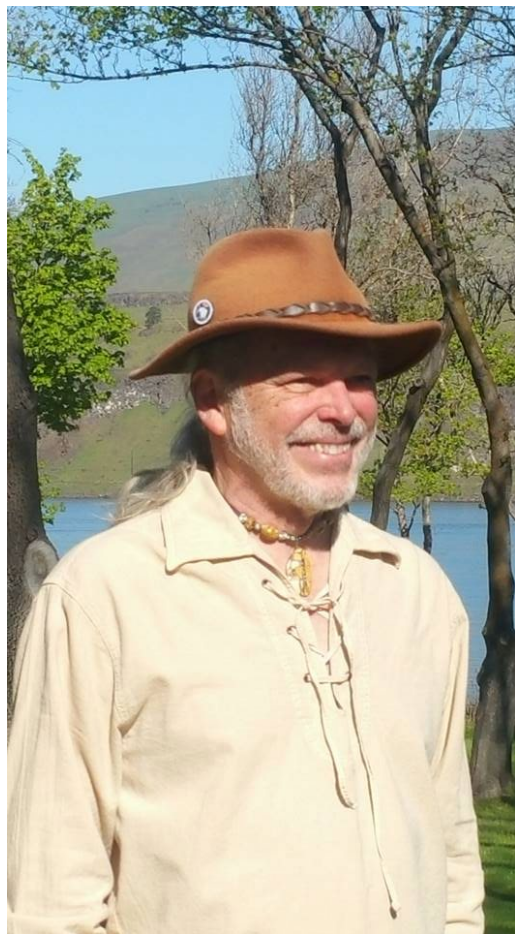




a novella by  
**Russell E. Vance, III**



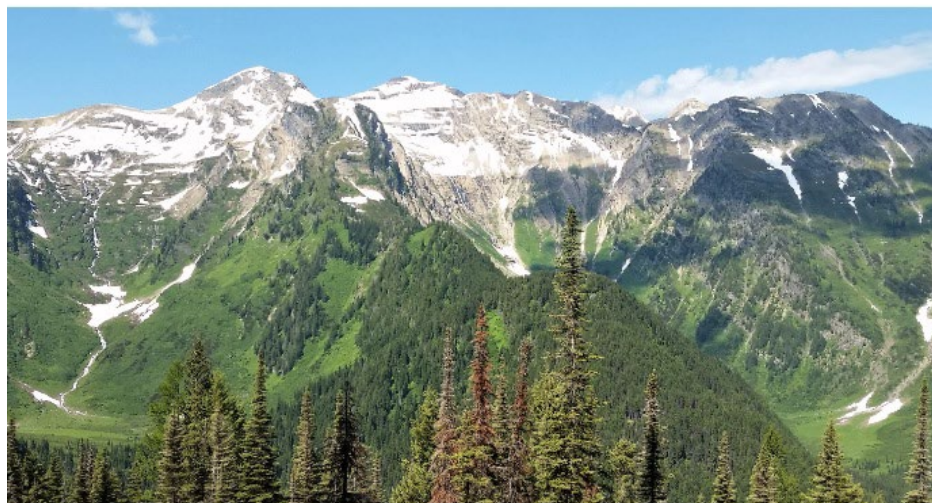
*Akakiááyo - old bear in Blackfeet*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR.** Russell E. (Rusty) Vance, III, PhD. is a retired psychotherapist who, after retiring, has followed his passions and dreams. He and his wife, Pamela, spent the first ten years of retirement as nomadic RVer's spending over 90% of their life off-the-grid far out into the Sonoran Desert or in the dense cedar and hemlock forest of Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana where Rusty and Pamela served as volunteer campground hosts.

An unabashed tree-hugger and environmentalist, Rusty's post-retirement advocacy became wildlife management, living among and helping keep deer, mountain goats, big horn sheep, bears and other creatures safe. Many of his stories carry a strong environmental message.

Rusty enjoys spending his evenings writing stories. His novels include – *AGEH*, *New Prince of Coillearnach*, *Tree of Life*, *The Tillman Place*, and *Mountain of Gold* along with several novella and short stories.





Papa Littlebear. Papa Littlebear." the child known as Glacier Lily spoke quietly and respectfully to the elderly man sitting on the log by the firepit looking up toward the mountain. His face was lined by age. His white hair hung down each side of his head in long braids. He was wrapped in a colorful yet well-worn blanket so only the cuff of his brown denim twill trousers and moccasins were visible. His eyes were sad as he stared up at the mountain before him. He looked very frail. He had come to Ponoká Mountain when he was about forty years old and he had fought many hard battles in the half-century he had lived here. He still lived in the same cabin built into the side of the mountain that he built fifty years before.

The sun was setting over the summit of Ponoká. The clouds in the big sky were running through a variety of pinks and reds. The snow that covered the summit was like a shock of white hair. Richard Littlebear laughed to himself as he stared at the mountain and thought "you age so much better than me." Richard felt a oneness with the mountain. Ponoká had been his home, his refuge, his life and his love for almost five

decades. He wondered, as he looked lovingly at his mountain, whether or not it might be his last night with her. Tomorrow was to be perhaps his greatest battle. If he lost . . . Richard couldn't bear to think about what losing would mean. This wasn't the first time he had his back against the wall. But he had never before been this old and this tired.

He held his hands above a small pile of wood and soon there was a warm, comforting flame. Two young girls and a young boy were sitting nearby watching him. They knew Richard's pain. They had seen it many times in Richard's and their parents' eyes. Their parents were a part of the small band that had grown up around Richard. Ponoká was also their home. They had known no place else and they knew the importance of the morrow's battle. Their parents were manning the barricade. They had sent the children to look after the aging leader as he withdrew into the wilderness to meditate and search deep inside himself for a way to save Ponoká.

Tini, the youngest of the three, could sit quietly no longer. "Please, Papa Littlebear, tell us again about the Mountain Spirits who gave us Ponoká," she pleaded.

"They didn't give Ponoká to us," corrected Lyle, a strapping young man of fourteen. "They gave Ponoká to Papa Littlebear, not us."

Richard smiled. "Yes. They gave her to me, but that was only because your parents and the others were not with me back then. Ponoká is yours too, and you belong to Ponoká."

"Tell us the story," the children insisted.

Richard looked up at the mountain. Perhaps such a distraction would help clear his mind. "Okay," he said. The children cheered. Lyle put another piece of wood on the fire and they sat back to enjoy the story they had heard so many times throughout their lives. It was a story they would gladly listen to again and again.

"I was a young man back then," began Richard. The children giggled. "Don't you believe that I was ever a young man?" he pretended to be insulted. The children laughed.

"As I said, I was a young man. I lived in a city. My name was actually Ricard . . . well, I won't tell you because you'd laugh. But I wasn't Papa Littlebear back then." The children laughed anyway. They always laughed when he wouldn't tell them that he had started his life as Richard Gaston from Detroit, Michigan.

"I felt that I couldn't breathe," he continued when they stopped laughing. "I was upset by the pollution and the way people had no regard for Unci Maka – Grandmother Earth. The people in the city didn't know and love Unci Maka like you do."

At this point the children would always shake their heads in disbelief and one of them would inevitably ask "how could anyone not love Unci Maka?" All of the children grew up knowing that Unci Maka, Grandmother Earth, their name for nature was not only beautiful but was their source of life. Without Unci Maka everyone would die.

Richard always enjoyed that break in his story because it confirmed that these children were among the fortunate few who knew what nature was all about. "I felt trapped," he went on. "I didn't belong there."

Richard's eyes became far away and sparkled with life as he relived those days. As he related the 'family-friendly' version to his young audience, you, dear reader, get the unabridged, uncensored version.



**R**ichard Gaston was almost 40 years old when he first saw Ponoká Mountain. You might say that it was love at first sight but Richard loved all the mountains. As it was, Ponoká offered the opportunity for him to escape so-called 'civilization' and live in peace. Society had not been very kind to Richard. He and his Mother had been beaten and abused by a tyrannical man who called himself a 'preacher'.

His Mother loved nature. Knowing this, his father purposely kept her locked in an inner-city apartment.

One cold winter night, when Richard was a teenager, his father beat his Mother and threw her out of the apartment without shoes or a coat. His Mother had actually believed that a god had given her husband the authority to beat her and forbid Richard from taking her side. This night, however, Richard could take no more. He could not believe that any god, especially one that was supposed to be loving, would purposely give a man the authority to beat his wife. He gave his father a taste of his own medicine and left him unconscious and bleeding on the apartment floor as he went out to find his Mother.

He found her huddled under some newspaper on a bench in a nearby park. She was blue. He carried her to a hospital. She had been dead when he found her. He was inconsolable. The pain of the following days was so intense that his mind refuses to remember. Probably for the best. He ended up in Chicago where he joined the Army. That was another chapter of his life he would like to forget.

He was in Texas when he was discharged from the Army and the first thing he did was head toward the mountains where he fell in love with Ponoká Mountain.

He had picked a spot well up the mountain and well off any trail where he built a cabin in front of a cave entrance where the back wall of the dwelling was the mountain rock itself. It was simple and unique and served his needs well. There was water in the cave, a beautiful mountain lake filled with fish and food was plentiful. Richard felt at home. More importantly, Richard felt free. He had truly escaped the ravages of a life of pain and violence and now wanted to make up time.

Richard had lived on the side of the mountain for several months when he was hiking near the road. Richard heard a woman screaming and crying. He rushed to help her. As he entered a clearing he found two men holding a naked woman by the arms while a third man, with his pants down, was trying to stop her from squirming.

"Hey, stop that!" Richard yelled.

The men paused and looked at Richard.

"Get lost, Ass Hole," the third man called. "This is none of your business."

"She certainly doesn't seem like a consenting adult," said Richard moving slowly toward the group. All Richard had with him was a staff. It looked innocuous but what Richard could do with that staff was just short of amazing. Richard's staff was a jo.

A jo is a Japanese martial arts short staff and Richard was an expert at its use. The staff as a martial arts weapon began as a means for nomadic, pacifist monks to travel dangerous roads and protect other travelers without killing the attacker. It became a highly respected weapon when a staff master took on the most renowned Samurai swordsman in the land and defeated him. Richard was a pacifist so the jo was perfect for him.

"It doesn't matter," said the third man, "she's just an injun squaw and I bought her. I paid two-hundred and fifty dollars for her so I can do what I want with her."

"It doesn't matter if she's a native American, buying and selling people is illegal so you can't do whatever you want with her." Richard's mind was flooded with memories of a less pacifistic time when he was in the military and had raided the compound of slave traders. He was so incensed. None of the slave traders left alive. Richard shook his head to focus on the present.

"Who are you? Mr. Goodie Two-shoes?" the man shouted. "Get the hell out of here."

Richard was almost toe to toe with the third man who had, by this time, pulled up his pants and turned his attention toward Richard leaving the other two men holding the young woman. Richard just kept moving ever so slowly forward constantly studying the man for any signs of attack.

"You are really a despicable excuse for a human being," Richard said calmly. He was so close he could almost have whispered.

"Go to hell, asshole," the man shouted in Richard's face.

"Really?"

"Get lost or I'll beat the shit out of you."

"That scares me," said Richard sarcastically. He turned slowly away from the man and without warning brought the end of his staff sharply up between the man's legs. The man screamed in agony and doubled over. Feigning surprise Richard turned quickly, brought the staff around his waist, bringing the head of the staff soundly against the man's head. One down, two to go.

The two men who had been holding the young woman let go of her and were moving to help their fallen friend. As soon as they let go of the young woman she crouched low and planted her elbow in one of the two men's groin with all of her might. He screamed and lashed out with his fist, but the young woman had stayed low and scampered out of the way. Richard kicked the third man causing him to roll onto his back. With the tip of the staff in the man's throat and his foot on the man's chest, he held his hand up to the approaching friends.

"Stop or he dies," called Richard.

The two friends stopped immediately.

"Do you have a cell phone?" Richard asked. They pulled out their phones. Richard took one of the phones and called 911. A rifle lay on the tailgate of a pickup truck. Richard had the young woman bring it to him. It was loaded so Richard withdrew the staff, and gesturing toward the ground with the muzzle of the rifle, he said "lay down, boys. Face down. Get comfortable until the police get here."

The young woman approached Richard. "That was a brave thing you did," she said.

"Naw," replied Richard, a wee bit embarrassed, "it was just the right thing to do."

"My name is Nizhoni," she said leaning over and kissing Richard on the cheek.



"I'm Richard," he replied smiling as he looked into the beautiful face. He was smitten.

When the police arrived, arrested the three men and had taken statements from Richard and the young woman they offered to take Nizhoni to a shelter but she wanted nothing to do with that. She turned to Richard. "May I go with you, Richard?" she pleaded.

Richard didn't know what to think nevertheless what to say or do. The police officer wanted to get moving. He was undoubtedly the junior among those who responded and it was obvious that he didn't like getting stuck providing transportation when the others were going to get to 'book the perps.' He looked questioningly at Richard and shifted his weight.

"Yes, officer," Richard finally said. "I'll find a safe place for her and make sure she's available to testify when the time comes."

