

BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHLINGS

A Native American tale - retold

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ACT ONE

Scene One The Storm that evening

Scene Two The next day

ACT TWO

Scene One In the wilderness

Scene Two The next morning

CHARACTERS

BOYD Father

STELLA Mother

FRIAR Spiritual Leader

FLOCK LEADER Political Leader

VULTURE Midwife and Vulture

AVERY Hatchling

SPECKLES Hatchling

CHICKIE Hatchling

SANDY Hatchling

SCRATCHER Hatchling

BUZZ Hatchling

JUNIOR Hatchling

CLIFF Eagle

ACT I

SCENE 1

A prairie out West.

A terrible storm is sweeping across the prairie. Thunder, lightning and rain have started. The wind is so strong that it has blown Stella and her eggs out of the nest. The action happens during the storm. The lines are to be yelled in order to be heard over the raging of the storm.

BOYD

(Enters looking for Stella)

Stella, where are you? Are you OK?

(looks in nest)

Where are the eggs? - STELLA!

STELLA

I'm over here.

BOYD

Where?

STELLA

(gathering eggs in her apron)

Over here - I can't get them all.

BOYD

Don't worry I'm coming!

Boyd finds Stella and they start picking up their eggs, frantically looking around, making sure they have them all.

The Flock Leader and Friar enter, each carrying an egg.

FLOCK LEADER

We found some more. This is the worst storm in years.

FRIAR

Are you two all right?

STELLA

We're fine. Thank you for finding all my children.

BOYD

You two are bold and beautiful. Thank you.

FRIAR

Right. So, what say we try to make it back?

FLOCK LEADER

Here, let us help you.

All struggle to walk against wind
toward nest with the eggs.
Stella gives one more look around
and see a large eagle's egg
rolling alone the prairie.

STELLA

(screams)

My baby! There's one of my babies!

BOYD

Stella, what are you talking about? We had seven eggs. We got seven eggs. Let's get back to the nest, The Friar and Flock Leader can help that family.

STELLA

Don't count your chickens before they hatch. We're the only ones with eggs in this neighborhood. That's our baby!

FLOCK LEADER

Are you sure? Look how big it is!

STELLA

Yes sir, that's my baby!

FRIAR

Maybe you lost count of your eggs!

STELLA

No sir, I don't mean maybe!

BOYD

I'll go after it. Stay here.

FLOCK LEADER

Here, put some rocks in your pockets so you'll be heavier!

They start putting rocks in
Boyd's pockets.

FRIAR

You're going out on a wing and prayer son.

BOYD

Thank you Friar.

Boyd trudges toward the large egg, then crawls to it in an effort to fight the wind. He grabs the egg in a prone position and then rolls back to the others as the wind pushes him.

FLOCK LEADER

Look, a chicken egg roll.

STELLA

Go over easy with that egg!

Boyd and egg roll into arms of
Friar and Flock Leader.

STELLA (CONT'D)

You did it! Thank you. Boyd you were so brave, so chicken
hearted.

Lights out.

SCENE 2

Stella is sitting high on their nest, but is leaning to one side because of the big egg they saved. She is knitting baby birdie booties. Boyd is nervously pacing the floor.

STELLA

After the heroic way you acted during the storm, I'm surprised you're this nervous. Relax. Everything will be fine.

BOYD

That's easy for you to say, you're not going to become a father.

(beat)

You know what I mean. How are you feeling?

STELLA

(Looking down from atop of the nest)

I never realized I was afraid of heights before, but other than that, I'm fine - never felt better. Did you remember to call the midwife to help with the deliveries?

BOYD

Yes I did. She should be here any minute.

Flock Leader and Friar enter.

BOYD (CONT'D)

That may be her. Back in a minute. Don't go anywhere.

(crosses to meet guests)

Friar, Flock Leader, nice to see you again. We're expecting the midwife any moment.

FRIAR

We won't be long - just wanted to see how you two were doing after last night.

FLOCK LEADER

That was a very scary storm. I'm glad we didn't lose any future voters.

(Friar and Boyd look at him.)

That's a joke.

STELLA

Boyd, send her on in. I think it's time.

BOYD

It's not her dear. The Friar and Flock Leader dropped by to see how you're doing.

STELLA

(Starting to feel some
discomfort)

I'll be fine when the midwife gets here.

BOYD

She should be here soon. Be patient my turtledove.

STELLA

I'm not a turtledove. I'm a prairie chicken that needs a
midwife...now!

