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Frances Washburn

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THE
SACRED
WHITE
TURKEY

Frances Washburn



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Set in Monotype Dante.

Designed by A. SHAHAN.

For my children,
Lee & Stella,
who have the most
important quality
in the world.
They are decent
human beings.



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THE
SACRED
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1 Stella

On easter Sunday in 1963, a white turkey appeared on Hazel Latur's doorstep, pecking at the door as if demanding entrance. That turkey set in motion a series of events that would rock the community from end to end, upset the established order, and make some of the most traditional among us question our beliefs. Had I not been there, I would not have believed what was to come, and even after all these years, I still doubt my own senses, wonder about where the turkey came from, why it came to my grandmother, of all people, and where it went. That white turkey was *wakan*, and you know, some of our people say that word means holy, and some say, no, it just means something unexplainable, and a lot of things can be unexplainable without being holy. Some people make jokes and say that the BIA is *wakan* because nothing that bureaucracy does is explainable, and that makes the people who think the word means holy and sacred pretty mad. Disrespectful. Sacrilegious even, if you can apply *that* word to a belief system that isn't Christian. I believe the turkey was both holy and unexplainable. I've tried a thousand explanations over more than forty years for all the things that happened, and none of them make sense. I can't prove anything. I only know what

I saw, me, with my own two eyes. Once you've heard the story, you can believe it or not.

A gentle knocking more like a tapping awoke me from my dreams of candy eggs delivered by a pink bunny, even though I was twelve years old and knew better. Hazel was a medicine woman, which meant that people were likely to show up at any hour of day or night with a sick relative or an injured animal asking for her help. I thought sure that was what the tapping was. It was early, the sun barely up, so I knew Hazel would be down milking the cow, but I could open the door and make a welcome.

I leaped out of the heavy comforters and into the crispness of the spring morning, ran to the door, and there stood not a person but a white turkey, cocking its head from side to side, darting its beak at the cats that dared annoy it, and pecking at the door. I had heard that some people bought their children colored chicks for easter, but Hazel would never stoop to such foolishness, not when our own hens hatched out perfectly lovely yellow babies every spring; nor was there likely to be a basket of candy eggs hidden in the flour bin for me to find, and certainly she would not have gotten me a turkey for easter.

Hazel almost dropped the milk pail she was carrying up from the shed, where the cow stood outside the battered wooden door placidly chewing her cud.

"What's this?" she said to me, and then to the turkey, "And where did you come from?"

The turkey trotted over to her, sure the pails contained grain, but Hazel pushed the turkey away with her rubber-booted foot. It danced sideways, pecking at her boot.

"Hmm," she said with her brows lowered at me, standing there shivering in my skivvies. "Is this your doing, Stella?"

I shook my head.

"Strange timing. It's months and months until thanksgiving,"

Hazel said as she opened the door and deposited the pail of milk on the table. Outside the cats clawed at the screen, yowling, demanding their share of the fresh, steaming milk. The white turkey pecked at the cats, pecked at the screen.

“Grandma,” I started, but no sooner was the word out of my mouth than her hand shot out and slapped me across the mouth hard enough to sting.

“The name is Hazel,” she said, “even though I am a grandmother, yours.” I did know better, but the appearance of the turkey had addled my brain, made me want some comfort, even if only in naming her as my grandmother.

Quickly, she pulled me to her cow-sweat-smelling shirt and hugged me so tight I could barely breathe.

“I love you more than life, little one,” she said. “But I don’t like to be reminded of—things.” She held me a moment more, then pushed me toward the door. “Go get some oats for that turkey. No. Wait, get yourself dressed first.”

I ran back to the bedroom, pulled on the knees-out jeans I had shed on the floor the night before, stomped my feet sockless into my old worn boots while pulling on an old blue checkered shirt of Hazel’s that hung on me like a sack.

She was putting together the parts of the cream separator when I came back through the kitchen, glancing through the screen from time to time.

I hesitated.

“Hazel? Is it special?”

“Is what special?”

“The turkey. It’s white. I’ve never seen a white turkey. Does that make it special? And it came on easter Sunday.”

