

She Walks Alone

Susi sits cross-legged in the living room of her parents' ranch house watching *American Bandstand* on the small black and white television set. She keeps the volume low. Turn that damn thing down, her father only had to yell once. Her mother had come scurrying out of the kitchen and given Susi a sharp look.

Most fathers leave for work every morning. Not Susi's. He sells life insurance from home. Her mother helps with the business and does her housewife chores, leaving Susi to watch TV. The only laughter she hears at home comes from that small box.

Thirteen years old, Susi is on the verge of blossoming into a young woman. Her figure is no longer toothpick straight, but curvy, and her blonde hair is as golden as the Phoenix sun. It's not as curly as her father's, but it's long, down to her waist.

As hard as Susi tries, she can't make herself invisible; her father always finds her. He strokes her hair, gently tucks a loose strand behind her ear, and takes her by the hand. As if on cue, her mother starts singing, loudly, like she's the opening act at a nightclub and Susi is the main attraction. Afterwards, Susi's told to go outside and play. But she doesn't want to play with anyone, and besides, she has no friends. She would never invite anyone to her house. Bad enough he did it to her.

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Like her parents, Susi has her own secrets. She leaves her body. She's done this for as long as she can remember. She likes the feeling of flying, of being free to visit other worlds. When her father creeps into her bedroom in the middle of the night, she goes up and out and floats around the room. He's doing it to someone else, not her. At first she thought the walls were impenetrable. But one night as she skimmed the popcorn ceiling, she slipped through and soared into the star-filled sky, her form translucent, glowing like a faint lightbulb.

On the nights her father doesn't visit, Susi dreams. Her favorite is when she's an old Indian woman. But the Indians in her dream are different from the ones she's learned about in school. They're not Hopi or Navajo, and their homes are different, made of mud and twigs instead of adobe, and sit along a river with vegetation she doesn't recognize.

In the dream, Susi walks into a river at dawn, naked, and facing each direction in turn, dips under the water and resurfaces. Speaking in another language, she chants a prayer and makes small, slow circles with her hands. Susi closes her eyes, feels the warmth of the sun, the rhythm of the river, the earth, solid below the water. When she opens her eyes, she's momentarily blinded before a golden eagle circling above comes into focus. Peace and harmony flood her. Then Susi wakes and the feeling rushes away.

At school she goes to the library and checks out a book on Native Americans. When Susi gets home she sits in her usual place but ignores her favorite program. Her stomach rumbles from the sweet aroma of tomato sauce her mother is making for their weekly spaghetti dinner. Susi opens the book and is so engrossed she doesn't hear her father walk into the room.

Have you done your homework?

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Susi peers up at her dad towering over her. Yes, she lies.

What's that? he says, nodding at the book.

Susi suppresses a sigh and turns it toward her father.

Indians, he says. You know your mother is part Cherokee, he adds matter-of-factly. Susi doesn't remember her father or mother ever telling her this. But he's also told Susi their ancestors came over on the Mayflower. She doesn't believe that either.

Susi finishes flipping through the book before dinner and is disappointed she doesn't find anything that looks like the tribe from her dreams. That night she dreams again about her life as the Indian woman. Her name is She Walks Alone. She never married and has no children, but she spends a lot of time with a young girl, the daughter of another member of the tribe. She Walks Alone takes Little Bird on walks through the forest, pointing out the various plants, flowers, and trees.

This herb, Rabbit Tobacco, cures colds and fevers, She Walks Alone says to the girl, who takes in everything with wide-eyed reverence. The older woman speaks slowly. This berry, Sumach, is good for blisters and sores, but make sure it has red berries, not white, those are poisonous.

They collect herbs and berries and take them back to their camp, where She Walks Alone crushes them into fine powder. Other members of her tribe are always waiting when She Walks Alone returns, for she has something they need.

Susi returns the book at the school library and looks for another that might give her a clue about her dreams but leaves empty-handed. The only other place she can go is the public library downtown. She's never gone there alone. After telling her mother she

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needs to stay after school to help her teacher, Susi takes the bus to the library. By herself, it seems bigger. Her oxford saddle shoes click on the smooth marble floor.

