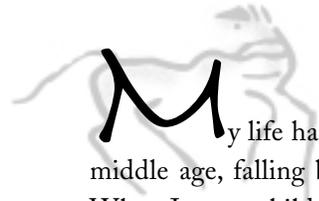


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Sun's Own Horse



My life has turned in an unusual way as I approach middle age, falling back into childhood dreams and beauty. When I was a child, the horses spoke with dark eyes and the motions of their bodies. I could understand them more fully. When I became a professional rider I stopped listening to the horses with the innocent clarity of a young person. Finally when I quit riding professionally in my late thirties and slowed down, the horses came swinging back into full voice and I understood them again.

Now in midlife, the horses call on a different part of me, something unusual. It is as if life wished me to ride what my ancestors rode—the horse of the Native Plains. These horses have fallen into my life like fiery stars, and their impact has left me transformed.

Inniskim, Buffalo Stone, was one of these horses; the other one was *Natoowapee Ponokamita*, which means “Sun’s Own Horse” in Blackfeet. He was one of the most challenging horses I ever worked with, even more than Belle, the gray mare nicknamed “The Hell Bitch.” Sun’s Own was certainly more dangerous.

I first laid eyes on Sun’s Own while visiting the Blackfeet Reservation with my friend, Pat. We spent four days visiting friends in the area surrounding Browning, Montana. Over dark

coffee, wine, fry bread, and hamburgers we talked for hours with friends while children ran in and out, slamming dusty screen doors and playfully shouting. Sometimes the children would sit with us and listen silently while we joked and laughed, told our stories, and solved all the world's problems.

After awhile Pat and I would clamber into the tall red truck with its sleeping pile of cow dogs and we would push on to the next stop. "We're Thelma and Louise on the rez," I told Pat as we drove the dusty backroads. She giggled and tossed her curls—she had just gotten a perm and a divorce.

On our last day we drove up to see the buffalo ponies in a high, wide expanse of land that clung like a mountain goat to the feet of the Rockies. The grass was still stiff with cold and the wind ran like mice through the stalks. The buffalo horses had come to graze and look out over the high vistas. "Look at the new colt!" Pat pointed out excitedly. A small, two-day-old foal with a sweet face and sturdy frame stood close to his mother. The colt was a grulla, the color of a blue steel gun barrel touched with gold. When I was a child, Pop had told me about grulla-colored horses. "These horses are the strongest," Pop explained. "Horses of that color have a thick hide and hard hooves." Since then I have always admired them for their beautiful and unusual color. This colt also had the black primitive stripes on his forelegs, hocks, and ears, hinting of an older ancestry.

The band stallion, Blue, watched us patiently as we admired the horses, but the colt's pitch-black mother laid back her ears and herded her colt away from us and the motionless cow dogs. "Duenna," Pat called out as she watched the independent mare. "No one was ever able to ride Duenna. She's like me!"

We laughed as we clambered back into the truck and the dogs jumped in the back and lay down with deep sighs. We

had more friends to visit before heading back to Vashon Island. I soon forgot about the grulla colt.



Three years later a friend from the Blackfeet Reservation, Billy, called me about a troubled horse. Billy had founded a nonprofit group on the rez with the vision of bringing the horses of our ancestors back to the Northern Plains—the swift, sturdy, wise horses of Native America. That morning Billy's voice was broken, tired, and sad as he told me the story of the grulla stallion roped and almost stolen from him. Horses still vanish from the Great Plains of the West, stolen and sold for dog meat down south in California and Texas. The kids in Billy's horse program had witnessed a young man from the rez rope the stallion around the neck and legs and throw him to the ground. The stallion fought in anger as the hard hemp cut into his legs. The children also saw the ropes break and the angry stallion trample his captor. The man was taken to the hospital where he laughed and joked about the stallion not respecting him, unwilling to admit that he had disrespected the horse.

Eventually Billy found the grulla stallion and managed to corral him into a six-foot, timbered round pen. The young stallion was so angry at life, humanity, and captivity that he was violent. No one could get near him without risk of injury. Billy despaired while he contemplated the hard choices that stared at him defiantly in the sparkling eye of the furious stallion.

"Oh god, T, am I going to have to shoot him?" Billy asked.

In an instant I remembered the grulla colt, his soft eyes and tottering legs as he followed tough Duenna, his wild mother.