She was just sitting down on the bench with the cream separator mounted on it, ready to turn the crank. The corners of her mouth turned up in amusement.

“You mean some spiritual being?”

I nodded doubtfully, fiddling with a button on the baggy shirt.

“Don’t be silly. It’s just a turkey. It probably escaped from a truck going through on the highway or wandered off from somebody’s place around here.”

“But I never heard of anyone around here raising turkeys.”

“Doesn’t mean somebody hasn’t just got a flock recently,” she said, putting the steel bowl on top of the separator, laying the clean filter cloth over the top of that, fastening it on with clothes pins.

“And it’s white,” I said, “Aren’t turkeys always brown or black? Like the ones we color in school at thanksgiving.”

She shook her head.

“No, dear. These days turkey farmers breed for white ones. They’re easier to clean for the market. Not so many pinfeathers.”

Pinfeathers. I knew about those. Little feathers just emerging that had to be picked out of the chicken’s skin when we dressed them, a tedious job, but not so nasty as having to kill the chickens and pull out the guts, saving back the liver, the gizzard, and the heart.

I heard the slow hum of the separator as Hazel started turning the crank.

The turkey picked at the oats I put out for it as if it was starving. It was a real creature, then; it had to eat, could not live off air, but I couldn’t help noticing how very *white* and clean this turkey was. The chickens that we kept had dusty feathers in spite of constant preening and pecking to rid themselves of mites, and there were always traces of manure around their butts. This turkey looked as if it had been bathed in bleach water and polished with car wax. It gleamed.

When it had finished all the oats I had scattered for it, it strolled off as if taking a tour of the place. I followed it, half expecting

it to speak to me, but of course, it only uttered the usual turkey nonsense. I thought that perhaps I had not the wisdom to understand whatever message it had. Maybe the message was not for me at all. At the chicken house, it stopped, looked inside, strolled in, promptly appropriating the end roost, the one that the black rooster had claimed as his territory. He did not object, but only gave a little dip of his head as he moved aside. In spite of Hazel's words, I believed that turkey was sent for a purpose, or was a spirit that had sent itself. More than forty years later, no matter what Hazel said, I still believe that or something like it even though I have no evidence to prove it.

School still had some weeks to run, and I was glad because all the students at the little county school lived so far apart that we didn't often see each other in the summer. I wanted to share my story of the coming of the white turkey, but when I breathlessly told the Morris sisters and Avril Lately, they only stared at me.

Finally, Teensy Morris said, "Oh, you're just making up stories again."

"I'm not! It's true! It's big and white and it's a turkey."

Avril gave a snort of disgust.

"Turkeys don't come in white. Everyone knows that."

"Yes, they do!" I said, hands on my hips ready to slap them into believing me. "Hazel said that farmers raise white ones 'cause they're easier to clean. You don't know everything!"

So it was that Teensy and Melva Morris and Avril Lately walked home from school with me, even though it was a mile in the wrong direction from their homes, to see the white turkey.

There it was, perched on the edge of the horse tank, getting a drink. I ran toward it in panic. What if it fell in and drowned? It happened to a chicken every now and then. But as I reached out to grab the turkey, I slipped in the muddy overflow from the tank and sprawled on my back, knocking the wind out of myself. As I lay there panting for breath, the turkey jumped down,

squished through the mud, and stood by my face, where it bent its head to look at my eyes. For one moment I thought it would peck my eyes out for foolishly trying to grab it, but it only made a garbled cluck, cocked its head, and pecked at something in the mud beside my ear. I sat up.

The Morris sisters and Avril stood staring at the turkey, at me.

“See!” I gasped out. “I *told* you we had a white turkey.”

“Wow,” said Avril, and then, “Where did it come from?”

“Is it—is it—*wakan*?” Teensy asked in a soft, low voice.

There. That was the word I had been searching for.

“Yes,” I said trying to look dignified and deserving of a sacred white turkey, standing there in my muddied clothes.

“Stella,” my grandmother’s voice came ominously from behind the kitchen screen door where I could barely see her for the glare of sun. I had been caught out running my mouth. Again.

