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The Bad Ones

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the bad ones

Cool musty air greeted Frank, Dan and me when we arrived at Ted's place on Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, for the Vision Quest Ceremony. After riding in a car for fifteen hours, I slept until the blinding spring sun streamed through the windows heating up the bedroom. I stumbled into the grimy kitchen where Frank, a small man with a broad smile, sat finishing a bowl of cereal.

Peering out the kitchen window, I spotted a herd of horses at the watering station just outside Ted's front fence. Their necks gracefully bent to sip the water while others rubbed their bodies against the bark of the trees. One mare had a persistent foal trying to nurse while she scratched herself. My mind drifted to memories of the horses that appeared during my last Vision Quest.

The moon was full and bright when three horses appeared behind me by the fence. The horse in front was a large, majestic mahogany male with a black mane and a long white spot on his head. Behind him was a smaller, all-white male, with a brown and white mare in the rear. Making eye contact, I told them mentally how beautiful they were, and asked them to come closer and stay with me. They grazed along the fence line and behind a small berm, only to emerge again in front of my prayer circle. The big male stepped forward, inching closer and closer until our eyes met. As we gazed at each other, time paused, and I felt our connection as a long, ecstatic moment just between him and me, like two secret lovers locking eyes across a

crowded room.

My reverie was interrupted when Dan, a tall green-eyed jokester, opened the front door. "Hey Karen! How's it going?"

"I'm still wiped out! But I have the kitchen and plenty of mouse dung to clean today. Other than that, I'm good. How about you?"

"I already cut the grass, pitched my tent and checked in with Frank. So I'm heading up to fix my prayer circle and center myself. The men will be here at seven. What are you gonna do while the men sweat?"

"I'm gonna go up to my circle and pray. But I was hoping to get a ride there on the ATV."

"Ted asked me to get the sweat lodge ready, so you'd better ask Frank for a ride. Later." Dan bounded out the front door.

Just before the men's ceremony, Frank and I bounced up the hill on the ATV, kicking up dust and rocks along the road. Stopping at the first fork in the road, he reassured me, "If you go to the right, you'll end up in front of Ted's house; if you go to the left, you'll end up behind his house. But either way, you can't get lost." As we drove along, his instructions stuck in my mind and bolstered my confidence to walk back alone.

Elated to be in my prayer circle again, I gazed west. The slowly sinking sun cast prismatic hues on the clouds, the rolling open plains, and the distant sacred Black Hills. Clutching tobacco in my right hand, I touched it to my heart, held it



up to the kaleidoscope sky, and began praying. Still mourning the sudden death of my younger sister, my grief spilled out like torrential rain—in sheets, drenching and overwhelming. When my emotions calmed, the sun had slipped below the horizon and it was time to leave.

Drying my tears, I walked to the dirt road. I followed it until I arrived at the second, rather

than the first, fork in the road. Frank

had not mentioned this one, thinking that I would not leave the main dirt road and make a hard right, which of course I did. As darkness descended, fear gripped me. Without a flashlight, I struggled to see the light color of the dirt road. Heart racing and out of breath, I

deer head
ink wash drawing
Jennifer Prucha

was close to having a full-blown panic attack—crying, browbeating myself for being an idiot and getting lost. After a few deep breaths, I convinced myself to calm down, that I was not lost, and refused to panic. With my confidence fading, I began speed walking.

Hearing galloping in the prairie, I paused and glimpsed the silhouettes of three horses. Moving closer, the horses trotted and then stopped. I squinted hard in the darkness. A large horse with a white patch on his head, a smaller white horse, and a white and brown one came into view. At that moment, I had an inexplicable but powerful feeling of deep recognition—that each of us knew the other.

The horses resumed galloping, so I continued my journey until I realized they were traveling toward the road and following me. When they arrived next to me, I stopped and turned to face them. The immense mahogany male walked right up to me. His tremendous body towered over me. As he leaned in closer, my heart pulsed wildly as sweat dripped down my face and arms. I wanted to pet him, but worried that he might become spooked and bite me. Deciding to be submissive, I allowed him to inspect me. He dropped his massive head and inched closer, until we were face to face. With soft brown eyes gazing into mine, he slowly lowered his head until I could feel his breath on my left hand. He tenderly caressed my hand with his soft muzzle once, and then again. Exploding internally with excitement, I stood like a statue. I told him mentally how beautiful he was, and how grateful I was for his loving gesture. He nudged the white male with his muzzle to come “greet” me, but the horse refused. He then tapped the brown and white mare to come to me, but she refused

also. Staring at each other momentarily, the three stepped back and turned away from me. Feeling our encounter was complete, I continued to follow the dirt road. Trotting toward the prairie, they gradually traversed out of view.

