

*Lakota Woman*  
By Mary Crow Dog

**Chapter 4**  
**Drinking and Fighting**

Got them real bad relocation blues,  
Got them long-haired Injun big city woes.  
One drunk Indian yells 'cause he's being mugged,  
Some young Indian complains his phone is bugged,  
But nobody is getting hugged.  
Passerby says: "How, big chief,  
What's your beef?"  
Ugh, ugh, big chief, how, how.  
Hio, yana-yanay, hi-oh.

Got them sweet muscatel relocation blues,  
Got them lemon-vodka big-city woes.  
Something rubs my leg. "Hi there, pussycat."  
Has a pink and naked tail, some big rat!  
Home sweet home!  
Hear the police whistle blow,  
Someone pissing in the snow,  
Tweet, tweet, ugh, ugh, clank, clank.  
Hio, yana-yanay, hi-oh.

—*Forty-niner song*

St. Francis, Parmelee, Mission, were the towns I hung out in after I quit school, reservation towns without hope. Towns that show how a people can be ground under the boot, ground into nothing. The houses are made of tar paper and almost anything that can be scrounged. Take a rusty house trailer, a small, old one which is falling apart. Build onto it a cube made of orange crates. That will be the kitchen. Tack on to that a crumbling auto body. That will be the bedroom. Add a rotting wall tent for a nursery. That will make a typical home, larger than average. Then the outhouse, about fifty feet away. With a blizzard going and the usual bowel troubles, a trip to the privy at night is high adventure. A big joke among drunks was to wait for somebody to be in the outhouse and then for a few guys to root it up, lift it clear off the ground, and turn it upside down with whoever was inside hollering like crazy. This was one of the amusements Parmelee had to offer.

Parmelee, St. Francis, and Mission were drunk towns full of hang-around-the-fort Indians. On weekends the lease money and ADC checks were drunk up with white-lightning, muscatel-mustn't tell, purple Jesus, lemon vodka, Jim Beam, car varnish, paint remover—anything that would go down and stay down for five minutes. And, of course, beer by the carload. Some people would do just about anything for a jug of wine, of mni-sha, and would not give a damn about the welfare of their families. They would fight constantly over whatever little money they had left, whether to buy food or alcohol. The alcohol usually won out. Because there was nobody else, the staggering shapes took out their misery on each other. There was hardly a weekend when somebody did not have an eye gouged out or a skull cracked. "Them's eyeballs, not grapes you're seeing on the floor," was the standing joke.

When a good time was had by all and everybody got slaphappy and mellow—lila itomni, as they said—they all piled into their cars and started making the rounds, all over the three million acres of Rosebud and Pine Ridge, from Mission Town to Winner, to Upper Cut Meat, to White River, to He-Dog. To Porcupine, Valentine, Wanblee, Oglala, Murdo, Kadokah, Scenic, Ghost Hawk Park—you name it. From one saloon to the other—the Idle Hour, Arlo's, the Crazy Horse Café, the Long Horn Saloon, the Sagebrush, the Dew-Drop Inn, singing forty-niner songs:

Heyah-hea, weyah-weya,  
give me whiskey, honey,

Suta, mni wanan,  
I do love you,  
Heya, heyah.

Those cars! It was incredible how many people they could cram into one of their jalopies, five of them side by side and one or two on their laps, little kids and all. The brakes were all gone, usually, and one had to pump them like crazy about a mile before coming to a crossing. There were no windshield wipers. They were not needed because there were no windshields either. If one headlight was working, that was cool. Often doors were missing, too, or even a tire. That did not matter because one could drive on the rim. There were always two cases of beer in the back and a few gallons of the cheapest California wine. The babies got some of that too. So they took off amid a shower of beer cans, doing ninety miles with faulty brakes and forty cans of beer sloshing in their bellies. A great way to end it all.