Hazel opened the screen door and walked out onto the stone step, a dish towel in her hand. Her dark, gray shot hair gleamed in the setting sun, silhouetting her tall, slender figure, held erect in that posture I knew meant she was less than happy with me.

“Stella, don’t be filling people’s heads full of nonsense.”

She sat down on the step, dish towel in her lap.

“Come here,” she said, patting either side of her. The Morris sisters and Avril went reluctantly, Avril standing in front of her but well back out of her reach, Teensy and Melva gingerly sitting as if the step was hot. Hazel had a reputation, one that I think she liked to perpetrate. She was a healer and a good one: sometimes her cures were so immediate, so long-lasting, that people talked. They said that anyone that effective had to be in touch with more than just the good spirits. It didn’t help that Hazel still looked young in her mid-forties, still beautiful, still turned the heads of men, including the heads of those who gossiped. The biggest talker of all was not a woman, but a man, George Wanbli, a big voiced medicine man from up on Potato Creek. He

scoffed at everything good said about Hazel. He was jealous of her, I know now. Medicine men don't charge for their services, exactly, but it is traditional of people seeking their help to bring a gift along with the request for help. Sometimes, they bring money, but usually the gift is more tangible—always an offering of tobacco, but also coffee, sugar, a case of soda or two or something like. Medicine people are supposed to go into the profession because they feel called to help others, because they have a connection with the spirit world, not because of what presents in money or goods they can extract from people. I don't know any rich medicine people, but some have more than others. George Wanbli had an active practice, with more people coming to see him than any other *wicasa waken* on the rez, but he was a jealous man who didn't want to be shown up by any other medicine person, especially not Hazel. She was a woman for one thing, and women *wicasa wakan* were not usual among us Lakota. Besides that, Hazel was gaining a reputation that made George feel threatened. Medicine people may have better contacts with the spirits, but they aren't always wise people, or even kind.

“Stella, you too,” Hazel said.

I walked over beside her just as reluctantly as the other kids, but not because I was afraid of Hazel's powers, not spiritual ones anyway, but the power of her right hand to swat me for showing out.

“Listen to me!” Hazel said. “That turkey is just a bird. It is NOT *wakan*. An eagle may be holy, or a certain place on the earth where a wonderful thing happened.” She nodded toward the turkey, now pecking small stones from the ground. “Look at it. It's a bird, a domesticated one at that. Turkeys are stupid birds. They say that in a rainstorm, turkeys will drown because they don't have sense enough to keep their heads down so water doesn't run up their noses. That's probably not true, but they can't be smart or they wouldn't have gotten lulled into eating what people give them,

sticking around until they're fat and we chop their heads off and eat them for thanksgiving dinner. See?"

Avril nodded, but his eyes kept returning to the turkey.

"See? You hear what I say?" Hazel looked from one Morris sister to the other. They nodded their heads vigorously. Hazel put her hands on the backs of their necks and pulled them up as she stood. "IT'S JUST A TURKEY. Now, go home. Your mommas will be wondering why you're so late."

She stood there looking after them as they walked back up the lane from our house heading home, lunch pails bumping against their thighs.

"Bye!" I yelled after them, but only Melva had nerve enough to give a little waggle of her hand.

"Stella."

I didn't want to look up.

"You can't be starting rumors about a dumb barnyard animal being a holy creature. It's not. You know that."

I didn't know any such of thing, but I couldn't say that to Hazel, so I didn't say anything.

"We'll have half the countryside out here to see this damned turkey, if rumors get started."

"I didn't start any rumors!" I protested. "Teensy is the one who said it was *wakan*."

"Then you should have told her that it isn't *wakan*. If it happens again, you know what to say?"

"Yes, Hazel. It's just a turkey. A dumb domesticated bird."

"Right."

Half the countryside started showing up that very night. After supper, a car drove into the yard, and more than half a dozen people stepped out. Avril's parents, his grandmother who lived with them, his three younger brothers, and older sister, Nancy, who had always tormented me in school before she graduated and went on to high school last year. Mrs. Lately had her arms full of bags.

“I’ve brought some clothes of Nancy’s that she’s outgrown,” Mrs. Lately said as Hazel came out to greet them. “I thought Stella might get some good out of them. I hate to throw out anything good.”

