TERRA TREVOR

WE WHO WALK THE SEVEN WAYS

A MEMOIR

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TERRA TREVOR

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Set in Quadraat by A. Shahan.

For my aunties,
who believed I could and taught me how

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The U.S. Congress passed the Religious Crimes Code in 1883. American Indian people were forbidden to hold religious ceremonies, conduct prayer, or teach children our cultures.

Anyone who did could be put in jail.

The Religious Crimes Code was in effect throughout my childhood, teens, and early adult years.

Joy Harjo writes in *An American Sunrise: Poems*: "Until the passage of the Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, it was illegal for Native citizens to practice our cultures. This included the making and sharing of songs and stories. Songs and stories in one culture are poetry and prose in another. They are intrinsic to cultural sovereignty. To write or create as a Native person was essentially illegal."

WE WHO WALK THE SEVEN WAYS

1

WE WHO WALK THE SEVEN WAYS

The Indian in me is strongest. Auntie said there's no such thing as being part Indian. But even before she told me, I already knew, have known forever, the Indian in me is strongest.

Bill said it was important for me to know who I am and not to let my skin color define me. Not to let it define the way other people perceive me when they don't know my story. Although it seemed natural for Auntie to be the one guiding me to walk the sacred hoop, the female cycles of life for Native women, instead, it was my friend Bill, because he led me to the women who showed me the path and picked up where Auntie left off.

Bill was mixed-blood American Indian and Black. I'm an olive-skinned mixed-blood—Cherokee, Lenape, Seneca, and white. He was a journalist, had published five books and taught creative writing. Seventy-two years of the woods and rivers ran in his knowledge. When we first met, I was a young mother-writer. We had weekly chats about writing, but our talks always moved over to conversations about race. I'm always on the verge of figuring out how to live in this world with my complicated racial mix and never quite reaching a satisfying answer.

Then on a Thursday in September, just as the moon was finishing its travels of the night and was ready to lie down in the west, I received the phone call telling me Bill was dead.

When Bill died, I was in my late thirties. Now I'm nearing seventy, looking back over three decades at the friendships he guided me into with the elder Native women who informed, instructed, and shaped me into the woman I am today.

After Bill died, I began memorizing everything. Moonlight falling on the tangle of blue morning glory in my backyard. The certain set to my oldest daughter's jaw. Seventeen, her black hair gathered in a ponytail at the nape of her neck, loose strands falling in her face, watching her tucking them behind one ear. We didn't have a reason to suspect it at the time, but it would be the last year she lived with us.

My youngest daughter, thirteen, brown skin tanned, rolling her serious eyes while smearing on strawberry lip gloss. My husband getting up at the first dim light, moving quietly in the dark house making coffee for me.

And the way my eleven-year-old son's black hair shone red in the sun and the freckle on his right cheek. He was recovering after having been diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. The tumor was resected with surgery, followed by radiation and sixteen months of chemo.

He was no longer bone thin and had gained thirty pounds. The knees of his jeans were streaked with grass stains. Gone were the pristine sick days when his white hooded sweatshirt stayed spotless for weeks at a time. Now, each time he left a muddy footprint on the kitchen floor, I rejoiced.

After my son regained his health, he didn't want to spend his Saturdays with me; he wanted to have playdates with friends, sleepovers, and go to summer camp. My daughters were active teenagers. Regular life was returned to us, and I was getting to know myself on new terms.

It's a medical fact that a mother who is raising a seriously ill child can age faster than her peer group of mothers raising healthy children. Perhaps this is why in 1991, at age thirty-eight, I found my way into the elders' writing circle Bill led on Friday mornings and began making close friendships with women who were in their seventies and eighties.

The shiplap side structure, where Bill taught creative writing, sat atop a hill on land that once belonged wholly to the Indigenous Chumash people. It was surrounded by orange California poppies in the spring and overlooked the Pacific Ocean, with the Channel Islands beyond.

I met Bill before my young son was diagnosed with a brain tumor. When my son was sick, my life was filled with caregiving, fear, and fortitude. My family urged me to find new activities for myself. As a writer, the only thing I wanted to do was be around other writers. Bill suggested I attend one of his classes. He taught a number of writing classes. Of all his classes, he wanted me to attend the Friday morning group he led for seniors, in which all of the writers were over the age of seventy.

Bill had a special way of making everyone feel like they were his best friend. Women leaned in close when he told his stories, and the men stood tall and grinned. He marched in that first day of class wearing jeans and boots. The way he leaned on the edge of his teacher's desk exuded strength and power.

Bill pointed to a chair and motioned for me to sit down.

I slid into my seat, and my notebook fell off my lap and landed on the floor with a thump.

