



DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Trail of Tears

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, and let the flames warm you, because this is a story that carries a great cold in it, out of the southern hills of a young America, out of green valleys in Georgia and Tennessee and the Carolinas where a whole nation once lived and farmed and worshipped. This is a true story, Carol, every sorrowful word of it set down in the record, and it is the story of how sixteen thousand people were driven from the only homes they had ever known and made to walk near a thousand miles through the dead of winter. The Cherokee remember it in their own tongue as the trail where they cried. And I think we ought to tell it gently tonight, and remember the ones who did not reach the end of it.

CAROL

The trail where they cried. Marty, that name alone brings a lump to my throat. When you say a whole nation, tell me what their life was like, before all this came down on them. I want to picture the people as they truly were.



MARTY

Then picture a settled and thriving people, Carol, one of the tribes the newcomers themselves called the Five Civilized Tribes. The Cherokee had farms and orchards and cabins, mills turning on the creeks, herds of cattle, and towns with streets. They had something almost no other people on earth could claim, a written language invented by a single man among them, a silversmith named Sequoyah, who worked for years until he had given his people an alphabet of their own. And with that gift they printed a newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix, in their language and in English side by side. They wrote a constitution, Carol, modeled on the one in Washington. They were not wanderers. They were a nation, rooted deep in that soil, and they meant to stay.

CAROL

A man who built an alphabet all his own so his people could read and write. Marty, that is a marvel. A settled nation with a newspaper and a constitution of their own. Then how in the world did anyone justify tearing them off that land?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, here the darkness comes creeping in, and it comes in the oldest shape there is. Gold. Gold was found in the Cherokee country of northern Georgia, and word of it spread like fire in dry grass. White settlers came pouring in, hungry for the land and what lay under it, and they wanted the Cherokee gone. And they had a powerful friend in Washington, for the president of those days was Andrew Jackson, an old soldier who had made his name fighting on the frontier. Jackson threw his whole weight behind a law called the Indian Removal Act, passed in 1830, that would push the southern tribes off their ancestral homes and away to the west, beyond the Mississippi, to a place called Indian Territory. It was to be done by treaty, they said. But the pressure behind it was as hard as iron.

CAROL

The president himself pushing them out. Marty, that feels hopeless from the start. What could the Cherokee possibly do against the whole government of the United States? Did they simply have to go?



MARTY

No, Carol, and this is the part that I find so remarkable, and so heartbreaking. They did not raise a war. They fought back the lawful way, in the courts of the very nation that was trying to remove them. They hired lawyers and carried their case all the way up to the Supreme Court of the United States. And Carol, they won. In 1832, in a case called Worcester against Georgia, the Chief Justice himself, John Marshall, ruled that the Cherokee were a nation with rights to their own land, and that Georgia had no authority over it at all. By the law of the land, they had every right to stay. The highest court in America had said so plainly.

CAROL

They won. Marty, they actually won, at the very top. Then it should have been over, shouldn't it? The court had spoken. How could anyone go against the Supreme Court itself?



MARTY

You would think it could not be done, Carol. But here the story turns as cold as the winter that is coming in it. President Jackson simply would not honor the ruling. There is a line handed down through the years, and the historians tell us he may never have said it in just those words, but it captures his contempt exactly. John Marshall has made his decision, he is said to have scoffed, now let him enforce it. The court had no army, you see. And the president would not lift a finger to protect the Cherokee. The one shield the law had given them, he let fall to the ground. And the settlers and the state of Georgia pressed in harder than ever.

CAROL

To defy the highest court in the land, and there was no one to stop him. Marty, that is a terrible thing, that a nation could win justice and still be denied it. So with the law brushed aside, what happened to the Cherokee then?



MARTY

Then came the trick that gave the whole cruel business its cover of legality, Carol. There was a small faction among the Cherokee, only a few hundred, who believed removal could not be stopped and thought it wiser to bargain for terms and go. These men had no authority to speak for the nation, none at all. But in 1835 they signed a paper called the Treaty of New Echota, giving up all the Cherokee land in the east in exchange for money and country in the west. The great mass of the people never agreed to it. Their principal chief, John Ross, carried a petition to Congress signed by nearly sixteen thousand Cherokee begging that it be rejected. But the government seized on that fraudulent treaty as if it were the will of the whole nation, and by a single vote in the Senate it was made law. And the clock began to run.

CAROL

A handful of men with no right to speak, signing away a whole people's homeland. Marty, and their true leaders begging and no one would listen. So when the time ran out, how did it come, the removal itself?



MARTY

It came with soldiers, Carol. In the late spring of 1838, under a new president now, Martin Van Buren, the United States Army and the state militias spread out across the Cherokee country to carry it out. Seven thousand soldiers. They went farm to farm, cabin to cabin, and they gave the families no time. A knock, a bayonet at the door, and out into the yard they went with only what they could carry. Some looked back and saw strangers already walking into their homes behind them. And they were herded, Carol, herded into rough stockades, crowded pens where they waited through the sickly heat of that summer, hungry and ill, while measles and dysentery moved among them. Many died in those stockades before a single mile was walked.

CAROL

Taken at the point of a bayonet with only what they could carry in their arms. Oh, Marty, the little children, the old people. And then the long road west in the winter. Tell me how it went for them out on that trail.



MARTY

It went hard beyond the telling, Carol. When the marches began in earnest, autumn had turned toward one of the bitterest winters anyone could remember. They went on foot, mostly, near a thousand miles, in long columns of families, in thin clothes and worn shoes, through freezing rain and deep snow, fording icy rivers, sleeping on frozen ground. Food was short and often bad. And so the sick and the weak began to fall. The very old, the very young, the mothers, they died of cold and hunger and sickness along the way, and their families dug graves in the frozen earth by the roadside and had to walk on and leave them behind. When it was all finished, Carol, the historians reckon that four thousand or more of the Cherokee, a full quarter of the nation, had died on that road or in the camps. Four thousand souls, for the crime of living where gold was found.

CAROL

Four thousand. Marty, a quarter of them, gone, and graves the whole length of that road. And the ones who lived reached the end of it having lost everything and everyone. That they endured it at all, and endured as a people, is its own kind of wonder.



MARTY

It is, Carol, and that is the note I want to end on, because the Cherokee did endure. They reached that hard new country, and they buried their dead, and they built again. They wrote their language once more, and raised up their nation a second time, and their descendants carry it on to this very day. But we must never let the wonder of their strength hide the wrong that was done to them, a settled and lawful people driven from their homeland by their own government, in plain defiance of its own highest court. That is the story, friends, and it is all true, and I hope we hold it gently. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of those long columns walking into the snow, of the little graves left by the roadside, and of a strong and gentle people who lost so much and yet did not vanish. Let us remember the four thousand who never reached the end of that trail, and speak their story kindly, and always, always come back to the fire.

