

OBSIDIAN

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Clarence Kicking Horse had seen it all through those sexagenarian eyes, now glazed over with cataracts. Eyes that had seen things few others had seen. Eyes ... *windows to the soul* some called them. His doctors had diagnosed him as chronically depressed.

Sitting listlessly askew in his wheelchair at the Red Fork Center for the Elderly, shoulder-length gray hair cascading from his sunset colored forehead, he stared through the dirty window as occasional dust devils and heat mirages whirled and eddied beyond the rear asphalt parking lot. He tried in vain to remember his youth.

1950's South Dakota. Days of powwows. Cool nights of counting coup in the back seat of his '57 Chevy, partying with eager rez girls. Clarence Kicking Horse had once been as wild as an unbroken sorrel mustang and as prolific as a king salmon. That is, until the excrement-coated pungee sticks of 'Nam forever pierced his spirit.

A nurse's aide popped her head into Clarence's shabby 8 by 10-foot room, cheerfully announcing: "Ya has a visitor, Mr. Kickin' Horse!"

Now who in the hell would wanna see ME? silently queried the despondent old Indian in the sagging wheelchair. *Don't have any relatives. Don't have any friends either! Betcha it's just some damn trick to get me into the shower!*

"Go to hell!"

He continued frowning at some imaginary bit of sagebrush way far in the distance. Focusing was proving harder and harder as one hopeless day wore on into the next.

Am I seeing things again?

And then ... a faint sound, a kind of soft footfall, as from deerskin moccasins. Something was coming down the well-buffed hallway.

Wait. Breathing?

Clarence could sense a presence in his room, not unlike sensing a Spirit Dog in a sweat lodge ceremony. He felt something moist touch the flaccid skin of his forearm resting on his chair.

What the ...? Licking!

Kicking Horse abruptly withdrew his arm as his hearing aid processed metal chain clinking against pitted chrome wheelchair tubing.

"Mr. Kickin' Horse, I'd like ya to meet Obsidian!" invited Shenequa Barnes, the aide. "She's a therapy dog from a place up in Canada. Calgary, I think!"

The old man puzzled over what he had just heard and felt.

Damn eyes! Can't see for crap!

Obsidian attempted once again to connect with the patient. Nuzzling her short, dense black coat against Clarence's gnarled forehead elicited a response from the ancient warrior. What was that fleeting look ... a *smile*?

Barnes had seen the positive effects of pet therapy before, at other nursing facilities where she had worked. She had pestered Jerry Robinson, Red Fork's administrator, to at least give it a try. He finally relented.

This unique canine visitor had been trained to carefully approach the elderly, especially those like Clarence, who suffered severe mental and visual impairments. No barking, no quick, startling movements.

Obsidian was as black as her namesake, that volcanic glass used for millennia as arrow tips by ancient hunters. She had been raised by a Cree breeder and sold as a sled dog. Creator mercifully intervened after her musher, enraged at losing the Iditarod race, shot her in her hind quarters. She would never race again.

That slowly-forming smile on Clarence Kicking Horse's wrinkled face evolved into a wide grin as he proceeded to stroke the pricked ears of this gentle, loving animal.

Nurse's aide Barnes, referring to her trusty notebook, spoke to the hearing aid of the old Indian.

"Obsidian's actually a rare breed, an American Indian Dog! Folks thought they was extinct. In olden days, these smart, strong dogs pulled sleds or was even fitted with backpacks for long huntin' journeys by the tribes. They was 'specially prized as guard dogs, protectin' the very young an' very old."

But unbeknown to Barnes or anyone else, Creator had given *this particular* American Indian Dog a special gift after her gunshot injury. Obsidian had been blessed with the uncanny ability to telepathically *speak* to the old ones, alive *and* passed. Obsidian, it seems, was a true "Spirit Dog."

