

## EL VIEJO ARRIVES

Expectations for an uneventful evening are shattered by a voice from the shadows. “May I join you?”

I jump from the chair, grab my hammer as a weapon, and look into the depths of the forest. I see nothing. I raise the hammer and ask, “Who’s there? Come out so I can see you.”

“Those are appropriate questions. Have no fear because I’m not here to harm you.” His words sag under a thick Spanish accent.

I still can’t see him, although slight movements far back in the bushes indicate his presence. He approaches the campsite, still in the shadows.

He asks, “May I eat some of your fish?”

I hesitate for several seconds and then say, “You’re very welcome to the fish.” I put the hammer on a nearby rock where I can reach it.

A frail old man walks into the fire’s dim light wrapped in a brown blanket. He is stooped over from either pain or age and walks slowly to the fire. He sits on the aluminum chair and crosses his legs. Tight leather moccasins protrude from faded denim pants. The blanket slips off his shoulders; he has

a pink bandana around his neck and wears a yellow sleeveless undershirt with *BE HAPPY* spelled out in bold letters across the front. Long silver hair is tied in a ponytail. But, it's the old man's face that captures most of my attention and interest. His eyes sink far back into a dented skull and a hooked nose hangs down to mouth level. Face wrinkles are set in deep rhombic lines, arranged so neatly that it seems the lines had been cut there. His mouth is caved in and contains few, if any, teeth. I stare at his shoulders; across both shoulders long white scars stand out in stark contrast to his brown skin.

I ask, "You are hungry?"

"Si—yes. I've traveled far."

I pass him the skillet. "Eat all you want. I can catch another fish if it's needed. Be careful though, the skillet is still hot."

"Gracias—thank you." He takes the skillet from me. I hand him six saltine crackers and he nods his head.

The old man pulls the backbone and ribs from the largest fish quarter and begins eating by holding the fish in his hand. He throws the bones into the fire. Meanwhile, his eyes probe mine. I cannot look away and stare into his eyes. The irises are a pale charcoal gray with vertical yellow slices. Black pupils seem bottomless and reflections of the flames leap across their surfaces.

He notices that I'm staring and mutters, "Eyes show the strength of one's soul."

I turn away and look into the fire. Chills finger up my back awakening a dim memory. I had seen those eyes before. But, where had I seen them? I shake my head to clear it.

He finishes eating two fish quarters and returns the skil-

let. I pick up a piece of fish and chew on it, all the while watching the specter as he takes a yellow pipe out of a brown leather purse that hangs from a braided leather belt. The pipe's curved black stem shines like polished ebony. He fills the pipe with tobacco from the purse and lights it with a small burning branch, sucking in the smoke and letting it drift out slowly through distended nostrils.

"Sit down there," he demands, and points to a spot directly across the fire. He hands me the pipe. "Smoke."

I sit on the ground, suck in, and inhale smoke from the old man's pipe. The taste fills my throat with a peculiar sweetness. I hand the pipe back and it leaps to his mouth. His nose hangs down and nearly buries its tip inside the pipe's bowl.

I ask, "Who are you and where do you live?"

"I live in a place far from here."

"Who are you?"

The end of his ponytail is draped over a shoulder. "I have many names."

"What should I call you?"

"You give me a name."

I put another branch on the fire as I ponder his statement. "Okay," I say, "I'll give you a name. You're a very old man and wisdom clothes you like a well-tailored suit. In Mexico and other parts of Latin America wise old men are called 'El Viejo.' May I call you Viejo?"

"I like that name and I've been called that before." He hesitates and whispers, "It was a long time ago."

He hands me the pipe and I fill my lungs. I hand it back over the fire.

I ask, "How did you get here? And why are you here, so

far from any town and the comforts you would find there?”

“I came on the back of a great eagle and am here to talk with you.” The old man scratches his head and flakes of dandruff cascade from his fingertips. His eyes meet mine. “I know you well and have watched you for years as you toiled in Hells Canyon and in the bordering Seven Devils Mountains.”

I shiver from a sudden chill and scoot closer to the fire for warmth. “Why have you done that?”

He sucks on the pipe and watches the smoke curl above the fire ring. “You have a decision to make because your age will not let you work in the canyon and mountains much longer.” He hesitates and then says, “You are an old man.”

My mind jumps from children to spouse to career as I try to figure out what he means. “Decision? What decision?”

“You will make a decision soon about the rest of your life. I don’t know what you’ll decide, but I’m here to help.”

“I’m in a quandary about what you mean, Viejo.”

He puffs several times on the pipe. The sweet aroma of his tobacco mixes with the harsh odor of burning tree branches. I toss several more branches into the flames. Sparks rise and the flames make dark shadows appear among nearby trees and bushes. The full moon is nearly overhead by now and casts its own shadows on the rugged landscape. The rush of water in Granite Creek subsides into a distant rumble and forest stillness descends to enfold us. A branch falls from a nearby tree and my shoulders jerk in surprise. I sit down on the ground.

