

"The Bitterroot"

It was the time just after winter in the valley in the mountains. There was no food and the people were starving. The fish had not yet returned to the streams and the game animals had moved far away into the mountains. The men had gone out to seek game and they had been gone a long time. It was not yet time for berries to ripen, and the women had gathered what plants they could find that could be eaten, but the ones that were left from the winter were tough and stringy.

In one of the lodges, an old woman was grieving because there was no food for her grandchildren. She could not longer bear to look at their thin, sad faces and she went out before sunrise, to sing her death song beside the little stream which ran through the valley.

"I am old," she sang, "but my grandchildren are young. It is a hard time that has come, when children must die with their grandmothers."

As she knelt by the stream, singing and weeping, the Sun came over the mountains. It heard her death song and it spoke to that old woman's spirit helper.

"My daughter is crying for her children who are starving," Sun said. "Go now and help her and her people. Give them food."

Then the spirit helper took the form of a redbird and flew down into the valley. It perched on a limb above the old woman's head and began to sing. When she lifted her eyes to look at it, the bird spoke to her.

"My friend," the redbird said, "your tears have gone into Earth. They have formed a new plant there, one which will help you and your people to live. See it come now from Earth, its leaves close to the ground. When its blossoms form, they will have the red color of my wings and the white of your hair."

The old woman looked and it was as the bird said. All around her, in the moist soil, the leaves of the new plant had lifted from Earth. As the sun touched it, a red blossom began to open.

"How can we use this plant?" said the old woman.

"You will dig this plant up by the roots with a digging stick," the redbird said. "Its taste will be bitter, like your tears, but it will be a food to help the people live. Each year it will always come at this time when no other food can be found."

And so it has been to this day. That stream where the old woman wept is called Little Bitterroot after that plant, which still comes each year after the snows have left the land. Its flowers, which come only when touched by the sun, are as red as the wings of a red spirit bird and as silver as the hair of an old woman. And its taste is still bitter as the tears of that old woman whose death song turned into a song of survival.

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