

Divorce

by

Tara Waters Lumpkin

Published in *Buffalo Spree*, Volume 23, Number 1, Buffalo, NY,
Spring 1989

—seventeen years old—

The sun burned a hole in the sky. The day was cloudless. Kate saw Alex leaning against a fence. She avoided his gaze and continued walking out her pony. Alex strolled over to Mother and placed his hand on her shoulder. They smiled at each other. Kate felt sick to her stomach. She circled by them again.

Patrice came over leading her pony. "Mum, will you school me for the outside course?" she asked, ignoring Alex's presence.

"Yes, but let a few more go. It's too hot—she'll be dead if we school her too much."

The winners were announced over the loudspeaker: Kate had won second place.

"Good going." Patrice said as she slapped Kate's pony on the hindquarters. The pony broke into a trot.

"I guess it's time to school you now," Mother turned and said to Patrice.

Patrice mounted her pony.

That afternoon, before leaving the horse show, Kate tried to erase any traces of Alex that Father might find. She checked the car ashtray removing Lucky Strike cigarettes from among Mother's lip-sticked Salems. Father must never know. He would leave them. Sometimes she wanted him to leave, but then she would remind herself that they would lose everything. Things would be worse. Cleaning the ashtray she remembered how Father used to rock her to sleep at night in the old wooden rocking chair by the window. Outside crickets would chirp; the stars would shine. He sang to her in soft tones, the rocking chair creaking back and forth. But all that had been a long time ago—she was sure she had imagined it.

In early December Father took Patrice and Kate to the Eastern Shore to goose hunt. The trip was "Dad's time with the girls." The air smelled of salt. The sun and marsh grass were ochre-colored. Father was jovial and more relaxed than usual. They stopped at a supermarket and bought food for the long weekend. One of Father's favorite parts of the trip was cooking and eating big meals. The next morning the three of them rose before dawn, dressed in heavy, waterproof clothes and pulled on hip waders. The black Labrador was whining and eager to be off. They filled a thermos with coffee and two others with hot vegetable soup. It was cold outside. The dog sat in the bow of the launch, while in grey pre-dawn light Father guided the craft through black water to a blind. The three of them hid as the sun came up, first orange—a thin line across the horizon—then pink, followed by yellow. They waited for geese to fly, warmed by cup after cup of hot coffee and soup. After an hour, they heard geese honking. The dog shivered with excitement. "Here they come," Dad said. The geese were flying in behind them. Wings beat air. Slowly Dad raised his gun. The geese flew past them, then turned and circled, checking to see if it was safe to land. They came in lower and lower. Kate wanted to leap up and wave her arms to scare them off. Watch out! Watch out! Go away! she thought. There's a man down here with a gun! But she didn't dare shout these words. The geese were wary and circled again. Then the first goose alighted, water spraying around him. Others descended—honks, whirring wings, splashing water. Then gunshots. Loud. Boom. Boom. Boom. Frightened honks. Panic. Birds rose, fleeing into the mottled sky. The gun pounded after them. Boom. Boom. Bodies tumbled through air. Two dead geese floated in the water. A last one fell from the sky. The others had escaped. Honking, they flew high and regrouped into a V formation, then flew on. "Go get them, girl," said Dad to the dog, who retrieved the geese in her soft mouth. They were large birds, heavy, with soft down beneath their outer feathers. The dog retrieved one bird that was crippled but still alive. Kate wrung its neck. The warm body lay still in her hands. She laid it next to the others, grimacing when Patrice looked at the pile. Father was happy and excited. He patted the dog, praised her, then settled back into the blind to wait. At eleven o'clock, they quit. The birds had stopped flying and the three of them were cold and hungry.

For breakfast there were five of them. Dad's friend, Mr. Marston, had arrived that morning with Sara. Mr. Marston made a pitcher of bloody-marys and drank two glasses. His hands stopped shaking. He remarked that it was a good thing that his wife didn't like to shoot. Everyone sat down to eggs and bacon. Mr. Marston had two more bloody-marys.

"Dan, where's that Henrietta?" Mr. Marston asked, as if he had just opened his eyes and noticed that, whoever Henrietta was, she was missing.

Father stared hard at Mr. Marston and the man shut up.

Kate and Patrice exchanged glances: So Father had a mistress.

