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Winnenap'

by Tom Durbin

Winnenap' squatted in the wickiup, his gray head bent, staring into the fire. There was not much more he could do here. The child would soon die. And he would be at fault. He was the medicine man, after all, he and no other. He wondered if the Paiutes would come for him. A few years before it would have been a foregone conclusion, execution being the price of repeated failure. But Wovoka's gentle teachings had spread widely through the Paiute people, though not so much in his own band. Still, they were a gentler people than in the old days, and that was his hope, for the campoodie lay a far piece from any white settlements and farther still from the white man's law. Many had died of this disease the whites called pneumonia, all up and down the valley, mostly the old ones, but many of the children too, the youngest, the weakest. And more than a few had died under his own care in spite of all he could do. Maybe it was the cold. As long as he had lived he had never seen such snow. It had heaped up day after day, stopping for awhile only to begin again, and the chill prying its icy fingers through the willow work walls of the wickiups.

The rest of the family was asleep, the father and mother and the other two children. It had been a hard night, the boy not being able to breathe and raving in his fever. His breathing had slowed now, the lungs pulling hard but with less and less force, and the fever eating him alive. It would be dawn soon, but the boy would not see it.

He waited in the hut, wanting to leave, to turn his back on death once and for all, but he could not. It was his duty to stay till the last. He was sick of this! He had never asked to be a medicine man. It had come to him by lot as it did among these people. He had never understood it. Among his own people, the Shoshone, a man was called by his medicine to be a healer, and it was understood that the ways of the Great Mystery were beyond all knowing, all understanding. The Creator gave or took away as the Creator would, and there was no way that a man could wrap his

mind around it. Only as mystery within mystery did it make any sense. But these Paiutes wanted everything laid out nice and straight. It was the law, or had been—three chances only. If more than three died under your care, it was your life. Oh, there were the exceptions of gunshot, broken bone, any sort of wound. And he could refuse any patient who had been treated by another. Also he could attribute the death to some witchcraft or coyote trick or some evil spirit. In the early years he had been in luck twice when at the death of a patient he had been able to step outside the wickiup and point to a whirlwind.

He picked up a stick and stirred the fire, coaxing a little more heat from the spent wood. At the risk of waking the family, he went to the woodpile taking a couple of piñon logs and placing them quietly over the coals. The wood was a little damp, and the hut immediately filled with smoke. No one was disturbed; woodsmoke was a constant in the winter.

He went back and sat beside the child. The breath now was very soft. He touched the pale forehead feeling the fever stronger yet. He closed his eyes and began singing a little song, very quietly so as not to wake the family. He bent over the child, singing in the boy's ear. It was not a healing song in the strictest sense, more a song of celebration, a song of spring, a song of renewal and rebirth. He wanted the child to die with some happiness around him, and so he sang the Hummingbird Song, his voice imitating the little whirring sounds of the wings, singing of colors, flowers and rainbows in the springtime waterfalls. He sang the song again and again telling himself it would comfort the child, but taking his own comfort too. When at last the boy's breathing stopped, Winnenap' thought he could feel the little wings of the boy's spirit brush against his face as it flew to the Great Mystery. Singing the death song of his medicine, he walked a little way with the child's spirit, guiding it on its way, helping it onto the good road.

He rose and slipped into his heavy sheepskin robe. Let

the parents wake without him, the knowledge would come to them the same whether he was there or not. Throwing open the door he walked out into the courtyard of the campoodie, his moccasins crunching the ice underfoot. He strode to the eastern edge of the cleared area. The snow beyond was waist deep. Hunting had been difficult to impossible this year. People were not starving now, but there had been much hunger, hunger that sapped the strength of those already weak and left them easy prey for disease. They would not have survived without the thin charity of the whites. Every few weeks, when they could get through, a wagon would arrive with weevily flour, moth eaten blankets, assorted scraps and castoff food items. No, the whites would not let them starve; they were needed to work the ranches; tend the horses, the cattle and the sheep; and look after the alfalfa.

