

## Black Elk Pukes

FROM THE other world of living light that was everywhere, the Lakota holy man carried his people's dream to the tallest mesa in the world, Detroit's Renaissance Center, a sky-scraping cylindrical rosette of four 39 story towers surrounding a central 73 story hotel capped by a restaurant. Pleased that the towers were round like a hoop, he craned his neck and squinted to see the top of the world. The glass-covered sides dazzled his vision.

"How do I reach the summit?" he asked a passerby.

The Detroiter recognized a non-native when she saw one. "I'll show you," she said. "It's a first-class restaurant." She walked him through the pedestrian bustle and into the massive structure, past concrete balconies bedecked with greenery, through a terraced, multi-floor atrium, to the heart of the Ren Cen.

"Welcome to The Westin Hotel Renaissance Center Detroit," smiled a concierge. "May I help you?"

"He'd like to see The Summit," said the native.

"Visiting, are we?" said the concierge, smoothing the lapels of his smart Westin jacket. "Certainly. The Summit. A fine choice." They guided him to a glass elevator that whisked him to the top of the Ren Cen very much like the swift cloud that had brought him through time to Detroit in 1980. The elevator doors slid open and he stepped out.

"Welcome to The Summit," a hostess greeted him. "Do you have a reservation?"

The holy man nodded respectfully. “Yes, but much time has passed. I do not know if my people kept it.”

“Well, hopefully they’ll show up soon. We don’t have a party waiting for anyone, but you’re welcome to wait in the lounge until they arrive. It’s on the observation floor. Can I take your name?”

“Nicholas Black Elk.”

“I’ll just use your first name, if you don’t mind.” The hostess smiled sweetly, patted him on his forearm, and escorted him to the lounge.

There, the entire observation floor of The Summit slowly revolved to provide a view in all directions of the compass, the whole circle of the day. On a clear day, you could see for thirty miles, the entire hoop of the world, up and down the Detroit River and across the river to Grandmother’s Land.

But rarely was a day clear. The summer sky was a nasty bruise on the horizons, yellowed by smog and smoldering. Inland there were countless buildings, square boxes of many sizes with vehicles moving between them in all directions. Nowhere could be seen open areas or horses. Black Elk felt unwell, shivering, his legs full of ants, his eyes half closed.

“Are you okay?” asked a waitress. “Let me get you a cup of coffee.”

Black Elk drank the black medicine and felt the rejuvenating power of the west. He summoned the lessons of his youth. *The Grandfathers have placed in this world many things, he recalled, all of which should be happy. Every little thing is sent for something, and in that thing there should be happiness and the power to make happy. Like the grasses showing*

*tender faces to each other, thus we should do, for this was the wish of the Grandfathers of the World.\** What had become of those happy things the Grandfathers had placed in the world? He remembered the grasses and the wind and the power of his horse's legs, and he sang softly:

*A horse nation all over the universe,*

*Neighing, they come!*

*Prancing, they come!*

*May you behold them.\**

"What?" asked the waitress.

"I'm remembering the power of horses," Black Elk said.

"You're in the right city for that," quipped the waitress. "This place was built on horse power. The Mustang. I saw Henry Ford the Second one night right here on this dance floor, gettin' down with his new mistress. Robbin' the cradle with that one, he was!"

Black Elk lifted his face to her. "This is a dance floor?"

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On the dance floor of the lounge of The Summit restaurant at the top of Detroit's Renaissance Center in the summer of 1980, alone without his people and not knowing if they had kept their reservation, Black Elk danced a Vision. He hoped his people would "walk the red road in a sacred manner pleasing to the Powers of the Universe that are One Power. . . . [He] believed that [his] vision was coming true at last, and great happiness overcame [him]." \* He danced fervently.

The waitress and the bartender watched, fascinated, ignorant of his vision and the power it could give. “[They] seemed heavy, heavy and dark; and they could not know that they were heavy and dark. So heavy that it seemed they could not be lifted; so dark that they could not be made to see any more.” They were traveling the black road of trouble and hardship, everybody for themselves and with rules of their own.\*

Entranced, Black Elk saw the entire nation. People lived in the small square boxes; the nation no longer had any center. He saw a thick mass of colorful butterflies, their wings making a sound like whimpering as if they were weeping. From the west came thunder beings in a dark storm streaked with fire. The blackness shouted and dust rose; the dust was the swarm of butterflies, and out of the dust dog heads rose.\* The dogs became people that were not people, and they rose clothed in unimaginable wealth and disappeared out of sight above the Renaissance Center.

Spectators in the lounge gathered around Black Elk as he danced. Some stared and some laughed, but Black Elk, deep in the Spirit World, didn’t see them. Instead he saw darkness. He saw people lose jobs and pensions and sink to the earth. They did not have good food. Hunger was among them. They grew sick and did not have medicine, and Black Elk too was sickened.

Nauseous and feverish now, wet but still dancing, he saw the rot and stench of poverty, social insecurity, and a future of social meania [sic]. He saw grandfathers of grandfathers, grandmothers of grandmothers, and generations of grandchildren, poor and hungry. He saw faces grow thin and sharp, for some were starving. The nation’s hoop was broken.

And then Black Elk saw the thunder beings leave and the frost come. In that cold time, the sky filled with lies more numerous than the stars, and they blotted out the western sun. There were many lies, but people could not eat them. He saw people label truth as lies, and he saw the lies dishonor the Grandfathers and Grandmothers. He saw people lie to themselves and so deceive themselves. Many knew that the lies were lies and many did not know, but the result was the same. Lies slaughtered the truth and trust, and then the people slaughtered the Great Fathers and Mothers and finally they slaughtered themselves. They had followed the black road and stained it red with blood. They killed first for the lies, and then they killed and killed because they wanted to kill. The nation was dying. People did not believe that the nation could die, but it was dying, butchered by falsehood and violence.

Alone and powerless without his people, Black Elk felt weighed down with pity for the despairing and dying multitudes of this future. "And [he saw] that something else died . . . . A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream." \*

Black Elk collapsed, heaving.

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"Why did you let him dance?" the bartender asked.

"I didn't 'let' him," said the waitress. "I mentioned 'dance floor' and he got a look on his face and he started dancing, like he was on drugs or something. I sure hope he doesn't sue."

"Sioux?" Black Elk said from the floor. His voice was weak, his eyes closed.

And so it was over. The bartender helped Black Elk to a chair and the waitress cleaned up the vomit. Black Elk, drenched with sweat and saddened beyond words, looked to the horizons, that spectacular panorama slowly rotating around him, its smog yellow with a warmth he could not feel, a harbinger of a greater and inconvenient truth, a truth denied but no less a truth.

The bartender escorted Black Elk into the elevator and offered to call for medical assistance, but Black Elk declined. He was free at last, free at last, the end of his dream as well as his people's. The elevator doors closed and the bottom dropped out from under him. No one saw him leave the Renaissance Center.

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*\* Black Elk Speaks as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow).*