Each week Bill called on me in class, and I couldn't come up with an answer.

Although we were good friends, in a classroom setting it felt like I didn't know Bill at all. He gave out fiction writing homework assignments, and I didn't turn mine in. I was fully engaged; I looked forward to the classes. But I was a nonfiction writer. I wrote feature articles and penned a monthly column in a family magazine, and I wasn't having fun writing fiction.

One morning Bill walked over to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Do the assignments," he said, "but try writing memoir instead."

I glanced up; our eyes met. His face was filled with concern. I blushed.

I began doing my homework assignments, and memoirs tumbled out of me like clothes from a dryer opened mid-cycle.

At the end of each class, Bill selected two homework assignments to read aloud, and feedback was offered. Later there was conversation and laughter, and the mornings always ended in a way that fed my soul. Those Friday morning writing classes became the anchor in my life. They felt like a combination of quilting bee, going to sweat lodge, writing lessons, and therapy all mixed together.

I began to make friends with the women in class. Two were Native women elders I recognized from gatherings within our local Native community, but I did not know them well, not yet.

Our Native community was a mix of Chumash, with Santa Ynez Mission Band Chumash, who were recognized by the federal government, and Coastal Band Chumash, who applied for recognition in 1981. We were also blended with Native people of other tribes, including some of the unrecognized California tribes, along with undocumented Native people. Our community was fragmented the way many California tribal people are—unrecognized, without the continuity and federal recognition many other tribes have.

Too often there is a division between who is federally recognized and tribally enrolled. Yet in our Native community, most important was the fact that we were are all Indians, and we listened to the elders, they led, and we did as they instructed. We also all moved through our lives respectful of Chumash ways, and we held the history of the Chumash people in our hearts.

Other older women in the writing class, along with a couple of older men, all in their seventies and eighties, were not Native, and they understood the importance of respect for Native land and for its people. Everyone in the class had a common bond: we all lived in an area that made up the traditional Chumash homeland.

After class the women brought paper sack lunches to the park looking out over the ocean. On clear days the island of Limuw loomed in the distance. Chumash creation stories tell how Hutash, the Earth Mother, created the first Chumash people on the island of Limuw, also known as Santa Cruz Island.

The first time I gathered at the park with the women, they talked about how the female body was connected with the moon, the ocean tides, and the seasons. This was something Auntie often spoke of. Sometimes they talked about women's spiritual work and the sacredness of women in the traditional ways their grandmothers had been raised within matrilineal cultures. Except they didn't say it like that. It just flowed from brief comments they made within our conversations. Whatever it was, it gave me goose bumps, like I had when Auntie told me her stories.

Auntie's stories began in the evening, as the sun was going down. The turquoise beads she wore on Sundays made her white hair shine. Her skin was like dark, smooth clay, and when she laughed, she held her hand in front of her mouth to hide her bare gums.

Before bed, she gathered me and all of the girl cousins and reminded us to remember our dreams and to feel our feet growing up from the ground so we would be able to find our paths within the great circle in relation to how Indigenous people viewed the world.

According to Auntie, there was woman's work leading to our spiritual path. She said it was equally important to be kind and to hold space for other women as they followed their path.

The stories she told me, way back in the 1950s, spoke of the female cycles of life within the medicine world and how our feminine energy was connecting us with Grandmother Moon. But she never used those exact words. Instead, she told stories, the ones that helped Native children to understand there was a natural world and a spirit world and places connecting the two, through which some could, if they were supposed to, move from one to the other.

Except I thought her stories were like fairy tales. There is a Grandmother Spider creation story, a traditional tale, and I thought she told it to me to keep my mind off all the teasing I got at school. The kid's called me "spider." Our last name was Webb, and I had long skinny legs.

Auntie and I grew up within a family in which all of the women had known their great-grandmothers. I grew up with my great-grandmother, and she had known her great-grandmother. From her

great-grandmother, Auntie learned how to dig sweet root from the ground. Yellow root, lady's slipper, she knew all of them. She knew about the helper plants. The ones that were not strong enough on their own and could help other medicine plants become stronger when combined.

"Time goes in a circle," Auntie said. Everything that has ever happened or ever will happen is going on all around me, always. I didn't understand. Yet I could feel roots beneath my feet reaching back or forward into an invisible place where time lived. I thought of it as one big swirling windy place, where all of the things that will happen in the future and what happened before I was born came together and had a meeting of sorts. I didn't know how, only that they did.

Most of the time I couldn't comprehend what Auntie was telling me, and I tucked her words into my heart for safekeeping.

After Auntie passed into the spirit world, Bill came into my life and led me into a circle of forward-thinking elders. Two of the elder women I was beginning to grow close with, Marie and Ann, were back-to the-blanket women following the feminine ways within the American Indian traditions they grew up in. They were picking up where Auntie left off.

