

A person wearing a white dress is walking on a sandy beach. The image is slightly blurred, giving it a dreamlike or ethereal quality. The person's legs and feet are visible, and they appear to be walking away from the viewer towards the right side of the frame. The background is a vast, flat expanse of sand under a bright sky.

Sometimes the ones that shape us,
are the very ones that break us.

Well-Broke

a Short Story Collection

LISA HARE

WELL-BROKE

A Collection of Flash Fiction Stories

LISA HARE

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TO MY FAMILY:

Past, Present & Future

WELL-BROKE

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WELL-BROKE

The girl's first memories with her mother were of the brooder house and its stale warmth in contrast to the breath-taking cold and hissing sleet beyond the walls of the low-roofed structure. To a four-year-old, it was like entering a miraculous cocoon. Lit red by the glow of heat lamps, the entire floor would come alive, moving in a single wave of tufted yellow as the chicks worried through the cob bedding.

She remembered the first time she knelt to retrieve a lifeless chick pecked to death by its own nest-mates. Delivering the bloodied fluff of a carcass to her mother she had implored her for a reason.

Her mother cradled the chick in her hand—a hand, which once graced ivory keys in philharmonic concertos critics claimed were of “unparalleled passion.” Hands unfamiliar with the harshness of farm life.

“I don’t know,” her mother said. “Once blood has been drawn, they just keep pecking until they’ve killed it.” She stroked the dead chick with tender reverence. “They’re a lot like people that way.”

It’s hard to tell of the events that shape us, the spoken words that mould perception and imbue belief. Our

individual histories mark us with the permanence of a date stamped in blue ink on the rind of a slab of meat.

Her mother was never meant for farm life. Though she loved the free-blowing wind and its sweeping influence on everything over which it breathed, she had a much deeper appreciation for the wild-growing grasslands and the skittering life supported there more than the straight and even rows of cultivated crops. That alone was enough to set her apart. But it wasn’t until the wild blue roan came along that her differentness became dangerous.

Taken in as a favor to a neighbor going broke, the horse made his introduction in a nervous lather of feral elegance. She loved him immediately.

Her husband was known for his horsemanship and was the neighbor’s first choice to avoid sending the horse to slaughter. But Bob had other concerns—mainly the demands of the farm—that kept him from giving any attention to the animal other than obligatory care.

“He ain’t nothing but trouble,” Bob warned his wife and daughter of the horse, but his lack of interest yielded a tempting opportunity for Lila.

So she took to sneaking to the barn at night, when the oppressions of heat and duties of the day gave way to the sweet freedom found in cool breezes and cricket song.

Watching the horse pace and whirl in the small space of his stall, one moonless night she undid the latch and let him loose. In a matter of moments he disappeared in the darkness with only the hammering of his hooves marking his existence in the night. Loose to run the hills of the pasture, his hoof beats grew fainter until Lila could no longer hear him. She waited. Patient. Knowing his youth and curiosity would bring him back.

She heard him before she saw him, ka-thlunk, ka-thlunk, ka-thlunking nearer and nearer, until his darkened form appeared before her, puffing warm breath with the brush of a velvet muzzle on the back of her hand.

"There you are, Beautiful," she whispered, scrubbing a hand over his forehead.

He let out a tired snort and relaxed into her attentions as she stroked his silky coat, over his neck, across his withers, down his back. Then she knotted a hand in the ropes of his untended mane and swung onto to his back.

For a brief moment he stiffened—coiled tension wound back on itself like the cocked hammer of a pistol with a hair-trigger. Then, in a silent signal, the rise of a breeze waved over them both and the roan took off at an easy gallop, head high, tail flagged.

And that was it. There was no going back. The free-flying thrill and covert excitement under the cover of the night became her drug of choice. Joined in freedom with the wild horse, Lila's night rides were her escape from the monotony of a work-laden life and the insult of rewarded conformity that lay scorn to any natural urge toward individuality.

The girl found out about her mother's secret rides. Having snuck from her own bed to look in on a mother cat with kittens in the haymow, she heard her mother enter the barn. She saw her open the stall gate, lift the hem of her nightgown, swing onto the horse's back and ride off into the night.

