



The Buffalo Singer

by Michelle Ferrer

April 1857

For the last time today, Retta Campbell climbed the hill behind the family's farmhouse until she reached the ancient live oak dominating the crest. Tall like her father, she folded her long frame on the ground to rest in the cool shade under the sprawling limbs of that familiar tree. Unused to wearing a dress these many months, she struggled to tuck the long skirt around her longer legs, then wrapped her arms around her knees.

Retta felt the tension leave her neck and shoulders as the fresh cool breeze caressed her ivory cheeks and teased tendrils of raven hair from the heavy braid wound around her head. Now that she was alone, it was safe to pull out the pins and shake the braid loose, freeing her hair to cascade down her back and over her shoulders.

Her dog Luke laid down next to her and rested his tawny head on her foot. After a long day of steady visitors, she was ready to relax on her own.

Friends and neighbors had come early in the morning. They streamed in from the nearby farms and Kellogg's Settlement five miles downriver. Everyone came dressed in their Sunday best, appropriate for the occasion. Retta kept the coffee hot and plentiful. Given her well-earned reputation for having no talent in the kitchen, she was grateful to the ladies who brought food to share.

The farm was quiet now. Even the chickens had nothing to say. The river Brazos below flowed gently around the homestead's western border on its journey south to the settlement and beyond.

She gazed down on the valley where fields of spring wheat and corn stretched to the banks of the river. Green stems swayed to the rhythm of early spring gusts.

She and her father had planted those fields by hand late last fall. Papa plowed the rows while she sowed the

seeds. Long, hard hours in the fields made their mark on her calloused hands and aching back. Too tired to eat, she dropped into bed at twilight and slept like the dead until the pre-dawn hours when her father shook her awake for another brutal workday.

"Looks like the crops are comin' in fine, Papa. Harvest should be good if a blue norther don't catch us this year like it did last. I'm remembering how that late ice storm caught some of our cows out in the open and sliced through the crops without a thought or care for all the hard work we put in."

Retta absently stroked Luke's warm golden fur, reliving the heartbreak of finding dead cows and frozen wheat stems. "Texas don't give up its land easy to folks who just want to make a living."

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The late afternoon sun spread its golden rays up the hill and cast soft light over Retta and the nine headstones in the family cemetery where she sat. The markers arrayed under the tree were all that was left of those Retta loved most.

Her eyes focused on the mound of fresh earth covering her father's coffin. Tom, the blacksmith at the settlement downriver, had fashioned a simple, sturdy cross and burned the name, WILL CAMPBELL, deep into the wood.

She swallowed to hold back the tears and steady her shaky voice. "Well, Papa, you got quite a send-off, didn't you? Preacher Wilson did a right fine job sayin' what a good man you was. Maybe it'll help you some to know that everybody we know cared enough to come and pay their respects.

"Somehow the world just don't seem right without you in it. I know your heart was in this farm. You worked yourself to death to make this place a home for all of us.

Here is where you planted us, and here is where we all stay. I won't let you down, Papa. I swear to keep us all together on our own land and let nothin' drive us off it."

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"Mama, Papa's missed you somethin' awful. Now you can be together forever."

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Retta turned to her mother's grave lying alongside her father just like they had always lain in life. "Mama, Papa's missed you somethin' awful. Now you can be together forever."

The heavy silence around her was broken only by the whisper of gentle breezes that seemed to carry her mother's voice. Retta began to sing the hymns they had once sung together. For a while, the familiar melodies staved off the loneliness crushing her heart. She sang until her throat was raw and the clouds rolled in, hiding the setting sun, and turning the late afternoon to gray dusk.

Retta stood and brushed the dirt off her skirt. Luke pressed close to her side. She leaned down and entwined her hand in the coarse fur around his neck. The soft breeze turned brisk. Damp gusts swirled her long hair around her.

She studied the sky covered in thick clouds and smelled the clean earthy aroma of coming rain.

"If it's all the same to you, Lord, I'd sure appreciate it if you could hold off awhile until my Papa gets himself settled in his grave. Seems kinda rude to make a man launch his soul in the wet."

