

NATASHA GAUTHIER

White Buffalo

HE APPEARED ON THE SIDE of the highway wearing a gasoline-soaked halo. A blurry aura. At least that's what it looked like from a distance with wavy rays of heat all around him. He had long white hair and a face full of laugh lines, and I imagined my grandfather out on the side of Highway 5 in the middle of a heat wave, grinning like it wasn't a big deal to stand around in an inferno. I'd want someone nice to pick up Grampa if he was out there, so I stopped for the hitchhiking mirage that didn't even stick out a thumb, just motioned for me to pull over.

This was June, the month of your return.

I backed along the shoulder so he wouldn't have to walk too far. There was a bright flash of light in the mirror—the sun got in my eyes—and for a second I saw a buffalo standing where the old man was, a big white one. I'd never seen any buffalo around town, never mind being white. But I looked again and it was just the same old Indian man.

He whooped and banged on the side of the truck.

Hooyeee! It's a hot one.

Hop in, I said, though he was already climbing in.

Been out there all days. Thought nobody was ever gonna stop. Haha.

Haha, I said, just to be polite. Where you headed?

Oh, nowhere in particular. You can just take me up the road a ways.

I shrugged and pulled back onto the highway. He was reaching around for a seatbelt that wasn't there.

I'm Anne, I said.

I waited for a response, but he just nodded and kept looking for the belt.

For a moment back there I thought you were a buffalo.

Oh? he said, raising an eyebrow at me. That so?

A white one, I shrugged. The sun was in my eyes.

Funny how things appear sometimes. People mix up the details. Sometimes I'm a woman.

I think I prefer you as a man.

That's interesting.

There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he smiled and kept feeling around for the belt, but didn't mention his name.

We cut it out, I finally said.

Like ta live dangerously, hey? Haha, haha.

It got stuck and kept getting slammed in the door.

The White Buffalo shook his head and stared out the window at the great dustbowl we were in. All around us were big brown mountains mostly covered in pine trees, and even more pines that died the year before—they looked like toothpicks and burned matches—their ghosts roaming the hills, haunting local beetles and smokers.

A patchy blanket of sagebrush grew along the highway and up the sides of the hills. Farther into the middle of the dustbowl there was a network of houses and buildings, the stink of the pulp mill hovering over all of it, containing it.

Used ta be a great land, he said.

Kamloops?

Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc, he nodded.

I nodded like I understood.

I could feel him looking at me, trying to figure something.

What kinda Indian are you?

Oh, I'm just part, I said.

That so? he said. Which part?

He was pretty funny when he wanted to be.

He reached for the radio and looked at me to see if it was okay. I nodded, but regretted it right away—it was that folk song about a "paved paradise."

Jesus, I said.

Whatsa matter?

This song.

It's Joni Mitchell. Why dontcha like Joni Mitchell?

I just get a little anxious when her voice gets all high and then low.

White Buffalo shook his head.

I shrugged.

Joni Mitchell laughed.

We didn't say anything else for a few minutes, and then he said this:

Do ya feel ya belong here in yer life? Do ya live with honour and intention? Have ya ever contemplated suicide?

Sure, I said. Who hasn't?

I turned the radio down a bit. I've always found it easier to be honest with strangers, so I didn't mind the questions.

He went on.

Do ya feel resentful of yer skin? Do colours startle ya? Do ya ever dream of fallin' inside mirrors and findin' ancestors? He rubbed his fingers together in the air and there was a strange breeze that felt like it was a billion years old.

I felt mesmerized by all the things he was saying and I blurted out the only thing I could think of:

I'm only one-eighth.

Haha, he said. Haha.

What's so funny?

An eighth. Yer an eighth-bag Indian.

Haha. I never thought of that.

What did ya think of?

He really did remind me of my grandfather. That's probably why I offered him the couch when he said he didn't actually have anywhere to stay. I would want Grampa to have a place to sleep for the night if he was wandering around with nowhere to go. Thinking about it made me sad, and I wished you were how you used to be so I could talk to you.

