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OF THE
Marriage
Hat

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A Novel of High Plains Women
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Wind Women Press
San Francisco, CA

Burning of the Marriage Hat, A Novel of High Plains Women
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“A generational tale deftly written with penetrating insight, personality and feeling, *Burning of the Marriage Hat* is very highly recommended reading and would make an exceptional selection choice for women’s reading groups.”

—*The Midwest Book Review*,
Small Press Bookwatch

“This is a spell-binding and most poignant tale of a woman’s search for the daughter she lost to adoption and the secrets she uncovers along the way.”

—Joe Soll, CSW, author of
Adoption Healing...A Path to Recovery

“The denial of the existence of the problem of a pregnant teen, a theme in this book, is also a theme in life—an extremely interesting book.”

—Susan Franzblau, PhD, host of
“Women’s Voices, Women’s Lives”
on NPR affiliate WFSS 91.9 FM

“What starts out as a novel about the author’s journey back to her roots in Wyoming, turns into a catharsis as she deals with the drama of giving up her daughter for adoption in the 1960s before *Roe v. Wade*.”

—Barrie-Louise Switzen, Executive Producer
“The Woman’s Connection (sm)”

“This is a compelling account—both of the hardscrabble western frontier and of a modern day woman’s quest for knowledge and healing. A remarkable book.”

—Shelley Buck, former editor,
“Her Say News Service,” San Francisco, CA

“The characters are real and the plot has a lot of ‘what happens next?’ The narrator Katherine comes to terms with a society which oppressed and dehumanized women by freeing the ghosts of her past.”

—Jane Edwards, book reviewer, *CUB Communicator*
(Concerned United Birth Parents)

“This was a wonderful book! It was beautifully written. The writer grabbed my attention by switching back and forth through time. I would recommend this book to everyone!”

—Barnes & Noble review

“A compelling novel about growing up in the 1960s in a middle class family in a small prairie town in Wyoming, *Burning of the Marriage Hat* describes the narrow-minded lifestyle one can encounter there. This book begs to be read in one sitting. Definitely a good read.”

—Amazon.com review

“The book is totally engrossing. The author’s mixture of the past and the present is very well done and she succeeds in portraying many characters in a truly enlightening manner. I especially appreciated her appealing descriptions of the Wyoming scenery.”

—BookExpo, 2002 review

**Based on the author’s own account of
coming of age in small town Wyoming on
the cusp of the 1960s sexual revolution.**

Burning
OF THE
Marriage
Hat

*In memory of Mother and Roger
and
for the six million
U.S. birthmothers*

*Let Love clasp Grief lest both be drowned,
Let darkness keep her raven gloss.
Ah, sweeter to be drunk with loss,
To dance with Death, to beat the ground.*

From "In Memoriam A. H. H."

*By Alfred, Lord Tennyson
(1809-1892)*

Author's Note

Wyoming

Brown Rock, Wyoming and Eagle Mountain, Wyoming are fictionalized communities that portray small town life on the high plains during the 1960s and other key points in the 20th century. These towns are drawn from extensive research, travel, and the author's own upbringing in Wyoming during the 1950s and 60s. They help provide a picture of what life was like during the 60s and other eras for young girls and women in Wyoming, whose motto is the "Equality State" because that's where women first gained the right to vote and sit on juries in the U.S. The right to vote for women was granted in 1869 before Wyoming became a state. It was thought that such a law would attract more women to the state. Women in most of the rest of the country didn't gain the right to vote until the early 1920s. Wyoming's early suffrage act failed to attract many more women. Wyoming is still the most sparsely-populated state. Red Earth, Wind Peak, Fort Wind Peak, Gainesville, University of the Rocky Mountains, and Indian Mountain in Wyoming are also fictionalized places, as is Greenville, Iowa.

Medicine Lodge Creek in the Big Horn Mountains in Wyoming is an actual place, but the camping area where the narrator Katherine and daughter Cynthia and grandchildren Ben and Jeff went camping is made up. Medicine Lodge Creek is known for its Indian petroglyphs and pictographs, and for the human habitation site that was uncovered there in the late 1960s, a site that humans had continuously occupied for over 10,000 years. The Big-horn Mountains are one of many scenic and still

unspoiled spots in the state. Ten Sleep, Wyoming was named by the Indians because it was “Ten Sleeps” from there to each of the main winter camps, one located near Casper, Wyoming and the other on the Clarks Fork River near Bridger, Montana.

Adoption History

Katherine, the narrator in this book, could be any of the six million birthmothers in the U.S. who have given their children up to the adoption system. Her story is similar to those of the approximately 250,000 women who each year during the 1960s relinquished their children to adoption in the U.S.

The large number of women who gave their children up for adoption began to decrease after the 60s. The number fell from 250,000 per year in the 60s to approximately 150,000 per year in the 1970s, 100,000 per year in the 1980s and 50,000 per year in the 1990s. In the year 2001, there were approximately 51,000 surrenders in the U.S. Fewer adoptions but still a great number considering the amount of money that passes hands in attorney-client adoption transactions where the approximate attorney fee runs around \$30,000.

There were more adoptions in the 60s than there were in the year 2001 for a number of reasons. More teenage girls and young women were getting pregnant 38 years ago because the birth control pill, relatively new on the market in the 60s, was not readily accessible until the mid- to late decade. Sex education classes were not part of the curriculum of most schools so girls did not know how to protect themselves. Few got abortions, which studies show are easier on a woman than giving a child up for adoption, because abortion was illegal. Before *Roe v.*

Wade, women basically had no choice except to get married or have the child and give it up for adoption. The societal taboo associated with being pregnant and unmarried forced women into hiding. Adoption was the logical sequence to keeping the pregnancy permanently hidden. In addition, most women were not considered adults and were not able to make legal decisions until they turned 21 since that was the legal age in most states in the 60s. Women who did marry were not able to sign for credit cards on their own or make legal decisions without the consent of their husbands.