You would have thought the weight of the world had been lifted from the young police officer's shoulders. He smiled at Richard, said "thanks", tipped his hat respectfully to Nizhoni, jumped in his car and sped off so he could get in on the action back at the office.

Richard watched him speed off and then turned to Nizhoni.

"And what am I going to do with you?" he said.

"You say that like I'm a child you're stuck with," Nizhoni retorted. She looked a bit hurt and a bit angry.

"I'm sorry," Richard replied. "I didn't mean it that way, but I just have a little cabin up the mountain. I've never had guests nevertheless a woman."

"Are you worried about what the neighbors will say?" Nizhoni laughed standing there wearing nothing but Richard's mountain shirt; a warm felt outer garment that showed lots of cleavage and barely covered her bottom.

"I guess not, but . . ."

"But what?" Nizhoni's voice softened as she reached out and gently touched his face, "I was just kidnapped from my home and sold as a sex slave. You risked your life to save me and now you're worried about

being alone with me. I'm not in the least bit worried about being alone with you in a mountain cabin and I promise you, I won't seduce you." They both laughed.



Well, both Richard and Nizhoni kept their word. There was no sex. At least not for quite some time. That doesn't mean that things didn't get tense at times. Dressing and bathing were always fraught with sexual tension, but neither was going to break their promise. Richard couldn't help but appreciate Nizhoni's beautiful young body.

Most of their time was taken up by gathering, harvesting, fishing and preparing food for the winter. Richard's cabin, as I have already mentioned, literally used the rock of the mountain as the back wall. Otherwise it appeared like a typical one room cabin. There was a large fireplace at one end with a raised hearth for cooking. Across from the fireplace was a table, two straight-back chairs, a rocking chair, book shelves and a crude cupboard. The shelves were lined with books. The collection verged on the eclectic. There was Plato, Thoreau and a collection of European philosophers. There were books by and about the Dalai Lama and a variety of eastern thinkers. Quantum physics was next to geology which was next to a line of books on medicinal herbs and natural medicine. Light reading was Arthur Conan Doyle and Jules Verne. In one corner were several spiral notebooks and one lay on the table with a pen on top.

The sleeping area was just inside the cave. Richard made use of the constant temperature inside a cave. A roughhewn wardrobe stood against the wall and a trunk at the foot of the bed. A second bed was a short distance from the first. Unlike the first and older bed, this bed was

actually made with logs and rope. It was the bed Richard made for Nizhoni. Despite its looks it was quite comfortable with an overstuffed mattress, a comforter and several quilts.

Just around a corner in a small antechamber off the main passageway of the cave was a spring. It filled a natural basin which it had undoubtedly carved in the rock over hundreds of thousands of years and flowed out through a crevice in the wall. This was one reason that Richard actually put his cabin against the mountain. It was better than having a well in the house. The spring not only provided Richard with water but it provided electricity. Coming out of the cavern wall the water passed over the paddles of a homemade hydro-generator. A group of deep cycle batteries were nearby. Richard used the power for lights and an old radio, just in case he got the urge to know what was happening in the outside world, which, honestly, wasn't very often.

Farther back in the cave were Richard's store rooms. These were filled with the food items that Richard had grown or gathered. He had a terraced garden where he grew leeks, kohlrabi, chard, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, beets, kale, radishes, fennel, pumpkin, squash and a variety of beans.

He gathers cow parsnip, glacier lily, pine nuts, white pine needles, golden rod and several types of berries such as chokeberries, huckleberries and wild wax currents. Most of his food was dried. The nearby lakes provided Richard with an excellent supply of fish. Some of the fish he smoked, but most of it is dried. He would eat fresh fish as late into the winter as possible to conserve his dried fish supply. Richard avoided going to town as much as possible. When he was forced to go, he would take some of his produce and fish and trade for flour, salt, sugar, honey and other things he could not produce for himself.

In short, Richard was as close to self-sufficient as anyone could be. He and Nizhoni spent the first winter comfortably on the mountain. In the evenings Nizhoni liked to pull the rocking chair near the fire and read while Richard sat at the table reading and writing in his spiral notebooks. It was one such evening that Richard put down his book and stared at the young woman happily sitting in the over-sized rocker reading Sherlock Holmes.

He walked over and stood by her. She looked up and smiled. He returned her smile as he admired her beauty, as he had so many times. He knelt down on the floor next to her. She looked concerned. This was not his normal behavior.

"You know that I care very much about you," Richard stated matter-of-factly.

"Yes," Nizhoni smiled. "And I care for you."

"I know," he paused. "But I can no longer ignore or pretend that I only care for you but do not desire you."

"What?"

"Nizhoni, I can no longer pretend. I love you. I want to hold you and kiss you and make love to you."

"And I love you too," said Nizhoni somehow springing from her chair to his arms in one move. Richard fell backwards and Nizhoni landed on top of him kissing each other like they had to make up for all the months of abstinence. From that night on the little rope bed was moved to the living area where it was used like a sofa.

On clear days Nizhoni and Richard would hike around the mountain. On "inside days" they would explore further back into the cave. It was on one such day that Richard struck it rich - literally.

If you read government literature on prospecting you will quickly come to realize that not only are the days of a grizzled mountain man with a burrow gone but that your statistical odds of making any significant money are exceptionally poor. They're almost as small as your chance of getting hit by lightning outside the state of Florida. We learn from history that those who actually made good money from gold mining during the famous California gold rush were actually successful veteran miners who re-located to California.

In any case, Richard happened across a passageway that he hadn't noticed before. He would have sworn that this passage was not there before, but here it was. Nizhoni was the one who insisted that they explore it. They

were but a few yards into the passage when Richard noticed something interesting. It turned out to be gold.

Long story short, prospecting on public land is legal. Richard got a lawyer, staked his claim and had the attorney work a deal whereby he was able to buy a large tract of land that included Ponoká Mountain. With his wealth Richard could live anywhere and do anything. He chose to live in his cabin and live life just as he lived before he became rich.

Some months after Richard discovered gold a large oil company leased some wilderness land near his property with the plans of drilling for oil. Richard attempted to buy the land the oil company was leasing. He failed. So Richard funded the Sierra Club's fight against the drilling proposal while he had a team of attorneys and real estate brokers quietly buying up all the surrounding land. When the oil company wanted to start exploratory drilling they had to cross Richard's land to get to theirs. He refused permission. He had won, for the time, and the oil company backed off.

Life was good on the mountain but Richard found that he could not ignore the destruction of Unci Maka that was going on around him. While he happily lived in a log cabin without running water or plumbing, his wealth went to those fighting to save nature from humanity.



The morning was bright and cloudless. The air was cool and crisp. Richard moved silently through the heavy woods. He was stalking Ponoká - an elk. He had neither gun nor bow. Richard had no intention of killing the magnificent animal. He only wanted time to watch. Spotting a giant bull in a clearing Richard just sat down and totally immersed himself in the scene before him. It was as Richard was

admiring the beauty of nature spread before him that he heard the anguished cry of Omahkapi'si . . . the wolf. Richard didn't hesitate. He immediately went looking for the crying animal.

It didn't take him long to find a young female wolf caught in a snare trap. This type of cruel hunting was illegal. Besides this was Richard's mountain. He didn't allow hunting no matter what the law.

The animal was thrashing around and screaming in agony. Richard stood for a moment trying to decide how he could get the large, strong animal to stay still long enough for him to remove the snare from her leg. There was only one option. He would move toward the animal, speaking calmly, and attempt to throw his coat over her in such a way that he could hold her down without her sinking her powerful teeth into his body.

His first attempt failed. He ended up in a pile on the ground having to roll quickly out of Omahkapi'si's reach. He would try two more times before he leaped and the coat covered the great wolf's head. As they both hit the ground Richard had his head next to the wolf's head. It took all his strength to stay on top of the struggling animal while he turned his body so that he could reach the foot entangled by the snare. Once the snare was removed Richard immediately rolled off Omahkapi'si. He didn't take a moment to consider the danger in which that put him. But Omahkapi'si struggled to her feet, paused only momentarily looking toward Richard and then ran off into the woods.

Richard slowly sat up. There was a giant smile on his face. As he laughed he waved in the direction Omahkapi'si had run. "You're welcome, beautiful Omahkapi'si." He looked at the snare still in his hand and his smile faded. Someone had not only trespassed and broken the law but they had hurt one of his friends.

It didn't take Richard any time to decide what to do. He gathered a handkerchief full of berries, sat his water bottle on the ground next to him, and sat back to wait until the owner of the snare came back. What made him think the hunter would check his snares this day was anyone's guess. Richard probably hadn't thought about it, but as it turned out the hunter did return.

Shortly after noon a large burly man came through the woods. He looked like the consummate mountain man. He was at least six feet tall and had to weigh three hundred pounds. He was wearing blue jeans, hiking boots, a flannel shirt, a red plaid jacket, a Drake Gore-Tex Jones hat and carrying a double-barreled shotgun. It was Douglas Manchester.

Richard knew Douglas Manchester. Everyone knew Doug, the town bully. In the crossroad town of Chester - using the term 'town' in its loosest sense - Doug did what he wanted and took what he wanted.

That's because Douglas Percival Manchester was the son of Marcus Rutherford Manchester, who owned most of the county - land, buildings and businesses. A high percentage of the people in Dexter County either worked for, rented from or were in business because of Marcus Manchester. It was also common knowledge that Marcus owned the local law enforcement and judicial system. The final voice in who stood trial and who went to jail was always that of Marcus Manchester. Obviously his own son was exempt from any social or judicial punishment. The local constabulary could drive him home if he was drunk and disorderly. They could warn him if he was going to kill someone. Otherwise any sort of enforcement might mean the end of the sheriff's term or the career of a deputy.

Marcus Manchester had inherited most of his money from family in the east. He had moved west because he could become a king. He increased his fortune in a simple, totally unethical but sadly quite legal manner.

He would propose a product, service or business and get unwary investors to buy into the project. He would literally run the business into the ground at which time he would give the Board a large bonus - the Board members were always his close friends - himself a large bailout and declare bankruptcy. The bankruptcy would result in investors losing their money to pay off creditors and the workers would be out of a job. Marcus called himself a successful business man. There were, of course, those who were equally ruthless and devoid of moral fiber who thought of him as quite a savvy businessman.

His wife had left him years before. She tried to take the boys but Marcus brought the entire weight of his power down upon her to discredit her. She ended up committing suicide.

Doug had a younger brother who was his total opposite. Orthel had been a popular and amiable boy in school. He often stood between other students and a physical beating by his brother. He had taken many of those beatings himself. Orthel was an embarrassment to his father. He gave to the poor and helped people in need. People stood aside for Douglas because they were afraid. People stepped aside for Orthel because he was admired, respected and probably on his way to get his brother and do what the Sheriff and his deputies were afraid to do. By the time he was out of high school Orthel had been thrown out of the house. His father couldn't abide by weaklings.

Richard was not surprised to see Doug. In fact, he would have been more surprised if it had not been Douglas Manchester. But Doug was startled to see Richard sitting there. Doug did not know Richard.

"Howdy," said Richard.

"Howdy," responded Doug carefully eyeing Richard.

"This yours?" Richard held up the snare. Richard stood holding up the snare with his right hand and planting the foot of his jo firmly between his feet with his left.

Doug looked wary. He obviously knew that trapping was illegal even if he didn't know that he was on Richard's land. "What if it is?"

"If it is," Richard took a step forward and carefully planted his feet to provide him the greatest stability. It was the classic staff fighting posture, but Douglas Manchester didn't know about such things. "If it is, you are hunting illegally and you are on private land."

"What?" Doug mumbled as Richard dropped the snare at his feet.

"You heard me, Doug," snapped Richard. " Trapping is illegal and this is my mountain. I own it. You're trespassing."

"I didn't know."



"You may not have known that I own this mountain, but you knew that you were trapping illegally."

Douglas Manchester looked at the snare and then up at Richard. He was sizing up the situation and deciding what to do. He took a step forward and reached down for the trap. In one fluid motion Richard flipped the trap far into the woods with his jo, spun the jo three times, and returned it to its position in front of him. The subtle difference in how Richard was holding the jo was lost on Douglas. Richard had a hold in such a way that he could quickly move to either a defensive or offensive position before his opponent knew what was happening.

Doug's shotgun was balanced on his forearm with the butt under his armpit. It didn't take any significant intelligence to know that there was no way he could raise the gun and bring it to a firing position before Richard could react. Doug may not have known that the jo was designed as a non-lethal defensive weapon but he did know that if Richard hit him with it, it would hurt. Actually, Richard was capable of causing it to inflict significant pain.

Sadly the hunter had the idea of using his shotgun like a club. Grabbing the barrel with his left hand, he swung the gun like a baseball bat. With one thrust Richard deflected the attack. His change in stance and hold was imperceptible as he brought the jo around his head and into his attacker's exposed side and then poked into his gut. The hunter screamed with pain and fell to his knees. He had dropped his shotgun and was holding his hand above his head as he anticipated the powerful jo coming down on his head. But Richard stopped it inches from its target.