At age twelve I could drink a quart of the hard stuff and not show it. I used to be a heavy drinker and I came close to being and out-and-out alcoholic—very close. But I got tired of drinking. I felt it was all right to drink, but every morning I woke up sick, feeling terrible, with a first-class hangover. I did not like the feeling at all but still kept hitting the bottle. Then I stopped. I haven't touched a drop of liquor for years, ever since I felt there was a purpose to my life, learned to accept myself for what I was. I have to thank the Indian movement for that, and Grandfather Peyote, and the pipe. Having children played a big role too, though I stopped drinking even before I had my first baby.

Barb and I have a lot of friends. Most of them are drinkers and I tell them I don't booze anymore. When I go out with them I drink 7UP. They keep asking me, "Are you too good for us, or what?" And I tell them, "I just don't find that alcohol is doing you any good. And if you feel like I'm acting too good for you, then that's up to you. You can have that feeling. If you want to drink, go ahead, don't mind me." I do not preach to them. In their drunken state they ask Barb or me what to do. Sometimes we feel like mother hens. They come to me and tell me their problems. So I try to talk to them in a way that peyote would want me to advise them. They listen to me and tell me that I am right and that they will stop, but they are not strong enough to do it. They say I am right, but the next day they just go out and get full again. I do not judge them. I am the last person in the world to have a right to do that, and I know where they are coming from. I tell them, "Enjoy your Budweiser, I'll stay with my 7UP or Pepsi."

I started drinking because it was the natural way of life. My father drank, my stepfather drank, my mother drank—not too much, but she used to get tipsy once in a while. My older sisters drank, Barbara starting four years before me, because she is that much older. I think I grew up with the idea that everybody was doing it. Which was nearly true, even with some of the old traditionals who always pour a few drops out of their bottles and glasses, sprinkle it on the floor or into corners for the spirits of their departed drinking companions, saying in Sioux, "Here, cousin, here is a little mni-sha for you, savor it!"

I started drinking when I was ten, when my mother married that man. He was always drinking, so I would sneak in and help myself to some of his stuff. Vodka mostly—that's what he liked. In school I crept into the vestry and drank the church wine, Christ's blood. He must have understood, hanging out with people like us. At any rate no lightning struck me. The first time I got drunk was when some grownup relatives had a drinking party. One woman asked me, "Do want some lemonade?" I said yes and she gave me a big, tall glass of lemonade and I put some of that stuff in it. That was my first time. I was trying to walk across the room and could not, just kept falling down, while everybody laughed at me.

Liquor is forbidden on the reservation, which is something of a joke, and drinking it is illegal. But towns like Winner, St. Francis, and Mission have a population which is almost half white and the wasicuns want to have their legal booze. So they incorporated these towns, which are within the reservation, putting them under white man's law. Which means that you have bars there and package stores. Also all around the reservation are the white cow towns with their saloons. Even if you are stuck in the back country, you can always find a bootlegger. My sister Barb was my best friend, the one who really loved me. She was the one who got me up in the morning and put clothes on me, watched over me. One day a boy took me to a John Wayne movie. Afterward we went "uptown" to hustle some hard stuff. The town hardly had four of five streets, two of them paved, and maybe two dozen shacks and mobile homes sprinkled around, but it had an "uptown," and a "downtown." So uptown we went to the cabin of a half-blood bootlegger, getting ourselves a pint of moonshine, the kind they call "liquid TNT, guaranteed to blow your head off," and a small bottle of rum. As we were coming out of the door we collided with Barb, who had come to get her ration of wet goods. She made a face as if she couldn't believe her eyes and said, "What in hell are you doing here?"

I answered, "What are *you* doing here? I didn't know you patronized this place."

She got really mad. “It’s all right for me. I am seventeen. But you are not supposed to be doing that. You are too young!” She took the bottles away from us, threatening to crack the head of the boy if he dared interfere. In her excitement she smashed the bottles against the corner of the log cabin instead of saving them for herself and her friends.

