

TRACY HAUFF

I Remember Turtle Woman

Driving across the desolate expanse between Kadoka and Wall where I-90 hugs the northern rim of the Badlands, I lost radio reception. Switching over to AM frequency, I fiddled with the dial until I recognized the distinctive timbre that is characteristic of storytellers and I knew that I had just tuned in to South Dakota Public Broadcasting. The soothing male voice recited, “One woman, Elsie Flood, a niece of grandma’s, had a big influence upon me.” Instant connection – I *know Elsie Flood*. The cloud of monotony that had been following me from East River, fertile farmland to West River, barren gumbo lifted when I realized that the narrative was about someone I vividly remembered from my childhood—Turtle Woman. As he read the passage about Elsie Flood, I conjured up a mental picture of her, recalling a hot summer day when I was very young. As the memory emerged, so did an instinctive awareness of the reservation that was located a few miles south of me. The narrator continued reading from *Lakota Woman* written by Mary Crow Dog. “In the summer of 1976 she was found beaten to death in her home. She was discovered under the bed, face down and naked, with weeds in her hair. Her death has never been investigated.”

My first instinct was to push rewind—useless, since I was listening to the radio. It must be a mistake. But no, he continued reading Crow Dog’s words just as she had written them. Tears welled up in my eyes. I *knew* Elsie Flood.

The heat was oppressive that summer day over thirty years ago. The mid-morning temperature already delivering the promise that darkness would not bring relief. The arid heat would gain momentum throughout the day, become angry about its confinement within grandmother’s small house, and punish us that night by hovering above our beds while we tossed and turned. It was the last week in August and we would soon return to Sioux Falls to start another year of school. It was the season of ripe chokecherries, deep, dark purple berries begging for release from their branches. Father, Grandmother, April, Steve and I were returning to Martin from a chokecherry-picking excursion. Heat waves shimmered atop the pavement and rolled across the hood of the car; a dazzling dance performed by air, light and energy. The car windows were rolled down, inviting the hot breeze to come inside and cool us off a degree or two. My mouth was dry from the astringent chokecherries I had eaten. I discovered that they tasted nothing like the sweet jelly I loved. Buckets filled with the ripened berries were safely deposited in the trunk, covered with worn dishtowels to prevent their escape. Tomorrow grandmother and mother would sort, rinse, cook, and can the tart berries. Chokecherry jelly and wozapi would be the outcome. Grandmother would date the surplus jars of jelly and store them on her shelves in the dark cellar. The wozapi would be eaten that night for dessert.

Flies and bees flew in one window and out another as we sat silent, content with our thoughts and the day's harvest, lulled into submission by the heat. Grandmother broke the spell.

"There's Elsie. We better see if she wants a ride."

Dad stopped the car beside an Indian woman. I crawled over Steve and stuck my head out the window to get a better look at her. She was wearing a faded housedress that had a ghostly floral pattern—the result of countless washings—and heavy black shoes with leather laces. They looked like men's work boots with their big round toes, the leather worn soft and encasing her ankles, sturdy heels supporting her step. Her shiny black hair was parted in the middle, braided, and wrapped up in a thick bun. She turned to see who had stopped and, flashing a grin, nodded her head in acknowledgement.

"Hi, Elsie. Would you like a ride?" Grandmother asked.

"Was'te, greetings, Zona. I will walk," replied Elsie.

"You're a ways from town Elsie," my dad said. "You should jump in. It's mighty hot today."

I was impolitely staring at the woman standing beside our car, and she, sensing my eyes upon her, turned to me. "Do you want to see my turtles?" she asked while thrusting her hands into the deep side pockets of her dress.

"Sure," I replied.

She pulled out two small turtles, one from each pocket, and held them out to me. I took one and set it in my hand.

"Okay, I will ride with you," Elsie said.

"Move over, kids," Grandmother instructed.

We scooted to the left to make room for our new passenger. I was very careful not to jostle the turtle I held. Elsie climbed in next to Steve and handed him the other turtle.

"Look at its belly," she said—pursing her lips in a familiar gesture. Grandmother also pointed with her lips and a slight thrust of her chin. It was the Lakota way, but I wasn't aware of the connection until that very moment. I thought it was a mannerism exclusive to my grandmother.

I carefully flipped the little turtle over. Its shell was a bland greenish brown but the underside was beautiful. Red, orange, yellow and black swirling in a pattern that resembled four legs and a long outstretched neck.

"The turtle pooped on me," I said, looking at the tiny mess in the palm of my hand. Without hesitation, I handed the turtle to April. She put down her Nancy Drew book and half-heartedly accepted the turtle, giving it a speedy once-over before handing it back to its owner. Elsie greeted her turtle as if it had been gone a long time. She spoke in Lakota, and judging from her tone, I knew it was a term of endearment. She placed the turtle back into her pocket. I was glad Elsie's turtles made her happy.

She made small talk with father and grandmother; this was the first time I remember my father speaking Lakota, and I was amazed. I was strangely drawn to Elsie and seeking to satisfy my curiosity, I continued to stare at her. A few lines, wrinkles and creases joined one another upon her chestnut brown skin—her personal road map of life. She didn't look old, but her

demeanor gave me the impression that she was. It was perplexing. I enjoyed her unusual voice, both tone and inflection. Most of all, I liked her manner. Calm, gentle, peaceful. Grandmother turned around, making eye contact with me while shaking her head and frowning; expressing her disapproval of my ill-mannered gawking.

When we were back at grandmother's house, I casually mentioned to her, "You should call Elsie and ask her if she wants to come over."

"No, Elsie likes to be alone," Grandma replied. "She may be off somewhere already. She doesn't stay home very long."

"Where does she go?" I asked.