"You will be happy to know that I don't want to go all the way down the mountain to turn you in to the sheriff," Richard said holding Doug's face up to his with the tip of the jo. "Besides I know that would be a wasted effort. I'd probably end up in jail. So, you will be so happy that I've given you a chance to mend your ways that you won't come near this mountain ever again and you will give up illegal trapping. Are you that happy?" Richard gave the jo a little jab to encourage a response.

"Yea! Yea, sure!" sputtered Douglas. He leaned down to pick up his shot gun. Richard put the end of the jo on the gun.

"No. I'm not going to give you the opportunity to shoot me in the back. I'll drop that off in town when I'm down there sometime."

The big man looked down at his shotgun and then back at Richard. Douglas now knew better than argue. He slowly stood up as Richard backed up about three steps. He was still close enough to do serious damage with the jo. With a lethal look Douglas Manchester turned and started down the mountain. Richard followed quietly at a distance and watched Douglas get into his truck and drive off. When he turned around there was Omahkapi'si watching him.

"How are you?" asked Richard, standing very still and watching carefully for any indication of aggressiveness. Other than his jo, Richard had a can of bear spray that always hung from his waist when he was out. He thought about getting the spray and taking off the safety, but for some reason he felt that the wolf was relaxed and non-threatening. She was just standing there watching Richard.

"I'm glad you seem to be recovered," continued Richard. "If you don't mind I need to be making my way home. I'm not as quick as you are, and it's a long climb." Richard started to move around Omahkapi'si and climb back to his cabin. Omahkapi'si didn't move. She just watched.

All the way home Richard felt that he was being followed, but every time he stopped and turned there was no one there. It took him a couple of hours to get back to his cabin. Nizhoni was getting anxious. She was accustomed to Richard taking off for long periods but he usually told her that he was going.

She met him at the door with a glass of their homemade stout. They sat down in front of the cabin and Richard related his adventure as they watched the sun set and the sky turn red. They were talking about the odds of Douglas trying to sneak back to seek revenge when Richard spotted Omahkapi'si standing at the edge of the woods.

"There she is," he said to Nizhoni. "That's the wolf I freed. Now every time I turn around she's there. She just watches me."

"Awendela?" called Nizhoni. "Awendela, is that you?"

The wolf ambled casually toward the two. Richard stood up. Nizhoni sat shaking her head in disbelief. As the wolf moved toward them she transformed into a woman. Richard's mouth dropped open. Nizhoni put her head down in her hands and continued shaking her head. The naked women walked straight to Richard, took a hold of his head and kissed him hard on the lips.

Nizhoni, without raising her head, lifted a hand and pointed at the naked Awendela. Instantly Awendela was standing there wearing an earthen brown moo-moo that hung almost to her feet.

"Awe, Sis!" shouted Awendela, "you're such a kill-joy. I thought that was pretty hot." She looked back at the stunned Richard and winked.

Richard looked at Nizhoni.

"Richard, you have just been seduced by my little sister, Awendela," said Nizhoni looking up with a face that begged forgiveness.

"He's cute in an old man human way," said Awendela walking around Richard and surveying him like one would in buying a horse. "Nice butt," she whispered in Richard's ear just loud enough for Nizhoni to hear. "No wonder you haven't invited me to visit you. How is he in . . ."

"What are you doing here?" Nizhoni interrupted.

"Well, big Sis, I do recall that we were going to see if your lover would be a good ni-namp'skan," snapped Awendela as she ran her hand down the front of her dress as to smooth it. Instead of smoothing the simple brown moo-moo it became a magnificent buckskin dress with a blue, red and brown beaded bodice with long fringe around the arms and the hem. Awendela stood looking at her sister with her hands on her hips.

Nizhoni looked away. Richard, who had staggered back a few steps and was taking in this confrontation between the lover whom he had thought

to be a young Blackfeet woman and a woman he had first encountered as a wolf, noticed Nizhoni's reaction. "Nizhoni?" he asked.

"Oh!" said Awendela. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

"Tell me what?" demanded Richard.

"Your young lover," Awendela answered, "is in reality a forest spirit."

"A what?" Richard looked totally lost.

"We are both spirits," explained Awendela. "We had been watching you and thought you might be a great ni-namp'skan - medicine man."

"I'm sorry, Richard," Nizhoni begged. "I meant to tell you. We were watching how you dealt with things. You risked your life to save me. When I gave you great wealth you used it to save nature. And now you have risked your life for a wolf. I . . ."

"You purposely allowed yourself to be made a slave? " Richard turned and looked out over the dark mountain trying to fathom what was happening. "And evidently you gave me the gold?"

"Yes," said Nizhoni taking a few steps toward Richard.

"What would have happened if I had used the gold for myself?"

"I don't know," Nizhoni said. "I was falling in love with you. I knew you would do the right thing."

"She was supposed to let me know if you were the one," Awendela added.

"The great ni-namp'skan?" questioned Richard.

"Yes," Awendela said softly. "Don't be angry with her. We did what we had to do." Awendela stepped near Richard and put her hand gently on his shoulder. "My sister is a good and gentle spirit. If she said she loves you, she didn't lie." Richard's eyes filled with tears. Nizhoni softly sobbed.

"People desperately need a great medicine man," Awendela continued. "Your beloved mountain and all the plants and animals on it need a great

ni-namp'skan to protect them. The people need a teacher. We all need you."

Richard turned and faced the two spirits. Tears were running down his cheek. "I'm confused. I need time to think." With that he slowly walked off into the dark.

Nizhoni went to her sister and put her head on her sister's shoulder. Awendela put her arms around Nizhoni and held her tight. "He will be back," she said. And, he will lead people back to nature."



**R**ichard did return and he did indeed lead many people back to nature. Articles that he wrote about environment and nature brought a host of invitations to speak, lecture and participate in rallies. As much as he disliked leaving his beloved Ponoká Mountain, he heard and responded. He was a frequent speaker at most of the Rocky Mountain universities. His seminars drew thousands and would end up more like a rally. Richard spoke and wrote with such passion that one had to be truly hard-hearted not to be drawn to him even if one was not environmentally inclined.

He spent most of his money on buying and protecting land. He established a foundation to which tribes, parks and communities could go to for help to purchase land. He was generous to a fault but there were strings - any development must be able to pass muster with the Wilderness Act and a minimum requirements analysis (MRA) must be submitted to a panel which Richard chaired. There would be no drilling, mining, prospecting or other search for minerals allowed. No hunting or trapping was permitted. Fishing was permitted if permission was obtained from the foundation. The land could not be sold or given away.

If the park ceased to exist or there was no one to maintain and protect the park it would revert to the foundation.

Richard funded ranger internships in twenty-five different national parks. He also funded an education program for state park rangers run by the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center. His foundation supported and funded park volunteer and conservancy organization across the country. All the while Richard lived in his cabin on his beloved mountain.

Over the years people began to come to Richard and ask to live near him. They wanted to leave the so-called civilization and return to living in harmony with nature. They argued that Richard could teach them how to regain skills our species had given up and therefore lost. They needed instruction they felt they could trust about how to live in the wilderness without hurting the wilderness.

Living in the wilderness without doing damage is not easy. Some argue that it is not possible but what could Richard do? If he sent them away they might go elsewhere and do far greater damage or turn against his cause altogether.

Richard started placing such couples and families in small communities around the mountain. He wanted to keep the communities small so they would have less impact. At the same time communities made less impact than having people spread out around the mountain. Containment. Many of the settlers failed. They were just not able to make the transition and give up the luxuries of the modern world. It didn't mean that they ceased to believe in and follow Richard. They returned to their modern communities and began to search for ways to live more amicably with nature while still enjoying their twenty-first century comforts. They became ambassadors who dramatically increased Richard's following.

By this time Richard had encountered and made enemies of many wealthy, influential and powerful people. History has shown time and again that the only lives that really count, especially in the so-called advanced civilizations, are those of the wealthy and powerful. They maintain their dominance by creating division among the 'lower' classes

of people and making each group believe that the rich person is going to take care of them.

President Lyndon B. Johnson, a southern politician who ended up being perhaps the strongest civil rights President in history, knew how to manipulate poor whites and once explained the process. *"If you can convince the lowest white man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice your picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."*

Richard was an obstacle not just because he was a nature preservationist, but because by teaching people to live in harmony with nature he was diminishing their need for and reliance upon the costly and addictive materialism which keeps the super-rich super rich. By reducing or overcoming such dependence the power of the wealthy is reduced. They could not have that. Their continued wealth depends upon continued power, and vice versa.

Time and again over the years the super-wealthy attacked Richard. They would attempt to out maneuver him in court. They tried buying legislation. Of course, that is perhaps their most common means of solidifying power. They tried to discredit him with false accusation. They even tried to have him killed. Each attack was repelled until the wealthy were more concerned about keeping Richard off the offensive. If he was this successful on the defense, what would he be like if he ever had the opportunity to take the offense? What the super-rich did not realize was that Richard was turning every defense into an offense because as he repelled their attacks he showed the world their true nature.

The Spirits gave Richard the name Littlebear because, while small in physical stature, he had the courage, heart, stamina and strength of the mighty bear, Kiááyo. The people who turned to Richard for guidance and followed him soon began calling him Papa Littlebear.

Nizhoni was always at Papa Littlebear's side. Her sister, Awendela, was a frequent visitor to the mountain. The people, who had become known as Ponokánii, did not know about the Spirits but many did notice that

Nizhoni seemed to show her age much more so than Awendela, who never seemed a day older.

There was good reason for this. Spirits don't age. Humans do. Nizhoni had given up her immortality to stay with Richard. It was the ultimate sacrifice and act of love. She fought each battle alongside of Papa Littlebear. Between them they were a powerful force with which to be reckoned. Sadly, evil and greed will always test good and push it to its breaking point.

One thing people like about evil is the lack of restraint. For evil everything is permissible, even an act of goodness or kindness. An evil person may appear to be a loving, compassionate person as long as the act serves their evil ends. The good person practices self-control - the point which they will not pass in the pursuit of their goals. If they go past that point - violate their ethics - then what began as good becomes evil. It is so much easier just to be evil from the beginning.

Those who desire to rule and control people, at the best, walk a fine line between good and evil. If you desire to rule, how can you not do evil? To decide that you want to govern means that you want to decide the rules of life for other people. Even if you are open-minded, liberal and willing to listen to your constituents, you must be willing and able to make decisions the people who elected you won't like. Sometimes those decisions will be bad. None of us make the right choices every time. If you have given in to lobbyist and big money interests who helped get you elected, some of your decisions will be downright evil, no matter how good you think you are. When you decide to legislate their personal lives - their sex, their beliefs, and their private behavior that does not affect and/or harm another person - and judge/legislate according to the prescriptions of a religion, then you are not only defying the US Constitution but acting in an evil manner.

Papa Littlebear knew that those at the gate at the foot of the mountain had evil designs on the fragile land. They didn't care about the earth, the water, the animals - including the human animal - that would suffer. He also knew that these greedy, evil businessmen were supported by politicians who were equally as greedy. That path of ultra-rich cronyism



and crony capitalism led straight to the top. How could people be so easily conned? How could they believe a man who is worth 3.5 billion dollars when he says he's going to fight Wall Street and big business for the common man? Such a claim is outlandish. He would be fighting himself. Richard had lost in court because the giant corporation, owed in part by the President of the United States, found some way to keep evidence and testimony out of court. They had falsified documents and totally denied him the ability to show the truth.



**R**ichard realized that he had stopped speaking right at the climax of the story. The children had heard this story many times before but yet they sat anxiously waiting for Papa Littlebear to finish. As he finished the campfire version of his story Richard's mind began to hash and rehash the dilemma that awaited him. The children were always full of questions about the story but tonight he put them off explaining that he had to think and meditate.

The oil company, Vronech Oil, that he had foiled so many years ago was back with a vengeance. They had made a shady deal with politicians (paid them off) to get mineral rights to an area deep in the wilderness bordering Richard's land. He had quickly countered by buying adjacent land so that he had them surrounded. They went to court, and with the help of cheap politicians and a judge for sale, had an order of eminent domain permitting them to build a road across Richard's land, and, if they found oil, to put a pipeline through it. The only option was for Richard and his small band to physically block Vronech's way. They built a barricade. In the morning the police were supposed to storm the barricade and arrest Richard and his band even though it was his land.

The children each gave Papa Littlebear a hug and left him alone staring at the fire. Nizhoni had been watching from the cabin door. She went to Richard's side and sat down. She put her arm around him.

"If I had not given up my powers to become your mate I could make these horrible men disappear. I'm sorry. I was selfish and wanted you."

"It isn't your fault. I have feared this day all my life." The two sat silently.

Suddenly Papa Littlebear stands up. "The answer is on top of Ponoká. I must go. Perhaps your sister, Awendela, will hear my plea and give me one last spell."

"You're too old to climb Ponoká during the day nevertheless in the dark," Nizhoni hugged the old man.

"There is no other way," said Richard without looking at her. Nizhoni knew better than argue.

Papa Littlebear put on a heavy wool long shirt and replaced his moccasins with heavy hiking boots. Drawing his Tilley tight to his head he picked up his walking stick and started up the side of Ponoká heading toward the summit. It was a hard climb under the best of circumstances even though Richard had done it many times. Between the pain of arthritis and difficulty seeing Littlebear fell several times.