He stood gazing east at the desert mountains, feeling a physical wrenching in the place where his heart was. Untold times he had wished that he could simply leave, go back to his own people, to his own land. Untold times he had told himself he could not. The honor of his people, the word of elders long since passed on, these held him with iron bonds. He was hostage, a marker given and received as assurance for the white-imposed truce. He would never leave...as long as he lived.

It had not been so bad. He had a Paiute wife, a good woman, wise and beautiful. She was gone now, but still there were his two grown sons. Besides, he was too old now to go back, his home was here, and his work. Yes, the work, this being a medicine man! At first he had resisted, but only a little. It had seemed right, natural. So he had taken it seriously and gone to the hills to get his medicine and his songs. It was good work. He liked helping people. His mother had known much about the healing properties of herbs, and she had passed the lore on to her son in her quiet way, not teaching really, just passing on her interest and her love for the plants and their natural relation to people. That had been useful. And he had been surprised at the strength of his own medicine, the chuckwalla and the rattlesnake. They were good helpers, reliable at a bedside.

And there had come his deepening compassion. As a boy and even as a young man he had thought that the role of medicine man depended largely on the healer's power, on his medicine, his magical abilities. He had come to understand that the chief tool was compassion. To bring the body or the spirit back into harmony with the Great Mystery, the healer had to feel an identity between himself and the one he was helping. Without that one thing, all the magic in the world was not only of little use, but also it was dangerous, liable to backfire and injure the healer. Without compassion the healer stood between the forces of healing and the patient, a barrier to the healing.

Well, he had learned. And learned more when he had gone to see the Paiute Messiah. He had expected a sad figure, the man after all was discredited after the terror of Wounded Knee, the massacre of the Big Foot Band. He had made the journey northward to Walker Lake in the fall, at a time when the flurry of chores at the C-Bar was over, everything left tight and ready for winter. The white man he worked for, John Sherril, was a good enough man, sending him home with a bonus, a couple of good blankets and some coffee. But he would never get used to the ways of whites. They were almost as bad as the Paiutes.

Wovoka had not been at all what he expected. A big man with large hands and feet, he possessed or was possessed by that deep sense of peace and gentleness that sometimes goes with great size. His face was very plain, not ugly in any sense, but with a sense that the planes of his face had been cut from rock and sculpted with a feeling for simplicity rather than cunning. The man had great presence, a tremendous magnetism. To Winnenap' it was as though he had walked into some great mountain amphitheater, a place of vast silence and peace. He seemed all-accepting, all-encompassing, and Winnenap' felt himself enfolded and brought to a peace within himself that he had not known existed. And this was all in spite of himself, in spite of his own wall of cynicism and doubt-nourished lifetime of having to see through one fraud or another. But this man, whatever he might be, was no fraud. Nor was he the broken shell Winnenap' had expected. Instead he found a man

hearty and whole, a man of wisdom, a man who knew. At one time most of the tribes of the West had sent their delegates to learn more of his vision and to bring back his ritual. His Ghost Dance had been enacted across the plains and even in the East, uniting many of the tribes around a common vision. It might have changed everything . . . except for Wounded Knee.

Now, no one wanted to hear about the Ghost Dance anymore. Wovoka was still a holy man, but he was not a medicine man, did not run a sweat, though it was said he had the power to heal. He still preached the same message, admonishing the people to do good always, to work well with the whites, and do no harm to anyone. He spoke of a time to come when the earth would be renewed, lifted from her sleep and restored to her youth, the whole Indian people, living and dead alike, reunited on that new earth.

Winnenap' had liked the man immediately, liked him on a deep, human level, establishing that instant trust that occurs only when two men are natural friends; it was as though they had always known each other. They had sat for hours talking of spirit matters, the Grandfathers, the Great Mystery and finally the tragedy of the Lakota. The Prophet had found it hard to talk about Wounded Knee, but finally he had come to it. He had led Winnenap' to a high place, a narrow valley folded in the mountains. There he had pointed to one of the ancient pictures that the Old Ones had carved into the rocks, figures, six of them dancing together with hands linked. One figure was larger than the others, and Wovoka had told him this was Creator, and that Creator had shown him the spirit dance as it was done on the other side. Then Wovoka had told him how the dance was meant to restore the earth, not only from the ravages of the whites, but also to restore it to its youth. He had described his vision of the happy union of all the tribes, all the Indian peoples, living and dead. He told Winnenap' how the delegates from the tribes had come and how he had taught them the Way of Peace and the sacred dance. Then, tears streaming down his face, he told how the Lakota messengers had come, asking for the ritual, how he had seen the desperation, pain and anger in their eyes and been taken aback