Another time, after a school dance, I was sitting with a boy I liked, smoking a cigarette, and out of nowhere suddenly there was Barbara yanking the cigarette out of my mouth. She threw it on the floor and stomped on it right in front of everybody. I hit her, yelling, “But you do it.” And again she said, “Yeah, but I’m older.” We used to fight a lot, out of love and desperation.

After I quit school the situation at home got worse and worse. I had nothing but endless arguments with my mother and fights with my stepfather. So I ran away. At first only for two weeks to a place that was not very far, just a few miles, then I stayed away for months, and in the end, altogether. I drank and smoked grass all the time. At age seventeen that was just about all I did. Whiskey, straight whiskey, and not Johnny Walker or Cutty Sark either. Then I changed over to gin because I liked the taste. How I survived the wild, drunken rides which are such an integral part of the reservation scene, I don’t know. One time we were coming back from Murdo at the usual eighty miles an hour. The car was bursting at the seams, it was so full of people. In the front seat were two couples kissing, one of the kissers being the driver. One tire blew out. The doors flew open and the two couples fell out arm in arm. The girls were screaming, especially the one at the bottom who was bleeding, but nobody was seriously hurt. I must have lost more than two dozen relatives and friends in such accidents. One of those winos was out in his car getting a load on. He had a woman with him. His old lady was in another car, also getting smashed. Somebody told her he was making it with that other woman. So she started chasing them all over Pine Ridge. In the end she caught up with them. I do not think they were lovers. He was at that stage where the bottle was his only mistress. His wife shook her fists at them, screaming, “I smash you up! I total you!” All the other drivers on the road who watched those cars drunkenly lurching about scrambled to get out the way, running their cars off the highway into the sagebrush. Well, the wife succeeded in bringing about a head-on collision at full speed and all three of them were killed.

Supposedly you drink to forget. The trouble is you don’t forget, you remember—all the old insults and hatreds, real and imagined. As a result there are always fights. One of the nicest, gentlest men I knew killed his wife in a drunken rage. One uncle had both his eyes put out while he was lying senseless. My sister-in-law Delphine’s husband lost one eye. She herself was beaten to death by a drunken tribal policeman. Such things are not even considered worth an investigation.

I fight too. During my barhopping days I went into a Rapid City saloon for a beer. Among Sioux people, Rapid City has a reputation for being the most racist town in the whole country as far as Indians are concerned. In the old days many South Dakota saloons had a sign over the door reading NO INDIANS AND DOGS ALLOWED! I sat down next to an old honky lady. Actually she looked about thirty, but when you are seventeen that seems old. She gave me a dirty look, moving to another stool away from me, saying, “Goddam, dirty Injun. You get out into the streets and the gutter where you belong.”

I came back, “What did you say?”

“You heard me. This place ain’t for Indians. Dammit, isn’t there a place left where a white man (I remember, she actually said “man”) can drink in peace without having to put up with you people?”

I felt the blood pounding in my head. In front of me where I was sitting was a glass ashtray. I broke it on the counter and cut her face with the jagged edge. In my insane drunken rage I felt good doing it. Possibly I would have felt good even had I been sober.

One time I was in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, visiting a girl friend among the Sac and Fox Indians. She is poor but always cleans out her whole icebox to feed me. Her tribe happened to be having a powwow with a lot of young people participating, over sixty of them young men. The full bloods were all standing or sitting around a drum, drinking beer. A lot were dancing with roaches or war bonnet on their heads, feather bustles on their butts, and bells on their ankles. The songs were militant. Some of the white boys and breeds were catching on to that and started hassling the skins. I should make clear that being a full-blood or breed is not a matter of bloodline, or how Indian you look, or how black your hair is. The general rule is that whoever thinks, sings, acts, and speaks Indian is a skin, a full-blood, and whoever acts and thinks like a white man is a half-blood or bleed, no matter how Indian he looks. So the full-bloods told the others, “If you are ready to get it on with us, so get it on!” The half-bloods and white boys had white or cowboy shirts on while the skins wore ribbon shirts and chokers. They wore their hair long, often in braids. The others wore it short. It was easy to tell friend from foe. They got it on. It was one of the biggest drunken free-for-alls I was ever involved in. It lasted about half an hour, but already after five minutes the breeds had three casualties. One man got his face knocked in, the others had concussions. In the end there were about nine of these white shirts lying on the ground under a big tree, bloody and knocked out. One had a broken arm. It’s something you

can't stop once it starts. If somebody in that fighting mood yells at you, "Go, get 'em!" you can't tell that person, who has been fucked over for so many tears, that he is wrong, that he should be a pacifist.