In a serious, quiet voice he warned, "T, I think he is dangerous! We can't even turn him loose around here where he

can get at people. He might kill someone. But I hate to shoot him—he is beautiful, magical.”

Softly I responded, “I’ll come get him.”

I felt a tremendous sadness at the possibility of this horse’s life lost through brutality. Besides, there are few of these buffalo horses left in the world. The loss of even one is tragic. They are tough, intelligent, and require time in order to convince them about the partnership with humanity. Buffalo horses are not quite domesticated, but once made a friend, they offer a unique partnership. My first buffalo horse, Inniskim, has shown me this friendship.

Two of my students from Wolftown, Summer and Jamey, went with me two weeks later when I headed for the Blackfeet Rez. Summer was eighteen and Jamey one year younger. They had been working with me since they were twelve and I trusted them around horses without question.

The ominous threat of October weather in the north hung over our driving. Already snow topped the mountains as we rolled along the highways, horse trailer in tow. The radio played cowboy love songs or oldies rock and roll. We would stop for coffee, pop, and candy at the quiet gas stations along the foothills of the Rockies, and then keep driving. We drove over the mountain passes and eased down onto the rolling prairie, and finally to Browning and the rez. We took the only left turn in town and soon arrived at Billy’s ranch.

Inside the six-foot timbered pen the young grulla stallion stood with his head lowered and his eyes watchful. His unusual steel blue coat had a black dorsal stripe that swept down his back, with additional stripes that scored his forelegs and hocks. He was barely 14.3 hands high, but he was muscled like a boulder. Wilderness lived in this stallion’s eyes under his black forelock.

The most significant feature about this horse was that his ears were flat back, not merely in displeasure but in a kind of fierce hatred. As I stood a good ways back, quietly observing the stallion, one of the young men on the rez casually walked closer to the fence. The stallion bared his teeth and charged the man, lunging furiously over the fence trying to get at him.

At the sight of this burst of anger, Jamey quietly asked, “How are we going to get him into the rig?”

At that moment the stallion made another charge at one of the men standing a little bit closer than we were. This young horse was like a provoked predator with the fierceness of a wolf or a grizzly. His eyes smoldered and he snorted wrath at us.

We all took three steps back. “I don’t really know yet,” I replied.

Then Summer asked, “How long do you think anyone would last in there?” Without hesitation, I responded, “Seconds...maybe.” As I rubbed my forehead I thought, *I am really asking for it this time.*

Billy reassured me the horse was untouched except for the roping incident. He ran the horses in family bands so they were as wild as the buffalo. For a long time I observed the blue stallion, pondering the situation. Every so often I looked at the sky where snow-laden clouds pressed down.

After about two hours of watching the stallion, we barricaded the round pen gate with heavy timber. Then I slowly backed the rig into the pen. The stallion watched with extreme concern, the whites of his eyes showing. His ears stayed flat back, always. We opened up the horse trailer, the divider was already out, and we tied the doors open.

For two days we fed the young stallion in the rig. At first he stayed away, his defiance greater than his hunger. But about four hours later that first afternoon, he began to lip at the hay that

had blown down the ramp. Finally, he went half way in. After the first day I watched him go in the rig, grab a mouthful of hay, and then back out quickly. He was beginning to get used to the trailer—the first step in getting him back to Wolfstown.

While we waited during those two days, I often rode Lonesome, a bay red roan gelding. I rode him with a war bridle, bareback, galloping across the rolling prairie. I felt as if I could have ridden into the circling horizon forever to join the wild horses. My students, both from Wolfstown and the rez, and I watched for hours as the family bands of horses ate and ran and laid down amid the windblown long grass of the Plains. These were days of peace and liberty for me as I waited patiently before taking the next step with the grulla stallion.

At the end of the second day I led Lonesome up to the front of the rig, outside the pen, where the stallion could see him through the trailer windows. The grulla stallion, excited to see this equine friend, surprisingly got into the strange contraption on wheels. I handed Lonesome's lead rope to Summer and then I crawled through the fence line. Softly I crept up to shut the doors while the stallion, still inside, called to Lonesome outside the rig's manger door. My nerves were jittery as I quickly closed the doors before the stallion realized I was there. He was innocent of my trickery.

