

THIS
INDIAN
KID

*A NATIVE
AMERICAN
MEMOIR*

EDDIE CHUCULATE

SCHOLASTIC
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Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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1976-77

CHAPTER 1

MONKEY TAIL AND Cookie chased the rabbit around the bank of the frozen pond, their bark-howl filling the universe. When the rabbit turned the corner in a gallop like a racehorse, sun broke from the clouds, sparkling the snow like sugar, and we had to shield our eyes.

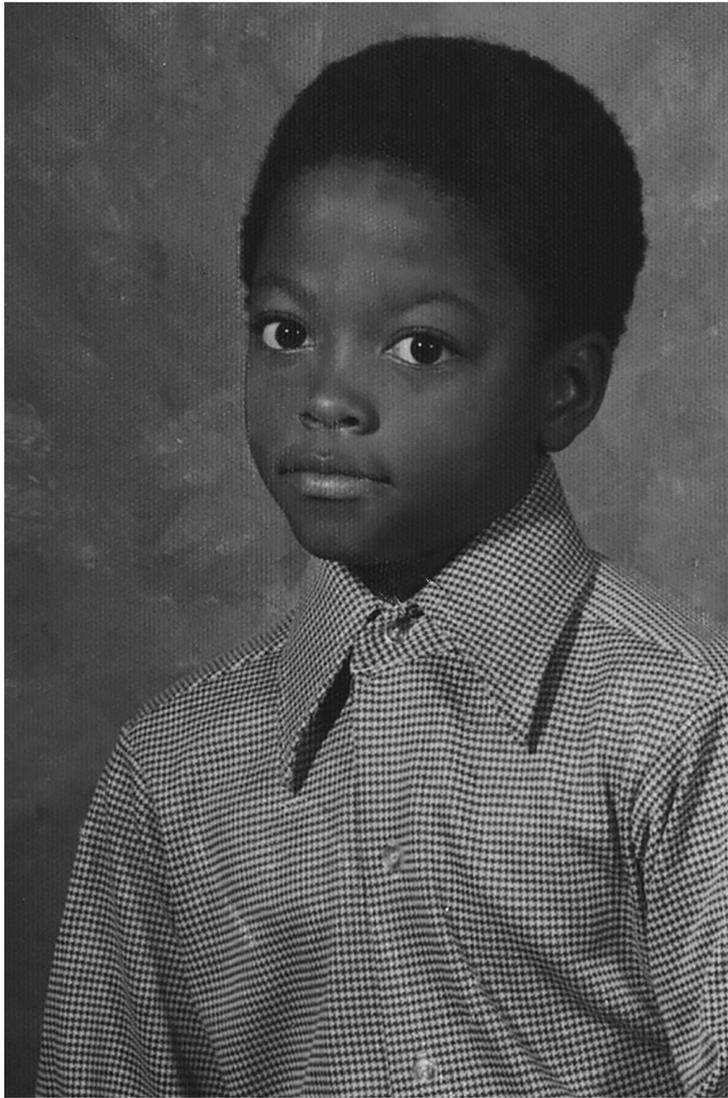
“They’re running him right at us,” my best friend and baseball teammate Lonnie Hill said, and I saw the pride in his eyes. I was in sixth grade in Muskogee, Lonnie in fifth but only two months younger, both of us out on Christmas vacation.

Lonnie raised his arm for me to stop and cautiously leveled his shotgun at the solitary rabbit, gray against the snow-white landscape, now standing on its hind legs, sniffing the air. The red lights of the KMUS radio towers blinked in the distance.

“Tell your Granny to get her skillet ready,” Lonnie said out of the side of his mouth, cheek flattened against the stock. “This one’s dead meat.” His breath puffed the air like steam. He shucked a shell into the chamber; the clack rattled the silence.

I knelt and watched, knee crunching snow.

The cottontail scooted ahead a few yards, nose to the ground. Lonnie lowered the barrel momentarily, then raised it again. The blast exploded clods of black dirt right behind the rabbit, which



Lonnie Ray Hill, Jr., age eleven, 1976-77, Muskogee. Lonnie routinely walked about half a mile up a gravel road to see me, carrying either a fishing rod, shotgun, or baseball bat, his beagle dogs trailing him. (Courtesy of Melita Griffith.)