Except I wasn't ready to carry it. I didn't understand. At first I thought Bill and the elder Native women he introduced me to were just teaching me to become a better writer.

When his health began to give out, Bill wanted to cut back. Then, at the last moment, he decided to keep his writing class going as long as he could. He turned his focus toward teaching us how to write a book. I was working on a memoir, my motherhood story.

"The theme within a book," Bill said, "is the slender golden thread that runs through the manuscript, and it comes from the idea. The flip side of the theme is the statement you are going to make." He ran his hand through his hair, smoothing it down.

"Hold those different paths the story can take. Hold the paths against the theme."

He grabbed his glasses off his face, pinched the bridge of his nose.

I looked into his red-rimmed eyes. He pointed to my notebook.

"Write it down," he said. Bill wheezed when he talked and ran out of breath.

Each week Bill asked us to read a page from our book-in-progress. When it was my turn to read, the overhead fluorescents buzzed, and my heart pounded.

"When writing memoir, you've got to show the reader who you are," Bill said.

"Don't hide racial markers."

I tensed up. My legs like a runner at the starting block. Suddenly I understood how deeply I was caught between two worlds. When I was in an all-Indian or an all-white setting, I behaved accordingly. I was either here or there. Bold enough to speak out and support Native rights and politics no matter where I was, and I never let anyone get away with ethnic slurs and racist statements. But I was a chameleon. My first impulse was to try to blend in. I thought about how my paternal grandfather covered all of the time, passing as white whenever he could. Auntie never covered. My cousins never covered, and my elder women friends never covered. I'd observed Bill acting Black with Black friends, Indian when he was with Indian friends, and white when he was with white friends. But he didn't cover. He was just doing what we all do when we are within our own ethnic group, where everyone carries the same speech tags, humor, and innuendos and has a common consciousness.

"Covering is a slippery slope," Bill said.

"Race is a necessary detail, include it."

Bill was once a bear of a man. Now he traveled on legs so shaky he appeared on the verge of collapse. His wife had died from cancer a few months earlier. He sold his house and began sorting through his possessions, deciding what to keep or give away.

He asked me to help his youngest daughter sort through his wife's clothes.

"I can't do it," I said, "Ask someone in the family. It's too personal."

Bill insisted.

I could tell his daughter didn't want me to be with her, but I also sensed she didn't want to do it alone. It was a job that must be done,

and I didn't blame her for not wanting me there. What we both wanted was for her mother to be alive and to be caring for her own things.

We opened the drawers of the dresser and pulled each item out and placed it on the floor. Then we sat cross-legged, peering down at the contents. Everything was folded and smelled of laundry detergent and sachet. I said a prayer before touching any of the clothes and tried to make myself appear as small as possible, to take up little space and presence so the spirit of the woman who had owned this clothing could fill the room.

Bill's wife had dressed with that certain chic I admired in older women. Sorting through her closet was like reading a book she had written, and the fabrics told her stories. As I lifted out each item, I could tell which ones had been saved for special and the things worn daily.

Bill held a yard sale. The money earned was given to hospice. Pots and pans lined the driveway. Casserole dishes, plates, cups, and bowls that once carried his family through their lives now sat forlorn, lost and pitiful looking. Again, he assigned me to clothing. My job was to hang everything up on clothes hangers and to keep things tidy. After the beloved dresses, shirts, and sweaters had been rummaged through, I picked up the ones that had fallen onto the lawn, brushed the bits of dirt and leaves off them, and hung them back up. At the end of the day, we piled the few items left near the garage, and I covered them with a blue plastic tarp.

Bill moved into an apartment in an assisted living center. His health seemed stable enough. The last time I saw Bill alive, I said, before dashing out the door, "See you next week."

"I certainly do hope we have the chance to be together again," he said.

I didn't want to think about what Bill was saying, but I knew exactly what he meant.

I couldn't look him in the eye. It was one of those stark, intimate moments I wasn't comfortable with and didn't know how to be present in, so I brushed it off, pretended I didn't understand.

"I'm glad to see you are getting on well with Marie," Bill said.

I nodded. Sometimes Marie took over Bill's classes when he was wasn't strong enough.

Bill stared at me. "You've got an old Indian inside you. You know that, right?"

My eyes dropped to the linoleum floor. The question took me by surprise.

My face turned hot. I looked up and nodded. "Yes," I said.

"Good," Bill said, with a long sigh that was swallowed by the night.

When I received the phone call telling me Bill was dead, I looked out the window at the night sky, searching for the moon. I felt as if time, as I had always known it, had collapsed around me and it was going in a circle, just like Auntie always said it would.