He was trying to climb a snow field when he slipped and started sliding down the mountain. Lying in the snow clinging to a branch to keep from falling to his death he realized that he could go no further.

"Ponoká, help me. You have been my home, my life and my love for over half my life. I have given my life for you and the rest of Unci Maka's wilderness. Please help me. If you give the Ponokánii the ability to stop these evil men from raping our home I will gladly accept my fate." He lays quietly for a long time listening to the sounds of the mountain. With a smile on his face he let go of the branch and slide silently down the mountain.



As the sun peaked over the horizon the sky was as big and as cloudless a western sky could be. Mount Ponoká stood majestically at the gate to the valley beyond that was ringed by other snow-covered sentinels. The Ponokánii stood silently behind the barricade they had built. They had no weapons. They just stood looking over the barricade at the menacing threat beyond. There was a line of heavily armed police wearing riot gear and carrying frightening guns loaded with rubber bullets and bean bags. The small army stood on either side of two big bulldozers. Behind them stood the men who were prepared to rape the land. There was silence. A long silence.

Then, with a frightening roar, the two bulldozers came to life. The Ponokánii stiffened. The time had come. With a wave of a policeman's hand the dozers started slowing moving toward the barricade and the small band of men, women and children beyond.

Suddenly, over the roar of the dozer's engines, the police and Vronech workers could hear sirens and singing. They turned to see an enormous convoy of people in buses, cars, RVs and on horseback. The police motioned for the dozers to hurry, but bulldozers only go just so fast. The convoy ignored the oil workers, police and heavy equipment. Police tried to wave them off but they just drove around. When a vehicle could go no further, the people piled out and walked calmly toward the barracade.

There must have been thousands of people. There were reporters, and radio and television crews that moved off to the side to get a good picture of what was going to happen. The police tried to stop the new arrivals but for every one they contained several dozen passed by.

A tall slender Native American walked at the front of the group. Ned Sandermann, the unofficial Ponokánii leader when Papa Littlebear wasn't

around, walked briskly toward the new arrivals with outstretched arms and a great smile.

"Oh, thank you!" he yelled above the din.

"Sorry we're late," replied the warrior. "we ran into some local resistance, but they decided that they might be on the wrong side of this argument." The warrior pointed over his shoulder. The convoy had been led by a local police car and another was bring up the rear. The local constabulary had abandoned their vehicles and were walking past the police line toward the barricade.

As the chaos ensued a large black SUV came speeding down the road. Oil workers and police had to jump to safety to avoid the reckless driver. The SUV came to a skidding stop just behind one of the bulldozers and a small man in a dark suit, white shirt and bright red tie stepped from the SUV. He cursed loudly as he looked down at his \$1000 Italian leather loafers that were now almost covered by mud, then literally stomped up to the officer in charge.

"Why is that damn barricade still there?" he demanded of the officer.

"We were starting when this enormous crowd arrived," said the officer, "and with the news media," he added waving toward the perimeter where cameras and sound booms were recording all that was happening.

"Well, run over them too," demanded the small man. "I want my men in that valley before noon." The little man got close to the officer's face, "do you understand me?"

"But, sir," the officer continued. "there are more people there than we expected. I don't have enough ..."

The little man in the dark suit interrupted. "I have eminent domain. This is my property and I want them gone."

The officer-in-charge, who had heretofore been meek and compliant before the demeaning tirade coming from the little man's mouth, suddenly raised up to his full 76 inches. "Sir, you do not own this land. You are crossing private property which does not belong to you. The right

of eminent domain belongs to the federal government, not you. You will stay back and keep out of this!"

"You will do your job or I'll have your badge," screamed the rude little man practically standing on his toes to be nose-to-nose with the officer.

"I will do my job," the officer almost whispered as he drew close to the man in the suit. "I will do my job according to the law. I don't like you. I don't like your bosses. I don't like what you are doing to these people and to their land. I have been given this nasty job to do and I will do it. BUT don't ever forget that I DON'T WORK FOR YOU and I would love to bust your ass if you ever get in my face again!"

The rude little man took a step back. A look of shocked disbelief crossed his face. No one had ever dare stand up to him.

"Now get back into your car and stay out of my way!" The officer-in-charge pointed at the man's SUV, turned and walked away.

The warrior was walking from barricade toward the officer-in-charge. The officer-in-charge took off his gun belt, handed it to a nearby officer and started out to meet him.

"My name is Jim Heavyrunner," said the warrior extending his hand. "I am one of Papa Littlebear's attorneys."

"Nice to meet you counselor," said the officer-in-charge who took the extended hand and gave it a good shake. "I'm Lieutenant Johnson. I'm sure you've seen the papers and need to ask your people to let us pass."

"That's where we've got a problem, Lieutenant," said Jim Heavyrunner pleasantly.

"A problem?"

"Yes," said the attorney. "You see eminent domain is a means for the government to seize a person's property through the process of condemnation. The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution requires that the taking of an individual's property be for public use and mandates payment of just compensation to the owner. So actually, we have three problems: First, Vronech Oil isn't the government and therefore any

eminent domain is not for public use, making it invalid. Second, there has been no compensation which means it isn't a done deal, and thirdly that means that you and all of these gentlemen behind you are trespassing."

"Counselor, I have my orders."

"Lieutenant, you have the full authority of the court to say this is an invalid order and it will not be processed."

"I need to call the judge."

"No," replied the warrior, "you need to move everyone out of here and take that to a superior judge who will confirm everything I just said. In fact," Jim Heavyrunner reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper, "I just happen to have a Cease and Desist Letter from a superior judge who doesn't happen to be on the Vronech payroll."

Lieutenant Johnson smiled from ear to ear. "Thank you, counselor." He took Jim Heavyrunner by the hand and shook it vigorously. He turned to the police and oilmen behind him.

"Wrap it up," he called, "and head home. This man came with a Cease and Desist Letter."

The rude little man in the big SUV jumped out. "What did you just say?"

"I said, we're out of here. He has a perfectly legal Cease and Desist Letter."

"That can't be. Judge Norton would never issue such a letter."

"Oh, Counselor Heavyrunner went above your judge," the Lieutenant smiled. "This order is from a Superior Judge and it is absolutely legal."

The little man again tromped through the mud and grabbed the letter from the Lieutenant. "This can't be. I won't have it."

"You don't have any choice, I'm not breaking the law for you."

"You just wait here and I'll be back before noon."

"No sir," said the Lieutenant. "At this moment we are trespassing. We will move everyone out of here and, if a proper order is given, I will return."

As the rude little man threw a temper tantrum those around him noticed Papa Littlebear walking toward them.

Ned Sandermann and Jim Heavyrunner hurried to his side.

"We were worried about you, sir," said Ned. "Nizhoni told us that you went up on the mountain."

"But we have good news for you," Jim added. "I have a Cease and Desist Letter."

"That's great," Papa Littlebear smiled, "but we're going to let them pass."

"We're what?" the two men asked together.

"I talked to Unci Maka. Only those whose hearts are pure - free of greed and walking in harmony with nature - can pass through Ponokánii land. All others will suffer great terror and madness and will flee never to return," Papa Littlebear said quietly.

"Are you certain of this?" asked Jim Heavyrunner.

"Oh, yes, Jim," Papa Littlebear smiled. "If we put them out they will just come back again and sooner or later someone is going to get hurt. If we let them enter and face my curse, they will eventually flee, never to return."

"Your curse?" questioned Ned.

"Well," Papa Littlebear winked and grinned, "we'll tell them that it's my curse. In reality it will just be nature fighting back."

Ned Sandermann and Jim Heavyrunner stood looking at each other. Then they began to laugh. They both knew Papa Littlebear well. If he had a plan, it was most likely the best plan. "Okay," they both agreed.

Papa Littlebear walked toward Lieutenant Johnson. The Lieutenant met him midway across the divide between the oil company and the barricade.

"Sir," Lieutenant Johnson finds himself almost bowing before this iconic preservationist. "I have your attorney's Cease and Desist Letter. I apologize for the mess and will have these people out of here immediately."

The rude little man, seeing the Lieutenant and Papa Littlebear talking, ran toward them. "You're not going to get away with this. I'm going to get my crews back in there and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. I'm going to squash you."

"Is that a threat?" the Lieutenant glared at the horrid little man.

"That's okay," said Papa Littlebear calmly. "He doesn't scare me. I am going to let them pass."

Lieutenant Johnson stood speechless.

"I will say this once," Papa Littlebear said in a loud voice. "Listen carefully. We will not hinder you but you will not damage the land. You will go mad and flee the land. I will not stop you from entering but I am warning you. Only the pure of heart can enter safely. You would be wise to not go in there, but you must make your own decision. When you fail, I will offer your masters \$1 an acre for their land. If you refuse I will lower my offer by ten cents for every refusal. Did you hear and understand me?"

The rude little man scoffed.

"Lieutenant, did you hear me? News media, did you hear me?" Turning to the Ponokánii, "Trust the Spirit of Ponoká and the power of Unci Maka. Let them pass."

As the oil people moved along the trail toward their land some of them gave the Ponokánii angry looks, made nasty gestures or called names. Others looked sad. One could almost see their eyes pleading for forgiveness.

Papa Littlebear took his followers aside. When the Vronech people were well away, he stood to speak.



"News media. I need to ask you not to record what I am going to say. I must speak with my people in private." The news media went off to report on the remarkable events that had already taken place.

"Ponokánii and friends of nature, I'm sure you are wondering why I permitted Vronech to cross our sacred land to rape the valley beyond. Let me explain."

"Do you think that Unci Maka really needs us to protect her?" There was a murmur among the crowd. "If we thought that we are the only one capable of fighting against the ravages of such people, we would be as arrogant as them."

"Last night, when I tried to go to Ponoká's summit to talk to the Spirits, I learned that there was already a plan. If we were to continue to play their game of legal writs and decrees they would come back again and again until someone was killed. If we let them enter and let nature deal with them, they will leave and never return."



For most of two days great trucks filled with equipment passed through the Ponokánii Pass into the valley beyond. The Ponokánii people sat and watched. They just sat quietly. Oilmen who had heard Papa Littlebear's warning found this unnerving. It was as though the people knew what lay ahead for them.

Before all of the equipment had made it to the valley there were already reports of men going crazy having to be sent back to town. The Ponokánii just sat quietly and watched as the men were brought out.

Tents were destroyed when a herd of bison stampeded through the camp. Supplies were ravaged by bears. Sleeping bags were gnawed by rodents.

Generators were failing. And more men were going crazy. The Ponokánii just sat quietly and watched as the men were carried out.

After a few days of one disaster after another and more and more men being stricken by the mysterious madness, the oilmen who were carrying their companions out of the valley were refusing to return. They began to call it the Littlebear Curse.

It was less than ten days after permitting the oil company to pass into the valley when Jim Heavyrunner showed up at Papa Littlebear's cabin to tell him that they had been summoned to the Judge's chambers.

Once there the Vronech solicitor began to blame all of their problems on Papa Littlebear.

"I don't know how you do these things, but we know you're behind them and we demand that you stop," said the rude little man who had been at the barricade.

"Why do you think I'm behind them," asked Papa Littlebear. "Everyone knows where I spend my days. My people and I have been sitting at the beginning of the road at the foot of Mt. Ponoká watching you carry your worker out. I haven't been anywhere near your camp." He paused a moment and then turned back to them in an exaggerated manner to ask "are you running out of men?"

"You threatened us," snapped the Vronech attorney.

"No, sir," said Papa Littlebear calmly. "I warned you. I told you that only the pure of heart can enter safely. You would be wise to not go in there, but you must make you own decision. You are obviously not very pure of heart and I know you're not there to protect the environment. But you made the choice."

"You must stop interfering with us," the solicitor screamed.

"I'm not interfering," Papa Littlebear spoken even more softly. "I haven't been near your camp. Nature can take care of itself. Unci Maka won't let you rape her land any more. I just warned you."

A large, over-weight man had been sitting to one side. Like the rude little solicitor he was dressed in a dark suit with a white shirt and bright red tie. He had been watching and listening carefully and finally spoke.

"Mr Littlebear, we're scientists and businessmen," he said. "please don't insult us with hocus pocus. You are doing this somehow."

"Sir," said Papa Littlebear turning his attention to the new contributor. "I'm not talking hocus pocus. Science will tell you that nature is quite capable of protecting itself. I'm just giving nature a name. You know as well as I do that you have no evidence that anyone has caused the disasters you've experienced. They've all been natural. Call her Unci Maka, Mother Earth, Mother Nature or no name at all, it still comes down to nature protecting itself. Have you tried to make friends with the trees or befriend the animals?"

"We don't give a crap about the trees and animals," retorted the heavy-set man. "All we're interested in is the oil."

"Therein lies your problem," Papa Littlebear said smiling. "I've warned you again and again. You can go many places around the world and see where nature has taken the land back from hapless humans. I also told you that I'd give you \$1 an acre for that land."

"Go to hell, you freak," spit the big man. "Stay off our land!"

"That was my first offer. It's only good until I get home." Papa Littlebear paused and stared at both men. "I haven't been near your property. I don't have to. Nature is taking the land back. Mine is the best offer you're going to get."