She knew right away her father didn't know. First, by the cover of darkness under which her mother chose to ride, and second, by the woman's lifted demeanor and the gleeful way her legs scissored swiftly beneath her nightie as she ran back to the house.

Bob found out, though it wasn't by his daughter's doing. He'd gone to town for coffee one morning, happy as hell his corn was all in because snow was threatening to fall. He took a seat at the counter at the drugstore, half-cocking an ear to the cluster of men at a table in the corner.

"She was all but naked in a damn flimsy gown a man could see right through."

"She's a looker, ya gotta admit."

"No argument there. But that ain't right. If my wife ever went out like that..."

"She's looking for trouble, that one."

"I'll tell ya something else, too. The way she rode that horse down, I'd say ol' Bob wasn't keeping the gears greased, if ya know what I mean."

Bob didn't remember getting up from his stool. He didn't remember grabbing Bud McCulla by the collar and smashing his fist into the man's stained, crooked teeth.

As Bob drove home, all he felt was a pulsing rage to match the throb in his hand.

He went straight home. Straight to the porch where his rifle hung above the hat rack. He didn't answer his wife as he marched out the door, sureness in his grip on the gun. He didn't mind her pleas as he led that damned horse from the barn and took him behind the silo and shot him in the head. He felt no regrets, whatsoever, lost in his fuming over having to avoid town until the talk died down.

But what was to come of it all later overshadowed any rumors of the improprieties of his wife, riding horseback in her nightgown. And the girl saw it all. That was the worst of it.

The girl's last memory of her mother was watching from the tree house as Lila climbed the steel rungs of the ladder up the side of the silo. Struck dumb with disbelief and horror, she saw her mother teeter momentarily at the peak of her grief before stepping away from the edge of the life she could no longer stand.

Like a bird lighting to the ground, Lila made her descent in a ripple of yellow

fabric and russet hair, making a soft thwump upon landing. And the widening pool of blood beneath her soaked the same spot where, in his own death, the blue roan had bled the ground red.

Ω

JADED

"You little *bitch!*" Like a catapult released, Gordon's arm snapped in reflex as he backhanded the girl across the face.

"Take it easy, man!" Coop struggled to hold the girl upright with his grasp on her wrists, still cuffed behind her, as she toppled sideways from the impact of the blow.

"She *bit* me! Fucking crack-whore." Gordon held his bleeding hand up in testimony.

The girl, maybe only fifteen or sixteen, was small but strong, and she recovered quickly, spitting a fat glob of bloody saliva in Gordon's face. "Fuck you, asshole!"

Gordon lunged at her again, but this time Coop spun around, putting himself between the girl and his enraged partner.

"That's enough!" He planted a hand on Gordon's chest, staying him. "I got it." He gave him a look, one of a thousand that in their twelve years of battling the human pollution of Los Angeles together spoke as plainly and conveyed as much as any verbal utterance. Coop didn't always agree with Gordon's tactics, but the chemistry they had, their ability to read each other, understand and act on split-second impressions without the wasted time and effort of exchanging words, had saved his life more than once. He wasn't

about to give that up over philosophical differences.

"I'd like to snap her fucking neck," Gordon muttered, backing off.

"Hey, go get me a Coke or something. I'm 'bout to choke." Coop fumbled for the cuff key with his free hand as Gordon let himself out of the holding cell.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"None of your business."

"Maybe not, but I'd rather *not* have to refer to you as the crack whore." Coop waited a few moments for a reaction that didn't happen.

Before freeing the girl's hands, Coop leaned down toward her ear, lowering his voice to an empathetic whisper. "Now, you're not going to try anything stupid, are you?"

She stood silent, frozen, and Coop could feel the over-wound tension in her body building to a new reserve of strength.

"I'm going to take the cuffs off now." He glanced back making sure Gordon had closed the door securely. "It's going to be okay. Just be calm." He slipped the key into the lock and the braces released with clack.

She turned to face him, rubbing the red rings on her thin wrists. "You can't keep me here. You got nothing on me."

"We'll see." Coop popped the cuffs back into their holster, snapping down the flap.

Now that he took a good look, maybe she was older. Eighteen, or nineteen maybe. Her size was deceiving. Ratty blonde hair with a good three inches of golden-brown roots showing, hung down to her shoulders. Her graying Fruit of the Loom undershirt—devoid of the propriety a bra would have provided—was spattered with flecks of blood from her lip.