THIS INDIAN KID

cartwheeled. His second shot sprayed a fountain of snow just in front of it. The rabbit reversed and darted straight for the pond, Monkey Tail and Cookie yowling right behind its flashing white tail. The shots echoed over the pastures.

“C’moan,” Lonnie said, “they’re on him now!”

I took off after Lonnie with my BB gun, stumbling over skeletons of brown brush that poked through the snow. The rabbit veered and slashed, always toward the pond, an oval rink dusted with snow. The barking beagle pups tangled and fell trying to copy the rabbit’s moves, but they scrambled up howling and resumed pursuit.

The sun dipped into the clouds again and it grew dim. A shadow slid across the pond as the rabbit sprang from the bank, hit the ice, and went spinning like Bambi in a Disney cartoon. Lonnie aimed and pulled the trigger but the gun clicked. As he fed another shell into it the rabbit regained its footing and shot across the surface, kicking up puffs of snow as it leaped onto the far rim and vanished in a blur into the bushes.

Monkey Tail stopped at the edge of the pond, but Cookie jumped onto the ice, tumbled, and I heard a grumble in her throat. Cookie tried to walk but slipped onto her chest each time. She finally gave up in the middle of the pond and froze, looking all around.

“Cookie!” Lonnie yelled. “Come here, girl.”

The dog looked up at Lonnie, whimpering.

“Come here, girl!” Lonnie whistled and smacked his thigh. “C’moan now.”

Cookie barked at him, then panted, her tongue hanging like

EDDIE CHUCULATE

a piece of bubblegum. She sat on her hind legs, whimpered, and barked at Lonnie. Monkey Tail joined us. He barked at Cookie, too.

Lonnie's uncle had given the pups to him last year. He'd brought them over to show me the day after, walking them down the dirt road. He'd seemed as happy as if he'd been given a stack of money.

"Dang it," he said. "Here, hold this."

Lonnie broke the gun open and handed it to me. I was astounded at its weight compared to my BB gun. I wasn't much of a hunter, only plunked at aluminum cans, birds, or turtles in the pond. Granny only let me go hunting with Lonnie because she trusted him. He knew all the regulations, wore a blaze-orange hunting vest, and kept the gun on safety and angled to the ground.

Lonnie tested the edge with his foot, stomped on it, then crept on.

"Come here, Cookie," he said in a soft voice, and whistled.

Cookie just whined and barked and would not move.

Lonnie eased out toward the middle, testing the surface every few feet with his boot. Cookie barked and wagged her rump as Lonnie inched closer. As he knelt to pick her up, the ice cracked and spider-webbed in long veins. He plunged in over his head with an arm stretched to the sky and Cookie went under, too.

"Lonnie!" I yelled.

He submerged for an instant and came back up, pawing at a big plate of ice, spewing water and yelling. He got a knee up onto a jagged shelf, then it broke off with a big crunch, and he fell in again on his back, disappearing. He resurfaced dog-paddling, thrashing and kicking, chopping and splashing water.

I ran around to the opposite bank, tripping and falling in snow

THIS INDIAN KID

with Monkey Tail barking at my heels. Lonnie had his head above water, elbows resting on a sheet of ice. It was thicker near the bank, so I inched out on my belly with the BB gun extended. He grabbed the barrel, and with both of us pulling like a tug-of-war, he slid onto the thicker section and stood up.

My small house was visible to the northwest, smoke trailing a thin line from the chimney, firewood stacked high out front. We jogged toward it, high-stepping and stomping through the snow, and as we neared I saw the windows fogged with steam at the corners. Dripping icicles hung from the porch roof like a row of fangs, but inside it looked warm and inviting.

We banged in.

“Granny!” I yelled, “Lonnie fell into the pond and lost his dog and gun and everything!”

“Oh, my word!” she said at the kitchen table where she sat with my great-uncle Chester.

