

Heartbroken in her marriage, Leora Ardmore Schumacher leaves Atlanta, driving nonstop to Pennsylvania where she spent her teen years. She finds work caretaking an old farmhouse and barn while owner Ren Willow is in a nursing home. Her unusual healing gifts remind Ren and others of folk healing called powwowing—and Leora's life shifts forever.

Pennsylvania Powwow: Rising Sun Above the Devil's Door

By Marian Frances Wolber

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Pennsylvania Powwow

Rising Sun Above the
Devil's Door



Marian Frances Wolbers

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Chapter Sixteen

The Woodpile

Do not press an enemy at bay.

In Granny's house, the woodstove stood witness. It stayed unmoving on its cold, shiny, green legs, over all those years of fighting and loving, mourning and celebrating. Grandad started the fire most mornings by shoving in pieces of wood and lighting a match to some rolled-up newspaper. During the day Granny kept the stove going. She would walk out to the woodbin in the drafty hallway near the back door to choose two or three small logs; then, cradling them in her arms, she'd reenter the kitchen, open a black circular hatch on the stove's top, and sort of sidle each piece into the fire below, laying each piece just so.

When she got low on wood, she'd bark at her husband: "Paul Jr., go out and chop more wood." Then she'd turn to the children: "Go to the barn straight away and fetch more kindlin' for the fire."

Leora was thinking about that stove. About how you had to keep the stove going through the day, no matter what. She was out in the barn, piling up wood for Ren's winter, for Ren's stove, the black Ben Franklin. Now that the blue star quilt was cleaned and back on Ren's bed, this was the only other task she knew she must complete.

Soon she would be long gone. The thought saddened her deeply. But then she thought of Paul, how sick he was. She shook herself mentally: *I have no grounds to complain. Soon Paul would be gone altogether—really gone! In mind, body, and brotherly self. No room to whine. No time to sink into sentimentality.*

About six feet outside the barn lay a huge pile, part of the preceding winter's supply of wood, dumped there by a neighbor's truck. In the past week, Leora had stacked about a cord and a half, whittling away at the pile in early morning and late afternoon. She'd begun placing the rows more deeply inside the open portion of the big barn, deeper in than usual since, as Valerie told her, last year's snows had been heavy, frequent, and deep.

There was still a cord left to stack. And a storm was brewing.

Have to get the wood in before it rains, she said to herself. *Leave the small pieces, just go for the big ones.* "No, get the little ones, too—they're good kindlin'," Granny's voice said firmly inside her head. *Yeah, yeah. Granny's probably met up with Jim by now, up there or out there or wherever it is that souls end up.* For the hundredth time that day, Leora's thoughts turned again to her sister.

It was sad that Jim had died, yes. Everyone was sad for Salome especially, and for G.J. and little Nellie... "Oh, to lose your father at such an early age!" they all said, shaking their heads. At the funeral, everyone had cried. Afterwards, everyone sent food. Everyone gave money, everyone called up to help. Everyone was crushed.

Everyone except me, Leora thought.

What on earth is the matter with me? Why the hell can't I just feel sorry for Sal? Why do I make excuses not to call or see her? Leora stacked wood furiously. *Now, when she needs me most, why do I run? Why can neither of us look each other in the eye?*

Frustrated over the distance with a sister who had always been close—so close each knew what the other was thinking, often miles away—and angry at her own paralysis, Leora bent and lifted, hauled and dropped piece after piece of the heavy logs. Until finally, in the deepening dusk, with a new autumnal chill in the air and dark clouds appearing on the far end of the cornfields, all the uncomfortable thoughts that had hung around the edges of Leora's mind blew in at last—opening up, roaring through her, unstoppable.

She's free. Salome is free. God handed her a divorce on a silver platter. Oh, to have Death do the dirty work for you! How horrible!

How wonderful! Sal can always say she was “working things out.” That she and Jim had passed through the hardest part of marriage and had come to a place of peace.

No one has to know she was days away from moving out on him.

No one has to see the pain her soul suffered under his tyranny: they will call it grief whenever she cries.

He’s dead, it must be grief, Boom, it’s over, and the children are yours. No contests.

No custody battles.

They don’t have to know you wished he was dead.

And what about me? I’m stuck fighting a crazed, bitter boy-man. Egomaniac! Self-centered, son-of-a bitching, cheating, blind lunatic! He will not keep my children away from me.

God, strike him dead!... and if you won’t, then I will!

A work glove flew off Leora’s right hand, snagging on a jagged splinter from a hickory log. Leora looked out toward the remaining woodpile as she dislodged the glove, and pulled it back on.

Have to get the wood in before it rains, she thought. Can’t quit now.

Methodically, never breaking pace, she moved back and forth between the barn and the pile, picking up two pieces at a time, then crashing the heavy wood down on straight rows, so hard each log cracked and shuddered and thudded down, one by one by one. *I’m cracking skulls*, thought Leora fiercely. *His skull cracks a thousand times! Again! Again! Damn him for what he has done to me! Damn the worthless vows! Damn the ring! Damn his denial! Damn his face, which I trusted. Damn his callous, self-centered heart, which never truly held me in it. Damn his skull, and leave it here to rot.*

In this manner, the time passed like never before.

Leora did not leave the woodpile, though her shoulders ached and her back cramped up on her. In the darkness, with the rain nearly upon her, the woman in camouflage-green Army cap and Ren’s heavy mountain boots stalked back and forth, between the woodpile and the barn, until, finally, three tall rows of firewood lined the east, north, and

west walls of the barn. As the last pieces landed on the uppermost rows, the rain fell straight down in sheets, rattling the metal strips on the roof.