"Sorry about that. I'll have someone bring you a towel and some ice."

She looked confused; he gestured toward her mouth. "For your lip."

The girl reached up and put a finger to the open gash in the corner of her mouth. Looking down at the blood on her finger, she tongued the abrasion. "Cora," she said quietly. "I'm Cora."

Coop nodded, even though she didn't look up at him.

"Well, Cora," he sighed, relieved that the worst was over. "I'll see that you get something for that cut." He turned to go, and in the next instant she was upon him.

With the deftness of a spider wrapping a fly, her legs clamped around his waist and an arm—bony but strong—locked around his neck, her teeth gnawing and ripping at his left ear as her other arm whacked repeatedly at the side of his head.

Later, much later, after he'd quit the force and left L.A., Coop would still remember her. He'd recall how after a short lock-up for possession, she would turn up dead in a dumpster with no one to identify her remains.

After Coop moved back to the family farm in Iowa, seeking solace in the comfort of turning over black dirt, after having lost all faith in humankind, Cora would come to him in his dreams.

And then he'd remember the rabbit.

He'd remember how he'd felt as a young boy, wanting to help the poor thing after it got caught in a skunk trap. Though its hind leg was nearly severed, he'd thought maybe he could save the animal, doctor it up and set it free again. He would remember how, in that moment, he'd fleetingly imagined the satisfaction of seeing a three-legged bunny hopping around the farm, knowing it was by his care and first aid that the rabbit still lived.

But when he reached down to release the steel jaws, the rabbit lunged against the restraint of its own flesh, making such a pathetic squealing cry that Coop had feared it would tear off what was left of its leg. In order to calm the terrified creature, he reached out to stroke its back but instead of velvety fur beneath his fingers, he felt an immediate stabbing pain as the rabbit pierced sharp teeth into the side of his hand and, with all its remaining strength, scratched bloody tracks up and down his arm.

He would remember how he'd had bad dreams about that rabbit for weeks afterward, because in the end, all he could

do was bludgeon the animal to death to end its misery.

As Coop smelled the rich loam churning over in long columns behind the plow, the dead girl's face would swim up before his eyes, and he'd think how she once had been someone's pretty little girl.

And in a low moment of regret and misplaced guilt, Coop would realize how much Cora was just like that rabbit.

Ω

SECOND CHANCES

It's not like I expected him to actually love me. He made that clear up front.

"My daughter will always come first," he told my mother and me the first day we moved into his house, referring to the 4 year-old little girl from his previous marriage who lived three hours away.

Mom accepted this news with a solemn nod, as though the statement garnered my stepfather more respect. But even then, I recognized her acceptance of his stern warning as an act of utter determination to make this marriage work, rather than true concurrence with the idea. And I was trying almost as hard myself to buy into the myth of second chances.

I hadn't seen my real dad in four years. He'd come by the house when he first got out of prison, presenting me with a hand-tooled leather purse he'd made, my name splaying across the front flap in a neat row of stamped letters.

"You are not welcome here!" My grandmother screeched as she marched up the walk to where we were sitting on her porch steps. Mom was still down at the law office of Briggs and Strong where she worked long hours as an underpaid secretary.

"Hello, Helen," My dad said in a tired voice, his rough hand not flinching a bit from where it rested on my stiffened shoulder.

He left a little while later, telling me to say Hi to Mom and to stay out of trouble.

But trouble had always been his department, according to my grandparents anyway. And why wouldn't I believe them? Grandpa was a deacon at the First Methodist Church, president of the school board, and a county commissioner flirting with ambitions of running for state senator. Grandma was... Well, Grandma was always right.

I was five when Dad was sent up for manslaughter after a brutal barroom brawl that left a local loudmouth with a fatal head wound, but for two years no one told me where my father was.

I missed the heavy sound of his boots coming up the steps, the smell of his breath—Camel smoke and Schlitz—when he'd lift me up and rub his stubbled chin over my cheek, whiskering me, laughing as I squealed. It hurt a little, but I liked it. And I missed it.

"Sit with me until I fall asleep," I'd beg my mother—a new, ever-present panic fluttering beneath my ribs, fear that she too would disappear.