"The oil company has asked for a restraining order against you," interrupted the judge.

"Hey, that's fine," smiled Papa Littlebear. "My first name is actually Richard. Figured you'd need that to make it legal. But what are you going to do about the fact that we share a common property line."

"Well, uh . . ." the judge looked stumped.

"How about we make it that I can't go within a hundred yards of our common property line?" offered Richard.

"If he suggests a hundred yards, make it a quarter-mile, your honor," snapped the Vronech attorney. "I know he's up to something."

"Works for me," Papa Littlebear was still smiling which was causing the oil men to come completely unglued.

"Counselor," the judge addressed Jim Heavyrunner, "why are you not fighting this?"

"Probably, your honor, because we haven't been anywhere near their property," replied Jim. "There's no reason for us to worry about it. They're bringing this on themselves. You can send us half way across the country and they're still going to fail." Jim Heavyrunner paused a moment and turned to Papa Littlebear. "I'd lower that offer to 90 cents."

"You heard him boys," Papa Littlebear said to the two Vronech men in the friendliest of manner. Then to the judge, "Your honor, if there is nothing more I would like to be excused."

"Yeah, sure," said the judge waving a hand in the direction of the door.

When Papa Littlebear and Jim Heavyrunner had left the heavy-set oilman turned to the judge.

"What the hell just happened?" he yelled at the judge. "You just let them walk out of here. What do we pay you for?"

"Hey, don't blame me," said the judge. "I've given you everything you've asked for. You haven't given me even the tiniest shred of evident that that man has been on your property. I've already written an injunction against him and you can't even show that he's ever been on your land."

"Next time he's in here I want you to throw him in jail," the Vronech attorney snarled.

"On what charges?"

"I don't give a damn," snapped the attorney. "Make something up."

The two Vronech men abruptly stood up and almost stomped from the room. The judge sat shaking his head. His entire career had been spotless. He had been known for honesty, integrity and an outstanding grasp of the law. What had he come to, he thought to himself. He had taken their money because they threatened to put him out of office if he didn't. Why hadn't he turned them in back then? Probably because he was afraid that they really were as powerful as they say. He couldn't be put out on the street. He still had two kids in college and a terminally ill wife. They knew that. His wife had Stage IV breast cancer. It had been a long hard fight trying to keep it from metastasizing. Between deductible, co-pays, out-of-pocket and thousand dollar pills their medical bills were far greater than a small-town judge's salary. They knew he'd cave. He put his head in his hands. He couldn't go any further but he would be ruined if the truth came out. If he did what was right, he would be ruined. If he continued to do these men's bidding, he would likewise be ruined. No matter what he did he was already ruined. He thought about the sizable life insurance policy that came with his job. It could pay off their bills but even then the truth would probably come out, and he couldn't do that to his wife and children.



Jim Heavyrunner checked the rear-view mirror to be sure the car that was following them was still there. Both he and Papa Littlebear knew that it had to be someone hired by Vronech to find out how he was sabotaging them. They didn't want him to lose them. The car was still there. Jim smiled.

After checking to be sure their tail was still there, Jim Heavyrunner turned to Papa Littlebear.

"Okay, Papa," Jim said looking back at the road ahead. "how did you do it?"

"Are you bound by client privilege?"

"Yes, so spill the beans."

"I really didn't do a thing," Papa Littlebear laughed. "An aspen tree and kaanaisskiiraa are the ring leaders."

"A tree and a mouse?!" exclaimed the attorney. "Come on! Tell me the truth."

"I am," Papa Littlebear was enjoying a good belly laughing. "I am."

"Okay, how?"

Papa Littlebear stopped laughing. "When I tried to climb Ponoká, the night before they were to attack the barricade, I fell. I was hanging on the side of a snow field by a branch and offered my life for the land and the people. I let go and fell down the side of the mountain."

"You what?"

"I let go of the branch. The last thing I can remember was sliding down the snowfield and going over the cliff. Then I woke up lying near an aspen tree. I lay very still for a long time and realized that nothing was broken. I didn't hurt, and I didn't think I was dead.

"When I sat up I saw Kaanaisskiiraa under a branch of the aspen nearest me. It was almost as though he was speaking to me. We were communicating."

"You were talking with a mouse," Jim glanced sideways at Papa Littlebear.

"Like I said, we were communicating. It was more telepathically. I guess that's the best description. He evidently knew what I was thinking because I would hear him reply in my head."

"Are you sure you were awake?" asked Jim Heavyrunner.

"I'm pretty sure I was," Papa Littlebear gave Jim's question serious thought. "Yeah, I'm quite sure. But if I wasn't it doesn't really matter."

"Why wouldn't it matter?"

"Because everything they told me happened. It was true."

"You lost me."

"Kaanaisskiiraa told me that he and the aspen had a plan. I told him that I was confused. He explained that plants have a consciousness but it isn't really like an animal consciousness. Nevertheless they can sense what is happening to their world and they can respond. Science confirms most of this, you know."

"Oh," said Jim Heavyrunner. "I'm sure it does."

"Honest! It does," insisted Papa Littlebear. "But that's beside the point. You can believe that I'm dreaming if you want. Anyway, Kaanaisskiiraa told me that the aspens around the oil company camp are almost fifteen thousand years old and they don't like what those guys are planning to do. I wouldn't want to get cut down for an oil well if I had survived fifteen thousand years, would you?"

Jim shook his head. He was aware that aspens grow in large clonal colonies which start from a single seedling. There are colonies of aspen in Colorado that are known to be 80,000 years old. Somehow what Papa Littlebear was saying made sense.

"Through its own consciousness the aspen would be able to 'tell' the other plants of the danger. Kaanaisskiiraa, because no one paid much attention to him, was able to move around the camp and get other animals to help sabotage the oil company. He got the bison to stampede through the camp and the bears to tear up the supply hut. It appeared like a natural event. He also got larger rodents to chew up sleeping bags, blankets, clothing and other items while he and his fellow mice took care of the generators. It all looked like 'typical' animal behavior."

"What about the men going mad?" Jim couldn't wait.

"Acacia georginae," laughed Papa Littlebear. "Poison gilyea. The pod is quite toxic and causes hallucinations. The aspen knew where some grew. Omahkapi'si carried some to near the camp. Awatoyi ground it with her hooves and Kaafnaisskiiraa put it in their drinks."

"Well, you did say that nature would take back the land," Jim Heavyrunner laughed.

Jim pulled the old Dodge Ram off the road near the trail to Papa Littlebear's cabin. Jim checked behind them. Their 'tail' had pulled off.

"Well, Papa, it sounds like you and Unci Maka have things well in hand."

"That sounded almost sarcastic," said Papa Littlebear feigning having his feelings hurt as he got out of the truck.

"I'm sorry," Jim quickly responded. "I meant . . . ." The two men met in front of the truck.

"That's okay. I was just teasing you." Papa Littlebear paused and looked up the mountain toward his cabin. "Why don't you come spend the night with us. It's been a long time since you've been home and I'm sure your Mother would love to have you spend some time with her."

"I would love to," Jim smiled and gave the old man a bear hug.



The two men grabbed trail poles out of the back of the truck. Casually looking down the road they made sure that their tail hadn't lost them. There was only one fork on the trail, so if they could get him past that they wouldn't have to worry about him getting lost.

The trail was rather steep with five switchbacks in the first couple of miles. Most of the trail was under the heavy canopy of cedar and hemlock



which soon gave way to Douglas and Mountain Fir and other high altitude vegetation. It was early afternoon but once under the canopy it was like evening. Occasionally they would pass through sub-alpine meadows which were giant expanses of vibrant color. At the end of one meadow they saw a Grizzly bear digging roots. Her claws, longer than a human's fingers, worked like the tines of a rotor-tiller as she moved methodically along an outcropping of rock. There were mule deer and some white-tail in the woods who watched them carefully as they passed. A coyote was stalking something as they entered one meadow, but they couldn't see what he was following. However, they could sense the intensity of his concentration. They walked silently taking in the natural wonder through which they passed. This was more than trees and flowers and animals. This was the real world for these two men. This was life. They each knew what the other was thinking. They were afraid of what companies like the oil company trying to invade the wilderness were going to do to what little of this world was left. Did those people have so little understanding of the consequences of their actions? It wouldn't be just the animals that would die.

Did they not realize that life on Earth is totally interdependent? Could they deny it? It had been proven and demonstrated time and time again. Yellowstone killed all of the wolves. Without predators the ungulate population expanded. That meant that they over grazed. That effected the vegetation which in turn effected the water. In the end Yellowstone was dying. Humans had removed a necessary part of the balance of nature. Everything in nature has its place. Very honestly, the only animal that can be found that is totally unnecessary for a balanced ecosystem is the human.

Above them, as they climbed, was the summit of Ponoká Mountain. It's dark gray stone covered with a light dusting of fresh snow and crowned by fluffy white clouds looked like the castle of a giant with the clouds giving the scene an otherworldly appearance. It appeared very foreboding but it was home to Papa Littlebear and Jim Heavyrunner.

Jim was the child of Richard and Nizhoni. He was born just after she gave up her powers to become Richard's mate. He had grown up on this

mountain. He knew every inch of it. He knew the animals by name. He spoke their language. From Ponoká - the elk - he learned endurance and agility. Kiááyo - the bear - taught him confidence, strength and courage. He learned self-control, personal power and loyalty to the pack from Omahkapi-si - the wolf. But most important to Jim Heavyrunner was what he learned from his parents - love of the land and all living things. At their insistence he had gone off to school and attended college where he first studied forestry. During his college days Jim met his mate, Chaska, an Oglala Lakota Sioux law student. When he visited her family on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, his life changed. The poverty he witnessed and the mistreatment by wealthy white men made him so angry that he vowed that he would not only fight for the wilderness but for the life and dignity of all children of Unci Maka. He graduated from Alexander Blewett School of Law two years behind Chaska.

Occasionally the two men would stop as though resting to be sure that their spy, whom they would later come to know as Harvey Anderson, was still following them. It didn't take long for them to figure out that Harvey was no mountain man. In fact, it was evident that he had come totally unprepared and had no idea what he was doing. After a while they didn't bother with the ruse of resting and just sat down to watch him with binoculars. On this occasion they stopped by a creek at the top of a deep ravine. The ravine had been cut by the water flow creating a spot of particular beauty.

Harvey was a tall man. Probably mid to late forties. He had on jeans, a plaid flannel shirt and a waist length down jacket. His hat was a simple baseball hat and he was wearing sneakers. Yes, sneakers.

Richard and Jim wondered why anyone with any sense would set out into the mountains in sneakers. I guess if you're from the city and are totally ignorant about such things you'd wear sneakers into the mountains. They looked down at Jim Heavyrunner's feet. He had on moccasins.

"But I'm an indigenous," Jim Heavyrunner protested laughing and throwing his hands into the air. "I can run these trails barefoot. Besides," he paused, "they're not sneakers!"

"Remember from whom you learned to run these trails barefooted," Papa Littlebear pretended to be insulted. Holding up his left foot displaying one of his prize Crispi backcountry boots, "But that poor fellow wouldn't be hurting if he had a pair of these."

The path, like most paths climbing the side of a mountain, was rocky earth. It was only about twenty-four inches wide since it was not heavily used. In the four plus miles that they had covered they had forded five streams. That is not an easy task when you have no idea what you are doing. Richard and Jim had to give their spy points for tenacity. Perhaps he was just more afraid of what would happen if he didn't complete his mission. They continued to watch and wait for Harvey to emerge from the last of the heavy forest.

"Do you think he'll even make it all the way?" Jim asked.

"He's getting slower and slower, isn't he?" replied Richard.

Shaking his head, "He is so out of his element."

"Let him learn," said Papa Littlebear. "We won't let him get hurt."

"Should we loan him a pair of our poles?"

"Naw," Littlebear shook his head and looked up the trail toward home, "He wouldn't know how to use them."

Harvey, still a good quarter of a mile below them, was struggling more and more. The sneakers did little to protect his feet and they were now soaking wet from the streams. He had found a tree branch that he was attempting to use as a walking stick, but it was too big, and, as Papa Littlebear had suspected, he had no idea how to use a trail pole or walking stick. It was probably doing more harm than good. A pair of trail poles or a good walking stick are highly personalized. The person's elbow should be at a ninety-degree angle when holding the poles or stick in front of them on level ground. Harvey's limb forced him to hold it at shoulder height. Poles and sticks are used for balance, not a crutch. Just about every ultra-marathon trail runner in the world, except for the Americans, run with trail poles.

If you watch a good trekker you will notice that they have the slightest forward lean. What they are doing is two-fold. First, they are maintaining their center of gravity under their hips. This reduces impact and fatigue while improving balance. Secondly, like the runner, this controls speed. The more the lean the greater the speed without demanding more of the muscles. It is actually a controlled fall where one is merely bringing their legs and feet under their center of gravity to keep their body from falling. The trekker, especially the power-trekker, and the runner use the same technique. The variations on the technique are that some maintain a pace while others vary the pace and lean according to the terrain. Harvey was beginning to lean only from fatigue. He had no idea that the two mountain men ahead of him were actually slowing down for him.