Immediately the stallion began to kick and scrape the sides of the trailer as he tried to find a way out of this strange box. We left him alone for half an hour. Once he was quiet, we got in the truck and headed back to the Pacific Northwest. As we drove, the stallion was calm whenever we peered through the trailer's window. He just kept watching us with glittering eyes and laid back ears.

Seventeen hours later we pulled up to Wolfstown's barn. The next challenge was figuring out how to unload the stallion

without getting trampled. First, we barricaded the trailer in the barn aisle and opened a stall door leading into a paddock with a seven-foot-tall fence. I instructed most of my students to stay inside another box stall with the door shut for safety. Then we opened the rig's doors and I stayed behind the doors as the stallion turned and cautiously looked out, sniffing and sizing up his situation. For a moment his ears pricked, then they laid flat again. He moved out of the rig slowly and investigated the aisle way. As we held our breath, he finally went inside the box to see what was in the paddock. My students reached from their box and slid his door shut.

I knew this would be the most difficult horse I had ever worked with. We peered in at him—his eyes still sparked with hatred and his ears still flat back.



A child once told me, "Horses must trust us a great deal—trust that we will bring them food and water. They must trust that we will clean their house and care for them." This child told me if this was done every day at the same time the horse would like it better, and love us for our concern.

When she was done telling me this, I asked her, "Where did you hear that?"

The child answered, "The Fox told the Little Prince that T!"



Billy had named the grulla stallion when we left the rez, "Sun's Own Horse." For the Blackfeet, this is a sacred name because the Sun was God in a way. In time, I gave Sun's Own Horse a nickname, Smoky, after the book, *Smoky*, by Will James.

During those first days, I watched him for hours. He turned his rump to me and his ears never pricked up. I put our other buffalo pony, Inniskim, opposite Smoky in the barn. Perhaps if Smoky saw one of his relatives being handled and loved by people he would begin to trust us. Inniskim sensed the loneliness of the young horse and nickered to him often.

After a week of nothing but anger from the stallion I wondered if this was the right thing to do. I questioned if it was safe for Wolftown. In my entire career, I had never met a horse with this much anger. I called Billy and told him if I decided Sun's Own didn't want to be friends with people then we would have to let him go back to the wild to take his chances. He could not be released on the rez, but so far away from people he might never meet up with humanity again.

Billy responded with a story. There was a Blackfeet warrior, Mountain Horse, and his war stallion fought as fiercely as a grizzly. "He ate people," Billy explained. Then he whispered into the phone, "I think Sun's Own is that horse come back."

After a long pause I replied calmly, "Bill, he is now at my youth project, he cannot eat anyone."

After that, I started feeding Sun's Own by hand. Every day I laid out his food, one handful at a time. He would have to start coming to me or go hungry. Those were long days. He would move up ever so slowly, his heavy muscles sliding under that blue hide, his ears back, watching me with a grim anger.

I am sure that long ago when First Horse came to humanity to become a partner that he or she was treated with kindness. It would be insane to try to force a wild horse to do anything. Now I wondered if domestication was always moral. In the old days the partners of humanity—the horse, dog, cat, and falcon—did not have far to go to return to wilderness and be

free of human beings. But some did not choose to leave their human companions. Once when Inniskim got away at Wolftown he stayed near the paddocks, grazing. He did not go visiting my neighbor's racehorse mares. He knew where he should be and waited for us to put him back.

Cookie the falcon flies free at Wolftown and becomes very angry if we lose track of her. Often she will land on my head or arm then peck me as if to scold me for not paying closer attention to her while she flies.

On occasion I ask myself, *How often are our old partners trapped within our worlds and now so domesticated they cannot live wild even if they remotely thought about it?* Perhaps the same is true of humanity.

After four months of patient hand feeding, Smoky came up to me one morning, one step at a time, and lipped hay out of my hand. He breathed a sigh and his ears moved forward. My heart melted as I witnessed his trust returning. After that his eyes softened a bit. He would still move away if I tried to touch him, but he no longer laid his ears back at my approach.

Now started the most risky part of my work with Smoky. I needed to go into the corral with him and put myself within his reach. Some people would have met this stallion's anger with violence, but I was taught if you did that the horse might respect you but never love you. So I took the slow long road to Smoky's heart.