Lonnie and I shivered and hopped with our arms crossed by the King woodstove, glowing red at the sides. It heated the whole house. Lonnie pawed pellets of ice from his hair onto the stove, where they puddled and steamed.

My grandpa Homer sat with his legs crossed in his chair across from us, holding the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix* spread open wide before him. It was like he hadn’t seen or heard us.

He brought the paper down, revealing his blue eyes, magnified through the lenses of his rubber-banded cat-eyed reading glasses.

“You boys shoot anything?” he said. “Where’s all them rabbits at?”

EDDIE CHUCULATE

“Lonnie fell into the ice. His dog wouldn’t come and he went out there to get it and fell in.”

“Well, son of a buck,” Homer said, drawing it out, just truly realizing what happened.

Lonnie stared at the stove, shaking. It looked like he was about to cry. The Christmas tree was up in the corner, no lights, but decorated with acorn shells Granny had strung up with curling red-and-silver strips of tin cut from Homer’s Prince Albert tobacco cans. They looked like tinsel.

“Eddie, go run Lonnie a bath,” Granny said. “Lonnie, go into Eddie’s room and get out of those clothes.”

I ran hot water into the tub from a hose screwed into a faucet at the sink because the pipes under the bathtub had frozen. Granny laid out a towel and a pair of jeans and a sweater from my dresser drawer.

While Lonnie took a bath, my great-uncle said, “What’s he crying around about?”

Over the years, I was always meeting one great-uncle or another, one of my grandma’s six brothers. They were always big and tall and sort of intimidating, loud, but friendly, buying me pizza, pop, and baseball cards. They usually had some artwork for me to look at, visiting Granny and Homer out in the country from Tulsa.

But this one, Chester, I had never met before yesterday. He showed up the night before from California, showing me pictures of him in rodeos dressed up with a floppy cowboy hat, suspenders over a polka-dotted shirt, red tights under cutoff blue-jean shorts. With painted red circles on his cheeks, he wore high-top basketball shoes and waved

THIS INDIAN KID

the hat in a bull's face, inches from its horns. He had scruffed my head last night, playfully slap-boxing and tickling me until I was breathless. He said I'd never make it as a bulldogger unless I toughened up.

We piled into the car to take Lonnie home. Lonnie and I sat in back with Monkey Tail between us, his tail thumping the seat. Homer started the car and got out to scrape ice off the windshield as Chester, a former semipro football lineman, drank from his bottle in the passenger's seat, broad-shouldered and hunched over in the small sedan. Granny sat in the middle.

Chester turned and snatched Lonnie around the throat.

"You freaking n—!"

Lonnie's eyes grew big. He gripped the armrest beside him. Everything froze; snowflakes swirled and floated outside the window, slid down the glass. The little car rumbled, exhaust puffing from the tailpipe. The windshield wipers swished every few seconds, loud in the silence.

Chester's eyes were narrowed, his teeth bared in a sneer.

"Here now, Chester, leave him be! That's Eddie's friend," Granny said.

Monkey Tail grew tense in my arms, trembling, and let out a sharp bark at Chester.

One by one, second by second, the fingers released from around Lonnie's neck like in a countdown. The last one bore a turquoise ring.

Chester drank the rest of his bottle, rolled down the window, and flung it into the snow. Cold wind rushed in.

"Oh, heck, he knows I'd never hurt him," he said.

EDDIE CHUCULATE

Lonnie looked at me wide-eyed. I mouthed “It’s OK”—although I had no idea if it would be—and gave his shoulder a shake, keeping a wary eye on Chester, who had grown silent. It all happened so fast and without provocation, we didn’t have time to react.

Chester instantly complied with Granny’s wishes, which made me feel safer, but I kept watching him as he shivered, as though cold, pulled his cap over his eyes, and leaned back against the headrest. I was further relieved when Homer—oblivious to it all—got back in, revved the engine, and turned on the heater. Granny didn’t say anything about it to him and, following her lead, I didn’t either. It was best to let a sleeping dog lie. That sleeping dog didn’t even know Lonnie. He didn’t even know me, really, since I’d only met him last night.

