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## Fools Crow

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## *Fools Crow*

It was a sunny, windless day and the seven children pulling their buffalo rib sleds to a steep hill beyond the horse herds talked and teased each other. The two girls, at twelve winters, were the oldest. They had been sent to keep an eye on the younger ones, but they were not happy, for the five boys made jokes about the size of their breasts and the skinniness of their legs. One Spot, in particular, was cruel to them. He liked these times when he didn't have to follow his older brother around, and so he bullied the younger boys and made the girls chase him. He boasted of his hunting skill and tried to rub snow in another boy's face. When one of the girls hit him with a small skin of pemmican, it stung his cheek but he didn't cry. He called the girl Skinny Weasel and he liked her, although she was a year older than he was. She liked One Spot's brother, Good Young Man, but he was more interested in hunting than girls. He was off hunting the bighorns with Fools Crow now in the foothills of the Backbone. They would be gone for two or three sleeps. One Spot had been jealous of Good Young Man's fortune, but Fools Crow had promised him a set of horns. He picked up a handful of snow and threw it at Skinny Weasel. His cheek stung but he liked her.

None of them noticed the wolf that had emerged from behind a clump of drifted-over greasewood until he was fifty paces to the side of them. He was large and gray and his eyes were golden in the brilliant sun. Snow clung to one side of him as though he had been lying down. As he walked, his tail drooped and dragged on the deep snow and a sound, somewhere between a growl and a grunt, came up from his chest.

It was this sound that Skinny Weasel's girlfriend heard, and when she looked over she saw the animal's gait was shakey and listed to one side. He had his head down, but she noticed his tongue hanging almost to the snow. Then she saw the whiteness around his mouth and she thought he had been eating snow. Her first impulse was to turn and run, but then the big mouth began to veer away from them. She watched him out of the corner of her eye as the wolf circled behind them. Then she said something to Skinny Weasel in a low voice and the girls stopped and turned. It was at this point that one of the boys let out a cry of fear, for he had just seen the wolf.

The wolf looked up at them and coughed and bared his fangs, making chewing motions as though he were trying to rid himself of a bone or hairball. He watched listlessly as the children ran, all but One Spot, who stood in the deep snow with his hands on his hips. He taunted the bigmouth with a war song that he had learned from Fools Crow.

The other children stopped near the base of the big hill and turned to watch. The wolf covered the thirty paces with such speed that they didn't have a chance

to cry out a warning. By the time One Spot had turned to run, the wolf was upon him, knocking him face-down in the snow, standing over him, growling, the hair on his back standing up and shining in the sunlight. The children screamed as they watched the wolf attack the bundled-up child as he tried to crawl away. He struck repeatedly at the blanket, his low growl now a roar of fury. At last he found One Spot's head and sank his fangs into the exposed skin behind the ear. The child screamed in pain and turned over, only to feel a fang knock against his cheek bone, opening it up. Then the fangs were twisting and pulling at the cheek, gnashing into the soft flesh. One Spot felt the wetness and the hot breath. He saw for one brief instant the yellow eye and the laid-back ear—then he sank into the red darkness and deep snow.

Skinny Weasel was crying as she watched the wolf stagger away. In his charge and attack he had used up the last of his energy. Now his throat was swollen shut and the saliva hung in long strands from his mouth. He began a wide circle, always veering to his right, his eyes now seeing nothing, his breath coming in harsh barks, his tongue and tail once again hanging and dragging on the snow. Skinny Weasel watched him disappear behind a stand of willows near the river; then she ran to the limp, ragged form in the snow field. When she rolled him over, she bit her lips to keep from screaming. A flap of ragged skin lay back over One Spot's eye, exposing the clean white bone of his cheek. One ear lobe hung from a thin piece of skin and there was a large mat of blood in the hair. She thought she heard a rattle deep in the boy's throat. With a shudder, she placed the flap of skin down over the cheek bone. Then she and the others managed to lift him onto his sled. Skinny Weasel's girlfriend covered him up with her own blanket. Then the two girls pulled the sled through the deep snow back toward camp. The sun was still high and the sweat was cool on the girls' bodies.