I'd watch the orange glow of her cigarette expand in the darkness as she took one long, deep drag after another.

"Where's Daddy?" I always had to try one more time.

Her head bowed and she tapped ashes into her cupped hand. "He's not here, now go to sleep."

But he was there. In the darkened quiet, without Grandma there to disapprove, I felt his presence so clear, so affecting, even if only conjured by my mother's silent longing. I gleaned a strange sort of comfort from her sadness. The flutter, for a time, stilled in my chest. I knew she missed him too.

I was fifteen when Mom married Doug and we moved to Pennsylvania. She was lonely and tired of paying for her big mistake: marrying dad. And I was ready to have a turn at being part of a "whole" family. I wanted a father. Bad enough to willingly play second fiddle to a four-year-old I'd never met.

My grandparents adored Doug. He was an insurance adjuster with a big, national company, and lived in a red brick house built before the civil war.

He showed us the mismatched brick patching the place where a canon ball had blown through one wall, presumably around the time of the Battle of Antietam.

A few days after we'd arrived, while taking a break from my unpacking, I caught my mother running the pads of her fingers along the jagged seam in the brick.

As I stopped on the porch steps, watching her, that same missing-my-dad

sadness came over me in a rush. Her longing still evident, I knew my mother wasn't seeing the patch in the wall so much as feeling the hole still there. Like the shattered pieces of our own past, there remained a scar no patch job could cover or fill.

But for a time I worked hard at being a good stepdaughter, though I wasn't sure what that ought to look like.

Then one night, after watching a movie together, Mom trailed me into the kitchen when I went for a snack.

"You should take more care in what you wear," she said in a voice frighteningly like Grandma's.

I looked down at the pink-flowered, baby-doll pajamas she'd given me for my birthday only two weeks earlier.

"Don't go parading yourself around dressed like that."

From then on, I did my homework in my room, kept the music low, made my little dog sleep outside, and tried to become invisible. No way did I want to be the one responsible for disrupting our grand new start.

Then on a brilliant November morning after a two-day blizzard had blown through, Doug and I set out on foot to go scoop out his parents who lived on the neighboring farm. Crossing the pasture between our house and theirs, the hip-deep drifts of glittering snow, though beautiful, made the trek a slow and arduous feat.

Doug led the way, breaking the crust of the banks, and as I struggled to follow the long steps of his stride, an

inexplicable joy rose within me. It was a feeling as close to a connection with a father as I had felt in a very long time.

Halfway there, we stopped to rest, sitting back into snow-molded seats. A kind of easy contentment spread through me as I leaned back letting the blinding sun warm my cold-burnished cheeks.

Beside me, Doug struggled to catch his breath and he snapped open the can of beer he'd brought along in his coat pocket. It wasn't his first drink of the day and I knew we'd wait there until he finished this one.

After a time, Doug ripped off a loud belch that rumbled and frothed, producing enough foam to allow him to savor his last gulp a second time. But I was determined not to let his rudeness ruin my bliss.

I looked back at the path we'd cut, a lumpy scar marring the perfection of the pure white waves.

Suddenly the stiff leather of his glove caught my chin and turned my head to face him.

"You know, you're not half-bad looking."

His voice was softer than normal and an unrecognizable look passed over his eyes, scaring me speechless.

"If you didn't have so much of your father in you." His hand pulled away roughly and he burped again, his cheeks puffing with the expulsion of sour air.

And in that moment, something shifted. Changed me forever. How I saw Doug, what I expected from our

relationship, how much I cared about pleasing him. How I saw myself.

Doug became nothing, as invisible to me as I had tried to be. From that day on, I knew who I really was—a part of my father—and I stopped accepting what Doug had to give as the best that I deserved. As imperfect and largely unavailable as my father was, *his* was the blood I shared, and my love for him did not require anyone else's approval.

There was comfort in that. Far more comfort than I ever found in my big second chance.

Ω

BOTH SIDES NOW

Charlotte Shafer was raised in a dusty mid-western town where tumbleweeds reeled down Main Street and the one and only drugstore gave the locals a free soda while filling their prescriptions.

Just entering elementary school in the early seventies, her generation heard plenty about the heathenistic revolts erupting beyond the safety of their Mayberry-wanna-be, but the closest the people of Charlotte's hometown got to *free love* and *Krishna* was bell-bottoms, muttonchops and macramé handbags.

