

*Excerpt from*  
**THE CRYING FOR A VISION**

Walter Wangerin Jr.

## Chapter 36

### *A Moving Flint*

"*Unchi!*"

It was midnight when *Waskn Mani* saw his tipi again. There was a bright white moon. The baby in his arms had awoken and was crying, drawing pitiful gulps of air and causing a sinew of pain in the youth's shoulder. He kept rolling the shoulder and dropping it in order to find some ease. No good. It merely disturbed the infant the more and she croaked such small woe that her face was swollen.

"*Unchi! Unchi!*"

His grandmother was standing when he entered. She had heard him coming.

"A baby!" she whispered.

"Take her, take her, please—she is hurting me!"

The old woman gave her grandson a single shrewd glance then gathered the tiny life into her arms. "Feed the fire," she said.

He did. It became a good red flame and the tipi grew warmer.

"*Unchi,*" he said, "the village is so sad. There is such sadness in the people. Each person moves like a *wanagi*. Every face belongs to a floating ghost. *Hehlokecha Najin* died today. Here is a baby that I found in front of Fire Thunder's tipi. And do you remember Red Day Woman? She is dead too. Fire Thunder gave her three pairs of moccasins for the ghost road. Fire Thunder did that. I don't understand us any more. It is very bad. It is the black road.

"Oiyaaa!"

The youth had been kneeling beside the fire. Now suddenly he fell backward to the ground and arched his chest and stomach and hips: "*Unchi, unchi,* why do I hurt like this?"

The baby had been quiet a while. But now she was cutting the air with a new wail and her voice had thrown the youth backward as though a bear's paw had swiped at him.

His grandmother knelt down and peered at him with her bright eyes. "*Waskn Mani,* tell me the truth. What are you feeling?"

He shook his head, staring at her. Sweat made his face shiny.

She said, "The baby's crying hurts you?"

He nodded.

She said, "The roaring we heard this morning? And the voices of all the Lakota—they hurt you?"

*Waskn Mani* touched the upper part of his chest, just below the collarbone, his eyes beseeching her.

The wrinkled old woman put her crooked fingers upon that place. "Here?"

He nodded and her face seemed to collapse like an empty bag.

In all his years the youth had seen his grandmother cry but once, when the *itancan* Slow Buffalo, her old friend, died. Not even when his mother had disappeared. Well, if she had cried then it was in secret or else he had forgotten. But now, gazing steadfastly at her grandson, she let tears run into the thousand gulleys other cheeks. Tears washed the lines of long sunlight and old sorrow. But she did not say anything.

The woman arose to her crippled feet and took the baby and washed her, then tucked the tiny one inside her robe against her ancient breasts to warm her. Two sisters, young and old, both of them wrinkled, one hungry but the other having no milk.

So then *Waskn Mani's* grandmother poured the liquid of *wojapi*, some fruit soup, into a bladder which she pricked with a sharp bone. She put the small holes into the baby's mouth and the baby stopped crying. The baby sighed and sucked and cried no more. So *Waskn Mani* was able to relax and let his poor body lie softly on the ground.

Next his grandmother took a very old bundle down from the place where it had hung as long as the boy remembered. She brought it near to him and sat down and untied it. Among a few other things there was a pipe in there with a finger-worn stem of wood and a stone bowl as red as blood and an eagle feather where the wood and stone were joined together.

"*Waskn Mani*," she said, "are you still awake?"

He said, "Yes."

"I want to give you a gift," she said. "It belonged to your grandfather and my husband, Black Elk. It is time that you should own it. It is time for you to use it now."

Suddenly she leaned over and slapped his face. "Wachin ksapa yo!" she said. Her bright eyes were very fierce, like the spotted eagle's eyes. "Be attentive, my grandson. Listen to me. I know why there is a pain in you. I have felt the same pain, but I was foolish and selfish and did not know what to do with it. Well, concerning the cangleshka wakan, the sacred hoop of the whole world, it is important that you know what to do with it."

***Waskn Mani's* Grandmother Tells This Story:**

My story starts long before you, my *takoja*, were born.

I lived with Black Elk as my husband for ten years. Ten good years. People envied me. I liked to be envied. I was not a shy woman when I was young. No, but I stood up straight and proud and most especially proud of that man, my husband, Black Elk.