When I first entered the round pen, I expected Smoky to attack me, but he did not. Instead he laid his ears back at my approach and he kicked and reared at me. Alarmed, I ducked out of the way of his black hooves, but I noticed his kicks were pulled at the last moment and the rears carefully timed. He was respecting my space and I realized he was careful not to touch me. I took deep breaths and slowly I began to trust him as he kept a wary eye on me.

In the round paddock the first thing I had to do was establish communication. I knew I could not lounge Smoky yet because of his distrust of ropes. He was free in the round pen and I wanted to be careful not to exhaust him. At first I only asked him to move a step or two, and then I would reward him with a soft word and a brief rest. Then I would ask him to stop, then reward him again. This established who was in charge, a social interaction that happens in every herd of horses. The band is led by the matriarch mare and protected by the band stallion.

Months went by as Smoky and I continued this slow and deliberate dance of trust. In the beginning he would always lay back his ears and kick and rear at me whenever I first entered the round paddock. Eventually he began to ease up on his fierce stance and more easily accept my presence. During those months other rescued horses came and went at Wolftown. Horses came injured and left healed to live with new families, or else they died and were buried at the little farm. Amidst the daily routines of caring for the animals at Wolftown, I always felt the presence of the grulla stallion.

Spring came with its mud and sunshine and strong breezes. Once when going through a gate a strong wind blew the gate shut against me. The stallion was standing close and pressed up tightly against my side in order to avoid the swinging gate. Suddenly, Smoky and I were trapped behind the gate. In that moment my thoughts turned as slowly and as deliberately as stones. *My god, I'm gonna get crushed by a wild horse.... What a stupid thing.* A moment later the little stallion looked at me strangely yet did not step on me or panic. I felt his warm hide and breath and the new found trust between us.

At summer's end, I decided to start the next phase of our training. One day after completing the round pen work with

Smoky, I walked up slowly to him with a soft brush. Instantly his ears swept back. I hesitated. I held the brush out to him and he took a deep breath. On the brush clung the hairs and scent of Inniskim. I waited silently as the slight breeze curled and whispered around us. Smoky stood still and his ears relaxed a bit. I touched him with the brush. Again, his ears swept back and he threw up his head. Then he shifted his front hooves. I reached out again and softly swept his shoulder with the brush. He stood quietly watching me.

In the sunshine I began to brush him and his ears came up and a look of softness seeped into his eyes. His thick hide and mane felt tough and strange almost like a donkey's. After ten months I was grooming and petting Sun's Own softly on the shoulder.

Every day we advanced on where he could be brushed or touched. Smoky was especially sensitive about his head and legs. I could see the scars from the rope burns on his pasterns. I longed to pick up his hard hooves and admire the quality of the horn, which required no shoes.

Undoubtedly Smoky had a long way to go and it was he who defined the rate of our work together. All that winter we worked on voice commands. He learned them easily. One day I was standing in the barn looking at the stallion over the door of his box and he was looking back at me. I told Smoky, "It was you. You were that colt I saw on the rez! How I wish you could have come to me then and been spared all that pain."



Young people come to Wolftown, oftentimes sent by counselors or state workers. They send these inner city kids to Wolftown with the hope that working with animals will help them feel better about themselves and heal some of their

emotional wounds. One teen named Malcolm came to Wolftown with long tousled hair that fell into his steel gray eyes. He was a tall young man who always looked down, at first shy and withdrawn. Right away he loved the horses, especially Inniskim and Smoky. For hours Malcolm would watch Smoky and try to entice him to come for a carrot. Malcolm longed for Smoky's trust.

One morning Malcolm arrived at Wolftown with his wool watch cap pulled down low. As he approached me I could see he was limping. He stopped and I took his chin in my right hand and pulled off his cap. His eyes met mine and I saw a look of infinite betrayal and anguish. He had a black eye and a lump on his forehead. One thin tear slid down his cheek. He pulled away roughly and headed for Smoky's paddock. He hung his arms over the paddock door, silent, watching the grulla stallion.

I called his caseworker. "His father beat him while in a drunken rage," she explained. "We've removed him from his home for his own safety." Shocked, I wondered, *What can I do to help Malcolm with his hopelessness and his silent anger and frustration?* Until that day, it had not yet occurred to me the value of the ruined horses of Wolftown. Sun's Own and Malcolm would soon teach me.