By the time Fools Crow and Good Young Man got back from their hunting trip, four days later, One Spot was able to sit up and take some meat. But most of the time he lay in his robes and thought of the yellow eye and the laid-back ear, the harsh breath and the snapping teeth. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the bounding wolf and he cried out in his weakness and pain. Heavy Shield Woman had slept little, despite the fact that Killdeer and another woman had attempted to take over the nursing of her son. Now she sat in a listless trance and thought of the many things that had happened to her family. She didn't really think, but images of White Quiver and Killdeer and Good Young Man entered her head and they all seemed far away, as though she had lost them all. Even when she looked down at One Spot, in one of his rare moments of peace, she saw the black pitchy substance that held his cheek in place and she thought that he had gone away from her too. Only Killdeer was there to talk with, but Heavy Shield Woman didn't talk. She answered questions without elaboration and she didn't volunteer any conversation. In some ways, she felt a lingering guilt (she had felt it for some time) about her role as medicine woman at the Sun Dance ceremonies. She thought she could not be a virtuous woman, for she felt no happiness or peace since her husband was returned to her. Her virtue (if that was what it was) resulted from a drab emptiness in her life, a day-to-day barrenness of spirit relieved only by moments

of pleasure at the antics of her sons and Killdeer's swelling belly. But these moments were short-lived and only increased her over-all sadness, as she thought of their futures, her own future. She knew she would never see White Quiver again and that thought almost gave her relief; but then she would think of the happiness they had shared, the times they had lain together, the pride in his eyes each time she delivered him a son, and she would become consumed with a restless fury. Many times she thought of going to Three Bears and telling him what was in her heart and renouncing her role as medicine woman. In her mind she had already done so. Now when the girls looked to her for guidance, she averted her eyes and said nothing. She began to avoid them, for she was sure they would see in her eyes what she felt in her heart.

But Fools Crow and Good Young Man did not know any of this as they rode into camp with the carcasses of two bighorns. True to his word Fools Crow had a set of horns tied to the frame of one of the pack horses. He rode first to his own lodge and dumped one of the bighorns in the snow beside the entrance. Then he led the other pack horse to Heavy Shield Woman's lodge, kicking a black dog in the ribs when he became too curious. As he loosened the rawhide strings that held the animal down, Killdeer emerged from her mother's lodge. She came forward and squeezed his upper arm and smiled. She called to her brother, Good Young Man, who sat exhausted on his horse, ready to drive the pack horses back to the herd. Wearily, he rolled onto his belly and slid off the horse. He had planned to return to the camp in triumph because he had shot one of the bighorns with Fools Crow's rifle, but now he felt the stiffness in his legs and wanted only to lie down and sleep.

But Killdeer motioned him close, and then she told them about One Spot's encounter with the wolf. Even as she explained that he was all right, her voice shook and she looked at the snow at Fools Crow's feet. Good Young Man listened to his sister, first with fear, and then relief. He had forgotten about being tired, and when his sister paused, he ducked into the lodge.

Killdeer looked into her husband's eyes. "The children he was with think the wolf might have the whitemouth. They say he was acting funny, walking sideways in a big circle, his tail dragging in the snow. They think he had the foam on the mouth, but they couldn't tell if it was that, or if he was eating snow."

"Did he breathe different?"

"Skinny Weasel said it was like a harsh bark in his throat."

"Maybe it was a bone caught."

"Maybe," said Killdeer, but her voice was doubtful.

"Is your mother in the lodge?"

"She is out gathering firewood."

Fools Crow entered the lodge, with Killdeer right behind him. Good Young Man knelt beside his brother, holding his hand. One Spot looked at Fools Crow; then he grinned.

"I sang my war song," he said.

"But did you have your weapons?" Fools Crow got down on his knees and ruffled the boy's hair.

"No," the boy said sheepishly.

"Hai-ya! What warrior goes out empty-handed?"

"He would kill this wolf with his bare hands. He would be a great warrior," said Good Young Man with a smile.

"If I had my knife—"

"If he had his knife! Listen to him talk!" Fools Crow laughed. "And now you have your first battle wounds. Let me see." Fools Crow leaned over the boy's face. The patch of skin held by the black pitch looked a pale purple and was slightly swollen. He almost lost his whole cheek, thought Fools Crow. As it is, it will always be swollen and discolored, but it will at least be there. The earlobe was completely bitten off and would cause no trouble. But behind the ear, in a patch of cut-off hair, there were several puncture wounds. The whole area was an angry red, except for the small white circles around each fang mark. These were draining, but the area was swollen and tender-looking. It scared Fools Crow to look at these wounds, but he didn't say anything.

"He has nightmares," said Killdeer. "He gets very little sleep because of them."

"Sleep-bringer will visit soon. All warriors have bad dreams after battle—they will pass." Fools Crow looked down at One Spot. "You must not think of this wolf as your enemy. He did only what wolves will do. The big-mouth is a sacred power-animal, and if he visits you in your dreams, it is only because he wishes to help you. Someday, he will become your secret helper."

"When I am old enough for my vision?"

"Yes. Then he will come to you and give you some of his secret medicine. But for now, you must think of him as your brother and treat him with great respect. Do you understand that?"

"But why did he attack me?"

"This one was—sick. I think he didn't know what he was doing. But wolves are unpredictable. It is best to leave them alone, even if they are our brothers—like the real-bear."

"Will I have a scar forever?"

"Do you remember the story of Poia—Scarface?"