Well, he had a virtue which made all the Lakota love him. Not wisdom, although he was wise; but a wise man is revered, not loved. Nor skill in killing buffalos, though Black Elk could do that too; but the hunter is admired, not loved.

Listen, *Waskn Mani*: your grandfather knew how to laugh. *Hau!* Black Elk laughed a good booming laugh. He could not help it. And whenever his big laugh went out over the plains, everyone who heard it laughed along with him. Then everyone felt good and healthy and happy too.

In those days people did not think of Slow Buffalo as the next *itancan*. It was expected that Black Elk would take over that position. But we were all young then. We were all friends and we were happy together. Slow Buffalo would mumble some joke and Black Elk would throw back his huge head and laugh like the thunder—not in scorn, no, never in scorn, always in delight because he was truly at peace with all things and he loved to laugh. His laughter banished fear.

So then that was his gift to the people, noisy friendship and loud confidence.

We had ten good years together. And then he died.

This is what happened.

One night Black Elk suddenly sat up on his pallet. No light. No sound. He was like a shadow but the motion woke me.

"What?" I whispered.

"Crows," he said. "They're stealing the ponies."

Right away he got up and slipped outside naked. I followed. He was right. Two Crow warriors were creeping inside the corral, unhobbling our ponies and getting ready to stampede them all at once. The guard lay bleeding by the gate, unconscious.

Black Elk glanced once around himself and then he made a decision. He jumped up and started to wave his hands, yelling "Hoka! Hey!" as if he had weapons and was planning to attack.

But he had no weapons!

I was so afraid for him, but I made the tremolo of encouragement.

The two Crows whirled around and each one leaped on a pony bareback and started to ride straight for Black Elk, the first one with a war club, the second one pulling an arrow from his quiver.

He didn't run away. He kept yelling "Hoka! Hey!" and I kept making the tremolos loud as I could, but I was afraid. I thought I was already looking at his death.

Well, but just as the first rider charged him Black Elk sprang straight up in the air and threw his body crossways against the Crow's chest and they both came down behind the galloping pony—Black Elk on top! I felt so happy! Black Elk had his forearm over that man's throat, choking him.

But as soon as the second rider passed them by he wheeled his pony round and notched an arrow and drew it back to his ear and then shot Black Elk in the

back. That arrow went in very deep. I saw it seem to go in slowly, as if in a dream. Black Elk was bending forward. The arrow pierced his lower back and thrust upward inside his ribs until just the feathers were sticking out, low and evil.

Black Elk stood up and stumbled sideways.

I started to scream.

The Crow warrior that Black Elk had been choking—he got up now. He went for his war club. But I was so mad that I ran for it too and I got there first. I picked it up. When the Crow jumped at me I swung my club with all my might. He put his arm up. I broke it. The bones popped out. I was screaming. I swung again and hit the warrior between his eyes. He went down. But I was so mad for what they did to Black Elk that I kept hitting him and hitting him. Soon he was bloody all over. He was not moving any more, but I could not stop hitting him. I was crazy, screaming at the top of my lungs, hitting a dead man.

Then someone grabbed me from behind and wrapped his arms around my whole body and lifted me from the ground. Well, there was only one person who could have stopped me. I smelled the smell of Black Elk. It was Black Elk, whispering in my ear, "Hush, hush, hush," over and over again. He wasn't dead after all.

I turned around and held him, and of course he was laughing low and softly. His laughing made me cry. I could not say how glad I was then. So he laughed and I cried.

But the arrow was still inside of him.

I lit an oil lamp in the tipi. He lay on the bedding on his stomach and I sat on the back of his legs to pull the arrow out, but I couldn't. It would not come backwards.

Black Elk said to push it through, but that would not work either because the point had stuck in a bone below his left shoulder. It went up inside of him like a second backbone.

He told me to twist it, then, and pull at the same time.

I did. There was a loud *Crack!* sound and then the arrow slid out easily. But when I looked I saw that at the end of the shaft were loose rawhide strips. No flint. The flint had stayed in him.

It was still stuck in the bone beneath his shoulder.

Black Elk saw this too. We both saw it and were silent. I bandaged the low wound by sticking a little sage to the blood. He put some *kinnickinnick* in his pipe and smoked for a while and then turned over and went to sleep. That night I did not sleep. I wondered about the flint inside of him: what did that mean?