Finally Harvey came staggering out of the heavy trees. He was planting the tall pole in front of him and practically using it to pull himself up the trail. Each step belied the pain in his feet and he would pause every few paces and bend forward from the waist. He was trying to catch his breath. Richard and Jim hadn't thought about the over two-thousand-foot elevation rise between the road and the cabin. The cabin was at over eight thousand feet elevation. The place where they parked was just under six thousand feet. Even if Harvey was from a Rocky Mountain city he was not going to be accustomed to such elevation or such elevation change.

It was getting late into the afternoon and they still had a good half-mile to go. At Harvey's current pace that could take another hour or more. From this point to the cabin the trail ran along the side of the precipitous ravine then turned into the last of the heavy forest. Over half of the remaining distance would be spent with high sparsely tree-covered rock walls on their right and a steep tree covered downward slope on their left. One could not see but one could sense that after a very short distance down this slope the ground would drop away almost vertically into the valley over a thousand feet below.

The path would climb gently through this portion of the trail. It was like walking along a rock shelf. One had to be a bit more careful because they frequently had to step up the almost constant ledges that varied in height from an inch or two to almost a foot. There was little to no soil on the

path at this point. What soil might be created was quickly washed down the mountain by the rain.

It was almost two hours before Papa Littlebear and Jim arrived at the cabin. Nizhoni, watching for Papa to return, came running from the cabin on spotting her son. She literally lunged into her son's outstretched arms. He swung the small woman around in a circle as the two laughed.

Going in the cabin to enjoy a hot cup of tea, Richard and Jim told Nizhoni about their meeting in the judge's chambers and the man who was following them. The smell of stew on the hearth filled the room with an amazing aroma. The tantalizing smell mixed with the smell of fresh baking bread coming from the brick oven Richard had added to the side of the fireplace when Jim was just a baby. The sights and smells took Richard back in time. He smiled as he thought about how hard Nizhoni had to work to learn to cook. After all she wasn't really a native American maiden when they met and had never, before that, had any reason to know how to cook. Richard had done most of the cooking but Nizhoni was bound and determined to learn. She had become quite a good cook and was a master of the brick oven, often leaving Richard to do the mundane daily cooking while she concentrated her efforts on creating delectable breads, pies, tarts, and cobblers.

The warm glow of the fire on the open hearth with the big cast iron dutch oven hanging above it gave Papa Littlebear a sense of peace. When things in the world away from the mountain got too much for him to manage, Richard would find peace and solace with his beloved Nizhoni in their little cabin high on the side of the mountain.

It was when Richard wondered out loud about the status of Harvey Anderson that Nizhoni insisted that they bring him inside. Jim argued that if they brought him inside then he could not legitimately report to his employers that Papa wasn't sabotaging the oil camp. Jim lost the argument. Mothers are always right.

While Papa Littlebear kept Harvey's attention by moving around in front of the cabin, Jim stealthily moved around and came up behind Harvey

who was hiding in a thicket about twenty yards from the cabin. Harvey was totally unaware of Jim Heavyrunner's presence.

"Stick-em up, cowboy," Jim said in a corny 1950s cowboy and Indian show fashion.

Harvey threw his arms into the air. Jim laughed heartily until he saw the 9mm Glock holstered on Harvey's right hip. Quickly he reached forward and removed the pistol.

Removing the clip and the bullet from the chamber Jim said, "I sure hope you weren't planning to shoot any indigenous people, mountain men or unarmed bears with this thing."

Harvey Anderson cautiously turned to face Jim Heavyrunner. "It's strictly self-defense, counselor," said the oil company thug.

"Awe, I'm impressed. You know who I am." Jim Heavyrunner appeared to be studying the weapon. "I don't know what type of self-defense, but I can guarantee that this thing would do nothing but piss off a bear and I can tell you I wouldn't be happy if you aimed it at me."

"I, uh . . . " Jim held up his hand to silence Harvey.

Jim reach down and picked up a handful of earth and poured it into the open chamber and then slammed it closed. "I think you're going to have to clean it before you can fire it," he said tossing the gun to the shocked Harvey Anderson. "Now get up. We're going to take you inside and get you dried and fed. My Mother insisted."

Jim Heavyrunner could tell that Harvey Anderson was sizing him up. Was Harvey so stupid as to consider attacking a larger man, who was physically in much better condition, just to run onto an unknown mountain with dangerous predatory animals and deadly paths when it is almost dark and he has no idea how to survive in the forest? Jim turned slightly sideways and patted the large knife in a beaded sheath hanging from his belt.

"All I have is my knife," Jim smiled. Harvey looked at the useless gun in his hands and the darkening mountain-side beyond and returned Jim's smile. Jim lifted the exhausted man by a shoulder, "Come on. Let's get

you inside where you can warm up and get fed. I don't want to answer all the questions or do the paperwork if we have to take your body back to town."

Once inside Nizhoni began to scurry around moving a chair near the fire and ladling a large earthen bowl of her marvelous stew. At first Harvey sat stiff and without expression like a prisoner, at least until Nizhoni gently handed him the homemade earthen bowl filled with steaming stew. Jim and Richard could see Harvey begin to melt.

"What's your name, son?" Nizhoni asked quietly.

"I'm Harvey Anderson, ma'am," Harvey replied politely and quickly putting a spoonful of stew into his mouth. "Oh, this is delicious," he said a few moments later.

"Thank you," Nizhoni said turning to get some of the freshly baked bread they had had for diner. "Where are you from, Harvey?"

"I live in Denver."

"Is that where you grew up?"

"No, ma'am. I'm originally from a little steel town in western Pennsylvania."

"I can feel a lot of pain," Nizhoni said gently as she placed her hand on Harvey's shoulder. She took his empty bowl as he put his head in his hands and started crying.



Harvey Anderson poked his head out of the small barn. The cabin was too small for four people so Papa Littlebear and Nizhoni had trusted him enough to give him a nice sleeping bag and a warm

place to sleep in their barn. He had slept well. After talking late into the night with Nizhoni about the pain which had driven and tormented him for so many, many years he felt like a new man.

This was the first time that Harvey had actually been able to observe his surroundings. The sun was just turning the sky blue. Standing in front of the cabin Harvey stood in awe. The cabin was on a ledge at the open end of a large cirque. In the middle of the cirque and a short distance from the house was an azure blue lake. The mountains into which the cirque had been carved rose another two-thousand feet above the lake to a snow-covered ridge. To the south was an enormous alpine meadow, a mass of colors and textures. Harvey didn't know about hanging valleys. He just stood and stared at the expanse of color that appeared to extend to the end of the world. He began to walk toward the edge but he was stopped by Nizhoni.

"We never walk on the alpine vegetation," she said gently as she walked up behind him.

He turned and looked at Nizhoni. The look of awe and amazement shone on his face. "Why not?" he asked innocently.

"Those plants are very fragile," Nizhoni explained. "They have a very short growing season and they struggle to survive. If we step on them it may take up to one-hundred years to recover."

"Really?!" Harvey's surprise was real. In all of the years he had worked for the oil company, he thought, why had he never heard anything like this?

"At this elevation you're getting into the alpine meadows," Nizhoni explained. "Down at the level where they are wanting to drill it is called sub-alpine."

"Is it like this down there?" The look on Harvey's face belied the fear of what he was going to hear.

"Yes," Nizhoni put her hand on his shoulder. "Yes, and it is just as fragile. At the lower elevations they may be able to recover in fifty to seventy-five years."



"If we drill . . . " Harvey couldn't finish his question.

"If your company drills all this will be destroyed."

"All of it?"

"Yes," explained Nizhoni, "all of nature is interdependent. It will be like a ripple effect or falling dominoes. By the time it is over all of these mountains and everything that lives on them will be dead."

"That can't be!" Harvey wasn't really contradicting Nizhoni. It was a cry of anguish. He was shocked at the lies he had been told. Lies which he had believed.

"There was a college professor who made many people angry in the community around her," Nizhoni began as Harvey stood staring out over the meadow. "You see they mined coal and were killing the land. The coal companies told the people that coal was their only hope of life and that the reclamation the company did put the land back just like original. The people wanted to believe that reclamation restored the land because they were afraid that they couldn't live without mining coal. Of course they were only afraid because they were told that they couldn't do anything else. In their hearts they knew that their coal was killing everything around them and everywhere they sent it. That's what made them so angry."

"The professor had one of her classes do an experiment. Each of the students was to get samples of soil from land where there had been no mining, from land that had been reclaimed and from land that had not received reclamation. In each sample they were to plant radishes. Radishes grow easily and in almost any soil. Then they shared their result. The simple radish did not grow in either the soil from land that had not been reclaimed or the so-called reclaimed land. Mining had killed the land."

"That's what's going to happen here, isn't it?" Harvey turned to look Nizhoni in the face. The pain on his face brought tears to Nizhoni's eyes.

"I'm afraid so," Nizhoni almost whispered. "The trampling, the chemicals, the damage to the wildlife, will all combine to destroy

everything for miles around it, and what it does to the water will bring death to many more downstream."

"Don't they know?"

"They know. They just don't want to hear. Their love of money and the power it brings is too great for them to care about what happens to the land, the people downstream or the future."

"I heard that you're sabotaging the site. That's what I was sent to find out."

"We're not doing anything right now. We fought by buying the surrounding land but greedy judges gave the company permission to cross our land. We fought in court but we lost. Now we must let nature take over."

"What can nature do?"

"Nature has the power to fight back," Nizhoni explained. "The US Army Corp of Engineers kept putting dams and levees on the Mississippi River to control water levels, make it navigable and protect farming the rich bottom-lands along the river. At least twice in the second half of the twentieth century nature rebelled and through the power of storms and water destroyed many of the dams and levees. The Corp of Engineers admitted that they had gone too far in trying to control nature."

"But they went right back to what they were doing!"

"True, but each time such things happens the destructive humans are forced to give up a bit more." Nizhoni paused. "Nature has the ability to deal humans a devastating blow. For example, consider the consequences to human life if one or more of the super-volcano, that go in a line from northern California to Yellowstone, were to erupt. In the Mexican jungles you can see how quickly nature can reclaim its territory. If one of the super-volcano were to erupt, nature would reclaim its land."

"You make it sound like nature has a consciousness," Harvey was intrigued with Nizhoni's understanding of nature and listened intently as he continued to stare at the marvelous world around him.

"To an extent it does," said Nizhoni. "Many quantum mechanics physicists believe that there is a universal consciousness, and they all agree that everything in the universe is connected in a way far beyond any human belief or comprehension. Plants have been shown to be aware of what is happening to them and to react. Humans far underestimate the intelligence and abilities of other life forms."

"Kind of like Spock and Bones," Harvey smiled and laughed for the first time.

"Bones?" Nizhoni was puzzled.

"There was a character in a movie called Star Trek. His name was Doctor McCoy and was called 'Bones' by his captain. One time they are talking about a massive probe from another galaxy trying to communicate with whales. When Bones questioned why anyone would do that, the intellectual First Officer named Spock, replied 'only human arrogance would assume they are the only intelligent life on earth.'" Harvey laughed again.

"I like this Spock."

"But we don't have a Spock or a Captain Kirk or anyone else to save us from ourselves," Harvey was talking more to himself than Nizhoni. Nizhoni gave him a questioning look. "How do you live with this? Now that I know the truth I'm so angry. I want to stop them. How can you be so calm?"

"We had to learn to be calm and methodically go about our efforts to save the world and humanity from itself."

Harvey stood for a long time without speaking. He just stared across the vastness of the wilderness that he now knew was so fragile and so much at risk. "What can I do?"

"Tell the truth," Nizhoni said softly. "Tell people what you have learned and seen. Refuse to be used by those who would destroy our fragile treasure."

"But I want to . . . ." Harvey started before Nizhoni held up her hand to quiet him.

"Just tell the truth. Show people the truth."

Papa Littlebear and Jim Heavyrunner came up behind the two with their trail poles and wearing day-packs. "We're going down to see what's happening before I have to go," Jim said.

"Take Harvey with you, please," Nizhoni's words were more instruction than request.

"He'll never make it in those," Jim stated frankly pointing to Harvey's sneakers.

"What's your shoe size?" Papa asked.

"Size ten."

"I may have an old pair that you could wear," said Papa.

Thirty minutes later the three men headed off down the mountain with Harvey sporting a real pair of hiking boots, carrying a day-pack and learning how to properly use trail poles. They would hike about two-thirds of the way down the trail. At one of the switchbacks they would go off trail and make their way down along the tree-line to the edge of a ledge that was some eight-hundred to a thousand feet above the valley below.

Harvey copied his two companions who found comfortable places to sit, put their day-packs so they could easily take a sip from their camelbak, and pulled out their binoculars.

"What now?" Harvey finally asked.

"We wait and watch," said Papa Littlebear. "and see what goes in or comes out of the oil camp."

"Is that all?"

"Yep," Jim laughed. "Don't worry, I understand it will be worth it." Harvey looked confused.

"I've been watching from here since we let them cross our land," said Papa Littlebear. "If my count is right, a lot more are coming out than going in."

"That means that they're running out of men to do the drilling," Harvey offered.