Part of the roof caved in after you passed. Since you came back you'd been trying to fix it, but there was a problem with your equilibrium and you kept falling off things. Cups and saucers trembled when you walked into the room. Ladders refused to cooperate and leaned away from you, intentionally shaking when you tried to climb them. So you got caught up in other projects—mainly electrical. Wires had a way of wrapping themselves around you until you were tangled up and stuck. You didn't even talk anymore, just made a series of clicking sounds with the wire cutters. It was like some kind of deranged Morse code.

When we pulled up to the house you were up on the roof again, trying to patch it. I slammed my door and you lost your footing—slipped over the edge and dangled there, suspended by a bundle of wires that wrapped themselves around one ankle and broke your fall.

Whoa there, said White Buffalo as he grabbed hold of you. Then I steadied you by the shoulders while he worked to untangle your foot.

He's been a little accident prone lately, I said.

Accident, said White Buffalo. Haha, haha. Should put up a sign sayin' "Watch for fallin' Indians." Haha.

You smiled at us like a proud little kid while you tried to clip yourself free.

Clip, clip, you went. Clip, clip.

Not too chatty, is he? said White Buffalo.

He hasn't been himself lately. I looked down at my feet.

Oh, geez. Didn't happen ta bury him without shoes, did ya?

I felt my face turn red.

White Buffalo shook his head at me for the billionth time.

Clip, clip, you went again.

Hmm, said White Buffalo, looking behind your ears and checking you over. Pretty bad case. Worst I seen.

Can we do anything?

We'll see. Gonna need to get outta this heat first.

All right, I said, and held your hand. I could feel myself cheering up.

I turned the kitchen tap to let the water run cold, but you opened the cupboard above the fridge and made a bottle of Wiser's Special Blend appear just like magic.

You set three glasses of whiskey on the table for us and nodded to White Buffalo. Then you raised your glass like you had something important to say, but you just tipped your head back and took a drink.

White Buffalo raised his glass to you and took a sip.

Soon we were all drunk and laughing at nothing. We played Blackjack, and White Buffalo told us stories about long ago. To start each one, he put his hands together in mid-air, then spread them out, smoothing and petting the air as he went. We saw everything as he described it; the landscape manifested right in front of us. Rolling hills and high mountains. Wild growth and flowers and clean water.

Then it was my turn to tell a story, but I didn't know where to start.

We'll never get anywhere if we don't get started, said White Buffalo. Haha, haha.

Twenty-one, I said.

Bingo, White Buffalo said.

Knock knock, you knocked on the table.

When it was your turn to tell a story, you made an elaborate series of clicks with the clippers. We couldn't understand, so you held the end of a wire up to your head and tried to transmit the story to us.

White Buffalo jumped up like there was an emergency.

Where's yer tv?

In the living room, I shrugged. Where else would it be?

You pointed and clicked with the clippers. I think you were trying to use some kind of phantom echolocation.

White Buffalo grabbed a long wire and made a set of rabbit ears, but they flopped over.

Got any tin foil? he asked, waving the floppy rabbit ears at me.

You ran to the kitchen and came back with the whole roll trailing behind you like a flag.

That's good, said White Buffalo. That oughta do it.

He wrapped the foil around the wires to give them some bulk. Then he formed them into a kind of antenna. It was pretty handy because it was an old tv—the kind with a knob you had to turn to change the channel—and we usually couldn't get much. Then he turned it on and went through the channels until we got something other than snow and noise.

Channel 7, which was usually the French channel, had a picture that kept rolling upward, so you could only sort of make out what was going on. The sound came like the picture, in fast blips.

White Buffalo moved the antenna around while I tried to adjust the horizontal focus. Then you reached out toward the antenna, and the picture slowed down.

Okay! said White Buffalo. Now we're gettin' somewhere. Haha, haha.

The tv kept blipping between the fuzz.