Miss Barnes, as her engraved nametag denoted, watched approvingly as those two natural Indian souls communed together like lifelong friends. He, softly mumbling some ancient tribal chant from his youth; Obsidian, her keen ears parabolically aimed at the old man's mouth, taking in the cosmic meaning of those barely-audible syllables. Man and dog, embracing on a level beyond the physical. Was it primal? Surely as primal as a petroglyph engraved on a shaded rock face in the western buttes.

What was they sayin'? Barnes puzzled.

Within the deepest recesses of Clarence's mind, in that mental zone reserved for just the deepest pain, lurked a darkness that even the finest doctors of psychiatry could not penetrate. But it only took Obsidian a nanosecond to pick up on that telltale synaptic flash as it jumped within Clarence Kicking Horse's wounded brain.

What'd she seen? Barnes queried silently.

"Time ta say 'bye, now, Mr. Kickin' Horse!" exclaimed Miss Barnes in a loud voice to her patient's hearing aid amplifier.

"Obsidian's got other folks ta visit today. She'll surely come again, if you're a good boy!" laughed the rotund African-American woman.

At that very moment, Clarence felt a bipolar tugging inside his head, as the dog licked his trembling hand, to take her leave. Something had just happened in that brief encounter! Something ... known only to the Great Spirit.

Helpless, hapless days wore on into months for the patients at Red Fork.

"Many moons have passed," Clarence repeated to the black nurse's aide with the jolly disposition, as he rambled on and on about his one brief visit with the therapy dog. He seemed to brighten, recalling that electric feeling as the dog's energy entered his own body.

The old Indian had never been much of a spiritual person, at least not in the way of actually attending a *washichu* church. But, somehow now, a spirit seemed to be moving unseen within the old man's depression-wracked psyche, a *Yuwipi* spirit, conjured up from within the bound blanket of Clarence Kicking Horse's mind.

During their rounds on the night shift, the Red Fork nurses often heard Clarence crying out in his sleep--bits and pieces of Vietnamese words; truncated recitations of old Indian prayers offered up to ancient relatives; some, two-legged; some, four.

That blessed dog! spoke the patient during his Technicolor dreams.

Obsidian returned several times to visit the ailing warrior, each time gleaning more from deep within the old Indian's mental cave. And in this spiritual duet, Clarence drew long and hard from the river of knowledge running deep within the Spirit Dog.

Man and dog. Dog and man. Loyal companions sharing the bleak confines of that nursing home room, if even for just twenty minutes at a session.

Then, weeks later, on a slate grey autumn day, Obsidian once again padded down the sterile hallway to the Vietnam veteran's room, for another routine visit.

Amazingly, both natural beings knew the exact day and hour way beforehand, as if Creator had whispered it into their waiting ears. Clarence beamed with anticipation as the hands of his battered alarm clock wound down atop the bedside table.

I'm ready, Spirit Dog!

The sixteen-year-old American Indian Dog, so familiar now with those tile floors, sat patiently outside the closed door of room 16. Shenequa Barnes unhooked Obsidian's beaded leash from its neck chain. Miss Barnes slowly opened the door, her trademark spiral-bound nurse's aide notebook in her left hand, as the odor of stale urine assaulted her nostrils.

Lying on top of his bed today, with glazed eyes fixated on some imaginary laser point deep within the dingy plastered ceiling, Clarence awaited those words.

"Guess who's here, Mr. Kickin' Horse?"

From his nearly mummified appearance on the twin-sized institutional bed, Clarence sat bolt-up with a strange, almost mystical willfulness that Miss Barnes had never witnessed during six years of caring for the elderly Indian. Though his eyes were dim and his voice weak, Clarence Kicking Horse cleared the phlegm from his aged throat and lovingly invited his loyal therapy dog to jump up onto the chenille bedspread.

"Obsidian! Come here, girl!"

Miss Barnes lingered in the lonely Naugahyde chair with its threadbare tribal blanket, scanning today's page in her nursing notebook, alongside her patient and his jet-black visitor.