"That's it," Jim was watching through his binoculars. "Evidently men are refusing to return or they can't get people to sign on."

"If they can't get workers, they'll have to retreat," Papa Littlebear added. "Ponokánii at the gate are telling me that those coming out are talking about people going crazy, equipment breaking and animals destroying food and supplies. They all say no one can make them go back in there."

"But how?"

"Kaafnaisskiiraa and the Aspen," Papa Littlebear smiled putting his binoculars to his eyes.

"What?"

"A mouse and a tree," laughed Jim Heavyrunner. "A mouse and a tree."

"Nature will fight back?" Harvey asked.

"You've got it." the other two men replied in unison.

"I'm not going to ask how."

"Wise decision," Jim looked at his father and laughed harder.

As they spoke Jim was the first to see two large Ford 250 4x4s coming from the oil company camp. All three binoculars were trained on the approaching vehicles. In the back of the first vehicle were three men. Each was wrapped in white blanket with straps around them. One of the men was squirming and kicking.

"Acacia georginae," said Jim Heavyrunner looking at Papa Littlebear who just nodded agreement. Jim shook his head and smiled.

The second 4x4 has one body in the back. It was the body of Kiááyo, the bear. Papa Littlebear dropped his binoculars immediately. Jim Heavyrunner was immediately by his side holding tightly to his father.

"Our first casualty," Papa whispered. "We must get the body."

"I'll do what I can," promised Jim Heavyrunner. Kissing his father on the head and grabbing his pack and poles he began to sprint down the mountain. Harvey watched in amazement.



Over the weeks to follow the exodus from the oil camp continued. Three to five would exit and only one or two would return. The oil company kept crying foul at Papa Littlebear and the Ponokánii but nothing could ever be substantiated. Judge Norton kept refusing to arrest or charge Papa Littlebear or any of the others. The oil company couldn't ruin the judge without exposing their own culpability. Each time Papa would meet the oil leaders he would lower his offer by ten-cents.

More than a month after opening their camp the oil company met with Jim Heavyrunner, Papa Littlebear and Ned Sandermann in Judge Norton's chambers as they had done over the past weeks. This time, however, it was different.

"Okay," the lead attorney for the oil company spat, "we're ready to take you offer. Fifty-cents an acre."

"Oh, sir," Jim Heavyrunner smiled, "that was that last offer that expired once Mr. Littlebear arrived home. I believe that the new offer is forty-cents an acre."

The oil attorney turned bright red, which gave Jim Heavyrunner great pleasure. He began to bluster around when Papa Littlebear actually came to his rescue.

"Counselor," Papa said, "let's give them a break. I'll pay fifty-cents an acre for a free and unencumbered title including all land and mineral

rights." The oil attorney looked shocked and, at the same time, relieved. As his natural color returned to his face he struggled for words. They could, of course, not include anything which might be construed as a 'thank you'.

"Your honor," Jim Heavyrunner addressed Judge Norton, "I have been carrying around this bill of sale for just this occasion. If you and the oil company would review it, I would like to conclude the sale and transfer of this land before we leave here."

Grudgingly the oil company agreed. Judge Norton reviewed the bill of sale and found nothing objectionable for either party. Papa Littlebear pulled out a simple checkbook from inside his trail shirt and wrote a check for two hundred thirty-two thousand, five hundred dollars and handed it to the oil company attorney with his left hand while holding out his right to shake hands on the deal. The attorney's handshake was the definition of a dead-fish handshake. It was all Papa Littlebear could do to keep from laughing. This powerful man before him was unaccustomed to losing and this is the best he could do.

"My bank is prepared to honor that check immediately. The funds should be in your account within twenty-four hours, and I will graciously give your people a week to pack up and get off my land." Papa Littlebear looked the oil company attorney squarely in the eyes without showing any signs of emotion. He was not going to allow anyone to know how he was feeling until he was out of this building.

As Papa Littlebear stepped out of the Court House there was a large crowd gathered. There were the Panokanii, those who had come to help at the barricade and hundreds of others there to celebrate the defeat of the oil company. A cheer went up when Papa Littlebear emerged from the building. Papa looked at Jim.

"Someone must have spread the word that the oil company was caving," Jim looked up and smirked. "They deserve to be here to make a public proclamation."



There was no celebration that night in the stately old home that belonged to Judge Leonard Norton and his wife, Rebecca. The two men from the meeting were sequestered with Judge Norton in his library. Rebecca, confined to her wheelchair in the adjoining parlor, could hear them yelling but she couldn't really understand what was being said. Finally she could take it no longer, wheeled up to the two massive sliding doors, and pulled them open.

The exceptionally large oil executive has somehow leveraged himself into one of her prized high backed Queen Ann wing-back chairs. Her husband was sitting in his usual place behind the mahogany writing table. The rude little counselor was leaning on the writing table across from the Judge. The attorney's hand was in the air with a pointed finger as Rebecca threw open the doors. He immediately dropped his hand and turned to face the woman. The attorney gave a sardonic grin.

"You know," he said momentarily glancing at the judge and then back at Rebecca, "you can't keep this pretty lady alive on a hick-town judge's salary. The boss is getting really pissed. You had better start doing something about Richard Littlebear. The boss wants that land back."

"What is he talking about, Leonard?" demanded Rebecca.

"Oh," continued the Vronech attorney still grinning. "I'm sure his honor will explain it all to you after we've gone."

The Vronech executive wiggled his way out of the delicate chair. He looked a bit disgusted. He knew that this was exactly what the company wanted when they hired this caustic scrappy-doo, but he couldn't look at the terrified woman who sat before them. She was so fragile and so frightened, despite her bravado. Her once dark thick hair was thin, mostly gray and matted to her head. Her skin was a pasty lifeless color and hung



on her bones. Her neck was so thin he wondered how it could hold her head upright. "Danville didn't have to go that far," he thought to himself.

"We'll find our own way out," hissed Danville.

"So explain," Rebecca Norton said to her husband when the two men were gone.

Leonard Norton explained the whole sordid mess.



Later that evening after Rebecca's home care nurse had helped her get ready for bed Leonard was sitting on the master bedroom balcony. He had searched desperately for a place where he could think and figure out what to do. As he sat in the dark the door opened. The nurse stepped out onto the balcony, looking back into the bedroom where she could see Mrs. Norton, she carefully closed the door. She didn't see the judge sitting in the shadows and took a cell phone from her pocket.

"Lyle," she spoken into the phone. "We've got a problem. The judge is going to blow the whistle." She paused, checking on Rebecca through the windows as she listened. "I don't know. Probably tomorrow." Another pause. "Oh, no! I didn't sign up for anything like that. I'm out of here." She put the phone into her pocket and slipped quietly back into the bedroom.

The judge sat in shock. Even the nurse to whom he had trusted his wife's life was on the Vronech payroll. Where could they go and be safe?



**I**t was almost 11:00 the next morning. Earlier that morning Judge Norton had put Rebecca in the car, loaded up her wheelchair and a few clothes and headed out of town. He had stopped for gas on the edge of town and made sure that the cashier knew that he was heading south toward Larch Lake. He drove long enough to be sure that he wasn't being followed and then started a wide circle around Ronfield until he arrived at the Ponokánii gate.

He paused as he pulled off the highway. It appeared that there were only a few of the Ponokánii men at the gate. He didn't doubt that Vronech had someone watching the gate somewhere, but that was a chance he had to take. He took a deep breath and put the car into gear. He hoped beyond hope that the Ponokánii would let him hide his wife. He knew that his life wasn't worth much. He just wanted to survive until he could testify against Vronech.

At the gate he stopped, rolled down the window and turned off the engine. One of the young men at the gate walked up to the window.

"My name is Leonard Norton, I ..."

"I know who you are, Judge Norton," snapped the young man, not looking particularly friendly. "What do you want?"

"I know that I made a horrible mistake and that you have every right to hate me," Leonard was pleading. The tears began to well up in his eyes as he spoke. "I don't blame you, but my wife is dying and I need a safe place to hide her. I blew the whistle on Vronech last night. I can't imagine that they will let me live and I'm afraid that they will hurt her to try to stop me. Please, can I talk to Richard Littlebear? Please."

"Papa Littlebear lives a good four hour hike up Mt. Ponoká." The young man was less harsh. "Ned Sandermann is here."

"Oh, please," the judge continued to beg, "let me talk to anyone who might help. I know I don't deserve your help but you are the only ones I know who might not be on the Vronech payroll."

The young man motioned to the other to open the gate. "Pull over there and we'll let Ned know you're here."

"Thank you!" Leonard Norton realized that he was sobbing. He was so emotionally upset that he had a hard time driving the car through the gate and pulling over where he had been instructed. The second man looked into the car from the passenger side. Rebecca had the seat fully reclined and was sleeping. He looked at Rebecca and moved off toward a small cabin nearby.

The man had hardly gotten out of sight when Leonard spotted him returning with a tall, middle-aged man with light red hair, and an equally tall, slender woman with long dark hair and mahogany skin. This time Leonard got out of the car.

"Good morning," said the red haired man. "I'm Ned Sandermann. You must have forgotten what you did to us or you have a really, really serious problem." Ned nevertheless extended his hand.

"I am sadly aware of what I did," said Leonard shaking Ned Sandermann's hand, "and, yes, I do have a really, really serious problem." He paused and realized that Ned Sandermann was waiting for more explanation. "I took Vronech's bribe because I was trying to save my wife's life. She didn't know. Last night we talked and decided that I had to blow the whistle on Vronech no matter what the consequences. My wife is dying. I'm looking for safe refuge for Rebecca somewhere where Vronech can't reach her. I only need to survive until I testify against Vronech. I want Rebecca's last days to be someplace safe and peaceful. You are my only hope."

"Why should we do this for you?" asked Ned Sandermann. "We have been to hell and back because of you."

"I know," Leonard looked totally defeated. He turned to go back to his car. "I have no right to ask you or involve you."

Ned reached out and stopped the judge. "That's right, but that doesn't mean we won't help."

Leonard Norton just stopped and sobbed. He couldn't turn around. He didn't think he could turn to face a man he had done so much to hurt who was now saving his family.

"This is Lisa Peta," Ned continued. "She is one of our nurses. May she see your wife?"

Happily Leonard introduced the nurse to Rebecca, who was just awakening. There was an infectious charm to Lisa's face and smile which smitten both Rebecca and Leonard Norton immediately. Lisa kept up a running conversation with Rebecca while she did her physical assessment. From time to time Leonard Norton would look back at Ned Sandermann with a 'I-don't-know-how-to-thank-you' look. Then Lisa looked through Rebecca's medications.

"You really seem pretty good," Lisa said to a very surprised Rebecca and Leonard. "I need to get a good history for Dr. Oldman. She went to one of the nearby reservations to do clinic and will be back tomorrow." Lisa looked up at Ned. Only Ned could see Lisa's frown. "Could we put them in the Synigh Creek cabin?"

"Sure," said Ned. "A nice fire and it should be ready to go."

Turning back to Rebecca, Lisa continued without acknowledging Ned's response, "And you, young lady, I'd like to have you sit out here in the sun and fresh air until we get everything ready."

"Outside?" questioned Leonard.

"All medicine comes from nature," Lisa smiled, "including fresh air and sunshine."

"You know me," said Lisa Peta to Ned Sandermann when they were alone. "I'm a field nurse. Give me a gun shot, a puncture wound from any angry cow, a snake bite or a broken leg from falling down the mountain. I'm not a hospital medicine type of girl, but something just doesn't seem right here."

"Yeah," replied Ned. "I saw the look you gave me. Is she faking?"

"Heavens no!" exclaimed Lisa. "That girl is going to die but she isn't as ready to die as she thinks."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Both she and the judge really believe that she is so bad that she can't walk or do anything on her own. I saw the look on his face when we went to the car. She was sleeping but he was terrified that she was dead. They really believe that we're counting hours, not days. I looked at her meds. She has large doses of atorvastatin and pantoprazole. Atorvastatin is a statin and pantoprazole is a proton pump inhibitor. Both of them cause fatigue and weakness, and both are dangerous. There's something fishy. My money is on her having months and maybe years."

"What!?" Ned was totally confused.

"I'm thinking that someone wants her to think she's worse than she is."

"Vronech," said Ned. "They'd do that to keep control of the judge."

"Oh, that's low," exclaimed Lisa. "No one can be that low!"

"How long have you been here?"

"Yeah, Vronech would be that low." Lisa agreed. "In any case, if they haven't tampered with her diagnosis her days are probably limited. According to the documents he brought, the cancer is Stage IV and in her lymph nodes. That means there's a good chance of metastasizing. If she doesn't go to the city for some heavy-weight therapy she's going to die a lot sooner. But I can't help but think there's something smelly."

"Let's keep it to ourselves until Dr. Oldman gives us her opinion," suggested Ned.

"Oh, I agree," said Lisa, "but I do want to get her outside and off some of those medications whose side-effects are worse than what they treat. We can at least make her last days more pleasant."

"Agreed."



The Synigh Creek cabin is a small one-room cabin right next to Synigh Creek and a hundred yards or so from the trail head of the path to Papa and Nizhoni's cabin. It had been there when Papa Littlebear bought the land and one of the original Panokanii had fixed it up and lived in it for several years. It took only a short time for the Panokanii to make it inhabitable again.