In the morning he woke and said, "*Hihani washtay*," to me. He said, "Good morning," as if nothing had happened last night. I kept quiet, but I was still wondering about the flint.

Well, but those were good years. Ten good years. They were the red and blue days for me.

We had a baby together. A girl.

She was so beautiful! Black Elk boomed with laughter every time he looked at her and all the people rejoiced because of the sound of his wonderful laughing. His daughter was just like him. Even when she was tiny she would grin and giggle with no teeth. She would giggle fast and hard as if she were trying to catch up to her father for laughter, as if it were a contest. Well, so he named her according to the little sound of her giggling. He said she sounded like the tiny tinkling of ice on a frozen lake: *Wsu Sna Win*, then. He called her Rattling Hail Woman.

It was in these days that the people of our band began to say that Black Elk should be the next *itancan*. Even Slow Buffalo said the same. And I truly believe that if it had come to pass there would have been no jealousy in anyone just because there was no guile in Black Elk. Only kindness. And love. And great laughter in that huge chest of his.

Then one day he went out and caught a certain wild pony that he had been trying to catch for a long time. He was a beautiful black stallion with white dapples and a mane like dark fire. Perhaps if it had been some other pony Black Elk would have stopped trying to break him after three throws. But he did not stop. Four times that stallion threw Black Elk down to the ground. Five times. Six.

In the end the pony was broken.

So was the man.

All night long I heard something like cracking twigs in Black Elk's breathing. In the morning I saw that blood had come up. It was crusty brown around his lips. It was red between his teeth.

He looked over at me and cleared his throat several times and spat to the side. Then he lifted his hand and laid a finger against his chest on the high left side. He tapped that place, saying nothing. He didn't have to say anything. I knew already: the flint had broken free. The flint was moving inside of him, cutting something when it moved. The crackling sound in his breathing was blood.

No, he didn't have to say anything. I knew of his pain because I, too, *Waskn Mani*—I felt exactly the same pain in my chest in exactly the same place. Exactly! In him it was a flint which the enemy had put there. In me it was love. The love in me was as sharp as that Crow flint and just as real. *Wachin ksapajo!*

Well, Black Elk had to be very careful now. He could not ride the stallion he had just broken—not hard, and hard was the only way that stallion could run. So, not at all! He gave the pony away.

And though Black Elk was a good hunter he should not hunt buffalos any more either. That motion drove the flint and made it travel through the soft parts of his lungs, sending up new blood.

He should not fight. He should not run, no races, no games, no dancing, no sudden moving of his body.

And most especially Black Elk should not laugh. No, no, the laughing shook his lungs and the flint cut deeper. No. If he laughed in the night, well, the next morning he would tap his chest and I would see that the tapping had always come

a little closer to his heart-but I knew that already because the pain in me was also closer to my heart, a sharp pain, a piercing pain in my chest, though the only stone in me was love. But love can kill, *Waskn Mani*, and that is what I am telling you.

One morning after he had laughed, when his mouth again was rounded by new blood, I said, "Now you must promise that you will not laugh any more. It is killing you. Black Elk. It is killing me with you. But we have a child now. For her sake you must never laugh again."

I argued very hard that morning. I would not let him go.

Finally he said, "I promise."

I said, "I am a witness. I will remember."

He said, "*Hau*. Yes. I know."

And so he was a solemn man after that and I was sorry for it but I was not wrong and I did not apologize.

He did not bleed again in that whole year.

Neither did I hurt. We were alive together.

But then it was your mother, *Waskn Mani*. It was *Wsu Sna Win*. And she never knew. This is the part of the story that I never told her but I am telling you.

No one could ever convince the girl that she was not a warrior, the best fighter among the Lakota. At five years old she had made weapons for herself. At five she thought she was a hunter.

So one day I saw her creeping through the underbrush crouched forward, tip-toe, tip-toe. She had painted the jagged yellow lines down her legs and a fierce red color on her face. She carried a little bow with arrows, a little buffalo-horn knife, and a whole dead mouse was hanging beside her ear.

Tiptoe, tiptoe: right behind her came a dog, his ears twisting, trying to understand what the girl was doing. She didn't know he was there. She took a step, he took a step. She stopped, he stopped.

Then all at once that dog got happy as if he understood the game and he grinned and pushed his nose in the girl's butt.

