

Wolf Medicine

one woman's journey into Hell's Canyon
and into a healing of the heart

A Memoir



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For Clayton & Kristen

*Oh Lord be thou merciful
for I am going into the forest.*
— European Prayer

Wolf Medicine



SUCH A PERSONAL QUESTION

December 1997

‘I’m sorry I have to ask you this right now, but I need some information. Exactly what was your relationship to the deceased?’

My emotions were still reeling from the events of the morning. I had to remind myself to breathe.

‘I’m not sure I can answer that,’ I said. ‘I’m not sure I could answer that on a good day.’

The policeman pushed back his hat and lowered his pencil.

‘Let me start again. Are you his wife, daughter, friend or relative? You obviously live here.’

Something in me didn’t want to admit that I had ever been his lover. I hadn’t even admitted it to myself. I especially didn’t want to bring it up in front of my daughter, Kristen, who was standing next to me. I wanted her to think that this relationship had been different; that we had only been friends. At twenty-eight, Kristen harbored deep resentments because her childhood needs had been consistently cast aside, in favor of the next stranger who offered the ever-elusive promise of love.

‘Such a personal question.’

‘Mom,’ she said in disbelief, ‘you need to answer. He needs the information for his report.’

‘I live in the guest room, I fix meals. We were friends and we slept together a few times. Mostly, he was my friend. I promised to stay with

him until spring.’

‘Please tell me exactly what happened and go as slow as you need to. I’m not in any hurry. Would you like to sit down?’

Kristen moved closer, put her arm around mine and led me to the couch. I forced a normal tone in my voice.

‘His son, Wagon Burner, wakes him up every morning. This was the first morning he missed because he went to a Christmas party the night before. He got home late and overslept. I was sleeping on the couch in the living room because Kristen was in my bed. I’ve been keeping an eye on her for the last two nights because her asthma’s been acting up.

‘Like I said, Wagon Burner was late for work, so he asked me to wake his dad. He left at about seven o’clock. War Eagle had a doctor’s appointment this morning. That’s the last thing he said before he went to bed, “Don’t let me miss my visit with the bone cruncher.”’

‘The bone cruncher?’

‘That’s what he called the chiropractor.’ I smiled, glad to see I could.

The officer removed his hat to appear less intimidating. He was trying to calm me, but it wasn’t working. He stood near the couch with his clipboard in his left hand, and pencil in his right. Kristen could see I was struggling and stepped in to help.

‘I came last night after class.’

‘You’re in college?’

‘Yes, Marylhurst. I’m a photography major.’

Kristen pulled a long strand of auburn hair from her face and secured it with a hair clip. She tucked her hands in the pockets of her flannel pajamas and moved her slender body into the corner of the sofa.

‘When I came last night I was struck with how happy he was. I’d never seen him so happy, and thought he must be feeling really comfortable with me to be so open. He was laughing, and dancing around, being silly. Mom had gotten a Tai Chi tape from the library and he was making everybody laugh by imitating poses.’

‘I didn’t wake until nine,’ I said, ‘and when I looked at the clock, I knew he’d be late for his appointment. He always sleeps with the fan on. I went into his bedroom, turned off the fan and walked to his bed. “Come on, lazy guy,” I said. “It’s time to get up. I think you’re already

late.” His shoulder was really cold. He was stiff and blue. His spirit had been gone from his body for a long time. I ran into my bedroom and told Kristen he was dead.

‘I didn’t know what to do. Kristen pointed to the phone and told me to call 911. The phone wouldn’t reach in the bedroom so I handed it to Kristen and told her to repeat the instructions. The first step was to turn him over but as soon as I did, I stopped. I told her to tell the woman on the phone that I wouldn’t do it because his spirit was already gone. “He’s too dead,” I said.’

‘The fire department was here in seconds,’ Kristen continued. ‘They wanted to know where he was. Mom pointed to his bedroom, and they went in.’

The policeman wrote everything down.