Pffft—blip—ffffft—blip—ffffft.

You stepped closer and touched the antenna, and the television said:

Pffft—Hello—ffffft.

Then there was a sound like a smashed lightbulb, and the tv went dark. But the audio didn't stop.

It was coming from you.

I stood up and faced you. It was the first time we really looked at each other in a long time.

There was so much I wanted to ask you, so much I wanted to know. Who was your best friend when you were a kid? What was your favourite colour and why didn't we ever talk about things like that? Were you afraid when you died? Are you okay now?

But none of my questions seemed good enough. I couldn't decide what was most important. And just like that, we lost reception.

White Buffalo nodded. We need a stronger signal, he said. Gotta go higher up.

I wanted to go up to the roof, but you held your clippers up in front of me. I understood. None of us were in any condition.

We'll head up the mountain in the mornin', said White Buffalo.

Then that was that. I made up the couch for him and he sat there staring at the broken TV. And it was funny, he seemed to sober up when he had something to do—we all did. But now that he was sitting down and staring at nothing, he was drunk as ever.

Yer mushu pushu makes a nice wigwam, he said.

It seems absurd now when I think of it, but it made a lot of sense at the time.

Maybe it was hearing your voice again, or maybe it was all the whiskey, but I felt lonely for you, so I took you by the hand and led you up the stairs. I did everything except take my clothes off and jump up and down. You were fascinated with the wire cutters. I started to think you were having an affair, spreading your ghostly semen all over the place, this time in the afterlife.

That night I dreamt the hole in the roof led to the other side. You were standing over it, gazing in. I came over and stood beside you so we could look together. But you didn't put your arm around me. You just smirked. Your face all lit up by some fire I couldn't see. Then you started laughing and wouldn't stop.

Your turn, you roared. And you shoved me in.

Everything flipped upside down. The sky was on the ground, trees and an ocean were suspended above me, and there was nothing I could grab onto. I tried to call for help, but no sound came out. In the distance, there was a strange clicking sound that seemed to be getting closer, and I was terrified I was going to find out what it was. When I woke up I felt myself fall into myself, and I fell and fell until I landed just an inch or two above the ground.

The two of you were already awake when I came downstairs. You were clipping and stripping wires at the table while White Buffalo ate a piece of toast with no jam. You seemed okay, but he didn't look so good. A path of white fur led all the way back to the couch, and my head was pounding.

We need to find a Walmart, said White Buffalo.

What for?

Ta get material. For the moccasins you're gonna make him.

I shrugged. You want coffee first?

No time, he said. Gotta get up the mountain before it gets too hot.

It was already hot. The house hadn't cooled down much through the night, and the temperature was about to start rising again. So we all piled into the shitty little Toyota.

We pulled into the parking lot at Walmart, but I didn't want to get out

right away. White Buffalo was still shedding all over everything and I felt sick. You sat in the back seat, clipping away.

This doesn't seem right, I said. Shouldn't we make everything ourselves?

Ya ever skin an animal before? he said.

I shook my head. Then wished I hadn't.

So, we go ta Walmart.

I just hate giving them my money. I pressed my cheek against the window hoping the cool glass would make me feel better, but it was warm.

Hmm, he nodded. How 'bout that craft store there? He motioned across the parking lot.

I shrugged. It was basically the Walmart of crafts, but it seemed a bit more appropriate.

White Buffalo got the fabric while I tried to keep you from finding the wire section, but you were too quick. There were trails of white fur and wires all over the store. Just when I'd see one of you, the other would disappear around a corner, so I gave up trying to keep track of everyone. When I got to the till you were clipping wire while White Buffalo rummaged through a clearance bin of rubber stamps.

Lookit this one, he said. He held it up, and showed us a picture of a mountain and squiggly lines for water, with the words "This Land is Our Land." He kept admiring it while a redheaded woman named Dolores rang up our purchase. I motioned to White Buffalo to put his stamp on the counter so I could pay for it. He smiled at that. Then you held up a pair of white-handled wire cutters that looked like they were for very delicate work. I nodded. I figured it would be the last gift I'd be able to buy you.