Lonnie and I played with Monkey Tail on the ride down to the gate, making him snarl and yap. I got out and unchained the gate. We were quiet on the short ride to his place, past squat little houses with green shingling and pens and hutches nearby for pigs and chickens.

“Here, Lonnie, give these to your folks,” Granny said, big jars of canned okra, small red potatoes, and cucumbers clinking in a box as she handed them over from the front seat. “Anytime you guys want more, come on over.”

“Thank you very much, Granny, I’m sure Daddy’s going to love this,” he said. “Thanks for everything. You, too, Mr. Homer.”

“See you later, Stud,” Homer said. “We’ll get them rabbits next time.”

I got out with Lonnie and carried his sack of wet clothes to the front door.

THIS INDIAN KID

“I’m sorry about all that, Lonnie, I don’t even know him.”

“Don’t worry about it, it ain’t your fault,” he said.

We executed our ritualistic handshake, which ended with two quick back-and-forth claps and a finger snap. I walked back to the car.

“Chook.”

I stopped and turned.

“Be careful,” Lonnie said, and raised his jaw toward the car. I knew who he was pointing at.

With Lonnie gone, I didn’t know if Chester would reach around and grab my neck next, so instead of going riding around with them, I said I wasn’t feeling good and had Homer drop me back off at the gate. I walked up to the house through the pasture, past Chester’s car in the yard with the California license plates I had thought were so exotic.

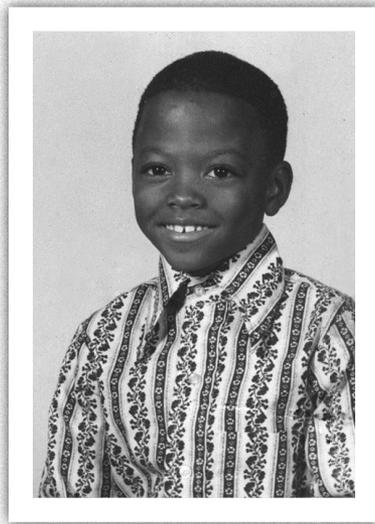
In my room, I got out my notebook and wrote down everything that had happened, from shooting at rabbits, the pups running and barking, and Lonnie falling in the pond. But from there, I rewrote it. Chester asked Lonnie if he was okay, where he lived, and what his parents did. He shook his hand and even boxed around a little with him, too. He took us to eat barbecue and bought us baseball cards. We went riding in the country to Fort Gibson Dam and saw eagles nesting in the bluffs. When we took Lonnie home he still had both pups, his gun, and rabbits to clean. But that was just a made-up story.

The next morning Chester sat at the table drinking coffee. I saw his unfamiliar silhouette through the sheet Granny hung up to keep the kitchen light out of my room. When I turned my fan off,

EDDIE CHUCULATE

I could hear them talking and the radio playing softly. His voice sounded normal again. I regarded him warily for the few more days he was around, but never saw the hatred in his eyes again. He tried roughhousing and tickling me a few more times but I pulled away, picturing his hand around Lonnie's throat. After Christmas, he left. Granny said he'd gone back to California. I didn't see him again until his funeral a few years later.

I wondered if Lonnie would ever come back after what Chester did, and I wouldn't have blamed him if he didn't. I thought about which was more offensive: the name-calling or neck grabbing, and figured they were about the same, but even worse combined. I didn't see Lonnie again until weeks later. He yelled my name and slapped the open seat next to him when I got on the school bus for the first day of the new year. We talked about everything except what



*Lonnie Hill, age seven, 1973.
(Courtesy of Melita Griffith.)*

THIS INDIAN KID

happened, it seemed. He even returned my clothes that he wore home that day. When spring came we started fishing again and in the summer he came over and we threw the ball against the pitch-back, angling it for grounders and pop-ups.

I never understood why Chester did that to Lonnie. Growing up, the N-word was not unheard of, but that was the first time I heard anyone say it with venom. Momma never said it. Homer and Granny, whose strongest word was “gosh,” never used it. Muskogee schools were racially mixed but everyone on my bus home was Black except for me, my sister Dawn, and the driver, Mr. Anderson. The Native kids got along with the Black kids, and vice versa. Some of us were best friends, played on the same teams, and hung out after school. Some were even mixed, half-Black and half-Indian and members of a tribe, or had cousins who were, which made it harder for me to understand Chester’s actions. Maybe it was his generation. But Homer’s generation was even older and one of his oldest friends was a Black man in Tullahassee.