"Yes. He came from Sun Chief and instructed our people in the Sun Dance. Afterward, Sun Chief made him a star in the sky, just like his father, Morning Star."

"But before all that, he was a boy just like you, with a scar on his face—"

"But the people laughed at him and scorned him!"

"In those days, the people were not wise. Now we honor Poia. Of all the Above Ones, he is most like us, and so you must think of your scar as a mark of honor. You will wear it proudly and the people will be proud of you. And they will think highly of you because you did not kill your brother, the wolf." Fools Crow laughed. "We will tell them you took pity on this big-mouth."

One Spot thought for a moment, his dark eyes narrowed and staring up at the point where the lodge-poles came together. He heard some children run by but he didn't envy them. Finally he said, "Yes, I took pity on my brother. But if I had my weapons, I surely would have killed him."

One spot did not get over his dreams, but now instead of attacking him, the wolf turned away or stopped, sometimes lifting his lip to growl, other times simply staring at the boy through golden eyes. But he always kept his distance and One

Spot, in spite of his fear, began to look forward to the wolf's visits, for he was memorizing every aspect of the animal, from his silver-tipped fur to the way his long ears flickered when One Spot shouted at him. For seven sleeps he dreamed of the big-mouth and on the eighth day, he was well enough to walk down to the river to throw rocks. Good Young Man stayed with him, never leaving the lodge to play with friends or even to visit Killdeer and Fools Crow. Together, he and his mother had skinned and quartered the bighorn. The meat was strong but good and would last a long time. Heavy Shield Woman also seemed to be improving. For the first time in many sleeps she went to visit a friend who lived on the other side of camp. The friend was very glad to see her for she had been concerned about Heavy Shield Woman. They ate and talked until well after dark and the friend noticed that Heavy Shield Woman smiled and laughed more than she had in some time and talked less about her bad fortune. When the friend's husband came home, with a fat blackhorn cow he had killed on the Cutbank, Heavy Shield Woman remembered that she had not fed One Spot and Good Young Man. She looked up at the stars as she hurried along the icy path to her lodge and the cold air was fresh in her chest.

When she entered the lodge, Good Young Man looked up anxiously. He was kneeling by his brother's side. "One Spot seems to be sick again. He seems to have difficulty swallowing. He moves his jaws and is thirsty all the time but he can't drink."

Heavy Shield woman ran to One Spot and sank to her knees. His forehead glistened in the firelight and his throat seemed to jump and quiver on its own. He looked up at her and his eyes were wide with fear. He tried to speak but the effort made him swallow and he cried out in pain. In panic he began to thrash around under the buffalo robe. Heavy Shield Woman held him, and spoke soothing words to him, but he didn't seem to hear or know her.

"Good Young Man, put on the water to heat—build up the fire first—then run for, for Fools Crow and Killdeer. Run fast."

One Spot had quieted down a little, but when Heavy Shield Woman looked down at him, she saw the saliva bubbling around his mouth. His eyes were dark and unseeing.

When Good Young Man returned with Fools Crow and Killdeer, Heavy Shield Woman was mopping the sick boy's face with a cloth dampened in the warm water. Suddenly One Spot began to tremble violently and make noises in his throat. He tried to kick the robe off, but Fools Crow held his legs.

"It is the whitemouth," he said. "The wolf has infected him."

"Oh, I feared it. I knew it would happen. I saw it once as a girl. But we must do something!" Heavy Shield Woman moaned as she remembered how her girlfriend had died of a kit-fox bite. She had never forgotten it, and now she was seeing it again.

"Killdeer! Hold his legs while I get Mik-api." But before he left, he glanced at One Spot's face and he shuddered.

Fools Crow was gone for a long time. Killdeer helped her mother hold down the struggling boy. He did not recognize either of them, but the strange noise in his throat seemed a cry for help. Killdeer sank back on her heels once when her brother suddenly stopped and held himself rigid. She wiped the sweat from her

forehead, and only then did she realize that she had been crying.

At last, Fools Crow entered the lodge. His chest was heaving and his face was crimson.

"Where's Mik-api?" Killdeer held her breath.

"I searched the camp—but he was not to be found."

He looked down and Heavy Shield woman was looking up at him with a blankness in her eyes. He suddenly thought that he had not looked at her this way since he had married Killdeer—nor had she looked at him. But now this taboo did not matter.

"We need a green hide," he said. "Mik-api once told me how to do this."

Heavy Shield Woman looked down at her son who was beginning to stir again. A trickle of blood from the crescent scab on his cheek ran down his neck. She wiped the saliva from his mouth. "Morning Eagle has just returned from his hunt. He brought back a blackhorn."

Fools Crow ran across a small icy field to Morning Eagle's lodge. He told the hunter what he needed and the two men began to skin the blackhorn. They worked quickly, not caring if they punctured the skin or left too much meat on it.