BOYD

(runs to his wife's side)

OK my little chick-a-dee, I'm going now to get her. Try not
to do anything till I get back.

STELLA

Don't you little chick-a-dee me. This is your fault. You
did this to me. I'm not going through this without
medication. Get her NOW or I'll...

Midwife enters the room and
stands behind Boyd. Boyd turns,
runs into the midwife (Vulture)
and screams.

BOYD

Thank Goodness you're here

Boyd pushes midwife to Stella,
hiding behind her all the way.

VULTURE

(to Boyd)

Are you planning on staying?

BOYD

What are you talking about? She's my wife. She's having our
little peepers. There is nothing that could tear me away
from her at this crucial time in our lives.

STELLA

Do I hear the prairie chicken who's responsible for this?
Bring him to me. All I want is his head. You can have the
rest.

BOYD

Uh, on second thought, I'll just wait over there with the
guys.

Moves across stage with the Friar
and Flock Leader.

VULTURE

Good idea.

She moves a screen in front of the nest.

FRIAR

All hens go through hatching pains. She'll be back to her old self soon.

FLOCK LEADER

Yeah, mine had cute nicknames for me like, Chicken and Dumplings, Chicken Soup, Chicken Salad, Chicken Cacciatore, Chicken...

FRIAR

I think he understands. Patience is a virtue. All we can do now is wait.

The three start pacing back and forth. They stop when Stella begins groaning. At the end of one of her groans, one of the prairie chickens rolls out from behind the screen to DS. The chick starts stretching and cleaning itself and says its line. The Friar and Flock Leader congratulate Boyd. Then they start pacing again until another chick is hatched. This is repeated for all seven prairie chickens.

AVERY

Fascinating. The inclement weather from last night must have hastened our gestation time. I believe I've hatched early.

SPECKLES

(Squinting and looking around)

Wow, hatching, I didn't see that coming. Wonder where I am?

CHICKIE

Oh my gosh, now I have to get my feathers fluffed and died.

(Picking an eggshell off of her arm)

Gross. Is that an eggshell?

SANDY

That's it? I go to the trouble of breaking out of my own shell and then I'm left out here in the prairie on my own? Great.

SANDY (CONT'D)

(Sees the others)

Oh, hello.

SCRATCHER

(Looking at his talons)

Hey look at these things.

(Starts scratching the ground)

Cool! I can scratch anything.

(Tries to scratch his/her back)

I can scratch anything but this one place. I can't reach..

Scratcher lays on back and wiggles around in an attempt to scratch back.

BUZZ

(After rolling into place, he stands up immediately and starts moving around.)

Hey, I wonder what kind of Bird am I? Do I fight? Do I dive bomb my victims? Do I walk through small towns and scare people?

JR

Wow, look at all the neat stuff around here. This is where I want to play.

(Looking at Buzz)

Are you my big brother?

Buzz hits him on the shoulder.

JR

OW! I guess so.

FLOCK LEADER

Congratulations Boyd.

FRIAR

You've got seven, the perfect number.

BOYD

Thank you, gentlemen. It's a brood. Have a worm.

Boyd hands out gummy worms like cigars. During the congratulations, Stella begins with a low moan that gets louder and higher. The midwife runs off stage screaming past the men. The Friar and Flock Leader look at each other and run off stage screaming.

Stella screams and Cliff runs out from behind the screen and screams. He looks at his brothers and sisters and they scream. Cliff screams again and runs to Boyd. Boyd screams causing Cliff to scream again and run behind the screen. We then hear Stella scream and Cliff runs out from behind the screen.

CLIFF

OK...time out! Let's just stop for a moment and take a deep breath.

Everyone on stage takes a deep breath simultaneously with Cliff.

CLIFF (CONT'D)

That's good.

Cliff turns to his brothers and sisters. They scream. Cliff screams and runs to Boyd.

BOYD

Now stop that.

(to the others)

And not another peep from any of you.

(to Cliff)

Who are you?

CLIFF

DAD!

Cliff jumps in arms of Boyd almost knocking him down.

BOYD

Get off me. You can't be my...Stella.

Stella enters from behind the screen.

STELLA

Don't look at me. This is from your side of the family. Remember that second cousin of yours?

BOYD

He's not ours. He's a bad egg. It's that last one. I told you we had our family, but you had to have that last egg.

STELLA

And you would have left that last egg in the storm - to fend for itself? He would have never made it Boyd and you know it. He would have been shell-shocked, scrambled or even if he made it through somehow - poached.

