

The Buckskin Dress

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"I am a woman with wings dancing with other women with wings."

Terry Tempest Williams, *When Women Were Birds*

Her soft white fringed buckskin swayed beautifully to the beat of the drum. Mom, a tall, brown-skinned, black-haired woman danced with the grace, poise, and power of a great bird ready to take off in flight. She danced the lead in a swan dance: a dance in honor of all the winged beings. A dance that was performed only by the women done in a vee form much like the geese when they fly south for the winter, with the women holding out their arms like birds flying—dipping and moving to the beat of the drum. The long buckskin fringe on their arms swung to the beat. I watched with great love and pride as my mom did her angelic thing.

Mom was an artist extraordinaire, but she would never describe herself that way—she was too humble. Mom was called upon to be head dancer at many powwows in Wisconsin. My first remembrance of seeing her dance was when I was six years old; I tagged along whenever I got the chance.

Who knew that the white buckskin dress, with long fringe on the arms and the bottom of the skirt with sparkling glass beads and beadwork across the shoulders and neck, would symbolize the strength of our relationship to the earth, and the animals who gift us their lives so that we may live in beauty and carry on our love and survival of our families and cultures.

“We give thanks to the horned and antlered ones who give their lives so that we may live and carry on our way of life. We give thanks to the winged ones who sustain us with their wisdom, their flight, their feathers in order that we may carry on our dances and songs. We are thankful to the Creator who gives us these gifts so that we may carry on our way of life so that we can teach our children to learn these ways so that they can teach their children, so that our lives can survive and carry on these teachings for the generations to come. We give thanks for all of these gifts of life.”

—*Potawatomi Prayer of Thanks*

The Hunt

To get the buckskin to use for making clothes and various accessories, the men had to hunt the deer, my grandfather shared in his stories of the hunt. My grandfather Misho, or Thomas Kitchkume, put down tobacco and said a prayer in the woods before he hunted. They lived at Skunk Hill, a Potawatomi village in the center of Wisconsin surrounded by woods, near the town of Wisconsin Rapids in the early 1900s. The deer were respected and we gave thanks for their sacrifice.

The big buck was standing there seeming like he was waiting for Misho to shoot him. Misho told us that sometimes he would see a deer standing on his hind legs behind a tree hiding from the hunters. He would never kill a deer that was not ready to die. He gave a prayer of thanks to the deer and shot; the deer went down and my grandfather went to the deer to make sure he was dead. He did not want the deer to suffer. Killing any animal for sport is a foreign concept to Native people; that is only encouraged when you have no respect or feeling for other forms of life—even people can become targets in that reality. That is what I have been told.

My cousin Alfred, one of the best hunters among our family, told me that his mother, Carol, told him, “You have to give an offering to the Pokenana, for good luck; they can help you get a deer.” Pokenana, or the little people in the woods, are mischievous helpers who rarely show themselves to humans. Once in a while someone will catch a glimpse. Alfred said he saw them twice in his life. “The first time I saw one, it scared the shit out of me. I was in the woods and it scampered quickly into the trees. I could not say exactly what it looked like—it was brown, I think—it went too fast to really get a good look.”

Alfred continued, “My mom said to leave the Pokenana some maple candy because they would like that. I did leave some on occasion, along with the seyma [tobacco] I would put down every time I hunted. When I killed a deer, I would drink

their blood out of respect for them so their spirit would be with me, but these days, the young ones don't do that anymore. They don't get it or they think it's gross.

"Us young guys liked to brag about how far we could shoot a deer and who could shoot the farthest to get a deer—my brother Brian said that he shot a deer from so far away that by the time he got to it, the meat spoiled!"

The Dress

My grandfather brought deer hides to be tanned to his cousins who were hardworking and very good at handling deer hides. In those days, it was women's work. After they finished tanning, the hides were ready to be made into moccasins, bags, dresses, shirts, leggings, or whatever. Misho then took them to his wife to work her magic.

His wife was Minnie Eagle, a full-blooded Ho-Chunk. Minnie was as beautiful as Thomas was handsome. She was an excellent seamstress and made clothes for her children, as well as for other people. They had four children: my mom, Vera, the oldest, next her sister, Ramona, then Thomas, their only brother, and Luverne, the youngest sister.