When they finished, Fools Crow draped the skin over his shoulder and began to trot back to Heavy Shield Woman's lodge. He was surprised to see so many people standing around. They had been talking among themselves, but he hadn't heard a word.

Back in the lodge the two women undressed the violent boy while Fools Crow spread the green hide, skin side up, on the other side of the fire. Good Young Man helped him clear away the spot. Fools Crow clapped him on the shoulder and squeezed. Then he helped the women carry One Spot over to the hide. He was taken aback by the strength in the small body and he understood how much effort it had taken the women to hold him down. But they managed to lay him on the smooth cool skin, with his arms pinned to his sides, and roll him up. Only his head stuck out of the furry bundle. Killdeer looked down and could not believe that the contorted face, the white foamy mouth which uttered such strange harsh sounds, belonged to her younger brother. But she knew that when a bad spirit entered one's body, the body no longer belonged to the person but became the embodiment of that spirit. And so, as she looked at the face, she grew calm, for she felt that now the spirit had been trapped, her husband would drive it away with the medicine he learned from Mik-api. She helped her mother to the far side of the fire and squatted to watch.

Fools Crow, who had stopped by his lodge for his parfleche of medicines, took out a small bundle of sweetgrass and threw some into the fire. Then he lit braids and purified both the out-of-his-mind boy and himself. He began to chant in a steady rhythm that matched his own heartbeat. As he chanted he passed his hands over the boy. His eyes were closed and the steady rhythm of his voice seemed to place the boy under a spell. One Spot had stopped struggling and the noise in his throat became less a cry of fear and pain. Then Fools Crow removed a burning stick from the fire and touched it against the furry hide. There was a hiss and the lodge was suddenly filled with the stink of burning hair. Heavy Shield Woman started, but Killdeer held her close. Still chanting, Fools Crow burned off more of the curly hair. He did this several times until the hair was black and crinkly, then he turned the boy over, and the movement made One Spot cry out. But now Fools Crow

began to pass the burning stick over the green robe, lighting long strips of hair and the smell made Killdeer feel faint. She looked beyond her mother to Good Young Man, but he was watching intently, mesmerized by the moving stick of fire. Again Fools Crow turned the boy over until he was lying on his stomach. The boy made no sound and Killdeer became frightened. But when she saw his eyes flicker, she let out a deep breath.

Once Fools Crow stopped to wipe One Spot's sweat-drenched head. He looked into the boy's eyes, but they were opaque and without recognition. Then he turned him again and burned off the last of the hair.

When he finished, Fools Crow threw a bundle of sage onto the fire to purify the air. As he did this he said a prayer to the Above Ones and to the Medicine Wolf to take pity on the boy and to restore him to health. Then he instructed the women to unwrap him and bathe him with warm water. While they did this, he took some sticky-root and tastes-dry and ground it up into a paste.

The women placed the small limp body on a robe and Fools Crow swabbed the paste on the boy's throat. They covered him with another robe.

Fools Crow sent the two women back to his own lodge, there to prepare some broth and meat. He said he would send Good Young Man to fetch them when they were needed. Heavy Shield Woman was reluctant to leave, but Killdeer talked her out of the lodge. The sudden draft of cold air swirled through the lodge and dried the sweat on Fools Crow's face. The lodge smelled of burnt hair and sage and sticky-root.

Good Young Man built up the fire and gave Fools Crow a drink of water. He dipped another cupful and looked questioningly at his younger brother, but the medicine man shook his head and motioned the youth to sit on the other side of the fire.

For the rest of that night Fools Crow beat on his small drum, which was nothing more than a piece of tough neck hide stretched over a willow frame. His stick was made of ash, rounded at one end and feathered at the other. He accompanied the slow beat with a monotonous song, and in spite of his fascination, Good Young Man eventually fell asleep. Four times before dawn he was awakened by a shrill whistle—short, furious blasts—and started to his feet to see Fools Crow crouching, blowing his eagle-bone pipe over the length of the still form of One Spot. Then he would watch for a while before drifting off again.

Sometime after first light, he awoke and it was quiet. He threw back the robe and sat up. Fools Crow still knelt beside his brother, but now he was hunched over, his head down. Good Young Man watched his broad back move up and down with his breathing. Then he slid from beneath the robe and tended to the fire. It was nearly out, but he coaxed a flame out of some dry twigs. When he had the fire crackling, he crept around and looked down at the face of his younger brother. In the half-light of dawn, the face looked pale and shiny, like the back-fat of a blackhorn. Only the skin on the cheek that had been torn away had some color. It was a dull purple, fading to bright pink along the scar. Good Young Man got down on all fours and looked closer. He looked at the chest beneath the robe. Nothing moved. He became frightened and in his fear, he blew on the face. The eyes seemed to move beneath the lids. He blew again, and this time the eyes opened and the brows came down in irritation.