In Seattle I went with my Blackfoot girl friend Bonnie to a little bar on skid row, I think it was called the Tugboat Café. This was in a neighborhood frequented by Indians. It was Christmastime and the stores and bars were hung with blinking red and green lights. We wanted to buy booze for a Christmas and New Year's party. My friend said, "I'm gonna call my folks and wish them happy holidays." We found a phone booth on a street corner. Bonnie was making her long distance call when a drunk white guy tried to force his way in, yelling at Bonnie to get out, that he wanted to use the phone, saying, "What's so important for an Indian to make a phone call? I bet you don't even know how to dial. Use a tom-tom!"

Bonnie said, "You goddam honky, leave me alone!" She was trying to fight him off. He had a beer bottle and he busted it on her head and face. She staggered out of the booth dripping blood. I rushed to her aid and we tried to fight him, but the blood was running down into her eyes so that she could not see. He hit her again, knocking her sprawling into the gutter. She was lying there, looking up at me but not seeing a thing, calling my name. I yelled for the cops, but the white winos hid that guy and the police made no effort to find him. People were milling around me—white, black, and Indian. One white lady pushed me aside, shouting, "Get out of the way, I'm trained as a nurse, what you're doing is wrong."

I told her, "Don't push me. This is my friend." But she still insisted: "Get out of the way. Can you believe that? Those Indians are really something!" I threw her against the car and she fell on her ass. The cops promptly arrested me. If you are an Indian woman, especially in a ghetto, you have to fight all the time against brutalization and sexual advances. After a while you yourself begin to strike out blindly, anticipating attacks even when none are intended. Many of these brawls are connected with drinking, but many occur just because you are an Indian. Also in Seattle I saw a white man kicking a passed-out Indian in the head with his boots, screaming, "*This is for Wounded Knee!*"

By nature I am not a violent person. When I get mad, I start shaking, my blood starts to heat up, and I am afraid I might hurt somebody fighting or get hurt myself. So I try to cool off and stay out of it. But if I see an Indian sister being abused, harassed, getting beaten or raped, I have to take up for her. Once I am in the middle of a fight, though, I enjoy it. I have often thought that given an extreme situation, I'd have it in me to kill, if that was the only way. I think if one gets into an "either me or you" situation, that feeling is instinctive. The average white person seldom gets into such a corner, but that corner is where the Indian lives, whether he wants to or not.

Nowadays I have learned better to control myself and situations as they arise, or if I cannot control them, avoid getting sucked into them. Barbara tells me that she prefers to sit back and watch a fight, rather than join in. She told me, "There is nothing sweeter than revenge, but don't do it physically. Revenge yourself with mind power, let your mind do the fighting." But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, Barb's mind is often in her fists. I have seen it.

One night, at Rosebud, Barb had a date with a boy called Poor Bear. She was sober, but he had a load on and the liquor had roused his fighting spirit. They were driving past the tribal office when Poor Bear suddenly stopped the car, saying, "That's where all the trouble comes from, from inside that building!" He had a shotgun in his trunk, took it out, and methodically busted every window in the building. Then he drove to the top of a hill overlooking Rosebud where he parked the car to admire his handiwork. The tribal police were there in no time. "We're just checking," they said. They found a half-empty gallon jug of wine and some whisky under the seat that Barb had not known about, and finally the gun and some spent shells. They said, "So you're the ones who've been shooting up the tribal building, huh?" They took Poor Bear in and Barb had to bail him out. He only got a year's probation for this stunt. Down where I live they are rather relaxed about this kind of thing because it happens all the time.

