

2,350 words

Walk in Beauty

Every day after school, Susi does her homework, then sits cross-legged on the living room floor and watches *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, and her mother came scurrying out of his office, gave Susi a sharp look. Most fathers left for work every morning. Not Susi's; he works from home, selling life insurance. Her mother helps with the business, leaving Susi to watch TV. The only laughter she hears at home comes from that small box.

Twelve 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 she tries Susi can't make herself invisible. Her father always finds her. He strokes her hair, takes her by the hand, and they walk to the shower. 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.

Susi's family goes to church. Her father was salesman of the year; her mother, Girl Scout Mother of the Year. What a joke. Susi knows the truth. Her mother didn't want her. Why else does she allow her father to abuse her? Her mother, in her own way, is just as bad.

Like her parents, Susi has her own secrets. She leaves her body. She's done this for as long as she can remember. It feels as natural as swimming in a pool. 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, floats around the room. He's doing it to someone else, not her. At first she thought she couldn't leave the room, that 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 she doesn't fly, Susi dreams. Her favorite is when she's an old Indian woman. She walks into a river, 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.

The first dream ended there, then Susi started having others about her life as the Indian woman, named She Walks Alone. Her husband, Running Wolf, died from what her tribe called the white man's fever. They never had children, but there's a young girl she's close to. 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 or boils them. Other members of her tribe are always waiting when She Walks Alone returns, for she has something they need.

The Indians in Susi's dreams are different than the ones she has learned about in school. They're not Hopi or Navajo, and their homes are different, made of mud and twigs instead of adobe. Susi checks out a book on Native American history from the library and flips through the pages until she finds what she's looking for. She Walks Alone is Cherokee. Susi freezes. Her father claims to have Cherokee blood, even though he has curly, blonde hair. She had never thought much about it, had considered her father's story a lie.

The Cherokee tribes are known as clans. They lived in wattle and daub houses, called *asi*, along rivers in the Southeast. Susi reads about the federal government's removal of the Cherokee to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. She remembers 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 Georgia mountains. The Cherokee didn't want to leave the land they'd lived on for many generations.

The dreams become more frequent. When She Walks Alone leaves the river, her senses are heightened, attuned to something in the wind that hasn't yet whispered its secret.

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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 She Walks Alone's eyes flutter open, she hears thunder. Not from the sky. Horse thunder. She bolts upright. An old woman yells near her *asi*. Then comes the deafening crack of a rifle, followed by silence. It is quickly filled with angry voices, from both the raiding white men and the clan's warriors; screams from women and children; feet pounding furiously through the camp; 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. She doesn't understand what is happening. 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; there's not enough time to take off their clothes. Their deerskin skirts quickly become soaked, heavy. She holds tightly to the girl's hand.

She Walks Alone feels a stabbing pain in 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. A young man stands at the edge of the woods. He's holding a rifle. His hands are

shaking. Curly blonde hair peeks out from underneath his hat. Despite the young man's apparent regret at having shot her, She Walks Alone fears he will shoot the girl. She yells to Little Bird, 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.

The water spirits pull She Walks Alone under the water, but she must make sure Little Bird gets to the other side. She struggles to keep her face above water, 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, your body will not be desecrated. 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 that she's still alive.

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Phoenix's neon signs are still lit when Susi and her parents load up the Chevy to go visit her father's war buddies in Colorado Springs. Perhaps the war caused his abuse. 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.

The night before, Susi had stood before the mirror above the dresser in her bedroom, staring at her reflection. Her world and the world of the Indian woman were blurring together, as if she was living in both simultaneously. Was the dream a premonition? Was she going to die? She picked up a pair of scissors resting on the

dresser. They were lightweight in her hands, heavy in her mind. Susi wanted to live. She also wanted the abuse to stop.

At Flagstaff, Susi's father heads east on Route 66 to Albuquerque, where they have 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.

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

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

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

Yeah, like that time in Germany...

The men laugh.

Susi 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.

Susi wants a glass of water. As she stands she hears the familiar sound of a gun chamber sliding back and forth. The hair on her neck rises again. She feels the gun pointed at her back. Feels her father pull the trigger. The TV set explodes; glass shards fly all over the room. Sarah feels a burning sensation on her right arm. She looks down. Her sweater is torn, and blood is seeping through. She instinctively covers the wound, looks around the room. Everyone is sitting in stunned silence, except for Susi's mother. Her face quickly clouds over, becomes twisted, her eyes turn black.

Pat, look what you've done! Susi's mother says with the coldness only heard at home, not in front of others. Susi is more afraid of her mother at that moment.

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, not looking at anyone, 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, her father says.

Instead of yelling at him, her mother finally looks at Susi. What are you doing standing there? she says. Her voice is taut. Go upstairs. Now.

Susi defies her mother and leaves the house, grabbing her coat on the way out. In the dusky light, she peers into the homes where the curtains haven't been drawn, watching as old couples and young families prepare dinner and go about their business like normal people.

She doesn't see any guns.

That night Susi dreams of the Indian woman. They're both in the river, floating below the surface, facing each other.

Why did I survive? she asks She Walks Alone. I would rather have died.

You have a gift, the Indian woman says. Like Little Bird, you were born without your veil broken. You are guided by the Great Spirit.

As She Walks Alone continues talking, Susi's body trembles. She wakes to find the bedroom light on, her mother standing over her.

Get up, we're leaving, her mother says. Her voice has a hard edge. Susi doesn't ask if her father is coming. Her mother is running the show, no questions allowed.

Susi hurriedly dresses and grabs her suitcase. The house is quiet; everyone else is still asleep. When Susi gets to the car, her father is at the steering wheel. For a moment, Susi considers not getting inside. But the consequences would be severe. She walks to the open trunk. As she places her suitcase inside, Susi notices her father's gun. She hesitates. Her parents can't see her. She imagines picking up the gun. Sees herself shooting her parents in the back of their heads. Which one would she shoot first? Her father, of course. And then as her mother reacted, Susi would fire the second shot. The bloody image lingers. Then She Walks Alone appears in her mind.

Just before Susi's mother woke her, the Indian woman had touched Susi's face. You had to survive, She Walks Alone said, to get rid of the debt owed to you from the past, so you can focus on your gifts. She had peered into Susi's dark blue eyes. Those who suffer much are often given the greatest gifts. You will use your suffering to better the world. Listen to your spirit and you will Walk in Beauty.

Then She Walks Alone had floated away, disappearing into the blackness.

Susi doesn't know exactly what the words "Walk in Beauty" mean yet, but she likes the way they sound. She suddenly realizes the significance of the Indian woman's

name. Being a medicine woman is a life of sacrifice, of service to others. You often walk alone. Susi has felt that way her whole life.

But she isn't alone anymore.

Susi closes the trunk and quietly slides into the backseat.