Before the late 70s, unwed mothers were forced into hiding not only their pregnancies, but also their feelings of grief after they relinquished their children to adoption. An unwed mother went away to a maternity home, had the child one day, gave it up the next, then went back home where the subject was never brought up again in most families. The grieving process was not completed. Unlike when one loses a mother or father, sister or brother or a friend to death and there is a period of mourning, when a birthmother gives up a child to adoption, she has normally been expected to get on with her life and forget.

There has been no support system in place in the white community, as there has been in the African American community, for a single teenage girl to keep her child and raise it. Thus, few single white mothers in the United States have kept their children until more recently.

A small group of birthmothers who gave up their children for adoption started coming out of the closet in the 80s and speaking openly about what they had been through. Many found and reunited with their lost

children. Many more began the searching process in the 90s. Still, even today many only talk with each other about what they went through in much the same way that veterans of World War II and Vietnam only talked afterwards with those who had gone through the same experiences. Similarly, a large number of birthmothers have suffered from a type of post-traumatic stress disorder, just like veterans of war.

Even though adoption is a more open process in the year 2002 than it was 30 or 40 years earlier, birth records are still closed in many U.S. states. This prevents adoptees from knowing their family histories and their real mothers and fathers. The closed system, in place since the Depression era, keeps birth certificates locked up tight and hidden as a way, they say, of protecting somebody somewhere. It's an antiquated system filled with a strong need to hide and keep people hidden.

Approximately one-hundred and forty million people in the U.S. have an adoption in their immediate families. Ingrained views and practices pertaining to loss, sex, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and adoption help keep many veiled and hidden. In respect to birthmothers and their children, the U.S. falls behind every other industrialized country, most of which have stopped separating the natural mother from her child after it is born except in extreme situations.

Prologue

1996

“Who’s moving about at this ungodly hour,” I wondered as I heard the floor creak outside my apartment door in San Francisco. I glanced at the clock. It said 3 a.m. Propping myself up in bed, I looked across towards the locked door. In the overstuffed chair by the head of my bed sat a red-headed woman in a rose-colored, shirt-waist cotton house dress, her hands clasped on her lap, her eyes set in a worried stare.

Terror held me strapped to the bed.

“I need your help, Katherine,” the woman said.

The hair on my arms stood on end at the sound of my name. How did she know me? I looked at her again. Her body faded in and out like a television set with a short.

As I struggled to sit up, it hit me. This was a dead woman speaking to me.

Afraid that eye contact would draw me deeper into the world of the dead, I stared past her. I shivered and my heart pounded. Finally, I forced myself to look in the

woman's direction. I tried to speak but the words wouldn't come as I sat frozen, caught in a strange world somewhere between reality and nightmare.

"Don't be afraid," the woman began.

"Who are you?" I finally forced the words out. My teeth chattered. Had the ghost heard my almost whispered words?

"I'm ..." Then the woman's voice faded out. Static, like one might hear on a short-wave radio, rippled through the air.

She looked towards me. Was that compassion in her eyes? Her red hair fell in curls about her face. She reminded me of someone, but whom? She had red hair! Yes, that was it! She looked just like old photos of my grandmother Naomi.

I had been three or four playing around the kitchen door the first time I heard Mama and Papa mention Naomi in one of their shouting matches.

"Your father killed your mother," Mama accused Papa.

"It was an accident. I was thirteen. I remember," Papa retorted. His voice rose until I feared he might explode.

Those words stayed with me and I worried at them. Finally I asked Mama.

"What happened to my grandma?"

"She died."

"How did she die?"

"She died in a fire."

"Did someone kill her?"

"Hush! We don't talk about that," she told me and closed the subject.

From then on, I never asked, just sat back and observed Papa's volatility when the subject came up, took in

the fear I felt from Mama each time he blew up. But I never forgot and the questions remained in my mind.

As I sat in my bedroom in San Francisco looking at my grandmother Naomi's ghost, I noted the intent set of her eyes and mouth.

"What do you want to tell me," I asked as I gained more courage.

Her mouth moved, but I couldn't hear her words.

I began to panic. I needed to know what the apparition wanted to tell me. But, I was losing her. Then, in between surges of magnetic electricity, I heard her say, "You... go... Wyoming..."

Did she want me to go to Wyoming? But why?

I had to strain to hear her as she continued to speak.

"It troubles me," she said. I leaned towards her to try to catch her next words. "The Lord will turn his eye again." Her voice faded then came through strongly, "on one of your broken family." The rest of her words trickled out into the night.

Did she mean that someone in my family was going to die? Who? I felt the sting of tears in my eyes.

I looked to the now empty chair.

I lay back on my bed shaken.

When I was growing up, my sisters and mother had heard and seen things that others couldn't see. Back doors slammed, lights flickered, and dog chains rattled in the middle of the night for unexplained reasons. But never when I was around. I thought that they were just afraid to be alone in the house, that they imagined it. That's what I thought each time I heard another story from some family member about a chair rocking next to their bed at night with no one in it, or a shadow passing through a

hallway when all of the curtains were closed and no one else was at home.

All of that changed with the visit from the dead woman.

A week after Naomi's ghost visited me, my mother went to the doctor. When they x-rayed her lungs and found cancer, I remembered Naomi's ominous warning.

My mother was dying! A year later, I returned to Wyoming to bury her.

A year after my mother's death, I finally set out on the road to Brown Rock, Wyoming where my grandmother Naomi died. I was egged on by an apparition in a rose-colored housedress and determined to find out the truth about Naomi's burning.

Katherine