

## **The legend of the Indian paintbrush, as retold by Tomie dePaola**

Many years ago, when the People travelled the Plains, and lived in a circle of teepees, there was a boy who was smaller than the rest of the children in the tribe. No matter how hard he tried, he could not keep up with the other boys who were running, riding, shooting their arrows, and wrestling to prove their strength. Sometimes his mother and father worried for him.

But the boy, who was called little Gopher, was not without a gift of his own. From an early age he made toy warriors from scraps of leather and pieces of wood and he loved to decorate smooth stones with the juices of berries he found in the hills. The wise shaman of the tribe understood that Little Gopher had a gift that was special.

“Do not struggle, Little Gopher. Your path will not be the same as the others. They will grow up to be warriors. Your place among the People will be remembered for a different reason.”

And in a few years when Little Gopher was older, he went out to the hills alone to think about becoming a man, for this was the custom of the tribe. And it was here that a Dream Vision came to him.

The sky filled with clouds and out of them came a young Indian maiden and a grandfather. She carried a rolled-up animal skin and he carried a brush made of fine animal hairs and pots of paint.

The grandfather spoke. “My son, these are the tools by which you shall become great among your People. You will paint pictures of the deeds of the warriors and the visions of the shaman, and the People shall see them and remember them forever.”

The maiden unrolled a pure white buckskin and placed it on the ground. “Find a buckskin as white as this,” she told him. “Keep it, and one day you will paint a picture that is as pure as the colours in the evening sky.”

And as she finished speaking, the clouds cleared and a sunset of great beauty filled the sky. Little Gopher looked at the white buckskin and on it he saw colours as bright and as beautiful as the setting sun.

Then the sun slowly sank behind the hills, it grew dark and the Dream Vision was over. Little Gopher returned to the circle of the People.

The next day he began to make soft brushes from the hairs of different animals and stiff brushes from the horses' tails. He gathered berries and flowers and rocks of different colours and crushed them to make his paints.

He collected the skins of animals, which the warriors brought home from their hunts. He stretched the skin on wooden frames and pulled them until they were tight.

And he began to paint pictures.

Of great deeds.

Of Great Dream Visions... So that the People will always remember.

But even as he painted, Little Gopher sometimes longed to put aside his brushes and ride out with the warriors. But always he remembered his Dream Vision and he did not go with them.

Many months ago, he had found his pure white buckskin, but it remained empty, because he could not find the colours of the sunset. He used the brightest flowers and the reddest berries and the deepest purple from the rocks, but still his paintings never satisfied him. They looked dull and dark.

He began to go to the top of the hill every evening to look at the colours which filled the sky to try to understand how to make them. He longed to share the beauty of his Dream Vision with the People.

But he never gave up trying, and every morning when he awoke he took out his brushes and his pots of paints and created the stories of the People with the tools he had.

One night as he lay awake, he heard a voice calling to him. "Because you have been faithful to the People and true to your gift, you shall find the colours you are seeking. Tomorrow go to the place where you watch the sun in the evening. There on the ground you will find what you need."

That evening as the sun began to go down, he put aside his brushes and went to the top of the hill as the colours of the sunset spread across the sky.

And there on the ground all around him were brushes filled with paint, each one a colour of the sunset. Little Gopher began to paint, quickly and surely, using one brush, then another.

And as the colours in the sky began to fade, Little Gopher gazed at the buckskin and he was happy. He had found the colours of the sunset. He carried his painting down to the circle of the People, leaving the brushes on the hillside.

And the next day when the People awoke, the hill was ablaze with colour, for the brushes had taken root in the earth and multiplied into plants of brilliant reds, oranges and yellows.

And every spring from that time on the hills and meadows burst into bloom.

And every spring the People danced and sang the praises of Little Gopher who had painted for the People.

And the People did not call him Little Gopher anymore, but He-who-Brought-the-Sunset-to-the-Earth.