El Viejo squints across the fire. “When you make the decision you’ll be swimming in a strong current that will carry

you to places you have never dared to dream about. Vaya—go with curiosity and deep gratitude to the Great Spirit.”

He hands the pipe across the fire and I suck in smoke as I ponder his words. I become slightly dizzy. A green branch pops in the fire as it gives up moisture. Noise from the creek’s plunging waters once again fills the narrow canyon and chases away the temporary tranquility. I stand up and give back the pipe. He knocks the bowl against his hand and fills it with fresh tobacco. I put another branch on the fire and lean against a tree trunk where I can see his eyes reflecting the flames.

I stretch and say, “I’ve thought much about what I want to do, but I’m afraid age and health will keep me from putting my thoughts into action. Maybe they’re only dreams. Perhaps, I tell myself, I should spend what little time I have left with the ones I love.” I move from the tree and sit on the ground across the fire from El Viejo. “Anyway, Viejo, I’m afraid to make a decision that will greatly change my life.”

The old man looks into the fire for a long time and I think that he will not speak.

Finally, in very clear English he says, “Your family members can get along well without you. In fact, you’ll become a burden as you age and weaken. Don’t be afraid to follow your dreams, even at your age. People are capable at any time in their lives to follow dreams that inspire them. You have proven that love and responsibility to family need not interfere with your work. You have spent more than forty years pursuing studies of Hells Canyon, the oceans, and island chains that rim the Pacific Ocean. The studies of the rocks and geologic evolution of Hells Canyon and the Seven

Devils Mountains are a large part of your destiny. But, there is another component, an ever-lingering component that has been with you for a long time, and you must heed its call.”

He stops for a few seconds, takes a deep pull on the pipe and lets smoke out slowly through his nostrils and mouth. “You must remember that there is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve.”

“And what is that, Viejo?”

“It is the fear of failure.”

Smoke from his pipe swirls around our heads. He closes his eyes and nods. He leans over as if to fall into the fire, but rights himself at the last moment. He looks at me and grins, his upper two canines the only teeth left in a shrunken jaw. He turns and gazes at the peaks of the Seven Devils Mountains, now bathed in moonlight. Among the peaks small patches of snow, left over from winter, sparkle in frozen brilliance. A slight breeze wakes the fire and sparks leap skyward.

Suddenly, the old man turns toward me. He raises both white eyebrows and his eyes open wide. He smiles and says, “I know these mountains well.”

“How is that possible? I’ve never seen you in these mountains.”

“I was in these mountains long before your time. In fact, I am really a part of them.”

“The Seven Devils?”

“Si—yes, I am part of the Seven Devils Mountains.”

I look at him and ask, “How can that be?”

“Believe me. Soon, you also will believe.”

He gives me the pipe and I puff on it, this time being careful not to inhale. I nod in gratitude as I hand it back

over the flames. He smiles again. Another branch pops in the fire and flames shoot up into the space that separates us. In the distance a coyote calls to its mate. Farther away the mate answers. A slight breeze fans the fire and flames are swept to one side.

“I’m curious, Viejo. You said that you’ve been part of the Seven Devils Mountains since long before my time. Can you tell me how they were named? I’ve heard the Nez Perce story about the Coyote and seven monsters, but I’m really not very satisfied with that explanation.”

The wizened old man picks up a branch and throws it into the fire. Sparks explode. The flames flare up again and shadows play hide and seek behind him. He takes the pipe from his mouth, pounds the ashes into the palm of his hand, stares at the ashes for a few seconds, throws them into the fire and watches closely as they disappear in the flames.

He whispers, “The native people you call Indians named the mountains ‘Tama Sorna,’ which means ‘Seven Spirits.’ The invading white men translated ‘spirits’ into ‘devils’ and that is how the mountains were named.”

“Why did the Indians name the mountains Tama Sorna?”

El Viejo gazes into the fire for more than a minute and then glances at peaks in the Seven Devils Mountains where He Devil and She Devil are now bathed in brilliant moonlight. He answers, “It’s a story about a young boy who went into these mountains to experience a vision that would help him discover his destiny. When the boy returned home he told the village elders about a vision that involved seven spirits and the elders named the mountain range Tama Sorna.”

“Do you remember the story?”

“Si—yes, very well.”

“Please tell it to me.”

The old man yawns and stretches. “It will take much time to tell.”

“I’m not tired.”

El Viejo refills the pipe, gingerly picks up a flaming twig from the fire and lights the tobacco. He sucks smoke way down into his bowels; when he exhales the smoke circles his head and obscures it.

I throw more branches on the fire and then sit on the ground with my back against a large smooth rock.

The smoke clears and El Viejo begins telling the story. “Young Indian boys were forced to go into the wilderness to have a vision that would reveal their destinies and guide them throughout their lives. This story is about a boy who had his vision in what are now the Seven Devils Mountains.”

The voice of this mysterious old man merges with the partly muted sounds of the crackling fire, rushing stream and howling coyotes. I close my eyes part way and focus all of my attention on the magical story that he tells.