Overhead, noisy flocks of crows gathered to roost in the branches of the ancient oak. Her father had always been fascinated with crows and mimicked their cries in a symphony of conversation. Tonight, the staccato two-caw calls seemed to ask for an encore.

Retta smiled at the performance. "You got company tonight, Papa."

After a restless night, Retta rose earlier than necessary. She woke up the cows for milking, and the chickens grumbled as she jostled them to collect the eggs. As the dawn broke, she savored a second cup of coffee while taking stock of how to manage the farm on her own.

"I s'pose it's a good thing that you worked me like a mule, Papa. 'Cause that's what it'll take for me to keep this

farm going."

Luke suddenly jumped to his feet, the fur bristling around his neck. He strained forward toward the door and issued a low warning growl. Retta heard the jingle of harness outside. A baritone voice she didn't recognize called out, "Hello, the house!"

Through the open door, Retta saw a large bay whose shiny coat and mane gleamed in the early morning sunlight. The horse looked a sight better than the scruffy man astride him. The buckskin coat and gloves he wore had seen some hard living. A battered broad brimmed hat put his face in deep shadow. Retta tucked a pistol into her apron pocket before stepping on the porch to greet the stranger.

"It's early of a mornin' for a social call," she said. "Have you got some trouble?"

"No trouble, ma'am. I'm looking for Miss Loretta Campbell."

"Who might be asking?"

"Captain John Harris, of the Texas Rangers." He swept his hat off revealing thick chestnut brown hair that curled around his neck and ears. "I'm stationed upriver at Fort Belknap. If you be her, I've come to escort you."

Retta drew her eyebrows together. "Escort, Captain? Where to and why?"

The saddle leather creaked as he shifted uncomfortably. "Not to be indelicate, Miss Campbell, but I understand your father recently passed leaving you on your own out here. The frontier's no good place for a young woman alone. I'll accompany you to the fort. From there, my men and I will take you to a place of safety."

Her frown in place, she crossed her arms over her chest and studied the man before her. Shabby hair and a ragged beard surrounded a weathered face that spoke of a rugged life. Intense but calm gray eyes tolerated her scrutiny. His dusty, battered outfit had seen better days, but the sleek condition of his horse spoke well for his priorities.

"Seems I've forgotten my manners, Captain. We can talk in the house. There's hot coffee and fresh cornbread if you care to partake. You can water your horse at the trough by the barn yonder."

Retta retreated to the kitchen and laid out the table with cornbread as promised along with fresh honey and the remains of yesterday's meat pie. Fussing about the kitchen gave her time to think. The captain's offer took her by surprise. She had never considered leaving the farm.

Boots scraped across the wooden porch. She turned to see the captain duck his head to fit his six-foot frame

through the doorway. His face and hands were freshly washed, hair still wet. She pointed to a chair at the table and placed a steaming cup of coffee in front of him along with a plate of meat pie and cornbread.

With a quick nod of thanks, he eagerly tucked into the meal. He looked a might slab-sided for a man his size which explained his hearty appetite. Seemed likely to her that if the fort was short on rations, she could wrangle a supply contract when the crops came in.

"So, let me understand you, sir. What makes you think I want to leave my farm?"

He blinked at the question, then wiped his mouth with the napkin. "Well, ma'am. Like I said, the frontier is dangerous for a woman alone. Reports are that the Comanche are raiding all along the Brazos. My rangers are spread too thin to come to your aid. You don't want to end up a captive, or worse, do you?"

"I know about the raids. Those are the wild bands from the escarpment raiding like they do every year. They'll stay west of the river until they get south of here."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I was seven years old when my family staked this land, about a dozen years ago by now. Folks warned us that the Indians would cut us up for bait. More coffee?" She refilled the cup at his nod.

"Just when we got settled in good, the Comanche came callin' one night. They stole some of our horses, including Papa's favorite, a bay stallion that looked a lot like yours. That made Papa real mad. He tracked that horse across the river all the way to their camp and waited.