Are you looking for something in particular? A librarian asks when she passes the aisle where Susi is hunkered over looking through several books. She thinks quickly.

I have a project for class, about Indians, Susi says.

Which ones? The librarian talks to her kindly but businesslike.

I haven't decided, Susi replies, then brightens. I saw a photograph of the ones I want to write about she tells the librarian. She describes what the Indians look like and what they wear without mentioning her dreams.

The librarian takes a pair of cat-eye glasses hanging from a chain around her neck and perches them on her nose. I think, she says, more to herself than to Susi, I think I know what you're looking for. She strums her fingers along a row of spines, stops, takes down a book, and hands it to Susi. It's hefty, bigger than most books Susi has read. She reads the title: *Indian Removal, The Emigration of the Five Civilized Tribes of Indians*.

At home, Susi goes straight to her room. She doesn't want to be interrupted. She opens the book, skims through the Table of Contents. There are unfamiliar names: Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and then she stops at the fourth one. Stares at the word: Cherokee. Her mind flashes back to her dad in the living room. Susi has never felt any connection with her mother, has always sensed that her mother never wanted her, and doesn't know what to think of this.

Susi reads about the Cherokees. They lived in wattle and daub houses, called *asi*, along rivers in the Southeast, mainly Georgia. Susi learns about the federal government's

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removal of the Cherokee to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. She recalls a dream where She Walks Alone sat in a roundhouse with other members of her clan, discussing the white men who were stealing their fertile land and the gold that had been discovered in the mountains. The Cherokee didn't want to leave the land they'd lived on for many generations. She also realizes that lately, when She Walks Alone leaves the river after her morning swim, her senses are heightened, attuned to something in the wind that hasn't yet whispered its secret. Susi is filled with explicable sadness—over the fate of the tribe, and her own trail of tears.

Susi is tired of secrets, but her fear of what would happen if she tells anyone is more overwhelming. Soon after, one night Susi can't get to sleep. Her stomach is cramping. Her father comes into her room, but before she flies to another world, he leaves. Confused but also relieved, she finally falls asleep, into the peace and comfort of her dreams.

I want you to meet your spirit guide, She Walks Alone says to Little Bird. Together, they lie down in the medicine woman's *asi* and hold hands. They soar above the sky arch that marks the entrance to the Upper World. A pale-yellow spirit meets them and tells Little Bird, I will protect you. She Walks Alone gently guides Little Bird back to their bodies. When their eyes flutter open, they hear thunder. Not from the sky. Horse thunder.

She Walks Alone bolts upright. A woman yells near her *asi*. Then the deafening crack of a rifle, followed by silence. The air is quickly filled again with angry voices, from both the raiding white men and the clan's warriors; screams from women and

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children; horses' hooves as the white men round up the clan's ponies. She Walks Alone peers outside. We must get to the river, she says to the girl.

They don't look back as they flee. When they reach the riverbank, Little Bird is crying. Why are they shooting at us, she wails. She Walks Alone wraps her arms around the girl, shielding her from the world. She takes Little Bird by the hand and they wade into the water. Their deerskin skirts quickly become soaked, heavy. She holds tightly to the girl's hand.

She Walks Alone feels a stabbing pain in the right side of her back before she hears the gunshot. The force makes her drop the girl's hand. She spins around as she crumples into the water and sees a young man at the edge of the woods holding a rifle. Curly blonde hair peeks out from underneath his hat. She Walks Alone fears he will shoot Little Bird and yells, go, go to the other side! The girl is frozen, the water swirling around her knees. She can't take her eyes off the man.

She Walks Alone struggles to keep her face above the river's flow, shouting at the girl to keep going. When Little Bird reaches the other bank and disappears into the woods, She Walks Alone allows herself to go under. We love you, the water spirits whisper. We will protect you, you will not suffer. She Walks Alone drowns before she bleeds out. In the river's womb, she is reborn.

Susi is sobbing when she wakes. She cries over her death as the Indian woman, and with relief she's still alive. But she's also confused. The man on the horse looked like her father. Susi drags herself out of bed. Her stomach still hurts. In the bathroom she takes off her pajamas and as she pulls off her underwear, she's shocked to see blood.