BOYD

Well, that may be true, but he's not our responsibility. I mean birds of a feather flock together. Let's look for his parents.

STELLA

We are his parents. There's no need to go off on a wild goose chase. I need you here to help take care of our helpless hatchlings.

BOYD

Helpless? Look at the size of this thing? You think he's helpless?

Stella is glaring at him.

BOYD (CONT'D)

All right, he's ours and helpless. We'll take him under our wing like the rest of them.

Cliff pulls Boyd's arm over him,
Boyd pulls away.

BOYD (CONT'D)

I don't mean literally. Go over there with the rest of the kids.

CLIFF

Sure thing...Dad.

Cliff laughs and punches his dad on the shoulder, almost knocking him down. Then walks over to sit next to Avery and keeps moving with each sibling's line.

AVERY

Excuse me. There is a definite pecking order in effect here. Move down.

SPECKLES

(Squinting and closely
looking Cliff over)

You are one big blur. I mean bird, and I can't see you sitting here. Keep moving.

CHICKIE

OK, like, I need my space and you're taking up half of it.

Chickie gestures for Cliff to
move away.

SANDY

Oh that's perfect. Let me take care of birdzilla. I don't
think so. Keep walking.

SCRATCHER

Oh no, not in my space. But before you go could you?
(Indicates a place on his
back for Cliff to scratch)

Thanks.

BUZZ

(Starts moving around like a
boxer)

Oh yeah. You want a piece of me. Come on. I ain't no
chicken tender. I will hurt you.

Buzz hits Cliff on the shoulder.
Cliff is unfazed and returns the
hit to Buzz's shoulder.

BUZZ (CONT'D)

Ow!

JR

(Grabbing Cliff's hand.)

He's with me.

STELLA

Aren't they beautiful Boyd?

All offspring stop whatever they
are doing and with big grins look
toward Boyd.

BOYD

Sure are a lot of beaks to feed.

Stella walks into the middle of
her brood, hugging and grooming
them. She touches their head and
names them. Before she can name
Cliff, Boyd speaks.

BOYD

They grow up so fast, don't they? I mean look at...at..

He indicates Cliff.

STELLA

(Touching Cliff's head)

You mean Cliff?

BOYD

Oh, so that's what you're going to call him. Yeah, look at Cliff. He's practically grown. He should leave the nest now. You know, see the world.

Midwife enters and stands behind Boyd who is unaware of her/his presence..

VULTURE

Then let him fly the coup.

BOYD

(Screams)

Don't do that. So you agree huh?

STELLA

Just what kind of midwife are you anyway? Pushing a baby bird out of the nest so early.

VULTURE

Well, maybe I'm not the best midwife, but I'm a pretty good scout for athletic talent.

(Removes glasses and nurses cap. Hands them to Speckles.)

And when I saw the size of that egg, I knew there was potential

SPECKLES

(Puts glasses on for rest of show)

It's a miracle. I can see. I can see.

BOYD

Well I don't see what going on here.

VULTURE

Your boy's got what it takes to make it in this world - size, looks, intelligence.

(Look at Cliff)

Well, maybe just size... but that's all he would need to make it as a professional athlete.

BOYD

Say, you got a point there.

STELLA

What are you talking about?

BUZZ

Cock fighting Mom.

CHICKIE
That's awful.

SANDY
Relax. It's not real.

SCRATCHER
It doesn't matter. He doesn't look mean enough.

JR
Sure he does. All he needs is a costume and a bad haircut.

SPECKLES
Really? Is that all it takes?

AVERY
The discussion is moot. Cock fighting is illegal.

STELLA
That's right. This discussion is...what was that word?

AVERY
Moot.

STELLA
Moot.

VULTURE
Well, I'm also a casting agent. I'll take him to Hollywood -
child star.

(To Cliff)
Say "The Sky is Falling."

CLIFF
What?

VULTURE
You see? He's a natural. I'll make him an overnight success
in six months.

BOYD
Honey, did you hear that? Our son's going to be a movie star.

VULTURE
Let's do lunch, Cliff. I can make a few birdcalls on your
behalf find out what's happening..

Their conversation fades, they
start to exit.

JR
See you later Cliff. You were a great little brother.

BUZZ

Let me know if you need a stunt double.

SCRATCHER

(Scratching his back)

I think I miss him already.

SANDY

(To Scratcher)

You're weird.

CHICKIE

My friends will be so jealous.

SPECKLES

You have friends? And how did you get friends? You just got here.

AVERY

Father, you should meet with an attorney before you let Cliff go.