I had white, Black, Native, and Latino friends. I can’t say I ever felt singled out or excluded from anything because of my race. Sometimes I found myself the only brown-skinned person in a setting, but I never felt ashamed or embarrassed. The city was more diverse than many small towns in Oklahoma where no Black or Indian people resided.

Nearby, small towns like Taft and Tullahassee (“Old Town” in Creek) were all-Black, but one sizable town, about fifty miles away outside of the Creek Nation, had zero African Americans. In the

EDDIE CHUCULATE

1980s, a woman called from Philadelphia looking to relocate there and was told there were plenty of houses available. But when she arrived for a meeting to be shown properties, the agent saw that her adopted kids were from Ghana and suddenly there were no listings. That would have never happened in Muskogee, which always had substantial Native and Black populations—Black doctors, lawyers, and, I presume, real estate agents. Black students had their own schools in town until desegregation in 1970 when Manual Training and Central merged and Muskogee High School was born.

The riders on my bus were a blend of elementary, junior high, and high school students. I'd sit in back with Lonnie and slap out beats to songs on the backs of the high green seats along with everyone else. At first I never joined in, but when I finally did, Lonnie nudged his friend with an elbow and nodded his head in my direction as I pounded on the seats with everyone else. A boom box blared "I Wish." After a bass and keyboard intro, the vocalist sang about being a nappy-headed boy whose only worry was what would be his toy for Christmas.

The bus was packed three to a seat and ear-ringing loud with singing, arguing, laughing, and yelling. Mr. Anderson stopped on the side of the road and looked at us in the mirror with his owlsh glasses and ball cap and said in a real friendly voice, "Now, boys and girls, we're going to have to keep the noise down."

"It ain't noise it's Stevie Wonder!" someone yelled.

The racket started up again but regressed in notches every time we dropped off a group down North 17th Street. It was quiet as a

THIS INDIAN KID

library by the time Lonnie got off. Dawn, Elaine Ledbetter, and I were the last to disembark after the asphalt ran out because the district didn't allow the bus down the dirt road. It turned around, empty, as we walked home. We all turned and waved to Mr. Anderson.

From the beginning of my school days in Muskogee, Black educators were a big part of my life. My first coach at age six, A. C. Richardson, played me at shortstop for the Blue Blazers, but would also put me on the pitcher's mound. I had two strikes on a batter one night at Hatbox Field and was about to deliver the next pitch, when I saw Momma in the stands behind the backstop pointing in the air. I stood on the rubber looking up into the sky until everyone started yelling throw the ball already. She told me later she was just holding up a finger to indicate one more strike.

Coach Richardson gave me the MVP trophy at season's end at the field where we practiced in Honor Heights Park. I had no idea it was coming, because I thought his son, Allyn, was our best player, but he called out "Chook" and gave me an Easton aluminum bat, silver with green letters, still shrink-wrapped in plastic.

Wearing my cleats, I dragged it to school every day, to the Muskogee Public Library, and back home. I don't know why I didn't carry it. I dragged it so much the rubber cap at the top fell off. Today you're probably not allowed to bring a bat or wear cleats to school—or to the library for that matter. I was so proud of that bat I should have had it bronzed.

At Jefferson in second grade, the only people who paid any attention to me were the older Black girls. They cupped their hands

EDDIE CHUCULATE

around my face while I watched them play tetherball and told me I was so cute. They asked what my name was and I said, “Radar,” which I’d heard on the TV show *M.A.S.H.* I thought it was such a cool name. But they stuck me with Eddie Chocolate, Eddie Chickenlegs, and Eddie Spaghetti, following that with, “Got Your Meatballs Ready?” I hung around their periphery while they bashed the ball around the pole on a rope until they noticed me. I especially loved one girl named Velvet Lee.