*Boom!*

The child exploded in fright. She jumped straight up. The bow and the knife went flying. The whole dead mouse flew backward at the dog. The dog yelped and ran one way; the girl screamed and ran the other way; and then I heard Black Elk laughing.

Black Elk had been watching too!

He couldn't help it. After a year he was laughing again and he was not stopping. "Girl, you are Lakota!" he roared. "You look for the enemy in front. He comes behind and you run. But he's only a dog! Ah, ha ha, ha ha!"

I shouted, "Stop it!" But he didn't hear me.

He grabbed his stomach and boomed with laughter. He thundered laughter.

"Stop it!" I screamed. "Black Elk stop it! You promised! Stop it!"

The tears ran from his eyes. He went down on his knees. He was not even trying to stop! I was so mad that I ran at him. I began to beat him. I hit him with my two fists. He was shaking with laughter. Didn't he know what he was doing to us? What was the matter with him? I hit him and hit him. I could feel the flint cutting me—*cutting through me because I loved him!* I didn't want either one of us to die! I was screaming, "Stop! Stop! You stubborn selfish man, stop laughing!"

And then for one moment I thought he was obeying me.

He drew a deep breath and fell silent. He put his hand up to my arm and pulled me down. I stopped hitting him. I bent over him. He was looking up into my eyes and reaching with his right hand across his breast—and suddenly something like a spasm grabbed his body and the blood burst from his mouth in a stream, but he didn't look surprised. He was gazing at me and tapping his chest.

I took his head against my breast. I was not mad any more. I was so scared. I was sorry that I had been mad. I rocked his head against myself. I rocked him back and forth. But the blood was running out of his mouth now and there was no way to stop it. He took my hand and put it on his heart. That's where the flint was. I knew. I knew. I knew where the flint was. It was in my heart too. It was killing me too.

I leaned down and kissed his bloody lips. I kissed the blood that came from his heart and my heart too. I kissed Black Elk and he crinkled his eyes and his stomach moved as if he were laughing low and slow, but only pink bubbles came up and foamed at his mouth and then his face went slack and his eyes closed and he died.

We died.

We both died, *Waskn Mani*. This is the truth. The flint in him, the love in me, cut my heart the same as his and we died together but my death did him no good.

*Wachin ksapa yo!*

*Waskn Mani*, listen to me: my death did not do any good for anyone. No one took benefit from my dying because I did not give it away! I fought it! I fought dying all the way to the end, and then I was only merely dead.

Our daughter, your mother, *Wsu Sna Win*—she laughed alone after that. I never laughed with her. She was happy and the people loved her just as they had loved Black Elk but I could not share in happiness. I was dead. She was lonely, truly. No one took the benefit, do you bear me?

And Slow Buffalo, my dear friend, waited a decent period of time and then offered to marry me. He asked me to marry him because he loved me. But I was dead. I loved no one. We stayed friends even unto the end, but neither did he ever marry. No one took the benefit of my dying. It was not a sacrifice. I did not give it away. Do you understand?

*Waskn Mani*, the wrinkles in my face began on that very day. I am a badlands on account of dying with Black Elk. I did not know that there might have been a choice. So I fought dying, his dying and my dying. I only hated it.

But you have a choice, boy. *Waskn Mani*, you are the same as I was before my dying. The pain in you is your love for the people. It is like the flint in Black Elk. In them it is starvation, a craving for company and food, all the four-leggeds and life again. Oiyaaa, it is a killing ache. In you it is love. It is a killing love.

But you, *Waskn Mani*, if you choose the death that is at the end of the loving before it kills the people, if you choose a willing sacrifice, if one person should die in the place of the people—well, then they all might have the benefit. The people might live. Love always suffers the same as the beloved. It is not a question, *koshkalaka*, whether true love suffers. To the extent that it is true, it truly suffers. The only question is whether it might do a little good before both of them die. One might make a gift of his life for them he loves.

Pray, grandson.

*Waskn Mani*, pray.

Take the pipe of your grandfather, Black Elk. Go to a sacred place and pray to *Wakan Tanka* for a vision that can save the people. If someone does not heal the hoop of the world, everyone will die. Go, *hokshicantkye*. Go, boy of my heart. Go and do what your selfish *Unchi* did not do. Pray.

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