Mom was thirteen years old when Minnie finished the dress. It was lovely, with long fringe on the bottom and sleeves. There were two pieces to the dress—the bottom, or the skirt, which was made with a slip-type top with cloth sewn in the buckskin that could be changed out when needed, and the top of the dress, which was a separate piece that covered the shoulders, arms, and torso. Grandmom Minnie tied and sewed on each piece of fringe by hand. The fringe on the sleeves was longer, and in the tradition of making buckskin dresses, the dressmakers hung family trinkets on some of the fringe. Mom showed us the thimble that was sewn into one of the fringes on the sleeve. I exclaimed, "Wow, isn't that amazing? I bet this is the thimble Minnie used to push the fringe through the buckskin!" So personal and creative—something moved me and I cried. I wish I could have known her.

Minnie had meant to sew buckskin dresses for all three of her daughters; unfortunately, she did not live long enough to make that dream come true. She died of tuberculosis at the very young age of thirty-six. Her whole family was taken early by TB. In those days, the early 1900s to the 1930s, TB was an active killer, and thousands of Native families succumbed to this disease nationwide.

She died alone in a sanitarium on Christmas Day.

Minnie would never know how many eyes would see this dress and how much

of a catalyst for our cultural enrichment and education this would be for all of us. The dress traveled all over the country and was worn by my mom, of course, but also her two sisters, her stepmother, and three of Minnie's granddaughters to gigs of all sorts, such as powwows, special events, celebrations, parades, contests, and fashion shows.

Mom was part of a dance troupe that performed around the Midwest. On one occasion, they performed at Chicago's Soldier Field stadium to welcome the three surviving Iwo Jima flag raisers who were on a World War II bond drive at the time. Mom's group got to meet them and shake their hands near the float they rode in on. One of the men was Ira Hayes, the Pima Native who helped raise the flag on Mount Suribachi. The battle was one of the toughest in the war, so the taking of this place was memorialized by raising the flag, which was captured by a nearsighted photographer. The photo became a huge symbol of heroism for the United States Marines and became one of the most famous war statues to this day. Hayes was one of the flag raisers but never felt he was a hero and did not deserve all the publicity that went with it.

When he returned to his home on the reservation in Arizona, water rights battles and poverty were still being fought by his tribe and it all became too much for him—he eventually drank himself to death.

A truly sad story, but at the time, he was a real hero for Native American people; and Mom and her troupe were thrilled to meet him and shake his hand. Mom said, "He was so friendly and happy to meet us. I had no idea that he was suffering inside." She wore the dress.

The dress was worn: when my aunt Lou was voted the homecoming queen at the Haskell Indian School in Kansas—she was absolutely gorgeous and her future husband was the homecoming king; when my sister Joyce won finalist in a Miss Indian Milwaukee contest; when Mom participated in the first Summerfest on the shores of Lake Michigan, where they put up a Native American village complete with teepees and a special display in one of the teepees of old artifacts that were found in that area.

Mom and her troupe were paid to dance nightly in the fake Indian village for all the tourists and audience who gathered in the center. Since there were no other facilities there, the dancers would use the teepees as dressing rooms. One night my mom used the teepee with the special display to get dressed for the dance. The leader of the group, Wayne, who was already dressed for the dance, went to this teepee and asked if someone was dressing in there. Mom answered, "Does someone want to see the display?"

Laughter erupted by all in hearing distance. Every single time that Wayne saw Mom, and since they did a lot of the cultural events together, that was many times, his greeting was always, “Do you still have that display?” Always laughter no matter how many years went by.

I got to wear the dress for the first time when I was thirteen years old—there was a fashion show that was organized as a fundraiser for the Native cultural group the United Indians of Milwaukee in order to fund their annual powwow and to pay the rent for an old firehouse in the south-side boondocks. I felt beautiful in that dress!

The dress was made by a young mother that would not live past forty as a gift to her eldest daughter to carry on the dances of our ancestors. With that dress we showed our pride in our culture, we danced, we laughed, we greeted war heroes, we educated people, and we raised funds for important causes in our community. The dress represented not only the beauty in our culture but also the importance of our survival and the teachings of our ancestors as we continue to fight our oppression to this day.

All eyes on the dress; may her love and caress live with us forever.