My mind raced as I replayed our encounter. I decided that it was my destiny to go the wrong way in order to experience this intimate rendezvous with them. As the road twisted and turned, I spotted a light up ahead and quickened my pace. As I rounded the last turn, a driveway light illuminated a truck, an ATV, and a trailer home surrounded by a fence. Out of breath, my heart sank as I realized this was not Ted’s place; but the lights inside were on. Approaching the house, I heard dogs begin to bark. I sprinted to the porch and knocked firmly on the front door.

A muscular middle-aged man opened the door and said, “Hello.”

“Hi. I’m Karen and I’m staying at Ted’s place and got lost. I’ve been walking forever to get here.”

“But that’s 3 ½ miles away. You musta got really lost; that’s a long way, the wrong way. Wow!”

“I know!” I panted.

“I’m Bill by the way. You want a ride?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, I would really appreciate it.”

Bill disappeared into the trailer, returned with keys in his hand, and motioned for me to follow him. Like everything on the Rez, his old truck was beat up, with various antique tools and plenty of dust in it. He was quiet, so I found myself telling him my story about my prior meeting with the horses, and again on the road to his place.

“I wonder why they visited me and what it

means?"

He looked surprised and asked me, "The horse walked up to you, came to you?"

"Yes! He surprised me! I never had a horse, especially a wild horse, come so close. And his breath felt warm, and his muzzle so gentle on my hand."

"That is amazing... unusual for a horse do that." He grew quiet, deep in thought. Suddenly he smiled. "I think that horse was trying to tell you, you was going the wrong way." Then he let out a big belly laugh.

"You're probably right. He was probably pushing my hand trying to turn me around to go the other way." We both roared.

When our laughter subsided, we traveled in silent contemplation to Ted's.

Later on that evening, after all the men had eaten and left, I sat at the kitchen table with Ted, Frank and Dan. I told my story about my prior Vision Quest and meeting the same three horses on the way to Bill's. Frank and Dan teased me while Ted made jokes about me getting lost. Suddenly, Ted got serious and told us that Bill has been a horse whisperer since he was 16 years old.

With a smirk on his face, Ted looked deep into my eyes. "I know those three horses that you met. I know from your description. Those three are known all over the Rez. They're called the 'the bad ones' because they cause trouble and mischief everywhere they go."

"Of all the horses in the herd, the only ones to come and visit me are 'the bad ones'? Not the good ones, or the clever ones or the nice ones? No... just the bad ones! Unbelievable!"

"I think there's a message in that for you,

Karen," Dan jeered.

"Hey, wait a minute." Frank bellowed. "Maybe they were the ones that attacked my car, broke my antenna and both my mirrors too! I think your friends wrecked my car, Karen!"

"Yeah, they probably were the ones," Ted declared.

"Hey Karen, your horse friends wrecked Frank's car. I think that makes you responsible." Dan's eyes twinkled as he chided me too.

"Yeah, guys that's right. My friends, the bad ones... sorry about your car, Frank!"

When I returned home, I struggled to understand the greater meaning of my interactions with the three 'bad ones'. Knowing Bill's talent with horses, I pondered his comments. I remembered being labeled rambunctious as a child and always getting in trouble for being rebellious. Later, when I became a preschool teacher, the administration always put the most challenging children, usually boys, in my classroom. I sympathized with their misbehavior, befriended and redirected them with my strength and tough love. Horses are known to be extremely sensitive to human emotions like fear and love. I believe the horses, like the naughty preschoolers, were drawn to me. They identified with my defiant nature, and I recognized theirs. The mahogany male returned my love and acceptance of them with his loving gesture. After much reflection, I realized that it was my destiny to encounter those horses, because we are connected and the same. We are 'the bad ones.'