All of a sudden the old man cried out.

"I have something to tell you! Write this down!"

With a gentle stroke of Obsidian's flank, Clarence Kicking Horse proceeded to spill his guts to the nurse's aide and the universe beyond.

"My mind's been sick for many moons, the shrinks tell me! I wanna confess why that is!"

Startled from her notes, Miss Barnes fired back.

"Say what?"

Clarence repeated his wish that she take down what he was about to say, in no uncertain terms. He began ...

“Back in ‘Nam in ‘65, I was a tunnel rat at Cu Chi. I did some terrible things over there. But one thing I did has haunted me ever since ...”

Miss Barnes dutifully copied it all down, as Clarence and his dog visitor exchanged knowing glances atop the bed.

Rereading what she had thus far written, Barnes looked up and saw Kicking Horse resting his head upon the velvety smooth body of the female dog. Obsidian turned to lick his face.

Within seconds, the dog lifted her head and let out a series of shuddering howls, so uncharacteristic of her when visiting patients.

Barnes rose from the chair to see what the fuss was all about, leaning over the bed to check on the old Indian, her hand upon his wrist. No pulse. Obsidian howled forlornly, continually stroking the visage of the old warrior with her paw pads.

Miss Barnes instinctively jabbed at the electronic call button above the bed to summon help from the nurses’ station, setting in motion a series of well-choreographed moves all those in the building were trained for.

Head nurse phoned the administrator and summoned the Medical Examiner. Twenty-five minutes later, George Banister, County M.E. efficiently concluded jotting his findings and left for the door.

Nurse’s aide Barnes stood in stunned silence, glancing out the window of the ambulance service area. Tears welled up again.

As the official-looking County vehicle slowly made its way down the long driveway of the Red Fork Center for the Elderly, Miss Barnes, trying valiantly to compose herself, couldn’t believe what she saw.

Obsidian, her beaded leash dragging along the faded asphalt, marched reverently behind the M.E.’s vehicle in a canine funeral cortege. American Indian Dog and Indian Man--linked forevermore.

Another response to the chain of calls made that day was from the local VFW post in town, which gathered its members to select an honor guard for Clarence’s send-off.

Post Commander Dalton Jeffries knew that at least one of them should be an Indian himself, out of respect for their dead brother. Jordan Drum would be a perfect fit, being a Gulf War veteran and an apprentice medicine man from the rez. Drum had that innate sixth sense that only a handful of men, red or white, had.

Donning his dress uniform that Friday morning, Drum gave a quick look at his bathroom mirror before leaving for the funeral out at the edge of town.

Great Spirit, I call upon you to lift up our dead warrior brother so he may live again at your side!

Jordan Drum's spit-shined combat boot hit the bottom of the screen door as he trailed off to his waiting pickup parked outside in the dew of that crisp autumn morning.

Assembled around a freshly dug grave, the honor guard and the priest made their last-minute adjustments. A bone-chilling katabatic wind blew down from the snow-capped mountain range in the distance, sending barely visible snow devils up to Father Sky's elevated realm.

The homily was read; M-16's fired in unison; the plaintive bugle was blown; then flag-folding. Finally, silence, as the warrior's coffin slowly descended.

While the rest of the honor guard and the priest walked silently back to their respective vehicles, apprentice medicine man Drum laid out the makings of a small fire pit beside the gravesite of Clarence Kicking Horse. Reaching into his shamanic bag with one hand while fanning smoldering tinder with his other, he withdrew a bundle of sweetgrass, ignited it and commenced smudging himself as he extended his arms to the mid-morning sky.

"Set him free, Great Spirit! Set him free!"

Then, he withdrew something else from his bag. A beaded leash.

Suddenly, the infant flames of the medicine-fire billowed as the solitary Gulf War vet again beseeched Creator. Was it yet another sharp blast from the katabatic wind stoking that funereal fire ... or something else? *We washichus* will never know.