"Now, Papa had a talent. He could mimic the sound of any animal. Well, when dark came, he sidled close to the pony remuda and nickered to his horse. That stallion's head came up, and he paced around lookin' for Papa. Then, Papa growled a hiss like a cougar on the hunt. That set the ponies to prancing in the rope corral. Put the Indians on guard, too. When they went looking for the cat, Papa quietly mounted his stallion, then let out the blood-curdling scream of a cougar. That panicked the whole herd. They bolted out of the corral with Papa leading the way, leaving the Indians afoot.

"From the top of a hill, Papa reined in his horse, raised his rifle above his head and let out an Alabama hunting cry as the ponies stampeded past. He sure wanted those Comanche to know who took all their horses.

"After that, the Comanche made a deal with Papa to give us their protection and raid only across the river if we would stay on our side and not hunt on their lands. And that's how I know they won't bother me."

"Your papa sure had some grit. I'm wondering why they didn't just kill him and take back their horses?"

"They'd never known a white man who could control horses like that. They thought he was touched by the Creator and were afraid he'd bewitch their herds, bring them bad luck if they hurt him. That rubbed off on me. Papa and me, we both have an understanding ear for animals."

"What happens when the Comanche find out your father is dead?"

"They already know. I found two fresh-killed jack rabbits hung up on the porch this morning in offering."

"How did they know?"

Retta paused in cutting a second slice of pie. "There's not much goin' on in this territory they don't know."

The captain suddenly leaned forward shoving the dishes out of the way. "You need to come out with me, Miss Campbell. The Comanche made a deal with your father, but he's gone now. There's no guarantee they'll leave you be.

"And something else you haven't considered. This is a big farm. Too big for one woman alone to manage. Now, you be sensible. Pack your kit and we'll get going."

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"Listen, Captain. I know you mean well, but I'm stayin' here. You know that a woman alone in a town or soldier fort is worse off than on her own land. My roots are in this farm, and so are the bones of my family. This is the home my father died for, and I'm not givin' it up. Besides, when there's no place else to go, standing still makes sense."

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Retta gave the captain a steady gaze, then slowly moved her head left and right.

He started to speak, but she held up her hand. "Listen, Captain. I know you mean well, but I'm stayin' here. You know that a woman alone in a town or soldier fort is worse off than on her own land. My roots are in this farm, and so are the bones of my family. This is the home my father died for, and I'm not givin' it up. Besides, when there's no place else to go, standing still makes sense."

"Ain't you got kinfolk somewhere?"

Retta shook her head. "All my family is lying out under that tree on the hill. I guess that makes me head of the Campbell clan, what's left of it. And I'm stayin' put."

Seeing the determined set of her chin, Captain John rubbed his face in exasperation. Resigned, he pushed back his chair and stood. "You're a stubborn woman, Miss Campbell."

For the first time, Retta laughed. "Can't argue that."

Retta followed him to his tethered horse. She admired the smooth black mane against the sheen of brown withers.

"He's beautiful. What do you call him?"

"Rivers," he replied as he swung into the saddle. "For all the rivers we've crossed in this rough country."

She handed him a tied bundle of pie and cornbread. "I thank you for your concerns. God keep you safe on your journeys."

The captain shifted in the saddle. "If you won't come with me, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, find me a couple."

He frowned, puzzled at her meaning. "A couple of what?"

For the second time that day, she laughed. "Well, what have we been talkin' about! I need help. Especially come harvest time. I need a strong, married couple to help me. A man in the fields. A woman to tend the garden and house chores. Out of all the folks trekkin' west, there must be some that need to stop for a while. Find me a couple."

"Will do." He nodded, giving her a brief smile and a casual salute before riding away.

She watched until he disappeared in a trail of dust.

Mourning took a back seat as the pressures of running a three-hundred-acre farm sat hard on Retta's shoulders. In the month that followed, daily chores showed no compassion from the pre-dawn hours of tending livestock to long afternoons chopping weeds in the fields. Until one morning in May.

Retta woke early with a vague nagging worry that wouldn't let go. She made her way to the barn by lantern light. Bessie lowed softly. But Sallie, her pregnant lead cow, faced the corner of the stall ignoring a very dead calf lying in the straw. His little body was still warm, but there was no heartbeat.

