

Forging

by Jane Hammons

Taken by agents of the United States of America, Felix Six-Killer grows up at the Carlisle Indian School near Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. His hair is cut and oiled. His shirts are starched and creased. For months he is startled to find himself seated for breakfast at a long table with too many other boys shorn of hair, stripped of beads, feathers, shells, turquoise, coral, sliver, leather, bone. Any reminder of home. Some are rendered mute by the command to speak only English. Felix can speak it but has little to say. White-shirted and grim, the boys take their morning meal together and make of themselves the best family they can. At morning prayer, Felix folds his hands, bows his head, and instead of giving thanks for the bounty forced upon him, he remembers the story of his birth.

It is 1883 and Mary Six-Killer is a thirteen-year-old girl walking briskly along the banks of the Neosho River, not far from where it becomes the Canadian. She is headed for the home of her sister Margaret, who lives with her husband and two daughters in Salina. Mary plans to give birth to her secret there. Felicity—the name she has chosen—flutters like butterflies in her mouth. She saw it on a sign in Tulsa. Felicity's Lace and Silks. The window displayed gloves fine as spider webs and stockings that shimmered like dew.

Mary's secret is small but heavy. She sits by the ferry crossing and waits. Cecil Spinney, the ferryboat pilot, has little hair but plenty of candy. Licorice whips and peppermint sticks for children who will sit and listen. Mary is a dreamy girl. Sucking peppermint and listening to Cecil talk of channels, currents and floods is how she got her secret.

She dozes until she is awakened by the sound of churning water. It

is not the familiar sound of the river lapping at the shore. It is not the ferryboat docking. It is a large gray swell breaking the blue water and bulging toward her. She screams when it stomps ashore and showers her with its snaky snout. She screams again and the baby inside her drops like a rock, wetting her skirt and the dirt where she sits.

Cecil Spinney blows the shrill whistle again and again, trying to draw her attention to his cargo. It will make an elephant coming ashore on a hot afternoon in Indian Territory seem less strange. Aboard the ferry is a zebra in bridle and reins tethered to the railing, a lion bored in his cage. Chimpanzees scamper about a little red cart. A white stallion prances across the deck. Cecil docks and rushes to her side. The ringmaster said it could swim, he explains. Mary growls like a mountain lion and pounds the ground with her fist. Cecil places a little sack of lemon drops at her feet and scurries away.

The elephant has moved up the shore now, each step an imprint fossil upon the land. Mary places her hand in one. A woman, smaller by half than Mary, chirps in her ear. An old one, beautiful in face paint, takes the green scarf wrapped around her ankle, and draws one leg up over her back. Resting her head upon her foot, she watches Mary give birth. A haughty man, the ringmaster with a long mustache, looks on, stroking the stallion's mane.

Mary has seen almost nothing strange in her life upon the prairie. Once a tornado dropped someone's wagon into a peach tree. Last summer she paid a penny to see a white man covered with tattoos.

When the baby comes, the woman in face paint scoops him up in emerald scarves stained purple with his blood.

Felicity, says Mary.

It's a boy, says the woman. She's not opposed to fancy names. Her own is Esmeralda. Felix, she says, as close to Felicity as a boy can get. Mary and Felix hitch a ride with the circus train.

She leaves the baby as planned with her sister Margaret who has heard stories about white men who hunt Indian children. She has a friend up north in Pine Ridge. Two children. Both taken. She will keep this boy, and when the white men come, she'll give him freely to keep her girls.

The ringmaster teaches Mary to ride. Soon she is the image featured on the circus posters atop the white stallion in a handstand, her slender brown legs split open like scissors. A soft pink skirt veils her face. She performs for Presidents.

The story of his birth is really the story of how Mary Six-Killer became Princess Cherokee, the famous bareback rider. Felix does not know that much about himself.

At school Felix reads a lot. He is fond of Kipling adventures and imagines himself riding an elephant through the foothills of Indian Territory, stomping down white men in their rush for his land. Other boys are sad. They miss food and games and warm embraces. A boarder all his life, Felix longs for little.

Considered smart but contrary, he is deemed unsuited to a career in law, medicine or education. He trains as a blacksmith. But he will not perform a task he does not understand. He's no circus monkey. What his teachers know is how to fire the forge, fit the hoof, pound the nails, soak the frog. What Felix wants to know is why. What his teachers cannot teach him about the horse's foot, he learns from encyclopedias and manuals, spending long hours on hard benches in the library.

The ancient Mongols who lived in high northern snow-capped countries made shoes for their horses from the horns of the reindeer. Felix tests the palmy parts of elk and deer horns.

In the eleventh century, Boniface, the Marquis of Tuscany, shod his horses in silver to impress Beatrix, his intended. The shoes fell off and littered the roadside with gifts to the peasant throngs that followed the progress of his entourage to her estate. No access to precious metals, Felix experiments with brass.

In the Sahara, Arabs eyed the ground and considered their horses. Stones wore away the hoof naturally as it protruded from the iron shoe, so hooves never had to be trimmed. In spring the horses wandered shoeless among the grasses. Blood, the Arabs believed, was replenished in this season.

Felix goes barefoot whenever he can.

After graduation Felix is sent home to Indian Territory. Classmates and faculty alike are surprised when stories about Felix make their way back to Carlisle. Drawings of his brass hoof plates engraved with the initials of bankers or the brands of wealthy ranchers are published in *The Blacksmith and Wheelwright*, the journal his teachers study. For festivals and special occasions, Felix Six-Killer will polish a horse's hooves until they resemble the glossy tortoise-shell brushes and combs that he sees in the window of Felicity's Finery.

Standing there he forges a different mother for himself, one who held him close, and hid in a meadow of blue indigo and buffalo grass. His friend Horace was snatched from his mother's arms where she lay tangled up in bittersweet and trumpet vine. Others last saw their mothers crouching empty-handed and shrieking

beneath dogwood trees and wooly buckthorn. Agents for the schools were trained to read the plains landscaped by Indian women hiding their children. They'd all ended up in the same place as Felix, but how they got there matters to him.

Younger than many mothers, she's still older than girls eager to climb up on a horse and split their legs for Presidents. So Princess Cherokee travels the countryside in a horse drawn cart, Fortune Mary, the name she uses now, written in smoky black letters on both sides. She wraps herself in fraying scarves and rubs a crystal ball. Several times a year, Felix sits at the small wooden table across from her. She gets out a deck of cards and puts them on the table.

Barely thirteen, she says, I was just a child.

Not quite six, he trumps her story, I was worth two girls.

When it's time for her to go, he checks her horse's hooves and sends her on her way. One day, she'll quit talking about her past, and give Felix the future he's been waiting for.