Though they did have Miss Bernard.

Colette Bernard, like the rest of them, was born in that same town. She'd gone away to college somewhere and returned to become the grade school music teacher. None of the kids in Charlotte's class knew exactly where she'd been in those intervening years, but they could tell by the way she dressed it was a far-off big city.

In their small farming community where, regardless of fashion trends in other parts of the world, women wore blue jeans and sweatshirts with calico designs stitched on the front, Miss Bernard's wardrobe was a complete enigma.

White go-go boots, pleated mini-skirts, short knit sweater dresses. And an even bigger shocker was seeing her away

from the school. That in itself was daring enough—actually having a life aside from her job—but wearing hip huggers that bared a dimple-sized navel and a sidekick mole? That was downright heresy.

To say the least, Colette's pupils were impressed, and not just with her clothes. Her face, always powdered a shade too pale, contrasted red-shined lips. Clean white nails, screaming of impracticality, were filed into long, oval tips. Her coppery brown hair lay sleek against her back but for the tube of rolled-under ends that perfectly matched her curled bangs.

As a kindergartener, Charlotte, like the other children, sat awestruck as Miss Bernard whisked into the classroom, smooth hair swinging.

"Are you ready for some music?" she'd chime to their delight.

And as Miss Bernard pushed Sammy Stereo on his little wheeled cart from one classroom to another, day after day, year after year, she never changed. But the children's perception of her did.

Cruel jibes whispered behind the backs of hands became the new norm as Miss Bernard tried to coerce the attention of Charlotte's sixth-grade class.

"Get some *real* clothes."

"The sixties are over, man."

"Doesn't she get paid enough to buy a new outfit?"

As Colette clapped out a three-quarter beat on her slender thigh to Sammy's crackling, 33-speed rendition of the Blue Danube, Charlotte was right there with the worst of them, scoffing.

By then, they were old enough to interpret the sidelong glances and grim-faced head shaking Miss Bernard evoked from the more conservative adults.

The children had outgrown their love for her differentness.

Charlotte went on to high school, then college in Berkley, later to San Francisco with her husband; Ventura after the divorce. She forgot all about Colette Bernard.

When her mother died last winter, Charlotte went back home for the funeral. To escape the house—overrun with stifling sympathies and cream-based casseroles—a group of girlhood friends (now in *their* blue jeans and calico-appliquéd sweaters) took her down to The Lounge Lizard for a drink.

As they slid into the corner booth and their eyes adjusted to the darkened, smoke-choked room, Charlotte spotted a lone figure at the bar, slouched over a martini.

She had string-straight, gray hair hanging down her back, and one spiked heel hooked over the brass boot rail.

"Is that-?" and she had to think for a moment because she couldn't even recall the woman's name.

"Colette Bernard," Martha whispered harshly. "Isn't she a disgrace?"

The teacher from Charlotte's youth—quick to smile and dressed for fun—popped into her mind and she struggled to reconcile that image with the sad husk of a woman before her.

Staggering to the jukebox, Colette leaned her pale powdered face into the blue light, her fingers finding the coin slot.

As Judy Collins' voice—cloudy as the drifted-away years—filled the stale room with *Both Sides Now*, Miss Colette Bernard draped herself over the consoling curve of the jukebox, closed her eyes and began to sing.

And while the four other women in the booth snickered and jeered—just like they'd all done some forty years earlier—Charlotte walked out into the muted light of that snowy November day and began to sob.

Ω

BLOODSTAINED

*Oglala Sioux winter camp in He Sapa along Rapid Creek, near present day Rapid City
Ca. 1869*

He would never know.

The thought wavered tenaciously on the thin thread of consciousness holding her to this world.

That it should end like this. How could that be? And he would never even know.

An odd sense of melting overtook her; she became as a swathing of light snow on a sunny slope. As she slipped into the nebulous realm between this world and the next, Black Buffalo Woman could feel more than see the surroundings in the lodge and the women attending her — Little Wing, Walks With the Moon and No Hips — the fatigue in their postures, the worry in their expressions. She wanted to comfort them, but didn't know how from where she was—strewn across the hillside, sparkling in the light, her life sinking to quench the thirst of the earth.