Wait, said White Buffalo. I found two more.

Good, said Dolores. Might as well get the deal. She seemed really excited about it.

See? he said. This one has an inuksuk, and this one's a wigwam.

Great, I said. Those will come in handy when you're watching *The Creative Native*.

Haha, said White Buffalo. Haha.

Oh, said Dolores. I don't think we say "Native" anymore.

All three of us looked up at her.

Her hair seemed to turn even redder.

Umm... Do you have the rewards card?

I shook my head.

Maybe you should get it, said White Buffalo.

I don't plan on shopping here again.

He shook his head at me. A good deal is a good deal.

Fine, I said.

Dolores was ecstatic. We all thanked her and headed for the mountain.

White Buffalo led us up, leaving a tinsel of white hair hanging on the branches as we ascended for the first little while. But the higher we climbed, the less he seemed to shed.

It was sunset when we got to the top. I used some bottled water to wash your feet very carefully, very gently, like it was the only job I ever had in this life. White Buffalo got out the fake leather, and wrapped it around your foot, motioning for me to do the same with your other foot. He brought out a needle that looked like it was made of bone, threaded it with a long strand of his own hair, and showed me how to sew the moccasins.

When we were done, you stretched out your feet and flexed them.

Then he blessed your new shoes with buffalo sage and made braids out of sweet grass for your ankles. We all took turns bathing in the smoke—it felt good to share that with you, we never did anything like that together when you were alive—and we stood together for a few moments, looking down at your feet. You were so proud. White Buffalo put a hand on my shoulder and I could feel the tears tugging at me, wanting to be born.

Cryin' only keeps the spirit here, said White Buffalo. And it has lots of other work ta do, so we have ta let it go do all that.

I stood up a little taller to straighten myself out.

Better start diggin', said White Buffalo. Gettin' late. He motioned to the sky that was turning pale purple now, deepening higher up.

I dug and dug with my hands until I had a shallow little hole, just deep enough to bury a bird. Or a pair of moccasins.

I felt guilty leaving you without shoes a second time, but you didn't seem to mind. I placed them in the tiny grave and covered them over with dirt. I took your hand and waited for something to happen. For the sky to open up. Or at least change colour. Anything.

Nothing happened.

Haha, said White Buffalo. Haha, haha. His face changing with the glow of a fire none of us lit. Ghost fire.

What's so funny?

You think buryin' a pair of shoes is gonna do something? Haha, haha.

I could feel the tears coming.

Oh, I'm just playin' with ya. Go on and tell us a story now. He leaned back against a tree and made himself comfortable while the fire crackled and hissed.

I took a deep breath. Then I closed my eyes and clapped my hands and rubbed my fingers together like I was sprinkling a fine dust over everything.

And I began.

It started way back. Before parking lots or convenience stores. There were mountains, and trees, and good clean water for drinking. Then one day, you were born. And it was good.

You smiled at that. Then you stood up and put your arms around me. I guess the beginning was enough for you.

There was the sound of static again. I knew I was running out of time. I tried to think about what I wanted to say to you, but I panicked and blurted out the first thing that came to me:

What's the most important thing in this life?

I wanted to smack myself for asking something so dumb.

Then you whispered to me:

Pffft—Everyone—ffffft—deserves—ffffft—to be—ffffft—loved—ffffft.

I felt the wind of your spirit move through me. You hugged me with your entire being.

And I loved you for that.

For a moment I couldn't breathe. There wasn't enough room in my body for the two of us, and I felt like a little kid, diving into the deep end with my nose plugged.

Then I felt you leave me. This time for good.

When I looked up, White Buffalo was wandering off to become a constellation, or whatever it is White Buffalo spirits do in their spare time.

Watch out for fallin' Indians, he said.

Haha, I said. Haha.