Retta lifted the calf and laid him in the bed of the buckboard along with the afterbirth. She watered the mother and cleaned the stall laying down fresh straw so

Sallie could rest.

The bone orchard lay where her farm merged with the wild prairie. It was a somber drive. The loss of the calf, especially a bull calf, was a stroke of bad luck that Retta didn't need.

Her horse snorted and bobbed his head as she set the brake. Alerted, she looked around and heard low-pitched chuffs and grunts. She grabbed her rifle and followed the sound into the meadow. A white buffalo calf only hours old bawled for its mother.

Nearby, she found the buffalo cow dead from a gunshot but still warm. Examining the wound, it was easy to see that the bullet wasn't a kill shot. She had run a long distance before she bled out and dropped. Retta stroked the dead animal, sickened by the waste of a life and possibly two.

"Oh, mama. Whoever shot you should be strung up by their heels for making you suffer."

The calf nuzzled its mother and tried to nurse. His hungry bleats tore at her heart. There wasn't another buffalo in sight. The calf would die if left on the prairie to fend for itself.

Hands on her hips, Retta was perplexed on how to save him. Struck with an idea, she walked back to the wagon and studied Sallie's dead calf. If she could fool Sallie into thinking the buffalo calf was hers . . .

Quickly, she climbed into the wagon and stripped the hide from the dead calf. She wrapped the buffalo baby in the fresh hide transferring the scent. "Okay, little one. Today's not the day you die. You're coming home with me."

She lifted him into the wagon, settling him on the straw where the dead calf had lain.

"Sallie, I'm bringin' you a mouth to feed."

The white buffalo calf thrived on Sallie's milk and settled in as part of the herd, both bovine and human. When he wasn't grazing, he followed Retta around like a puppy. She would sing to him and often dance to the rhythm of a Virginia reel. She imitated buffalo chuffs and grumbles so he would learn the sounds of a buffalo herd. Sometimes, she pawed the ground like a bull would do to give him the hint. She drew the line at wallowing though.

She told him, "I don't have fleas, and I ain't wallowing in the dirt just to show you how. You'll have to figure that out for your own self."

After a game of chase, that the calf always won, she roughed his growing creamy mane and kissed him on the nose.

Hidden in the trees, a lone Comanche watched them play.

The good spring weather continued to hold soft and clear. The crops and the garden grew lush promising a profitable harvest. From inside the chicken house, Retta heard the jingle of a familiar harness making her smile. She paused her chores to welcome Rivers and his rider.

"Been awhile, Captain John. What brings you up this way?"

"I'd a come sooner, but we've been out on patrol these last thirty days."

The line between her brows deepened into a furrow. "Sounds like you've got news. Got time for a cup of coffee?"

"Sorry, Miss Retta," he said as he dismounted. "I need to report in at the fort."

She nodded, hiding her disappointment. "Sounds serious. What are you needin' to tell me?"

"There's trouble in the lodges. Some of the warriors are going rogue. Leaving the reservation and raiding ranches and farms. We're warning the settlers. Can I convince you to come into the fort with me?"

Retta studied her boots while she took in the full meaning of his message. She shook her head. "Can't do it, Captain John."

He wet his lips in frustration. "Alright. I brought you something."

He pulled a long-barreled pistol from his saddle bag along with three rotating cylinders, loaded and ready to fire. "This is a Paterson Colt revolver. We got in a shipment some time back. This one was assigned to a ranger who was killed last week. I'm reporting this weapon as lost so you can have it."

"But, Captain John, I already have Papa's Walker Colt."

"I know that, Retta. This gun is lighter weight and easier to use. Here's the holster so you can carry it when you're away from the house. With this weapon, you have double the fire power."

Retta slowly raised her eyes from the pistol to meet his gaze. "You're that worried trouble is coming?"

Captain John's grey eyes bore into her brown ones. "Keep it loaded, Retta, and keep it close."