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After school while her mother is helping her father in his office, Susi sneaks into her parents' bathroom. She quietly opens a drawer, then another, and as she opens the cabinet underneath the sink, her mother walks in.

What are you doing? She says sharply.

Susi quickly closes the door and straightens. I'm looking for something she says to her mother.

Obviously. What do you need?

Susi thinks of *She Walks Alone* and *Little Bird*. The Indian woman has never spoken harshly to the girl.

I'm bleeding, Susi finally says.

Her mother barely reacts. Or does Susi notice a flicker of—fear—in her mother's eyes?

Her mother opens the cabinet and pulls out a few tampons, hands them to Susi. Do you know how to use these?

I'll figure it out, Susi says and takes the tampons.

Susi stands before the mirror above the dresser in her bedroom, staring at her reflection. Her world and the world of the Indian woman are blurring together, as if she's living in both simultaneously. Susi studies her features. She has the same nose as her mother, and the same high cheekbones, but Susi's skin is fairer. Her mother has dark hair and large, dark, sunken eyes, whereas Susi has light blue eyes. But if her mother has Native American blood, then Susi must too.

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She picks up a pair of scissors resting on the dresser. They're lightweight in her hands, heavy in her mind. Susi wants to live, yet she also wants to die, which doesn't seem possible.

Early the next morning Phoenix's neon signs are still lit when her parents load up the Chevy. School is out for the holidays and they're going to visit her father's war buddies in Colorado Springs. Perhaps the war caused his abuse Susi often wonders. Or maybe he was born evil. Possessed by a demon at birth. She had found a book at the library with stories about changelings, human babies switched out with fairies.

At Flagstaff, Susi's father drives east on Route 66 to Albuquerque, where they stop for lunch. Inside the warm diner, Susi takes off her ski cap.

What have you done to your hair, her mother shrieks.

Susi touches her hair, which is now a short bob. She stifles a smile, glances at her father. His eyes narrow, harden.

I can't believe you did this, her mother scolds. What were you thinking?

Susi looks at her mother vacantly. Repeats the question in her mind. *What was I thinking? Do you really want to know?*

I'm sorry, she mumbles, even though she's not.

In Colorado, Susi sits cross-legged in the living room watching TV, just like at home. Her father and his friends gather at the kitchen table, drinking and cleaning their guns, while her mother chats with the other wives in the living room. Susi hears bits and pieces of the women's conversations and the talk from the kitchen, which opens to the living room.

Be careful, one of her father's friends says.

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I know what I'm doing, her father replies.

Yeah, like that time in Worms...

The men laugh. Another says, how many Germans did you kill?

Susi doesn't listen to the answer.

She can't see her father behind her, but she can feel his presence, his eyes taking her in. The hair on the back of her neck prickles. She decides to get a glass of water. As she stands, she hears the familiar sound of a gun chamber sliding back and forth and freezes. Susi closes her eyes and sees herself as the Indian woman standing at the edge of the riverbank. She feels the gun pointed at her back, the pressure on the trigger. Susi shifts her weight to the left. The TV set explodes, sending glass shards all over the room. Everyone sits in stunned silence. Then Susi's mother's face quickly clouds over, becomes twisted, her eyes turn black.

Pat, look what you've done! She says with the coldness only heard at home, not in front of others. Clean it up, her mother demands, but she doesn't wait for Susi's father to get up. No one asks Susi if she's okay. She stands in the middle of the living room, unscathed physically—the bullet missed—as the women pick up the broken glass. Her mother keeps muttering to herself, shooting sharp looks at her husband. The others remain silent, but the uneasiness is loud.

June, it's not that much of a mess, Pat says.

Susi turns to her father. Their eyes lock. The house around them dissolves and Susi is back at the river's edge, staring into the eyes of the soldier on the horse. He's holding a rifle aimed at her. Little Bird's small hand grips hers. The chaos at the camp is far away now. Susi's eyes are unwavering. The soldier with the blond curly hair lowers

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his gun, then Susi turns and wades into the river with Little Bird. When they make it safely to the other side, Susi looks across the water. The man is gone.

END