Hazel took the bags with a smile and a thank you, but I knew I would never wear any of those clothes. Hazel said that Clara Lately let Nancy dress like a hooker. One of her skirts wouldn’t make a good-sized dish rag.

“Come in,” Hazel said. “I’ve got coffee on the stove and half a batch of cream puffs.”

I wished Hazel hadn’t said that. I loved cream puffs, but Hazel didn’t make them very often. She saved every ounce of cream to sell in town to pay for coffee, sugar, flour, and an occasional package of hamburger, ground fresh at Jerry’s Market. I knew there wouldn’t be any cream puffs left after Clara Lately and her family left. Clara was the joke of every gathering, funeral, wedding, ceremony, or whatever. People said she always left with a doughnut stuck on every finger, and it wasn’t far from the truth. She would displace a lot of water if she could be fully submerged, a concept I had just learned in school.

“Let’s go see the turkey,” Avril whispered.

“Yeah, let’s!” his youngest brother, Lester, insisted.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Hazel’s mad at me about showing off the turkey.” I turned and went into the house behind their father, Ed, a skinny little man who looked like he didn’t get enough to eat.

They sat at the table while Clara Lately removed every piece of clothing from the bags, one at a time, and held them up to me. I was six inches shorter than Nancy Lately. Most of the pieces had seen better days, with frayed hems and stains from who knew what. One white sundress had grass stains on the back. Grandmother Lately fingered the fabric of the various items and remarked that they would have made good material for the quilt she was making.

I was tired of the Latelys long before they were ready to go home. They lingered over cup after cup of coffee and just one more of those cream puffs, “Hazel, you’re such a good baker.” Finally, even Clara couldn’t think of another thing to say, so she just came out with it.

“Avril says you’ve got a turkey. A *white* turkey.”

Hazel shot me a look from her black eyes that said “YOU!”

I changed my mind. The longer the Latelys stayed, the more time Hazel had to get over being mad at me for telling about the turkey.

“We had one wander in here on Sunday morning,” she said. “I’m going to put an ad in the paper about it. It belongs to someone, that’s sure. It’s been well fed.”

Clara licked a spot of cream off the back of her hand.

“We’ve never seen a live turkey before,” Clara said. “I can’t imagine a *white* turkey.”

Hazel shrugged.

“It’s just an ordinary turkey, except it’s white.”

“Grandma,” Clara said, poking the old lady awake. “Grandma, have you ever seen a turkey before?”

The old lady’s milky cataract eyes stared at the corner of the ceiling.

“No. I can’t recall ever seeing one. A live one, that is. But I’ve seen many a cooked one. Did I tell you about—”

Clara smoothly interrupted.

“It would really be nice if Grandma could see a real live turkey,” Clara said. “She’s not getting any younger, you know.”

I wondered how she could see the turkey anyway with her eyes half blinded with cataracts.

“Avril saw the turkey!” Avril’s next-youngest brother, Melvin, spoke up now from his position beside his grandmother, where he had been silently pinching off bites of the last cream puff, which she had in front of her but couldn’t seem to find with her gnarled, arthritic hands.

“It’s just a turkey,” Hazel said, “a dumb animal.” The way she was looking at Clara, I wondered who she thought was a dumb animal.

Mr. Lately spoke up. “Are you *sure* it was a turkey, Avril? Might have been a white wild goose or—”

“It’s a turkey!” Hazel said. “All right. Everybody out. We’re going to see the turkey.”

She grabbed the flashlight from atop the refrigerator and led the way out the front door to the chicken coop. Clara rushed after, leaving her husband to lead Grandma stumbling along behind as she tried to shake off Mr. Lately’s hand.

“I’m old and half blind,” she grumbled. “I’m not a cripple.”

The flashlight beam bounced along the weed-bordered path as Hazel took long strides. One of the kids tripped over a sleepy cat, came out to see what the fuss was about. The cat yowled and ran off into the weeds.

Hazel waited until the entire Lately family clustered at the chicken coop door, and then she ceremoniously pulled out the stick that went through the hasp to keep the door shut.

“Be quiet,” she said. “No use disturbing the hens.”