"Here, there and everywhere," was grandmother's answer.

"But what about her kids?" I wondered.

"Elsie doesn't have any children."

"Then you should be her friend, Grandma."

"Oh, I am her friend. Everyone is Elsie's friend," my grandmother replied.

"I don't think you should walk on the highway with her, though," I added.

Grandma laughed. "No, the farthest I will walk is uptown and to church."

I nodded, satisfied with her answer. I did not like the idea of my grandmother wandering around the reservation roads. I already worried about her living all alone.

I saw Elsie walking along the highway several times after that hot summer day, heading east to Rosebud, west to Pine Ridge, north to Kyle, or just as likely, nowhere in particular. I'm sure she didn't plan her travels. She was a traditional Lakota elder with no schedule and no agenda. Her daily activities could change as easily as the direction of the wind. I asked my grandmother a second time to invite Elsie over because I wanted to see her, but again, she said no. I understood that it was not because my grandmother did not like Elsie; it was because she respected her desire to be free of social protocol and to be able to come and go as she pleased.

Every November and December, we made the trip from Sioux Falls to Martin to spend the holidays with grandmother. On one Christmas visit, we were a mile or two outside of town on Highway 18 when I recognized Elsie sitting on the side of the road. The ground was a wintry mix of snow and ice and I panicked, fearful that she was frozen.

"Dad, stop!" I yelled. "It's Elsie. It's Turtle Woman." Our entire family was crammed into the station wagon, along with suitcases, and there really was no place for her to sit and my dad said as much. My siblings and I even took turns sitting on the floor with our Dalmatian, Freckles, just so we could stretch our legs.

Dad did slow down to make sure Elsie was all right. I was feeling anxious until I saw her nod and smile, reassuring me that she was fine. I pacified myself with the assumption that she would have turned us down anyway; after all, she looked perfectly content bundled in a heavy woolen coat, scarf tied securely around her head and a muffler about her neck.

I remembered all of this as I listened to Mary Crow Dog's story. For the remainder of my drive, equal portions of sadness and anger consumed me. Who would kill Elsie? Why hadn't I

heard about it before now? I wanted answers for this atrocious crime that had taken place in her tiny cabin a couple of blocks from my grandmother's house.

The sun had disappeared behind the Black Hills and I was tired after the six-hour drive, but instead of going straight home, I stopped at my parents' house.

I bounded up the stairs to their living room, taking two steps at a time.

"Mom, Dad," I called. "I was listening to Public Broadcasting radio and they said that Elsie Flood was murdered! Is it true?"

My mother was very surprised with my sudden appearance, not to mention my odd question. "Well, yes, that's true."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I whined. How easily we revert from adult to child when traumatized.

Mother's expression was blank. She began hesitantly, "It happened almost twenty years ago. In the late seventies. I don't think you were around here when it happened. You were living in Texas."

"Well, who did it? Why? Why would anyone kill Elsie?"

"No one knows who or why."

"What do you mean? Why don't they know?"

"They never found the murderer so they don't know why she was killed. She had been missing for several days and friends went to her house and found her. She was naked, under her bed. She had been bludgeoned to death." My mother repeated, almost verbatim, what I had heard on the radio. The denial I had been harboring—that somehow, it might not be true—vanished.

"I don't understand! Why didn't they find out who did it? There's not even a thousand people living in Martin. How hard could it have been to investigate?"

I turned to my father, who had worked for the federal judicial system for twenty-eight years. Surely, he knew something. "What do you know about it, Dad?"

"Just as your mother said. It was very sad. She wasn't found for several days and there were no obvious clues. They think she may have been killed outside and her body was taken into her house and placed under her bed."

"How could this happen? She never hurt anyone. Everybody liked her! She was a good woman!" I could not comprehend the fact that a respected medicine woman who spent her lifetime helping others had been brutally killed and, even more incomprehensible—her death was so insignificant that it did not warrant a full investigation.

My image of Elsie Flood's final moments on this earth haunted me for many years. Now, I choose to remember her as she lived her life, a gentle spiritual Native American woman walking down the road on her journey to a better place. I remember Turtle Woman.

Author's Note: Several years ago, in an attempt to find out more about Elsie's murder, I discovered some disheartening information. Between 1973 and 1976, approximately sixty-nine Native Americans were killed on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. These deaths went unresolved for over two decades. In 1999, the US Commission on Civil Rights questioned senior

FBI officials regarding the lack of accountability in these deaths and in May 2000, The Minneapolis Division FBI released the “Report for Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota” with their accounting for Native American deaths between 1973 and 1976. In this report, fifty-seven of the deaths were recorded and “cleared by the FBI with arrests or were never crimes.” Eighteen of the murders resulted in convictions, and another three in acquittals. The remaining thirty-six deaths were (a) not investigated, (b) declared that no crime was found, (c) not prosecuted—case closed. The causes of death in this report include exposure, gunshot wound, accidental gunshot wound, self-inflicted gunshot wound, stabbing, stomping, run over with an automobile, automobile accident, hit and run accident, machine gunfire, ambush gunfire, carbon tetrachloride poisoning, carbon monoxide poisoning resulting from a house fire (the victim had a stab wound in her neck), propane gas explosion, bludgeoning, shock, heart attack, suicide (the “suicide” victim had multiple stab wounds through the face and neck), hatcheting, and acute alcohol poisoning. The one thing each victim had in common was that he or she was “documented” as being an AIM (American Indian Movement) member or supporter. This roster included three children. To this day, many of the victims’ families dispute the autopsy findings as fictitious or the result of coercion and proclaim the report a mockery. Elsie Flood’s murder was not recorded in the 2000 report although she was listed in earlier government reports as an AIM supporter. Her murder has never been investigated.