by their fanaticism. He had warned them then that he was not giving them the whole of the ritual, that the wholeness of the thing must wait until a time when there was a greater unity among the tribes. He knew they had not listened. He had seen that there would be a disaster, but had been powerless to stop it. He had even gone so far as to admonish the Lakota that the pipe he gave them was under his own, and therefore powerless unless they obeyed his instructions, that they must perform the ritual only as he had said. And he had known the moment when old Sitting Bull had wrested the pipe away and broken the covenant. He had seen the disaster coming, had sent messengers to warn them, but it was too late. No, he said, the sacred shirts which he had shown them how to make were never meant to stop bullets. That also had been Sitting Bull's idea. Insane! The whole idea of the Ghost Dance had been to establish a path which the entire Indian people could walk in peace, a way to survive alongside the whites until the time came when the two worlds, red and white, separated as naturally as day emerging from night. Yes, he said, it will still happen. In some places the Paiutes still danced, albeit secretly, and the more the people danced the closer the new world would come. Yes, Wovoka knew that he had frightened and offended the whites, but he could not change either his vision or his message.

Winnenap' had looked him in the eye and said, "What about this business of you sayin' you're Jesus."

The big man had looked right back at him, his eyes great warm pools. "But I am Jesus," he had said. "There is no difference between me and Jesus." And he had smiled, an expression of such vastness in its compassion and understanding that Winnenap' had, for awhile, believed. He understood then how the tribes had been mesmerized by the man's presence and his teaching. And, for the first time, he understood the Paiute people, drawn as they were between the peaceful teachings of this man, their Messiah, and their ancient ways.

Well, that was years ago. He knew for a fact that certain groups of Paiutes still performed the Ghost Dance, and for that matter, followed the teachings of Wovoka. Not that he

could see that it did them much good, not at least with the whites. Those people may talk about turning the other cheek, but you better not turn your back on them, not if you wanted to keep your land or your hide in one piece. Still, he had to hand it to those who still followed the teachings of the Messiah. They were the best kind of people. He himself had been changed by his time with the gentle healer. He had ceased hunting altogether, finding that he could not kill. It seemed there was some basic conflict with his medicine, a conflict which he could not quite understand, but which he had to take seriously if he was to continue as a healer. And he found his medicine got stronger. But he was still not sure whether he believed or not. The man had possessed such power! Sometimes in his heart he felt like a traitor, like a white man in his refusal to acknowledge the Messiah. They were all too willing for the Indian to become Christian if it was through their own teaching. But an Indian Jesus? A living Messiah? They wanted their Christ safely on the cross, not walking among them embarrassing them with his teachings!

His reverie was broken by a sharp keening from inside the hut. Winnenap' stepped to the door, lifted the buckskin cover and stepped in. The woman was in her husband's arms, the little girl crying, the older boy staring, uncomprehending. Again there was nothing he could do, but he sat down anyway, waiting. At what he hoped was the right time, he rose and told the parents he was sorry, that he had done everything he could and it was not enough. He knew he should have covered himself with some coyote story or tale of snow spirits or such, but he was fed up with all of it and he would not. He had truly done all he could. He had made sure that the child was kept as warm and comfortable as possible, had cautioned the mother to make sure he got plenty to drink, had administered the most potent herbs he knew for lungs and fever and had sung the healing songs of his medicine endlessly. He had not dared to take the child in the sweat lodge because of the fever.

The parents were understanding, not blaming him. He knew this family to be "Wovoka people." There would be none of the nasty business of the past in this wickiup, no

cutting off of fingers or other mutilation. Such goings-on were against the teachings of the Messiah. They were good people and would be no threat to him, but the word would go out. He finished up with the boy, singing another song for the dead, this time one that was meant more for the comfort of the living.