The moon was just rising over the distant hills, a fat spring moon that made the flashlight unnecessary for seeing outside once your eyes got used to the semi-light.

Hazel opened the door and aimed the flashlight inside the coop, motioning the Latelays one at a time to step up and peek through. Avril pushed his way to the front, but Melvin jerked him back.

“Not you! You already saw!”

Clara pushed them both aside and leaned over slightly to peer through the low door.

“I see chickens,” she said.

“Of course you do,” Hazel said. “It’s a hen house.”

“But where’s the turkey?” Clara’s voice was muffled as she pushed her round body through the shorter than normal door.

“Look at the end roost,” Hazel said.

“I don’t see . . .” Clara started to say.

A fluttering of heavy wings interrupted her, and a loud sound that wasn’t exactly a gobble, wasn’t exactly a squawk, wasn’t anything human, either. It came from behind them, from the fence that divided the chicken pen from the cow pen, and all the Latelys pushed forward against each other, shoving Clara to her knees in the mess on the floor of the chicken coop.

I turned, and there with the moon behind its head like a halo sat the white turkey, with something around its head like a shiny crown of thorns. Again came that sound, “RRR ppptt.” I never heard a turkey make that sound before or since, but there was no doubt it came from the turkey’s beak, directly from the turkey’s beak, a pronouncement on the state of affairs it observed.

Old Grandma Lately saw—well, whatever it was that a half-blind old lady could see, or thought she saw.

“*Wakan!*” she exclaimed. “It’s holy! Look, it has a halo! And a crown of thorns! And it said ‘REPENT!’”

It didn’t sound like “repent” to me, more like it had a piece of corn caught in its craw.

“It’s not *wakan!*” Hazel yelled. “It’s just a goddamned turkey, for chrissake!”

Clara had backed out of the chicken house on all fours, looked over her shoulder, and saw the turkey perched on the fence with the halo of the moon behind it, and immediately rose to her knees and began praying the Hail Mary, but she couldn’t remember the words past the first line, so she only repeated it louder.

“Hail Mary, full of . . . full of . . . Hail Mary, full of . . . HAIL MARY, FULL OF . . .,” as she reached out and pulled the Old Lady down to her knees, too.

The rest of the family stood shocked, staring back and forth between the turkey and the kneeling women.

Then Mr. Lately hollered, “It’s a sign! A sign from the spirits,” and he began a prayer in Lakota. “Tunkasila . . .”

“STOP IT!” Hazel yelled and began laying about her with the flashlight, one blow catching Clara alongside the head, after which she toppled over moaning into the weeds. Another near blow brought the turkey down off the fence, where it gave a very normal turkey sounding “gobblegobblegobble” and walked sedately into the chicken coop.

It took half an hour to herd the hysterical Latelys back to the house, and another pot of coffee and another hour of talking from Hazel before they seemed calm enough to drive safely home, Clara with a wet dishcloth pressed to the knot on her forehead. But Hazel was not able to convince them that they had not seen something out of the ordinary. After that, Hazel was too tired to take me to task for telling Avril about the turkey. We just went to bed.

The next morning when I went out to feed the chickens—and the turkey—I saw that the turkey had gotten an old piece of barbed wire wrapped around its head and neck that it couldn’t get off, or maybe didn’t want to get off. I pushed the turkey up in the corner of the hen house and pulled the wire off, leaving a few little drops of red on the turkey’s neck where the barbs had pierced. I showed it to Hazel, and she just shook her head.

“Fools will believe anything,” she said.

That very day she went to town and put an ad in the LOST, STRAYED, STOLEN section of the newspaper Want Ads. It read: “Strayed in to Hazel Latour’s place, one white turkey. Will the owner please claim it.”

No one did, but the ad sure stirred up conversation. There were no turkey farmers within five hundred miles or more, no turkey processing plants any closer than Minnesota. Highway 20 ran along just south of the state line, but it wasn’t the main route for trucks to take when transporting turkeys to the slaughter plants. The railroad tracks paralleled the highway, but the trains didn’t transport poultry either, or not that anybody could

swear to. Speculation said that maybe a truck had gotten off its main route and come through on the highway; maybe the turkey had escaped from a cage that way. But wouldn't the turkey have been injured crawling out of a wire cage and falling off a truck going at least fifty miles an hour? Then someone else wondered, how could that turkey have made its way across twenty miles of prairie with no water and nothing to eat and coyotes running around out there, not to mention the occasional farm or ranch dog? It might not be a holy turkey, but its appearance was certainly strange and unexplainable.

