

WABLENICA

Tale of a Lakotah Orphan

by
Mary Kay Thill


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First printing 2004

ISBN: 0-9743908-0-1

LCCN: 2003095688

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

p. cm

(1. Native American young adult fiction-Chicago-Fiction
2. Foster care fiction 3. Orphan fiction 4. Death of parents fiction.)

Summary: Eleven year old Rose's mom dies a year after her dad's death. Rose is an instant orphan and becomes part of the Chicago foster care system. She is placed in several homes, none that last. To help Rose with her grief, a Lakotah guardian angel, Ruli, appears. Ruli teaches Rose about her native heritage and that she belongs to a large family on the Pine Ridge reservation. Eventually she is lead to a good family.

Cover art: Lisa Cinelli

Cover & Interior: Irene Archer, book-cover-design.com

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the orphans that I met through my years as a Family Counselor. You taught me about being brave and enduring whatever life brings.

I would like to thank all my friends on the Pine Ridge reservation who counted me as one of them.

Thanks to my Mom for all her editing and proof reading help. Especially for her continued support and encouragement of my creativity all my life.

My gratitude and love to my husband Tim for his constant encouragement and renewed passion for all my dreams.

MITAKUYE OYASIN

(All of Creation is One)

“The Lakotah people were given seven sacred rites by the white buffalo calf pipe woman. They are our way of life and we hold them very sacred. One of these rites is the wiping of the tears which takes place at moments in our lives when death is near to us. Sometimes in life we must see and feel death in order to become stronger. The Lakotah people learned this through our own struggles and it made us a stronger nation. We learned to adopt death rather than to fight it. The Lakotah believe that there is no such thing as an orphan. We are all here to take care of one another, and when someone is lost through death there is always someone who comes to take the place of the lost loved one.”

*Warfield Moose, Medicine Man,
Oglala Lakotah 2004*



CHAPTER ONE

My mom joined my dad in heaven.

The ignorant doctor explained it to me in that way, as if Mom was on a vacation or something. I remember glaring at his tiny head, wishing it would pop off. He'd obviously never lost anyone he loved.

On a cold, windy, Chicago day in March, I teetered next to the preacher at my mother's grave. I couldn't make out a word he was saying. His lips moved, but nothing registered. Gray melting snow covered the earth and dripped from the naked trees. Cold air kicked through my numbing body. Why wasn't I with them? I wished I was dead, but the warm breath fogging my glasses told me I was still alive; and an orphan. An eleven-year-old without a family or a home.

A bright red cardinal flew past me. Mom always said cardinals were the opera singers of the bird kingdom. All winter long she'd

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keep her feeders brimming with sunflower seeds just for them. Who would feed them now?

My tears overflowed like the water in Buckingham Fountain...water that disappeared down an unseen drain. Why couldn't I disappear like that? Would anyone here even notice?

Or care?

Before Mom died she told me I'd have to live with Dad's Aunt Gloria in Iowa; the one Dad used to call the 'zoo keeper.' I'd never asked why. Did she keep chickens and cows? Would I have to feed her stinky animals at four am?

Iowa. Real farm country. Aunt Gloria looked the role, tall as a corn stalk and wider than a haystack. My stomach roared, as if preparing for the zoo that surely awaited me.

Aunt Gloria took my hand and coaxed me to drop dirt on Mom's coffin. Grown-ups are weird...throwing dirt on graves! The dirt trickled on top of the coffin, reminding me of the downfall of pebbles in my rain stick. On her deathbed Mom had promised to leave me part of my Lakotah heritage. I wondered what she meant.

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I shook the remaining dirt from my hands, thinking I should be fair to Aunt Gloria. It was a big responsibility for a woman who'd never married. Would she know how to be a mother?

I'd been awarded to the state, like some kind of prize. I didn't know which was worse, being called an orphan or a foster child. It was like asking what I liked more spinach or broccoli. Why haven't they come up with a name we orphans could live with, like flower child? That sounded much nicer to me.

"It's time to go back to your house, dear." Aunt Gloria squeezed my shoulder a little harder than I liked.

"I'm not leaving!" I broke free. "I want to watch them bury her."

Her face hardened as she stepped back, leaving me alone to touch the cold pine box that was Mom's final home. I couldn't help wondering if she would be cold, buried so far down in the ground. Mom had explained that only her body would die, that her spirit would travel the ghost trail (Wanagi Tacanku), but I didn't understand. Why did it hurt so much? Watching them lower the coffin I leaned over wanting to jump in.

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Aunt Gloria grabbed me as I swayed back and forth like a drunk and pulled me toward her. "It's time to go."