Retta was wise enough to take his warning seriously. Throughout the remainder of spring and into summer, she kept her rifle within easy reach and wore the holstered

revolver. Her part of the world remained peaceful letting her focus on working the farm.

Luke took her place playing with the white buffalo calf. She had named him Snowshoe for his unique coat color. He was growing rapidly, already developing the distinctive buffalo hump and the wayward ways of youngsters. But he still liked to come close when Retta sang.

Retta filled another basket of vine-ripened squash and stretched to ease her back. The mid-June summer heat seemed somehow hotter this year. Maybe she just noticed it more now that she was alone.

She made her way to the well and drank a full dipper. The water was cold and felt good against her parched lips. She splashed and refreshed her face and neck with another dipper full. Wiping herself dry, she spied a stranger on a sleek gray horse with a black mane and dappled rump coming down the lane. He was a big man with thick black woolly hair, dressed like a hunter in deerskin leggings and a fringed frontier shirt. She could smell him from where she stood and imagined what could crawl out of that scruffy beard straggling down his chest.

He stopped in the yard and dismounted without asking permission. His deep-set black eyes looked her over settling on the parts of a woman he liked the best. "Can a man fill his canteen at your well?"

Retta's skin crawled as she pointed to the bucket. "Ain't Christian to deny a man a drink of water."

"You got anything to eat?"

Not wanting to risk touching him, she tossed him her sandwich of bread and a slab of ham.

"You alone here?" He asked between bites of the sandwich.

"No."

"Looks like ain't nobody around."

"You can ride and eat, can't you? Best be moving on. You can make camp on the other side of the river before nightfall."

He paid no attention. Instead focusing on Snowshoe grazing in the meadow. He stared hard at the calf. His eyes narrowed, then shifted a glance at her. "That's a valuable hide. How'd you come by a white buffalo?"

"Listen, mister, if you're thinking of taking that hide, you best reconsider. The Comanche set quite a store on a white buffalo. They won't take kindly to anyone who kills one of their Sacreds just for a hide."

"Ain't no matter for worry. I got whiskey. Indians'll do anything for whiskey." He stuffed the last of the sandwich in his mouth and wiped his hands on his clothes.

"You ain't too friendly, are ya." He resumed undressing her with his eyes, then lunged for her arm.

With hackles raised, Luke bared his teeth and lunged at the hunter's hand. In one motion, Retta cocked and aimed the Colt straight at him.

The hunter backed away and raised his hands, palms open in surrender. "Ok, woman. I hear ya . . . and the dog."

He mounted his horse and loped away down the lane. Retta trained her pistol on him until he was out of range. She made note of the gray's hoof print. Just in case.

The hunter had spooked her. For the first time, she felt vulnerable as if something dark lurked beyond the trees. Retta spent the following week working close to home. She kept the rifle within reach and the revolver handy, both loaded.

The garden was laden with fruit and vegetables. Steady rains and warm sunshine produced a bumper crop. Too much for her to eat and not enough time to put up the rest. Retta considered trading the surplus for flour and salt at the sutler's store in the settlement. Sallie and Snowshoe grazed close by.

With no warning, Luke sprang up on all fours, neck fur stiff, nose pointed to the trees. Retta smelled who was coming before she saw him. She touched Luke lightly to get his attention and gave him the signal to round up the herd. The hunter broke through the trees on foot and headed for the calf. She positioned herself between Snowshoe and the hunter.

"Stop where you stand, or I'll shoot!"

The hunter barreled forward as if she wasn't there.

Retta aimed the rifle and fired. Blood spurted from his shoulder where the bullet hit. He reeled back but regained his balance and kept coming.

Her hands shook as she rammed another bullet into the chamber. The hunter was on her before she could fire. He jerked the rifle out of her hand. She pulled the Colt, but he knocked it away. With his good arm, he grabbed her by the throat and lifted her off the ground.

Retta kicked and scratched blindly, struggling to breathe against the iron grip on her neck.

Luke lunged and sank his fangs into the hunter's neck. He let go of Retta to tackle the attacking dog.

Sucking in air, she found her pistol on the ground. Her head jerked back. She felt his fingers entwined in her hair and saw the glint of a knife blade aimed at her throat.