I knew Malcolm loved the little grulla stallion so the only thing I could think of was to let him help. When I returned to the barn I handed Malcolm a soft brush. "Come in, let's brush him together." At first Smoky was nervous with Malcolm, perhaps sensing the boy's pain. Slowly, gently, Malcolm began to brush Smoky's steady, steel blue shoulders. Over the next few weeks Malcolm and Smoky became friends. Often I saw the boy smiling and humming softly to the stallion.

One evening after the chores were done the rain began to pelt down. Malcolm and I stood in the trees and watched the horses

eat. He had been helping at Wolftown for three months and the trust between us had grown. In a sad and young voice, he asked, "Will Smoky heal? Will he forget? Can we ride him someday?"

As he spoke, I stood very still letting this young man's words sink into me. Malcolm was asking this question about himself as well as the blue stallion.

"If we love and trust and expect good, sometimes miracles happen," I answered softly.

The boy nodded, paused, and then asked, "Why did this happen to Smoky? What did he do to deserve this?"

I swallowed hard before answering. "Nothing, it was bad luck for Smoky to be around people who were cruel. But now he is with kind people. His luck has changed."

The boy smiled slowly.



That second winter I began brushing Smoky softly with the halter and lead rope, gently stroking the soft rope halter along his body as if it were a brush instead of something that would hurt him. This let Smoky get used to the rope halter, and learn to trust what was once pain for him. Now he came when I called him, his eyes softer and filled with wonder. He would stand still when I petted him, and finally, he no longer laid his ears back.

That spring about a year and a half after Smoky first arrived at Wolftown, he learned to be tied. The first time it was to a strong fir tree with a thick heavy rope and I sat with him and talked to him so he wouldn't panic when he felt he could not get loose. I had a big towel and after allowing him to sniff it I stroked his body with it. His head went up in alarm and he pulled back, frightened at this strange thing touching him. The rope broke and he ran off toward his

paddock. I quietly put down the towel and went to catch him. I knew this, too, was a test. He might not forgive me for tying him.

Smoky stood snorting in alarm, but he did allow me to catch him and quietly lead him back to the tree. I wrapped a stronger rope around the tree, but this time only holding it instead of tying it. I wanted to give Smoky some room if he pulled back. It was the fear of capture that made this so hard for Smoky.

When he was quiet I started stroking him with the towel. He flew backwards but feeling the rope give a bit he was quieter. He lunged forward and stood still, trembling. I petted him and rewarded him with an apple. Strange things meant pain and danger to the stallion, but he tolerated it from me.

Every day we did this until after about two weeks the towel was nothing to Smoky. Then I added brushing his body with the saddle pad and the little saddle. Both of these new pieces of equipment took a much shorter time, only about four days. He would move away but not bolt off. Soon he just stood still and trusted me.

Young adults sometimes travel internationally to get to Wolftown for an internship and the opportunity to work with the horses and wolves. When Chloe, a new intern from Spain, arrived at Wolftown she instantly fell in love with Smoky. All that summer Chloe helped me get Smoky used to the saddle and girths. Quickly, Smoky began to trust Chloe. I often laughed with amazement as the stallion started to realize that here at Wolftown people were friends. By this time, Smoky had been at Wolftown for nearly three years.

One day the stallion pulled and reared playfully while Chloe was leading him back to his box. He got away from her

and ran back to the main gate. Chloe was in tears, thinking the stallion was gone, but Smoky knew where his home was and let me easily catch him.

On a bright cold fall day after Chloe had gone back to Spain I decided it was time to try to sit on Smoky. Malcolm was visiting and it seemed like a good time to take the next step in teaching Smoky trust. I slipped the bitless bridle over Smoky's head. Nothing happened. He just sighed and stood waiting. Silently, Malcolm watched as I saddled Smoky, lounged him, and then sat on his back. Malcolm looked at me longingly.

"When I come back from school will you let me ride him?" Malcolm asked.

"Of course!" I answered.

That day I called Billy and told him that Smoky's days of fear were over. He loved his home here with us and he now had a home forever at Wolftown.

It took three years of working with Smoky to get him to the point of saddle and sitting on him. Through many seasons and many changing moods this horse and this woman ran upstream like salmon with joy, frustration, determination, and finally peace. We are still learning from each other. Today, *Natoowappee Ponokamita*, Sun's Own Horse, is Wolftown's teacher of returning trust and joy in partnership.