

# **Preying Game**

**Frank Walters Clark**

© Copyright 2010 Frank Walters Clark  
All Rights Reserved

This document is protected under Title 17 of the U. S. Copyright Act of 1976. Reproduction in any form, printed, electronic or otherwise, is strictly prohibited without the Author's specific permission.

Two boys, each wearing Nike Air sneakers, pocket pants and baggy shirts, ride dirt bikes through the backstreets of St. Petersburg toward Crescent Lake Park. Their knees pump in time with the music that thumps from a radio strapped to the handlebars of the younger boy's bike. He is tall and thin, has closely-cropped hair covered with a Devil Rays baseball cap he wears backwards, while the older, heavy-set boy wears his hair woven in dreadlocks and razor-cut on the sides.

The rain has finally stopped, and bright sunlight slants through massive oak trees and between buildings painted in fifties' pastels, burning off the morning mist and incubating the heavy morning air. As traffic builds, the boys defy stop signs and red lights as they wheel through Kenwood, an older neighborhood of red brick streets lined with Craftsman-style bungalows and patchy lawns of St. Augustine grass. They charge the occasional pedestrian along the way with their bikes, screeching with laughter at the stream of complaints that follow the near-misses, then skid around the final corner and race down the sidewalk that leads to the lake.

The old man, his skin weather-beaten, wrinkled, and browned by years of sun and nicotine, walks erect, his high cheekbones and broad nose evidence of countless generations of Miccosukee blood. He wears a black string necktie with an eagle clasp, a threadbare, western-style snap-button shirt, and bleached-out jeans. His clothes are clean but hang from his body like rags on a scarecrow, his faded and battered porkpie hat sweat-stained and shadowing over thick, wild eyebrows.

As he walks along the sidewalk he tries to ignore the sharp, hot pains in his joints, focusing in the old way his grandfather taught his father, and as he, Daniel Longfeathers, had been taught. Soon the stabbing sensations fade from his mind, but his progress is still slow. He moves rhythmically with the plastic tote-bag that swings heavily at his side, banging his knee painfully with it each step of the way. He swats at no-see-ums that bite at his skin, and the cigarette dangling from his mouth sends curls of smoke swirling behind him.

He pauses, stepping into the thick grass that borders the sidewalk and surrounds a multihued, neatly patterned bed of red and yellow phlox, and draws breath in short rasps. He squints down into the

bag hanging at his side and mumbles to himself Lifting his hat at an angle, he sweeps beads of sweat that have gathered on his high forehead straight back into the tight, matted strands of white hair he has tied low on the back of his head, then steps back onto the walkway and moves on.

"Hey! Stevie!" the older boy whispers excitedly when he sees the man walking ahead. "Check this out...."

"What, Win?" Stevie replies.

He is careful not to call the other boy by his full name, and he is even more careful to do what the other boy commands. He remembers his second week at Southside Middle School, when he watched Winston beat-up a classmate outside the chain-link fence that surrounded the schoolyard. Winston wanted to buy a pearl-handled .22 pistol that the other boy had stolen but didn't want to sell.

The gun, with a full load of bullets, now belongs to Winston, Stevie thought. It would have been easier on the other kid just to let the fat one have his way.

Winston has money to spend, something Stevie seldom possesses, even for school clothes or lunch, much less to spend on junk-outs and things like guns, as Winston does. The pocket pants Stevie wears are too short in the leg and far too baggy in the waist—they belong to Winston.

Baggies are cool, Stevie thought. At least that was what Winston had told him.

"Make you look cool on cool," Winston had said.

Winston is Stevie's only friend. Stevie wants to believe him despite the things he does to other people, things that pick at Stevie's conscience like buzzards on a rotting carcass.

"Let's wing this old boner!" Winston yells, then pedals hard, the fleshy rolls on his hips and thighs quivering obscenely as he flies past the old man. Then, just beyond the Indian, he makes a quick u-turn and pedals directly at him.

Stevie rolls toward the old man from behind, waiting until his friend is the same distance away, then speeds-up. The boys flank their prey simultaneously, as they have done with others several times before. Grabbing at the old man's arms, they yank his bird-like frame into a spin as they pass, knocking

him to the ground in a tangle of limbs.

The boys skid to a stop at opposite ends of the walk, and turn to look at the old man lying sprawled on the rough concrete. Stevie scans the park to see if anyone is watching. Except for several joggers on the far loops of the lake, the park is all but deserted this time of the morning.

They are alone with their victim and Winston is laughing. He has the old man at his mercy.

"What's the matter, Chief?" he jeers, "too much prune juice for breakfast?"

"Yeah, why don't you watch where you're going, you old... fart-sack!" Stevie blurts. He giggles, but it is tight in his throat and he chokes it off as abruptly as it begins.

Flushed with sudden embarrassment he looks expectantly at the older boy, then frowns as a sneering grin spreads wickedly over Winston's shiny face. Stevie turns away as the older boy's thick body quivers with excitement.

Stunned, the old man sits up, his movements slow and stiff. Torn loose by the spin, his bag has landed some distance away, its contents strewn across the grass like hurricane debris. His face creases in agony as he struggles to his feet and limps to where his things are scattered. Joints grind as he stoops, and picking up wood gouges and carving knives one by one, he carefully replaces them in the old shoe-box he uses for his tools, then lays the box gently back in the bag.

"Catch, Stevie!"

Stevie turns, and in the nick of time catches a large chunk of wood that Winston tosses at him. In awe, he turns it over in his hands, realizing that it is a large, incomplete wood sculpting that reminds him of the wood carvings his father used to make. He recognizes the wood as black mahogany, and sees that the piece has the form of a raptor emerging from its swaying veins. The bird's sharp beak is thrust forward aggressively, and its intricately detailed wings are unfolding as if preparing for flight, its fierce eyes seemingly focused on some distant and helpless creature.

"Toss it back, Stevie!"

"Young one. Give me my bird," the old man says, walking unsteadily toward Stevie with