With a sudden jerk, he arched, then stumbled forward, quivering. He dropped the knife. His fingers lost their grip releasing her hair. She scrambled out of reach.

He rocked on his feet like an unsteady boulder, eyes unfocused, and slowly crashed face first into the ground. Six arrows protruded from his back.

Two Comanche warriors stood behind him. One knelt confirming the kill. The other stood over Retta.

"You are Sings to Buffalo, she who cares for the sacred white calf. The Creator has chosen you as friend of the Comanche. We will protect you."

The rooster crowed outside her window startling Retta out of a deep sleep. She rubbed her face against pale light creeping into her bedroom. Her eyes flew open as she registered the time. DAWN! Lord, she was late. Morning chores should be done by now.

Retta threw back the covers and rolled out of bed, only to crumple on the floor. Her face planted into the braided rug. Her head felt like a ball of lead on the end of a stretched rubber neck. Every bruised muscle and bone complained at her efforts to rise. She remembered wrestling with her brothers that sometimes left her sore for a few days. But never had she taken a beating like yesterday. Nothing was broken, but even her hair hurt.

Steadying herself with the bedstead, she winced with the effort to stand and gingerly reached for her clothes. Bessie wouldn't milk herself and the chickens had to be fed.

Inside the barn, Retta rested her forehead against Bessie's warm flank. The familiar rhythm of her fingers pulling on the teats, accompanied by the sound of milk squirting into the pail, helped loosen her up. When finished, she stood and stretched her back and neck easing the knots. Released from the stanchion, Bessie meandered to the meadow to graze alongside Sallie and Snowshoe.

Retta fed the chickens and gathered only the eggs she could easily reach.

She had skipped supper last night. Just too tired and sore to stand over a stove. The morning chores had loosened her up a bit. Still, she didn't feel like cooking, but her stomach rumbled. Coffee was a good start.

She wanted fresh hot biscuits. But her biscuits could be used for sling-shot ammunition. She laid out a slab of ham and some eggs to scramble.

Retta rested a few minutes while the coffee settled. "Lord, I'm tired. Papa, are you listening? I'm real beat up, just now, but I ain't beat. I'll make it somehow."

The squeak of ungreased wagon axles rolling into the yard interrupted her. Luke charged outside barking a warning. The wagon stopped in front of the house as Retta

stepped out on the porch.

The driver called to her. "Morning, ma'am. We's lookin' for Miss Lo-retta Campbell."

"You found her. What's your business?"

The driver smiled wide, teeth all intact. "I'm called Hoke. This here's my Oleta. Cap'n John up at the fort. He say you need a couple."

Retta examined the rickety rig whose best days were long gone. The two-horse team looked just as worn out. Not much in the wagon in the way of goods. The man called Hoke sat tall with a broad chest and firm muscular arms that spoke to a lifetime of hard work. The woman beside him was long and lean like her man. Her frizzy hair was twisted into a tight bun. Smooth chocolate skin said youth, but the lines around her mouth gave away long hours of heavy toil. Her work-roughened hands rested on her pregnant belly.

"How come Captain John to recommend you?"

"He say you gotta a fine farm that needs some tendin'. I been tendin' farms long as I can remember. And my Oleta, she's a mighty-fine cook. She make the best biscuits in three counties, least wise that's what Cap'n John say."

Retta rested her hands on her hips. "What else did Captain John say?"

Hoke and Oleta looked at each other. Hoke fidgeted with the reins.

Oleta looked Retta in the eye, pursed her lips, and took a deep breath. "He say you c'aint cook for beans."

Retta gazed steadily at Oleta. Despite herself, she chuckled. "You got an apron?"

AUTHOR

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With a business career behind her, Michelle Ferrer has returned to her passion for writing stories, mostly historical fiction, and other stories that can't be ignored. In addition to short stories, she is also working on her first novel. Michelle is a member of Women Writing the West and the Writers Guild of Texas. She lives in Texas with an understanding and supportive husband. Her writing efforts are assisted by a creative terrier mix who perches between lap and keyboard.