I sobbed and held on to her, not able to reach my arms around her wide waist. After a few minutes, I broke free of her hug. Who is this stranger hugging me? I glanced from the grave to Aunt Gloria.

In the howl of the wind, I could hear Mom reminding me, "Be strong my little Rose. You're a Lakotah and proud."

That confused me because she had never been big on admitting she was a Native American. Suddenly I'm supposed to be proud of my heritage? On her deathbed she mumbled Lakotah things I hadn't understood.

Aunt Gloria escorted me to the parked limo. "We must get back, Rose Marie. Guests are coming to pay their respects."

Aunt Gloria had the nerve to call me Rose Marie! No one called me that except Mom when she was mad. I was named after my great-grandmother, Rosegatherer, who was named for the Rosebud Lakotah tribe. My middle name, Marie, was Mom's first name. I was Rose Marie, and she was Marie Rose.

I stumbled toward the limo whispering the lyrics that swirled in my head, “Marie Rose, Marie Rose, why have you left me all alone?” Hoping to bring her back. Mom loved to sing. She made up songs for every occasion. Her funeral was a terrible occasion, but an occasion nonetheless.

With one last backward glance at the grave I realized that I would never see my Mom again. My mind screamed. I would never see my Mom again. I would never see my Mom again!

Aunt Gloria’s stinky perfume filled the immense back seat of the limo. Her neck skin hung slack and wrinkled like it belonged to a walrus. I bet she wore fake teeth too! Jonathan Winthrow, my friend who lived down the block, told me his grandma had fake teeth. She took them out once and chased him around the house. Old people are so gross!

The ‘For Sale’ sign on our front lawn was like a punch in the stomach. Maybe I should wear an ‘Orphan For Sale’ sign around my neck and plant myself next to it.

I drifted into the foyer. Strangers filled my dining room milling around the table

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filled with food. I recognized Sandy, one of the ladies from the hospice group that met at the hospital every week.

Eyeing the food, I held my stomach, choking back the urge to puke. I wished everyone would leave me alone in my house, forever!

Memories of a happy childhood, along with my home, would soon vanish.

My parents had tons of friends and laughter had filled our house when I was younger. But when Dad died and Mom got sick, those friends faded away, along with most of the laughter. Mom said they were all afraid of sickness, and so they were afraid of her. That's why they stayed away. Me, I never understood why they'd be afraid of my beautiful, kind mother. It didn't make any sense.

It wasn't just my parents' friends, my best friend, Carry, hadn't been over to play in months. He made excuses and finally said his parents wouldn't let him come over any more. It was as though Mom and I were on a leper colony in India, forced to live in isolation.

Mom had promised that God would care for me, but I still felt forgotten. Why did everyone I love die?

Sandy, from moms group, walked toward me. “Rose, honey,” she said, “Your Mom was the best. I’m going to miss her. Doesn’t seem fair.”

I shrugged, not able to find words.

She persisted, “Dear, tell me about your folks.”

“Ummm.” I searched my mind for memories afraid they were lost already. “My Dad...” I pictured him lying in his coffin surrounded by a spring bouquet.

Sandy’s look of compassion urged me to remember. My despair burst into a panic to tell all or forget my entire childhood.

“They met in college you know- at Northwestern. My dad was studying architecture and my mom music. Which explains my talent for drawing and singing. Dad said I was the best of both of them.”

Sandy smiled watching my face.

“Dad’s mom was French-Canadian. She died in childbirth and his dad left him to be raised by his grandparents. He...he lost his parents too.” Realizing I shared this common bond with my Dad brought me no comfort.

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“And your mom?” Sandy asked.

I put my hand over my mouth and mumbled, “Mom’s parents were Lakotah. They lived on a reservation in South Dakota.”

“She never mentioned that.”

“She left the reservation to go to college. She said being a native was hard. She wanted to fit in, be the average American girl.”

“She had a lot of courage.”

“Growing up Mom told me to be proud that I was an American. Toward the end she told me to be proud I was Lakotah.”

“I can see that she taught you to be a brave young woman.” She said as she placed her hand on my shoulder and looked away trying to hide the sadness that lay in her eyes.

The words “brave young woman” played in my head. I’d never thought of myself that way. Maybe I was old enough to live here and take care of myself.

Aunt Gloria joined us and handed me a plate of food. “Rose, eat something,” she said. “We have a long ride home.”

Home. This was home, Iowa wasn’t. I sank down into Dad’s recliner and tried to

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swallow some food. His image was already fading from my memory and it had only been a year since his fatal car crash.

The three remaining guests shared their condolences and left.

The emptiness of my once happy home cracked my heart.

Aunt Gloria and I cleaned up in silence.