I am a wife and mother now and my husband is a medicine man. I have my baby with me nearly all the time. I don't drink anymore. So it stands to reason that I try very hard not to get into fights. But no matter how hard I try, I sometimes still find myself in the middle of an uproar. There seems to be no escape. One evening, early in 1975, we were on an Indian reservation in Washington State where my husband had to run some ceremonies—Leonard, myself, my little boy Pedro, another Sioux leader, and my friend Annie Mae. We had taken rooms in a motel inside a border town inhabited mostly by whites, half in and half outside the reservation. We were just leaving to drive back home. Leonard, as always, had long braids wrapped in strips of red trade cloth. As we were putting our things into the car we noticed the gas tank was leaking. It had been okay before. As we were standing around, trying to figure out how to fix it, two rednecks came up. They started making offensive remarks: "Look at those Indians, look at their long hair. How long since you been to a barber?" They just stood there, staring at us and laughing. Leonard told them, "We did not come here to fight. We came here on business. What do you want? This is an Indian reservation, do you know that? Let's not have any trouble."

The honkies laughed, grabbed Leonard's braids, and yanked them hard. Then they jumped him. At that moment two Indian friends came out of a barn, Russ and Iron Shell, and they joined in the fight. I had my baby to protect. Then another carload of rednecks came into the scene. One guy had a sawed-off shotgun, and the others were armed with baseball bats. I tried to head them off, pleading with them to leave us alone, but they just kept going after our men. I heard later that beating up Indians was a regular pastime among the white lumberjacks and fishery workers in that area. Suddenly I saw that a police car was parked across the street. I told Annie Mae, "Take Pedro. Watch over him," and I ran over to the police. There were two of them, state troopers. I told them, "Look what's going on. We didn't do anything. They're hurting our men. Why don't you do something?" The troopers said nothing, just started up their car and drove off. The stopped about fifty yards away and sat there, watching and grinning. By then the hoodlums were demolishing our car with their bats, busting all the windows. I ran over to an Indian friend's house and she gave me her car for a getaway, to make it possible for us to escape. When I got back a few more skins had joined our men. The street was full of honkies with shotguns and baseball bats. As I drove up I heard gunshots. Pedro was in the front seat of our car and one shot just missed his leg. Two more police cars drove up. The troopers told the honkies, "Break it up, fellows, go home to the little woman. Call it a day!" Then they started arresting the Indians.

It was the usual sequence. Honkies, be so kind, and go home! Then arrest the Indians for "disturbing the peace." Put them in jail. Charge them. Let them get bailed out. Drag them into court. Collect the fine. I got scars on my face from the incident, barely an inch from my eye. I kicked one of the honkies in the head, between the legs, wherever I could kick him. Alcohol was not involved in that fracas, except among the honkies. I gets tiresome, almost boring. These things remind me of an old joke: One Indian tells his white neighbor: "You've stolen my land, shot by father, raped my wife, got my daughter with child, turned my son on to whisky. One day I'm gonna lose my patience. Better watch that shit!"

It seemed early in my life, before I met Leonard and before I went to Wounded Knee, was just one endless, vicious circle of drinking and fighting, drinking and fighting. Barb was caught up in the same circle, except that she was running with a different crowd most of the time. She was unusual in that she could drink just one beer or one glass of wine and then stop if she wanted to. Most of us at that stage could not do that.

I had not been drinking for years, but when I heard that one of my closest friends had been found dead with a bullet through her head I broke down completely and felt a sudden need for a drink. I happened to be in New York at the time. Shaking, and with tears streaming down my face, I blindly staggered to the nearest bar and downed four margaritas, one after the other. It had no effect on me. I remained totally sober. And it did not help my sadness. That was the last time.

People talk about the "Indian drinking problem," but we say that it is a white problem. White men invented whisky and brought it to America. They manufacture, advertise, and sell it to us. They make the profit on it and cause the conditions that make Indians drink in the first place.