BOYD

I guess you're right, some of those Hollywood agents can be vultures...

(He realizes Cliff is leaving
with a vulture.)

Hey, wait a minute. You come back here.

VULTURE

I'll have my peepers call your peepers. Chow.

Vulture runs away.

STELLA

Boyd, that vulture was pulling a con to rob our hen house.

BOYD

Yeah, (s)he's a real condor all right and I almost fell for it. What a birdbrain. We could have lost Cliff. We could have lost any of them. Well not on my watch.

(To his offspring)

Troops. Gather 'round. It's time to learn about the birds.

AVERY

You mean the birds and the bees don't you father?

BOYD

Uh...no. You'll have to ask your mom about that. I'm talking about just birds. The birds we have to watch out for - birds of prey.

SPECKLES

You mean like the Friar?

BOYD

No, not that kind of pray, the other prey. I mean birds that will have you for dinner.

CHICKIE

I love dinner parties.

BOYD

NO...no dear. You would be the main course at this dinner.

SANDY

You mean it's a bird eat bird world?

BOYD

It can be. The point is some birds are dangerous. Especially those that fly.

SCRATCHER

So, do we look up all the time? What if it rains?

BOYD

You're better off looking at the ground. That's right. You're keeping an eagle eye for the shadow of an eagle.

BUZZ

Won't we hear one? Then we can just look up.

BOYD

The eagle flies silent and near the sun. If you look up you'll be blinded. But when you see his shadow, you'll know he's near.

JR

What does the shadow look like?

BOYD

(Interlocks his thumbs and makes a bird shadow using his hands as wings.)

See that? That's what an eagle shadow looks like. So whenever anyone of you sees a shadow like this, I want you to shout as loud as you can DUCK.

CLIFF

OK, let get me get this straight. When we see an eagle, we yell duck. And this usually works?

BOYD

Not that kind of duck.

STELLA

Boyd, you're scaring the children. There's more to learn about being a prairie chicken than knowing how to duck, and that's knowing how to dance. Now watch me.

She turns on a CD player and leads them in the Chicken Dance. The following conversation happens during the dance.

AVERY

Through these rhythmic gyrations we connect with our ancestors.

SPECKLES

Mom, he's talking like that again.

STELLA

Avery, don't talk over your brother's head.

AVERY

My apologies.

CHICKIE

Oh, I love this. I think I was hatched to dance.

SANDY

You may be, but look at Cliff.

Cliff is struggling with the dance. Others start laughing.

SCRATCHER

Come on Cliff, feel the rhythm. Shake a tail feather.

BUZZ

Look! Cliff can't dance. He's got two left drumsticks.

JR

You take that back. He can beat the stuffing out of you.

(To Cliff)

Don't listen to him. You're not an ordinary Prairie Chicken. You're more like a...

CLIFF

DUCK!

JR

No, I wouldn't say that...

CLIFF

(Pointing at a shadow on the ground)

NO THE OTHER DUCK!

ALL

DUCK!

Everyone, except Cliff, drops to his or her knees, facing upstage, head on the ground covered by their arms. Cliff remains standing transfixed looking up at the eagle. The others scream for a while and then begin ooing as Cliff seems to fall into a trance looking at the eagle. Then they go back to a quick scream. Boyd looks around.

BOYD

OK everyone, it's all clear. I don't know why we weren't attacked, but it doesn't matter. The important thing is that we're all safe.

(Sees Cliff still standing looking up.)

Cliff! Why didn't you duck? Standing there made you an easy target for that eagle. We could have lost you son... Cliff?

(Starts to shake Cliff)

Cliff, speak to me.

CLIFF

It was so majestic, so beautiful.

BOYD

Snap out of it son.

CLIFF

Did you see the way he swooped and glided right over top of us? I wish I could fly like that.

BOYD

What am I hearing? My son's a birdbrain. That's a killer you're swooning over. Don't you ever admire an eagle in my presence.

CLIFF

I just want to be able to fly like one.

BOYD

We are Prairie Chickens and if you're going to live in my nest, you're going to act like one. So get this eagle business out of your head.

Boyd exits.

STELLA

Cliff, honey, your father doesn't want you to get hurt trying to do something you're not made to do.

CLIFF

But Mom, I never felt this way before. When I looked up and saw that eagle something moved inside of me.

AVERY

Mother, a similar incident has happened to me. When I saw that eagle something moved inside of me too. May I go change my underpants?

Avert exits.