But of course Jordan Drum *did* know, as he chanted to the four directions, dancing in the regalia of a modern warrior. Out of the corner of his eye, Drum next witnessed what few men have ever witnessed.

Within the curling contrail of the smoky fire pit, Drum beheld the faint, transparent visage of an elderly Indian, shape-shifting as he rose into the sky. And by his side, the ghost of a black dog spun round, shape-shifting as she, too, rose on the heated column of holy smoke.

Awestruck, Drum sat back on his ceremonial blanket, still as a statue, to catch the show as the two spiraling earth-born friends transformed into each other. Man into dog and dog into man.

No sooner had they risen than they were gone! Drum blessed Creator again and concluded his solitary vigil at the graveside. A smile crossed his wind-chapped face.

It was done.

“That bless’d dog sure loved that ol’ Indian man with her whole heart! That she did,” recounted Miss Barnes when it came her time to reveal the circumstances surrounding the death of Clarence Kicking Horse.

At the request of the common-law ex-wife of the deceased, an estate hearing was held months after he died in Red Fork. It seems that the ex-spouse learned from a mutual friend that Clarence had died intestate and yet monies were found in several bank accounts in his name, throughout the West. Had he been so cruel during his tortured days on earth that he intentionally hid these funds from her? And if so, for what reason? Maybe ... just maybe ... he simply lost the will to decide. PTSD can do that to a warrior.

All in the courtroom sat in awed silence as Barnes read from her notebook the dictation she had taken.

“... An’ ol’ Clarence ... I mean, Mr. Kickin’ Horse ... he tol’ me that he kep’ a *big* secret from his wife an’ from God hisself! Seems that on one of them missions around the Cu Chi tunnels of Vietnam, him an’ his squad members, all high on weed, found a woman with an infant bound ta her breast with jungle vines. A sergeant began interrogatin’ her.

‘VC! VC!’ yelled the sergeant in disgust. ‘VC!’

“That wild-eyed woman with the baby ran screamin’ toward her hootch.

‘No VC! No VC!’

“Trippin’ on a pile of bamboo, she exposed this here trapdoor leadin’ to a tunnel. Next, that whole squad jes ‘sploded!

‘Waste da bitch!’ yelled one trooper.

‘Do ‘er, man, do ‘er!’ taunted others.

“That’s when ol’ Clarence screamed ‘*dung lai!*’ and runs up on her, rippin’ that baby from its momma’s tremblin’ body. Throwin’ that bawlin’ kid inta da air, shoutin’ like some crazy man, he gets right inta her face, shriekin’: ‘YOU VC!’

“An’ then, without battin’ an eye, that crazy Indian kick’d aside that trapdoor with his boot an’ throwed that poor child inta da tunnel! Soon’s he done it, he yanks da pin off a grenade an’ lobs it onta that poor baby!

‘Fire in the hole!’ he shouted.

“Done sent ‘im right over da edge, it did! Couldn’t have no normal relations ‘back in da world’ as he’d say. Saw that dead child everywhere! Couldn’t bring hisself ta havin’ kids with his Indian gal an’ all. Those two jes fell apart. And so did he!” concluded Barnes.

The black therapy dog never returned to the Red Fork Center for the Elderly. Nor any other nursing home. She was with Clarence Kicking Horse now, in the black robe of heaven.

But in her place appeared a phoenix-dog, reborn on earth and tasked by Creator with a new mission. She would soon walk the corridors of Veteran’s hospitals, offering her unique brand of consolation to brothers-in-arms. She would also visit children’s wards of hospitals across the country, seeking to repay a debt for the unforgivable; the death of an almond-eyed child down a jungle tunnel in a forgotten land.

To complete the circle of life, a proud young Indian boy with jet-black hair was seen at the feet of a tribal holy man, learning just what it takes to become a warrior, a protector of the very young and the very old, and an arrowsmith of the highest caliber, working his artistry in that stone of stones ... obsidian.