Before heading back to the house, Leora straightened all the way up at last, stretched her back, and regarded her work: the boxy, whitened ends of logs banked solidly to her right, left, and straight ahead. She congratulated herself for having the foresight to toss all the kindling, all the chips and smaller branches and odd pieces, in one pile close to the exit. In a corner near the door, was a piece so oddly shaped, so interesting, like a buck's antler, she had saved it. Maybe it would be good for hanging up or whittling or whatever, she thought, either for G.J. or maybe for Ole Man Willow, if he ever got home to his barn, that is.

It was a job well done. As Leora drew one last deep, satisfied breath to fill her nostrils with the smell of wood, she realized sharply that, if she were to stay, each and every time she returned here to fetch wood, the memory of crushing Terry's skull in the barn would come back.

To haunt me...or Ren or his son, Brad...

Oh, God! Leora's sorriness threatened to drown her again. But once again Granny's words saved her, as she heard her say for the thousandth time, there in that kitchen with the green stove, where all the dinners were cooked, "Leora, once the butter's on the table, no one remembers that you milked the cow."

Haunting is not for me. No, "haunt" is too strong a word, Leora decided. I will simply remember this anger. I will honor it, not hate it. I will see to it that my children live here in Pennsylvania with me, safe in my domain— wherever that is to be. And that way I shall not be haunted.

But I will look at forests and at trees everywhere I go until that day arrives, and each tree will be an ally; each tree I see will make me fight for them. Though he may have pushed me away, Terry will not divide me from my sweet Margie and little Heather.

I have made up my mind.

Leora stooped down near the kindling and sobbed into her work gloves. As clear as anything, she could see her girls getting themselves ready for bed; she saw them tucking each other in; she could feel their hearts longing for her nurturing presence. She felt the full grief of her loss, and their loss, and vowed, finally, that the grief would end.

She shut the doors of Ren Willow's barn and latched them tightly.

It rained all night long. Leora slept deeply and well.

At daybreak, she arranged to meet with Valerie before she went to work. They met at the Hamburg Diner, where Leora asked her to watch the farm, since she would be leaving to go north. Valerie hugged her hard. Pushing back a chestnut curl from Leora's face, she asked just one question: "May I call Terry? He asked me to tell him if you were leaving the area. It's just in case, in case anything—"

"Do whatever you need to do, Val. Give this note to Mr. Willow, please."

It read:

Dear My Favorite Old Man,

I am going to New Hampshire to break an old hex.

Love,

Powwow

"Oh, heck," said Valerie suddenly, "I need to give you something, too." On her front seat was Terry's book, *The Art of War*. "Willow said you wanted it back."

Leora placed it in The Tank, on top of a large box in the rear cargo area.

"When you come through again, you should stay at my house, you know."

Leora smiled. "I'll call. I promise."

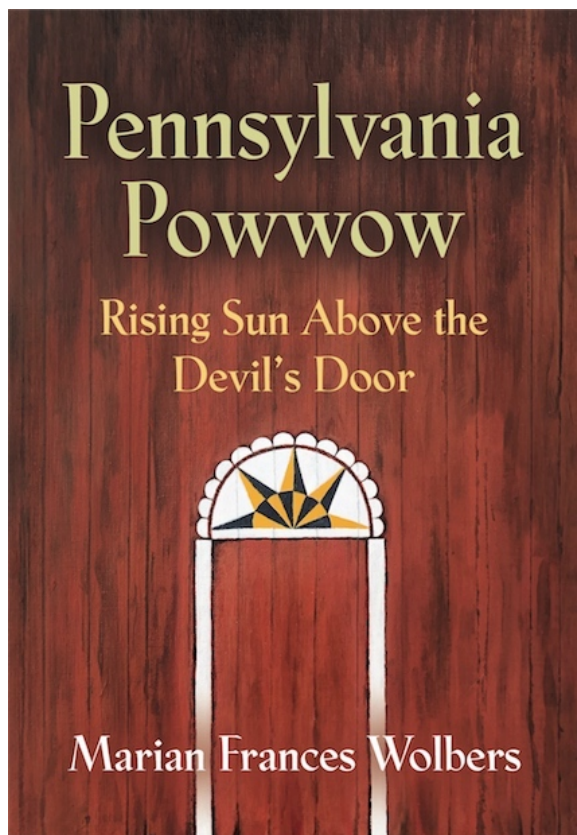
"Get on the road. I gotta get to work, anyway," groaned her friend.

Crows cawed raucously across the street from where they stood. Their gazes lifted, the old friends spotted two raptors coasting so high

on the skyway, it was nearly impossible to discern what exactly they were. Probably some kind of hawk, they concluded. In another month, the airways above the restaurant would be filled with a near-constant stream of birds in migration, from songbirds to eagles, heading south.

Still, the highway beckoned north to Leora.

Unbeknownst to her, Salome and her children were already in Noah, ahead of her. Noreen was there pretty much around the clock. Paul appeared to be losing ground.



Heartbroken in her marriage, Leora Ardmore Schumacher leaves Atlanta, driving nonstop to Pennsylvania where she spent her teen years. She finds work caretaking an old farmhouse and barn while owner Ren Willow is in a nursing home. Her unusual healing gifts remind Ren and others of folk healing called powwowing—and Leora's life shifts forever.

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