SPECKLES

I should probably do the same thing.

Speckles exits.

CHICKIE

I'm going to change just to make a fashion statement.

Chickie exits.

SANDY

I think I would feel more comfortable if I made a fashion statement too.

Sandy exits. Scratcher looks at Mom, grins and sidesteps offstage.

BUZZ

(Running after the others.)

Hey guys, does anybody have an extra pair I could borrow?

Buzz exits.

STELLA

(Looking at JR)

Well?

JR

I'm not wearing any underwear.

Stella immediately points for him to leave. JR runs off stage.

STELLA

Cliff, sometimes we confuse scary with exciting. When you're older you'll be able to sort out those feelings and do what you're supposed to do.

CLIFF

And what's that, Mom?

STELLA

Be the best Prairie Chicken you can be. Now why don't you go and ask your sister to help you with your dancing?

CLIFF

Yes Ma'am.

Cliff exits. Boyd enters with the Friar and the Flock Leader.

BOYD

Stella, The Friar and the Flock Leader have agreed to try and talk some sense into that boy. I think he actually wishes he were an eagle. He just stood there staring up at it. I bet he was hypnotized. That's got to be it. Why else would he talk like that?

FLOCK LEADER

Were his eyes glazed over?

FRIAR

Was his speech incoherent?

BOYD

No, no I don't think so.

STELLA

Boyd, I've already spoken to him. Youngsters have big imaginations and silly dreams. That's all. He'll be fine. He's practicing the Chicken Dance with his sister.

During Stella's line Cliff crosses upstage of them on a skateboard pretending he's flying. His bothers and sisters run after him. When they are all offstage, Boyd, Stella, Flock Leader and Friar react to the noise and look upstage. Seeing nothing, they resume conversation.

FRIAR

There is a bright side. Thinking like an eagle can keep you safe from them. It's good to know your enemy. And it doesn't hurt to let children spread their wings from time to time too.

While they are thinking about what was said, the brothers and sisters run back across upstage with Cliff chasing them on the skateboard pretending to be an eagle.

The adults see them as they go off stage. A loud crash is heard.

BOYD AND STELLA
CHILDREN! What are you doing?

All except Cliff run back on stage looking innocent.

ALL BROTHERS AND SISTERS
Nothing.

BOYD
Cliff. Come out here.

Cliff enters and stands beside his father.

BOYD (CONT'D)
Cliff, I want you to listen to these wise prairie chickens. They have important advice for you.

FRIAR
(To Flock Leader)
Why don't you start? Take your time. I'll speak with him later.

Friar exits.

FLOCK LEADER
(Awkward silence)
So, you like eagles do you?

CLIFF
Yes sir.

FLOCK LEADER
You know they're our mortal enemy don't you?

CLIFF
Yeah, uh, yes sir, I had heard that.

FLOCK LEADER
And that doesn't bother you? You wanting to be like someone who would eat your brothers and sisters?

CLIFF
Well, if you put it that way it seems kind of gross.

FLOCK LEADER
That's what they do you know? Eagles swoop down and eat us.

CLIFF

Are we the only thing they eat?

FLOCK LEADER

Some like the fish in the lake up north, but believe me, there are enough who like the taste of chicken. Why do you want to be like them?

CLIFF

But I'm only interested in the flying and swooping part. That eagle was soaring up in the sky. Then it looked like he was falling, but he's wasn't. He pulls up at the last second and you realize he was in control the whole time. Oh wow, to be able to fly like that.

FLOCK LEADER

But that's just it. Prairie Chickens don't fly. We may get a few feet in the air on a good day, but for the most part we stay on the ground. It's what we do. We're Prairie Chickens. And the sooner you realize that the better.

CLIFF

But what's wrong with wanting to go higher than a few feet in the air?

FLOCK LEADER

It's not who we are. It's not natural. We're called Prairie Chickens not Airie Chickens. If you start pretending to be something you're not, eventually folks will know it. You've got to be true to yourself and others. Don't take that chance. We're Chicken remember?

CLIFF

I guess... but when I saw that eagle, I wasn't scared. I just wanted to be up there flying too.

FLOCK LEADER

I know it must be tough for you trying to fit in with your size and not being able to do the chicken dance and all, but don't make it any worse on yourself with this eagle thing.

CLIFF

But I felt like that could be me. I don't know why. I just felt that I should be up there flying too.

FLOCK LEADER

There's a reason you're on the ground with us. You're one of us.

CLIFF

But I feel different. Why can't I at least try to find out who I am?

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