All winter long when Kate looked at the moon, she saw in it the outline of a white stallion. She was obsessed with men who worked with horses. She was obsessed with Jamie. He was a horse trainer, twenty three, tall and sinewy, with dark, curly hair, and brown eyes. Kate had been in love with him for over a year now. She knew he had numerous girlfriends, but still she kept an eye on him in case the right moment came along. She had decided he would "deflower" her. She saw this not as a plucking, but as a great earthly blooming, a fantasy of perfume and power.

It was December, the Christmas party season. Father let Kate drive his sports car. The world seemed erotic as she swept along dark, curved roads. At a party at the Culpepper's she saw Jamie. He was standing alone in a corner, leaning against a wall, swaying gently, whiskey in hand.

"Jamie," Kate looked at him and took a sip of her drink, "my name is Kate Black."

"Hullo." He held his glass up to the light and squinted. "I've seen you before." He was drunk enough to collapse at any moment.

"Will you drive me home?" he asked.

The night ahead bloomed in her mind.

An orange cat slept at the end of his bed. Never just lay there—a girlfriend had warned her—they hate that. But Jamie was lying there, and she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do. She kissed his chest, his lips, his forehead. He fell asleep.

An alarm went off at four thirty in the morning. Outside it was black. Kate awoke and had no idea where she was, then remembered: she was in bed with Jamie.

"Jamie," she reached over and shook him.

"What?"

"It's Sunday, the alarm's gone off."

"Oh," he mumbled.

Kate stretched out beneath the covers and breathed deeply, thinking how she would catch hell for staying out all night. Her parents had probably called the police. What did she care? After all, what right did those two have to lecture her? She wasn't doing anything they wouldn't do.

Jamie kissed her and folded her into his arms. It was just as she had imagined it would be—she felt as if she were an orchid blooming. His fingers combed back her hair. He told her she had beautiful eyes. She wanted to say: I love you, I love you, I love you, but her friend had warned her that men hate that. "It scares them off," she'd explained. Jamie's body was ugly and hard, so much nicer than her own leaf-like softness. There was initial pain—a bursting—and then slow, building pleasure, a horse galloping inside her, hooves pounding on a sandy beach. She plunged into warm sea foam. She was drowning. Losing herself forever. Lamenting, laughing, crying, moaning. Tearing her hair out. Eating his heart raw. She drowned once, drowned twice, resurfaced again—wet and waiting, naked on a beach. "Just one more time." They plunged under, drowning again, the last time, salt on their tongues. Father in the marsh. Sweat trickling down her back. Mother and Alex. Salt,

sweat and fury, and then a great placid calm—the mind finally blank, empty, purged, saved.

When Mum found out, she cried. "My own daughter, a whore; out all night with that man, that man with his reputation."

"Good God, Mother, this is the twentieth century," Kate snapped.

"Don't talk to your mother that way." Father said.

For days Mother wouldn't speak to her. Father left for the ducking shore. Then one night finally Alex called. Mother's eyes snapped up from her newspaper. She went to the bedroom to take the call. Kate hung up the phone, then looked at Patrice. "Dad told me not to tell you, but I will."

"What?"

"He's divorcing her."

Mother came back. She went to the bar and poured herself a drink then sat in her reading chair.

"I'm going to divorce your father," she announced. The room went dead silent. "He's been having an affair." She put her head in her hands.

"It's all right, Mum," Patrice said.

"I drink too much," Mother replied.

They looked at each other.

"If you're going to drink, you might as well enjoy it," Kate suggested.

"Leave me alone. Okay?" Mum asked.

Kate and Patrice walked up to the barn. There was snow on the ground. The moon cut a gleaming trail of white across fields. A horse nickered when they entered the stable. Inside, the air was warm and smelled of horses. Kate and Patrice stood in the dark. A faint moonlit glow entered through the windows. As their eyes adjusted they could see the shapes that were horses. Kate's pony lay asleep in her stall. She undid the stall latch, entered, knelt in the straw, and laid her head against the pony's neck. The pony's rhythmic breathing was soothing. Meanwhile Patrice had climbed on her pony's back and stretched out, stomach down, her head resting on the pony's hindquarters. The sound of horses munching hay surrounded them. The barn felt warm and safe. In the end you could only rely on animals, Kate thought. People let you down. She would protect herself with animal spirits, the way the Indians did. But then the Indians had all been wiped out, she reminded herself—obviously, there were no guarantees. Still she would fight, fight hard, to protect herself and Patrice. She would be as ruthless as her parents. She would become a woman warrior.

—The End—