A fireman excused himself as he moved equipment past my arm then motioned to a man in the kitchen to follow him out the front door. Three of his friends stood in heavy boots in front of the medicine cabinet listing War Eagle’s drugs on pages secured to clipboards. A puddle of mud and snow dripped from their boots.

‘The firemen left the room right away,’ I continued, ‘because it was so obvious he was gone. We all went to bed about eleven, and I think he must have died around midnight, because his body was so hard. It was a gentle passing, though. No cries for help, and no suffering. He was still hugging his pillow when I went in, and he had a look of peace on his face.’

‘That’s a good way to die,’ the policeman said. ‘We should all be so lucky. Anything else you can think of?’

It was hard to focus my thoughts. The house was swarming with activity and neighbors were gathering on the lawn to find out what had happened.

‘I went back in the bedroom after the fire department came out and tucked the covers around him again. I thought it was important for him to look natural when his sons found him. I wanted it to look like he was still sleeping. Kristen lit a candle to help his soul pass.’

‘It was obviously a natural death,’ the policeman said, ‘and judging from the number of drugs in the cupboard, he hadn’t been in good health for a long time.’

‘No, he was overweight, diabetic, smoked cigarettes and already had two heart attacks.’

‘I can’t leave until I get some information from a relative. I need to know where the body will be taken. Who would that be?’

‘Wagon Burner should be here soon. A neighbor called him at work. He should be home any time.’

I took Kristen aside.

‘Could you handle this for a minute? I can’t be here right now. I need to walk. I won’t be long. Can you deal with all this for a little while?’

‘No problem, Mom. Go.’

‘It’s normal for people to need distance between themselves and an event like this,’ the officer said.

A routine visit for him, I thought, just part of his day.

Revolving red lights against snow blinded me as I stepped outside. Harrison Street was filled with flashing lights and emergency vehicles. Firemen passed gear into the back of the truck, an ambulance driver leaned against the side of his van and a man in uniform busied himself with paperwork. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ I answered, no longer trying to hold back tears.

Black slickers hung inside the fire truck, next to calf-high boots, shiny helmets and chemical extinguishers.

‘Thanks for asking.’

Cream-colored pajama bottoms covered my legs. A denim shirt-tail hung below a red Christmas sweater, but I had given no thought to shoes. Frozen grass pushed sharp and brittle into the flesh of my feet as I moved across the lawn into the cinder-covered street. My mind wove in and out of the present with a sense of urgency — the same urgency I’d felt after the death of my brother, Mark. My body remembered and sent a shiver of cold through my bones.

The morning sky was radiant blue, a few billows of clouds floating in a calm expanse. I’d walked sixteen hours after my brother’s death. ‘Mustn’t do that now,’ I told myself, ‘Keep track of time.’

I’d walked all night. Dogwood trees had shed pink petals over city sidewalks, and had been forever associated with his loss. There were no flower petals now — only traces of crusted snow clinging to a shallow curb. I felt a moment of confusion because something inside me

expected to see pink petals.

A neighbor stood weeping in the street, his breath making small clouds of steam that rose in the air. He held a grease rag against his rounded face, while his little boy hugged his legs in torn pants and tall rubber boots. As I passed, he opened his arms to embrace me. A complete stranger. Both of us shaking in waves of despair. How odd, I thought. Here we are standing in the middle of the road on a winter morning, embracing without knowing each other, and weeping without shame for a man we both loved.

‘War Eagle was like a father to me,’ he said. ‘He taught me all I know about cars. I’d have done anything for him.’ His voice trembled with a deep rumbling sorrow.

‘I’ll miss him too,’ I said. My firm grasp on reality seemed to have opened into a dreamscape, as we stood holding each other in fragile morning light. Without realizing it, I had gathered the folds of his shirt in my fist, and told myself to let go.

‘A lot of people will,’ he said, releasing me in turn.

I was lost in streams of sun that slanted down through kitchen windows, the air full of glowing gold specks, shadowy and warm, when Kristen tugged at the sleeve of my sweater.

‘Mom, I need to get back to school. I need a ride home.’

‘I’ll drive you,’ I said, wanting to escape.