The buffalo robe her body was lying upon was wet from sweat and where the baby's life waters had seeped from her hours ago when a strong pain had gripped her belly and she had strained into it, feeling a pressure so great she imagined herself turning inside out. Then finally, deep within, a soft *pop*, and the pressure mercifully released in a gush of slick warmth smelling sweetly pungent.

This event had pleased the two older women in attendance, Little Wing and No

Hips. They laughed and congratulated her and each other, as if that was what she'd been laboring for all this time. Walks With the Moon who was, herself, due to deliver any day now, was there to learn so she might be better prepared when her turn came. Black Buffalo Woman feared she was setting a poor example, based by the stricken look on the young woman's face as she reluctantly looked on from a safer distance.

It seemed like she'd been in labor for days, and perhaps she had, though from the darkened interior of the lodge she didn't know if it was day or night. It had been early evening when she'd settled onto the blanket to get down to the business of bringing this baby into the world. But her labor had really started earlier that morning.

She had gone out to gather firewood, straying quite far from camp as much of the accessible wood close by had already been used up. She felt the first pains coming on, but she wanted to finish her task. Though quite cold, the morning was bright and clear, and after having spent the last three days inside while the wind blew and the snow whirled, the walk felt good. But she knew better than to push on any further. The cramps were coming closer and getting stronger.

She had just stooped to toss one more good-sized branch onto the pile she would bind up with the horsehair rope and pack on her back when a sharp pain seized her lower back. She toppled sideways, leaning against the knotty trunk of a pine for support. Bracing her hands on her knees, she forced herself to breathe slowly and deeply through the pain. Her eyes focused on the pile of wood she'd gathered and she was considering whether or not she should just leave it when the movement of an animal caught the corner of her gaze. She raised her eyes to meet the steady stare of a black bear not twenty paces away.

Black Buffalo Woman didn't move. Somehow, in that moment, she was not afraid. The bear swung its head from side to side, nose raised high to catch her scent and gauge the danger, or maybe consider her flavor.

It was a female bear, and she should have been sleeping in a den somewhere. Her coat was ragged looking and she was gaunt, and even at that distance, Black Buffalo Woman could smell the sharp muskiness of her. But there was something else about her.

The bear held her gaze for several moments more and some strange understanding seemed to pass between them. As the bear turned to wander off in another direction, Black Buffalo Woman saw her hindquarters were darkened and smeared from very recently having given birth. No doubt she had emerged from her den looking for water, and probably any berries or carrion she might scare up. But

she wouldn't leave her new cubs alone for long.

And on her walk back to camp, the bundle of firewood slung over a shoulder, stopping when she had to, to breathe through the pains, Black Buffalo Woman considered that the bear most likely perceived that she, too, was about to give birth. And at the time she had considered it a special sign. *Tankashila* had a way of bringing all life together through the shared experience of birth. Her heart had been lifted by this thought. She had needed that lift.

This was Black Buffalo Woman's fourth child, though it was not of her husband.

"You mustn't give up." No Hips' words were stern, but her face was kind and mild. She was the oldest woman in the clan and had attended hundreds of births. And as she peered down between Black Buffalo Woman's trembling legs, her concern was evident. She knew when to be worried.

"For your husband," No Hips urged. "Find your strength for No Water, so his child might live."

Black Buffalo Woman held the gaze of the old woman, thinking of her baby's real father. Even now with death beckoning, the thought of him made her heart swell in her chest.

A wash of pain, somehow vague and distant, went through her body and she let herself slip out and away again. Far away from feeling anything at all, except

the lingering joy of her memories with him.

They had grown up together. *Tashunka Witco* had been making eyes at her as long as she could remember. And she had returned his looks.

He had always been different. His hair curled at the ends and his skin was light as a maple sapling. And though he kept much to himself, he looked upon the world with a wisdom beyond his age. He held himself differently, his chest always open, as though everything he saw he was taking into himself through his heart.

She was quiet and shy, but her eyes were quick and she was perceptive in ways that the more outgoing girls were not. She believed that *Tashunka Witco* recognized this in her and that's why he liked her over some of the other, prettier girls. Though of this, she could only guess; he was never one for many words.