When he was done, he left the village, wading through the waist-deep snow to a nearby hilltop. He sat looking down. Should he leave? Try to make a run for it? He would not. He was an old man, and running did not become his dignity. Further, he would not break his oath, or the faith of the elders. Yes, he was afraid to die. If he looked at it too long, he was sure he would be trembling, but he rode instead the hard wave of anger and contempt which he had nursed for these many years. It was difficult though, and at last he gave it up, surrendering to his own wisdom which told him there was, after all, little difference between Paiute and Shoshone, that it was his own pride that had made him magnify differences that were not worth the telling. The boy who had just died was as good as any boy, as good as his own son and as little deserving of death. For that matter, what was there to tell the difference between Indian and white? One could murder as ruthlessly as the other, and either one, given the power, would certainly exercise it.

He had grown to despise ignorance and brutishness. He saw it in the Paiutes. He saw it in the whites. And he was sure there was plenty of it in his own people, and he would know it well if he were not looking back at them through the illusive mists of time. Bad was bad, good was good and there was enough of each in any man regardless of the color of his skin.

Well enough of that! He felt the weight of his own thoughts on his back like the very snows of winter upon the earth, heavy and cold. He tried to remember what it had felt like to be young, and he saw his wife's face as the young woman she had been. It is like that, he thought. For a man, the story of his life is the story of what he can bring to a woman. We play at being great warriors, but when the day is over, we come home to the fire, home to the wickiup, home to the woman. That is where a man's life is, at that

fire that she makes and tends with her hands. Without that fire a man is nothing, a leaf on the wind, separated from the branch that nourishes and sustains it.

The sun was climbing in the eastern sky now. There were tendrils of gray cloud blowing off the high peaks of the Sierra, gathering over the valley. He looked at the eastward hills, up past Winedumah. Over there was the land of the Shoshone, the land his heart had never left, the desert land, land of chuckwalla and rattlesnake. He would go visit in the spring, if only to see the land again.

He returned to his own wickiup and waited. If they were going to come, they would come soon. He rested for awhile, pushing the thought of his own death away, wishing the old woman was still there to tend the fire, maybe make some stew. Finally he allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

When he woke it was late afternoon. He went outside and down the hill a little from the campoodie to where the sweat lodge had been erected. He gathered together the stones and wood and made fire, then brought water to the little domed hut. When all was in readiness, the stones dragged in to the pit, he smoked himself with the sacred sweet sage, making his spirit clean, then getting down on all fours, he entered the lodge.

He had determined that he would be ready, that perhaps they would come, perhaps not, but he would be ready. So now he sat quietly in the semi-darkness, the buckskin door not yet pulled down, making a silent prayer. Then he closed the door, threw first a little tobacco on the glowing stones as an offering, then poured the water. The stones hissed and popped, some of them breaking apart with the sudden change in temperature. Instantly the little hut was transformed to another world, a world of steam and heat and total darkness. Very gradually he began one of the songs of his medicine, the Bear Song to give him the courage he would need for this night. He began singing very softly, almost inaudibly, letting his voice rise and grow until it thundered in his own ears, and he could see the bear clearly before him and feel its power within himself. He entered that state in which he could move back and forth easily between the visible and invisible worlds, the world of ordi-

nary life and the world of spirit. After a long time of this and a long time of silence, he shifted to the Hummingbird Song, recalling the spirit of the boy who had died and sending him once again the blessing of the beautiful colors as well as the immense courage of the little bird. He felt his spirit rise and walk on the rainbow road, the good road, the road of happiness, and he was not surprised to find the boy walking beside him, lifting his hand to his own so that they walked together for a time, the song of hummingbird all around them.