Hazel decided to put another ad in a paper in the next town over, but the results were the same: no results except for more talk. We would wait a little longer, she decided, and then we would have turkey for dinner, maybe for memorial day, or fourth of July at the latest.

I begged her not to kill the turkey. It might be bad luck, I said, but she laughed at me and told me not to listen to idle talk. In the end, it wasn't my begging that saved the turkey, it was Hazel's own practical ways.

After the Latelys began spreading the story of the turkey's miraculous appearance, other people began showing up. I think they were afraid of the turkey, didn't necessarily want a visitation of the spirit within it but wanted to satisfy some curiosity with a sighting from a distance—in the daytime, of course. People that used to take their troubles to George Wanbli or one of the other *wicasa wakan* started bringing their offerings of tobacco and money, bags of sugar and three-pound cans of Folgers to Hazel.

A car or a pickup would drive up, people would get out with bags of goods. They would observe the social graces of chatting over a cup of coffee and then present their tobacco and gifts and ask Hazel if she would help them with their problem. She could refuse, or she could agree, but if it seemed a worthy case, she agreed. People rarely came to a medicine man with a foolish

request; they knew better. Even if a medicine person agreed to take the case, the spirits would likely be annoyed and give a bad outcome. Hazel's supplicants were real, all right, but while they were getting out of the car, while they were presenting their case, or while they were leaving, they were looking out of the corners of their eyes for a glimpse of the turkey. I knew Hazel was annoyed, she talked about it to me, but she also knew that most of the people had a legitimate need for help, so she wouldn't turn them down just because they had some silly notion that a turkey could be sacred.

A little cash money came in, but much more goods. Our cabinets were full for the first time I could ever remember, with more piled on top. There were stacks of cans full of coffee, cases of canned vegetables, fruit, soup, and bags of sugar that Hazel finally had to put into a metal trash can with a tight lid to keep the ants out of it. Our refrigerator had so much meat inside that Hazel had to rent a cold storage locker in town to preserve the meat that we couldn't eat up right away. I never felt so full when I left the table, so rich.

The house smelled, too, not just of cooking food, but of the cedar, sage, and sweetgrass that Hazel burned as part of the ceremonies she performed for her clients. They worked, too, almost every time, and that brought those people back when they had other problems, brought other people who heard of Hazel's success. It was a prosperous time, and Hazel knew it was because of the white turkey.

One day coming back from a trip to deposit yet more meat in the cold storage locker in town, she brought up the subject of the turkey dinner.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea," she began, "because that turkey is *NOT wakan*. It is just a turkey, a bird. It's true that it's because of the turkey that we have more now than we ever had before, but it's just circumstances because silly people choose

to believe in something even sillier than themselves. There's a logical explanation for where that turkey came from, even if we don't know what it is. You understand?"

I did understand. I knew she was feeling guilty about using the turkey as a drawing card for her medicine man practice.

"We're going to eat that turkey," she said, "but not just yet."

"Okay," I said, and pulled back as she reached out and tugged on my pony tail.

Hazel was wrong about the sacredness of the white turkey, but I couldn't tell her why. She would never have believed me. The white turkey was *wakan*, but not because of some piece of barbed wire wrapped around its head, not because some people thought it spoke to them. On the night the turkey had appeared on the fence to the Latelays, I had put it up for the night with the chickens. The turkey was inside on the end roost where the black rooster used to sit. I saw it there, gleaming in the muted light as I shut the door and put the wooden pin through the hasp on the door. That chicken coop was animal proof. Hazel had made it so after losing too many chickens to winter hungry coyotes, and I had helped her nail strips of board over every crack. That turkey could not have escaped to sit on the fence in the moonlight under any ordinary circumstances, but it had.

That was the first miracle of the white turkey. There would be more.