As they grew into young adults, he paid her more and more special attention and gave her gifts, but nothing had ever been spoken of marriage. She was under the guardianship of her uncle, Red Cloud, and *Tashunka Witco* never went to him to ask for her.

By the time she had passed seventeen winters, she had become particularly impatient with him, and when he left to go on a hunt without saying a word to her, her anger had been piqued.

A few days after he'd gone, his cousin, No Water, came back from the hunt early with a debilitating toothache. Her uncle asked if she would attend him, and

whether through his gratitude for the relief provided by the bark tea she brewed, or merely an opportunity won of circumstance, No Water became quite smitten. Unlike *Tashunka Witco*, No Water made his intentions clear. When he had asked for her two days later, and offered Red Cloud three beautiful ponies and a headdress of red tail hawk feathers, her uncle asked if she wanted to go with him.

When she hesitated, Red Cloud patted her hand.

"*Tashunka Witco* is a good man, but he has chosen a different path. His eyes are not looking to tipi living," her uncle told her. "No Water will provide for you and be kind to you. Don't keep watch for the hawk that has already flown. Your eyes will grow tired and your body, old. Even if he does come back, you will be different to him."

So she agreed.

But when *Tashunka Witco* returned, it was clear to Black Buffalo Woman that he had assumed all along she would be his wife. In anger, he left camp and stayed away for several winters.

But one spring, just after *Tashunka Witco* was bestowed the honor of Shirt Wearer—when he had come home to rest from battling the white soldiers and seek the counsel of the elders—he set out to win back Black Buffalo Woman.

He had already won her heart years ago, but Black Buffalo Woman could not just put No Water out. She had three children with him by then, and he was good to her. He provided well and had no interest in seeking glory for himself in

battle, but cared more for protecting his family. In her mind all these things made sense, and kept her from leaving. But to her heart, none of that mattered at all.

"I have a camp set up for us along Wounded Knee Creek."

It was a beautiful spring day and Black Buffalo Woman was stripping a deerskin of sinew when *Tashunka Witco* approached her from behind.

She did not face him right away, though her heart had leapt into her throat at the sound of his voice. Finally, with a steadied expression, she turned to see him standing over her in that straight, open-legged stance that was his alone.

"Did you tell No Water about it?" She was being sarcastic, but in truth, she'd been thinking about that. Maybe if he would make an offering to No Water of some horses or maybe guns, he would let her go. Such arrangements had been known to happen before, especially if the woman wanted to go.

"I don't need to ask your twisted penis of a husband for anything. I'm asking you." He'd crossed his arms over his chest, over the red-dyed and decorated shirt that signified his authority as a moral leader for the people, and she wondered in that moment if such behavior was becoming to his new position.

She turned her back to him and resumed her scraping. "You should have asked me that several winters ago—"

In one abrupt movement he pulled her up from where she crouched on her knees, and though she feared his temper,

there was no hardness in his eyes. She saw in them the look he'd had as a boy, and something in her softened. And as the feeling weakened her further, *Tashunka Witco* picked her up and carried her to his waiting horse.

Black Buffalo Woman had gone with *Tashunka Witco* to that camp in the next valley where they'd spent a blissful four days. They had lived completely apart from the world in that brief interlude, and it gave Black Buffalo Woman a lightness of heart she hadn't felt since she was a very young girl.

But there was no way she could foretell that was last time she would know happiness. That their love, so true and pure, could not hold back the changes coming — or how ugly the final days of the Lakota, as free people, would be.

If Black Buffalo woman could have seen then the life that was to come for the child conceived on the banks of Wounded Knee Creek, she would have rooted it out of her womb with a stick. She would have given the baby girl back to God before the village slaughter and the child's displacement. Before the missionaries in their boarding schools had the chance to show the girl what hell on earth could be like. Before she lost her people, her name and her history. Before all her relatives, and their children's children would know the anguish, insult and disgrace of reservation life.

As the life of Black Buffalo Woman ebbed toward the spirit realm, her

daughter slipped into this world. The babe cried out angrily against the harshness of her entrance, as though in her passing she'd caught a glimpse of what was to come.

Too weak now to hold her daughter, Black Buffalo Woman blinked away tears as she recognized the damp, dark curls on

the babe's crown as the mark of its father. And with the last remaining breath of her life, Black Buffalo Woman whispered his name.

Crazy Horse.

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