When that was done he lay down for awhile, feeling the spirits gathering within the sweat and seeing some of them, the Old Men, the Healers of the Mountain, the River Woman and also his grandmother, his t'utsi. They all came. When he sat up again and began to sing, it was the Mountain Song and it was hard for him because it seemed that the life of the mountain was so far away from his own at that moment. He suddenly felt old and feeble, and he was trying to draw in the strength of the mountain, the strength of the rock and the earth. But it was hard. His voice was shaking and soon he found himself weeping, weeping for himself, for the boy who had died, weeping for his dead wife, for the terrible loss of his land and his people, all his people, Shoshone and Paiute, for the Indian people, all of them. He felt then his own death, knew that he would surely die this night and felt that his own passing was the passing of his people, that with his death his people would enter some new and unknown era, and he was afraid for them.

In the midst of his tears he looked and saw standing in front of him the figure of Jesus as he had seen him in the white man's Bible. And behind him stood Wovoka. Smiling gently and radiating peace, they came and sat on either side of him; and he was comforted beyond all measure, feeling lifted beyond the care of death. One of them motioned to him, he could not tell which one, and he saw that the door of the sweat lodge was in fact the door of life and death, and simultaneously he knew that this Jesus and this Wovoka were the same, and that they were that door, the door and the guardians of the door. A voice spoke and said, "I am

the way and the light." And he saw that death and life were merely passageways into one another, and that in fact there was no death as he had understood it. He was consumed then, completely enraptured, so that his experience was beyond his own comprehension or remembrance.

When he woke in the darkness of the sweat, he was shaking, shivering with cold. He could not tell how long he had been asleep or if he had been asleep at all. He felt helpless as a newborn babe and at the same time clean and powerful, possessed of himself, of the full range of his abilities and powers.

Outside he heard the sounds of drunken men and knew it was coming. He was not afraid. He was sad for the men that they had needed alcohol to work themselves up to it. He knew he did not want to die, but there was nothing to do but sit in the darkness, now singing the death song of his medicine, now just sitting in the silence. He found his pipe and tobacco and smoked in the sacred way, praying for his people, for all people, for all the relatives, all things. Finally he sang one of the songs from the Ghost Dance.

Wùmbi' ndomā'n, Wùmbi' ndoma'n,
Wùmbi' ndomā'n, Wùmbi' ndoma'n,
Nuvā ri' p noyo' wanā, Nuvā ri' p noyo' wanā
Nuvā ri' p noyo' wanā, Nuvā ri' p noyo' wanā

The Whirlwind! The Whirlwind!

The Whirlwind! The Whirlwind!

The snowy earth comes gliding, the snowy earth comes gliding,

The snowy earth comes gliding, the snowy earth comes gliding

They were the words of Wavoka's vision, the words for bringing forth the new earth, the words of healing.

All night long, whenever he was quiet, he heard the men shouting and cursing. In the hour of first light they came.

"Winnenap"! Winnenap"! Come out you worthless piece of Shoshone shit! Come out here and get what's coming to you!"

He crawled outside. The night was startlingly clear, stars blazing in the heavens, and the Milky Way spread like a great blanket from south to north, the spirit road, the road that all must travel from life to death. Standing, he looked at the men. "What business have you got with me?"

"You let people die! Old people, young ones too!"

"I did all I could. I did everything that anyone could do. Go away! Leave me here with my medicine."

"Your medicine! Ha! It failed us and now you're through. You gotta die! It's our way!"

"That part of your way is dead. It died with Wovoka."

"Ha! You and that Wovoka! Him and his Ghost Dance!"
The man spat in Winnenap's face.

He held his head high, looking each man in the eye. "I have been in your wickiups, all three of you! I have doctored your children when they were sick. I have helped each of you and each of your wives. You dishonor yourselves and you dishonor your people! You dishonor your own manhood! Go home! We are past this!" He stared at each of the men till they were forced to look away in their shame. Then he turned toward the eastern mountains, toward the country of the Shoshone, toward home.

The blow came to the back of his head, swiftly, and he was free.

Spring came at last to the lands of the southern Paiute. A south wind was blowing up from Coso and with it the fevers ceased. Around the fires the women gathered at their daily chores and told the story of the old medicine man and his ending. Some remarked on the goodness of the old man and how he would be missed while others nodded to the wisdom of the ancient ways, ways which no mind could understand, but which allowed the people to continue.

And each year, at the turning of the seasons, the people danced. ❖