Wagon Burner pushed stiff-shouldered between us and spoke with a tone I had not heard before. His gaze was intent and vulnerable. ‘Don’t leave me alone. I need you here.’ Wagon Burner was busy making arrangements for his father’s body. I pulled out my car keys and gave them to her. ‘Do you mind driving yourself? Are you able?’

‘I’ll get the car back as soon as I can. Walk me out.’

I was still in bare feet and pajamas as I walked across crusted snow. It was beginning to look like a morning bath, fresh clothes and warm feet were far away.

Kristen stopped by my Nissan Sentra, warming one bare hand and then the next.

‘Remember the dream I had on Monday?’ she asked. ‘Well, this is it. This is my 911 dream.’

Kristen had awakened in the middle of the night and sat in the living room next to me. ‘Why can’t you sleep?’ I had asked. ‘Are you having trouble breathing again?’

‘No, I’ve had a bad dream. When I woke up my heart was racing and I felt really cold all over.’

‘Tell me about it.’

‘I dreamed there was a medical emergency. There were doctors all over the place, and everything was out of control. I called 911 and asked for help, but no one came for a long time. They told me that I’d have to handle it myself. When the police finally did come, they were very nonchalant, like it was no big deal.’

My face lit with recognition.

‘I thought that dream was telling you to go to the doctor for your asthma, and to take care of your health before it got worse. I never put that together.’

‘I didn’t either, until now.’

The world slowed to stillness around us. A white cloud of snow flew up, shimmering as I opened the car door, the engine sprang into life, gravel crunched under the tires and she drove away.

I went back inside as Wagon Burner was coming out of his father’s room. I moved to him, and we held each other for a long time.

‘I’m sorry you had to be the one to find him. I always figured it would be me.’

He had on his work coveralls and layers of long underwear. His eyes were glazed as he strived to maintain composure.

‘I think it was supposed to be me,’ I said.

Bear walked through the door and filled the entryway with his presence. He wore his usual baseball cap, bright orange highway vest, worn jeans and steel-toed boots. His friends stood by his side in similar dress. They’d all come straight from work and entered behind Bear to give what support he might need.

All rugged, hardy, outdoor men, they stood in silence to fortify him.

Bear stared at the bedroom, didn’t speak and didn’t go in. Tears welled in his eyes. He stood immobile in his grief. A large man to his right reached forward, put a hand on his shoulder and said, ‘You can

do it.’

Bear moved slowly toward the door and removed his hat.

‘Oh Dad,’ he whispered. ‘Oh Dad.’

He sat on the edge of the bed and put his hand on War Eagle’s shoulder. War Eagle lay on his side, still hugging his pillow.

‘I don’t think I can live without my dad.’

I came in to comfort him, and began stroking his back before I realized my mistake. He needed to be alone. This was a time for saying good-bye and it didn’t involve anyone else. I slipped quietly from the room.

Bear pulled up the covers that lay over his father and tucked them around him. When he was satisfied, he drifted to a chair and hung his head and shoulders between his knees. All the sadness in the world seemed to weigh against his body. After several minutes, he gathered his strength and walked out.

‘Did he suffer?’

‘No,’ I answered. ‘He died as you see him now — in peace.’

He went to the sofa and sat down.

‘Ya gonna be all right, buddy?’ one of the men asked.

He shook his head and didn’t speak.

‘Take all the time you need,’ he continued. ‘We’ll cover for you as long as you want to be away.’

Bear got up and walked his friends to the door.

‘Where are my manners? Mountain Woman, this is my boss and these are my friends. You guys know my brother, don’t ya?’ Everyone made polite gestures, the men repeated how sorry they were, and filed out the door.

Bear and Wagon Burner held each other.

‘What do we gotta do?’ asked Bear.

‘We’ve gotta decide where he’s going to be buried. I’ve been talking to sister and Red Wolf. They’re on their way, and we’re all thinkin’ he should be buried in Mill City next to Mom.’

‘Can we get someone to come clear up here to haul him down?’

‘I guess there’s a local funeral home that will store the body until it can be moved. The local folks said they could be here in an hour.’