Judge Norton and Rebecca sat under some nearby trees watching the almost constant parade of Panokanii going in and out of the cabin carrying bedding, cooking utensils and boxes of food. Some of the people took a moment to approach the couple and welcome them. Leonard Norton couldn't help but wonder how these people, whom he had done so much to torment and persecute, could so quickly and easily accept and befriend him. It would only be after many hours of walking the mountain, talking with Papa Littlebear, that Leonard would understand. He would eventually discover the real strength of compassion for all life when he discovered the reality of the oneness of all things. It would take time for him to completely comprehend and understand the reality that had been repressed by human society for millennium.

Lisa Peta sat with Rebecca for a long time taking medical history notes. It had been several hours since Rebecca had received some of her medicine and Lisa was thinking that she was noticing a bit more color in Rebecca's face. Lisa wondered to herself whether there really was some

improvement or if this was just because of her suspicions. Rebecca was definitely a lot more animated in her conversation and expressed numerous times how much she was enjoying being outside. Her nurse - the one whom they had caught calling Vronech - had never let her go outside. She had, for several years, been confined to a few rooms in their house. Lisa kept finding herself looking at the two rather pathetic figures and wondering how, if her suspicions were correct, anyone could purposely do this to other humans. She was anxious to talk to Dr. Oldman.

A Panokanii named Angela approached. "Your cabin awaits," she said cheerily. "It isn't what you've been accustomed to but you'll find it comfortable."

Rebecca stepped inside and looked around. Tears started streaming from her eyes. "It's beautiful," she said between sobs and holding on to Angela's arm. Leonard leaned up against the side of the door frame and bawled.

In the middle of the room was a large braided rug on which stood a lovely oak oval table. The fireplace was to the right with a large pot crane and an old cook stove. A beautiful fire was burning. Cast iron cookware hung on the wall. There was an opening to the left of the fireplace which exposed a lean-to attached to the cabin that was filled with wood. The back wall was lined with shelves piled with supplies and, to the left, a large closet that went from floor to ceiling. One of the Panokanii swung open the closet doors to expose the interior. One side had space to hang clothes while the other were shelves filled with sheets and blankets.

The left side of the cabin was dominated by a large rope bed with an overstuffed feather mattress and covered with a magnificent handmade quilt. Just to look at it made you want to jump into the bed and bury yourself in its comfort. On either side of the bed were small homemade tables. On either side of the door were pegs for coats. Four chairs also hung on the wall. In the middle of the oak table, which dominated the center of the room, there was a simple pitcher filled with marvelous wildflowers.

Another Panokanii named Betsy grabbed one of the pine straight-back chairs from the wall while Angela supported Rebecca. Rebecca sat just inside the door looking from one side of the cabin to the other. She laughed, smiled, and cried. Time and again she attempted to express what she felt - express her appreciation - but tears and sobs would always prevent her. Leonard was still standing in the doorway, leaning up against the door-frame. He couldn't move.

Ned Sandermann stepped up beside him and put his hand on the judge's shoulder. The friendly physical contact made the judge begin crying again. Ned just stood and waited as Leonard Norton tried desperately to talk.

"Why?" is all the judge could get out. "When I've been so . . . why?"

"Perhaps the real opposite to hatred and anger is compassion," said Ned squeezing Leonard's shoulder.

"Yes," said the judge, "but . . ."

"There isn't any 'but' to our rules of life," Ned spoke quietly. "Our first rule of life is to do good to all living creatures, and if we can't do anything good for them, we do our best to do them no harm." Leonard just looked. He could understand the words but such sentiment, such behavior, such a rule didn't make sense in his world. Ned continued, "these people are practicing what they teach their children. Many of our relatives, who thought we were crazy for coming here to live, profess religions that teach love and compassion but they practice hatred and bigotry. In their world compassion and forgiveness are seen as weaknesses. In our world compassion and forgiveness are signs of great strength."

Leonard, who had been staring intently at Ned as he spoke, returned his gaze into the cabin. The Panokanii women were now gathered around Rebecca and talking excitedly. "But my wife was innocent," he said.

"We didn't know that," said Ned, "and, as you can see, it didn't matter."

"I've got a lot to learn," said Leonard transfixed by the scene before him.





Where did they go?" an angry Daville Vandergras almost screamed at the two men standing before him. "We pay you ten times what you're worth and you can't keep track of a stupid Podunk judge."

"I don't know how he got past Larry outside the gate, but we picked up his trail at a gas station and they said he was headed toward Larch Lake. We went to Larch Lake but he wasn't around. He must have kept on movin'" The first man almost blubbered. He knew Danville's reputation.

"Yeah," said the second man. "I bet he just kept going. We have some friends who owe us a favor and they're watching in case he shows up in Fairmont."

"Where's that idiot doctor?" demanded Danville.

A small, frail looking man in his mid-fifties, was rather ignobly ushered into the room. He looked terrified. He was sweating profusely and he appeared haggard with dark sunken eyes.

"That looks like a man who needs a fix." Danville's sadistic laugh was enough to frighten even the most despicable villain. "How are you doing Dr. Olivet?" The doctor went limp and was poured into a nearby chair. "How long before they figure out what you were doing with Mrs. Norton's medicines? Can they trace them back to you?"

"Both of the drugs have a legitimate diagnosis. We shouldn't have to worry about them tracing it back to me because it is a legitimate script," said Steven Olivet, Rebecca Norton's physician.

"That's good to know," Danville smiled. "You'd better hope they don't figure it out."

"Don't worry, Mr. Vandergras," whined the shaking physician. "I put a blood test from a patient with very high cholesterol in Mrs. Norton's chart and I charted that she needed the PPI because of the gastrointestinal upset all of the medications and therapies are causing. I was very careful."

"What if they do their own blood tests?"

"I guess, but there's no reason for anyone to do more blood tests."

"But they could."

"Yes, I guess."

"Thank you, Dr. Olivet," said Danville waving toward the door. "The boys will be sure you get a fix."

With that two men dragged Dr. Olivet from the room. Danville Vandergras looked up at a tall, slender man wearing a suit that seemed to hang from his skinny frame except for the bulge under the left armpit.

"It sure looks like Dr. Olivet needs a fix," Danville said matter-of-factly. "Make sure that he get a fix that will last him for a while . . . a good while. Heaven know he needs it."

The man looked dully at Danville for a few moments before the message registered. "Sure, boss," he said. "Sures thing."

The local newspaper headlines the next morning - "Local physician, Dr Steven Olivet, dead of drug overdose."



**H**e's got her on how much Lipitor?" asked Dr. Jennifer Oldman with surprise.

"Twenty milligram q-i-d," responded Lisa Peta. "She's been on it for months. Her chart has a nasty looking blood screen but there were no follow-up tests and the one we ran was normal."

"That's interesting."

"Yes, ma'am," Lisa Peta continued. "I've never seen anyone go from 400 mg/dL on medication to 184 mg/dL off."

"Good point."

"And her complaints are classic for atorvastatin over-dose. She thinks it is the cancer."

"And you say she's showing improvement off these two meds?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good work, Lisa," said Dr. Oldman smiling. "You took quite a risk, but you were right and made a good call. I'm going to see if I can get a buddy, who is an oncologist, to come spend a nice weekend in our beautiful mountains."

"That would be great."

"Now let me meet Mrs. Norton."



The cirque in which Papa Littlebear and Nizhoni's cabin sat was rather elongated. It had more the shape of an old spoon holder than what most people would think of as a cirque. The open end of the cirque opened to the southeast. The opposite wall was much more gradual than the southwest or the northeast sides. It was still steep and it was almost as high as the northeast side, which was Mt Panoka. The southwest side, like its northeast counterpart, was almost perpendicular,

but it wasn't nearly as high as the other sides of the cirque. If one were to start at the open end of the cirque and climb to the top of the southwestern rim they would be standing on a narrow ridge looking down into the cirque on the northeast side. Turning around they would be looking almost 1,200 feet straight down into the valley. Across the cirque was the majestic Mt. Panoka that rose several thousand feet above them like one giant rock with a cap-stone that would dwarf the largest sports dome.

Papa Littlebear and Leonard Norton sat on the trail to the southwest ridge looking down into the cirque and across at Mt Panoka. The lake in the center of the cirque was an azure blue. With the sun reflecting off its surface it had the appearance of a giant gem in a setting of Black Hills gold. The late summer alpine wild flowers surrounded the lake and climbed the sides of the cirque with an amazing pallet of colors ranging from brilliant yellows to vibrant purples. Even the lichen clinging to the side of Panoka made a subtle border and contributed to the magnificent vista.

"People have lost their sense of being a part of the land," Leonard was saying. "I never realized that before. People have a we-they mentality toward nature, and the only thing that is important is the 'we'. We want to 'control' nature or 'subdue' nature or 'overcome' nature." He looked at Papa Littlebear with tear-filled eyes. "When did we get this way? When did we forget that we are a part of nature and what we do to nature we do to ourselves?"

Papa Littlebear just shook his head. He took a moment from the vista to glance at Leonard. The judge looked very old and frail. Gone was the erect posture and confident presentation Papa had seen in his chambers. The judge was now a broken man desperately seeking redemption but, at the same time, not allowing himself to be forgiven. "What you did you did because you . . . ."

"What I did," Leonard interrupted, "was despicable no matter how you cut it . . . no matter what excuse you try to give me."

"I'm not trying to give you any excuse," Papa said with emphasis. "We both know that you are already paying for your behavior. We both know

that, even though you are testifying for the prosecutor, the ultimate payment for what you did is going to be your freedom." The judge stared at the mountain without reply. He was painfully aware of the penalty he would pay, but he was glad it was over and he was glad that he had made the right decision. He only worried about Rebecca.

"All I *am* saying," Papa continued, "is that you acted in a very human way. You selfishly did what you were told in a desperate attempt to save Rebecca's life and didn't think about the lives of others. That is human. Vronech knew that you would do that. That's why they poisoned Rebecca. It doesn't make you a monster beyond redemption."

"I couldn't bear the thought of losing Rebecca," Leonard looked at Papa with tears in his eyes. "I knew what I was doing was wrong but I honestly didn't realize the tremendous and deadly impact of what I was permitting Vronech to do."

The two men sat and looked at the vision of peace and serenity below. They had spent many hours over the past weeks sitting on the side of the cirque talking. They had talked about how hard it is to resist people like the oil company owners and how oil companies and others, who would plunder and rape the land, make the very ignorant general population feel that it is necessary to allow them. It isn't that the general population is bad. They are ignorant in the proper sense of the word. These companies are using the same tactics en masse as they used on Leonard.

As they walked together back to the cabin in the cirque little did they know what the next weeks would bring. Judge Leonard Norton would make his first appearance in court. He would be found guilty but would be allowed to serve his sentence after Rebecca's death. Rebecca enjoyed almost three months of sunshine and fresh air in the mountains, but what meant most to her was that she and Leonard were at peace. She died peacefully in Leonard's arms in their little cabin with Lisa Pete, Nizhoni and Papa Littlebear at their side.



Papa Littlebear and Nizhoni knew that the day would come when it was time for them to move on and let the younger generation take care of the land. Ned Sandermann and their son, Jim Heavyrunner, were good men and good leaders. Leonard Norton would be a tremendous legal asset and a great help to Chaska Heavyrunner when he finished his prison term. The Ponokánii people would continue to find their place back in nature and discover new ways not only to repair the damage of previous generations but new ways for all humans to live and prosper in nature. Papa and Nizhoni had talked frequently about these matters. They wondered what would lie in store for them.

Papa Littlebear sat down on the boulder in front of his cabin and looked out over the cirque. He had spent many hours sitting on this very boulder admiring the beauty of his mountains and pondering the trials of the day or the path to the future. He realized that he had never looked back.

He looked at the lake almost perfectly centered in the cirque with its azure blue water, that hue halfway between blue and cyan, reflecting the light of the sun which was just rising over the eastern rim. The snow on the western slope was glistening with the light of a new day. Papa Littlebear could see a nanny Mountain Goat with her kid and a couple of tag-along yearlings feeding on a rocky ledge.

It had been a hard struggle but they had prevailed. The Ponokánii had a new home and the land had been saved. But the price was high. He had lost his beloved Alaya Kiááyo. He had known her since she was a cub. They had scattered her ashes in the high alpine meadow she had loved. Tears welled up in his eyes. Unci Maka had been good to him but the walk was long. At least this place was safe for another day.

Nizhoni came up behind Papa Littlebear, put her hands on his shoulders, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"It is time," she said gently.

Papa Littlebear stood up. Holding Nizhoni close, they stood looking at the small log cabin that had been their home for almost fifty years. Ponoká, the great elk for whom the mountain was named, was standing majestically to one side. He lowered his mighty head as Papa's gaze fell on him.

"Yes," he replied hoisting his backpack onto his shoulders, "it is time."

Arm in arm Nizhoni and Papa Littlebear set course into the heart of their beloved mountains. They could be heard laughing and singing as they faded from view . . . faded from view but not from the hearts of those whom they left behind.

