the phone. The diner would not be open yet, but he knew she would answer the phone in the kitchen. It was not a good connection, but she could hear him if he raised his voice. "No, I'm starting today. I haven't tried it yet." He glanced uneasily at the chief's costume that was spread out on the bed. "There should be lots of tourists today." After pausing to listen, he said, "Yes, I know. It's for the school, the clinic, the road. There'll be money. This will help." Sid also fingered the sign that

he had lettered with a red marker: "Photo with the Chief." He stiffened his back a little when he wondered how the day would go. "What?" he continued with Marge. "Oh, no, it'll be fine. It's no problem. What can happen?" His eyes were focused on nothing, and his expression was fixed.

Driving toward the park, he could not avoid a look of disdain as he passed another roadside chief on the way. The man was standing in front of a makeshift teepee, and holding something that appeared to be a peace pipe. He was surrounded by tourists. Sid reminded himself that he was on his way to do the same thing, and he faced forward. He soon found a grassy spot on the shoulder of the road, not too far from the park entrance. It did not take long for Sid to get everything ready at his stand. His last step was to put on the headdress. The feathers spilled brightly and wildly over his shoulders toward the ground. He stood straight as a rod while carloads of vacationers drove past him on their way to the park. Sometimes the drivers honked at him, and some children waved. Sid waited. He felt the sun as the day grew warmer, and he wished he had chosen a spot with more shade for his first day as a Road Chief. He was hot in the costume. He drank a bottled water that he found in the cooler on his back seat. The label of the bottle said "Indian Springs."

Sid's first customers were a young couple who parked near his stand. They giggled and held hands as they walked quickly over to him. A painted scrawl on their car door read "Oh What a Night!" and "It's Legal Now!" They were newlyweds. In a moment they were standing in front of Sid and telling him everything. They were from Atlanta. They worked in the same office. Their parents didn't want them to get married. The wedding was just yesterday. All their friends were there. This was their first time in the mountains.

As he listened, Sid's expression began to soften. The girl reminded him of his own daughter, the way her eyes would light in the middle of a story, the way she would talk faster when she was happy or excited. The boy watched proudly as his wife showed Sid her new wedding ring. At first he just looked at the ring, but then he cradled her hand in his hands. He closed his eyes, bowing slightly for a moment. He found himself wishing the best for them, their life together, the place where they would live, their happiness. After several moments he opened his eyes to look at them again. Sid released her hand, and stood upright to pose for their picture. His shoulders were back and his eyes were fixed ahead, but he was smiling. Then he surprised the couple. He said to them, "Let me take your picture." They stood close together, arms around each other's backs. They were so happy. He found himself looking after their car as they drove away.

An hour or so later a Chrysler drove up to Sid's stand. He watched as a mother in her thirties helped her young daughter out of the front passenger seat. The little girl was about five or six, and she walked gingerly. Sid bent down to see her face, and she seemed to be afraid. He spread his hands apart before her, turning his palms up in a gesture of welcome and offering. The little girl seemed to like him. She looked him in the eye. She smiled. He found himself humming a simple melody for her. It was a song his wife used to sing when she put the kids to bed. He could only remember the first part of the song, but he repeated it several times for the girl. She watched him carefully as he hummed the little song for her. She did not move until he finished. Then she saw a butterfly in the grass, and she walked a few steps towards it.

As the girl walked away, her mom spoke quickly in a low tone. "She needs more treatments. We're going back tomorrow. The best doctors. We don't know what will happen. We're trying everything." She began to cry, and started to turn her face away

from him. Sid looked at her calmly. He gently extended his right hand to her as if to shake hands, but then he held her hand when he touched her. He found himself thinking about healing. For the girl and her mother. He thought of light in the morning that chases darkness, and he thought about that light for the girl's pain and fear. The woman was looking at him when he opened his eyes. She had a curious expression on her face, but she had stopped crying.

The little girl stood quietly next to Sid as her mom took several photos of them. His hand rested softly on the girl's shoulder as they posed for picture after picture. The little girl skipped around him for a moment or two when the pictures were done. Sid knelt on one knee in front of the little girl, and he could feel the hard earth through the leather of his costume. He reached behind his back and pulled a bright orange feather from the headdress. "This is for you," he said to the girl, and he handed the enormous feather to her. She received it with both hands, inspecting its every detail. "You will be brave," he said to her. "The creator will be with you."

Later that afternoon Sid heard a car skidding to a stop in front of his stand. The owner of the old Buick was burly, and his face was flushed as he got out of the car. He closed the car door harder than he needed to shut it. "Well," he spoke loudly as he moved heavily toward Sid, "if it isn't Chief Wanna Bucko." The man had a twisted grin on his face. He looked over Sid's Indian costume with amusement. Standing in front of Sid, the man was about an inch shorter but probably fifty pounds heavier. There were beads of sweat on his forehead. He was wearing a wrinkled gray suit coat, with no tie, and a handkerchief folded roughly in his white shirt pocket.

"So, Chief," the man asked with a taunting expression, "what brings you here? Not enough fire water in Minnesota?" He had noticed the license on Sid's car. Sid answered him evenly, looking into his eyes, "I'm here for you." The man snickered. "For me, Chief?" He looked like he was about to spit. "All my life there's people saying that. My teacher. My older brother. Now it's even my boss, the guy who runs this sales district. That's what he's saying all the time. He's here for me." The man stopped talking for a moment, and the air was quiet. Sid was just listening, and did not move. He kept looking at the salesman. The man started talking again, like a rapid-fire gun. But his expression had softened a little. "My manager, he's just a kid. Thinks he knows it all. Rich kid. Family owns the business. Doesn't know anything. Doesn't even know the clients or what they want." Then he stopped talking again. And it was quiet again. Sid had not moved. For a moment they were just looking at each other, and they were still. It was a strange dance.

Sid reached out and touched the salesman on his arm. He said to his visitor, "You can do better." Then it was quiet again. The man seemed confused, but he said nothing. He lowered his eyes. Sid kept looking at him and said again with a firm voice: "You can do better." The salesman opened his mouth as if to respond, but he said nothing. They remained there for another few moments, as if nothing else mattered in the world. There was no noise. Finally the man said, "Mister, can I take your picture?" Sid smiled.

By evening Sid was back in his rented room. The Chief's costume was carefully laid out for the next morning. He was glad to take off the outfit and relax. He called Marge back at the diner. Most of the regulars would be there by now, and he missed them. "No, it wasn't so bad," he said to her on the phone. He smiled easily. "It went pretty well." He glanced at the wild array of feathers in the Chief's headdress. "I can do this."