

CHAPTER 54

COLD WATER SPIRIT

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*Stories are sacred and real,
and the storyteller is a consecrated person.*
from *Breath of Whales*, Circle film.

In the early New Mexico morning, before the yellow light of dawn, the wind sweeps gently through the high mesa flats. I was little, and I remember waking up hearing the battered corrugated tin shade catch in the wind. It was loosely tied with wires to long wooden poles above the doorway of the little stone and mud house that was my grampa's sheep camp.

My bare feet touched the cool dirt floor as I rushed to dress and be out into the new morning before he would call, "Get up! Wash with cold water; it'll make you tough and handsome, like me." In that early Pueblo Indian childhood on the reservation the word was still sacred to me. I grew up in that world of tending sheep and seeing the land, discovering that life for our people continues in the telling of stories, that language is a gift of God, and when a story is told we are given a way to learn and to live.

A child wakes up believing in the world he finds himself in; and for a long time I believed everyone had stories to guide them, like I did. Forty years later I now see much is lost or being forgotten about the telling of stories. We are now living in a time when the storyteller is no longer a human being disciplined by life but can be anyone with a facility for language, anyone who can turn words cleverly for their own ends, never fearing that such willful action is wrong, or that thoughtless words obstruct the life vision. Where I grew up, the storyteller was still a consecrated person.

My grampa, in his stern reprimands, the harshness removed by the mischievous twinkle in his clear eye, understood the commands he gave me and applied that knowledge strictly: "Get up! You gonna rot in that bed all day? Get up; run to the river; wash with the cold water; you wanna stay young, like me." I always saw him wash with cold water, and catching me looking he'd say, "The girls can't stay away from me because I'm so young looking!" Grampa knew life was full, never dull, and always new with unexpected surprises. For him life was real. It had dimension and depth and was to be taken seriously to be enjoyed. A man had to be tough; he knew this, and he wanted me to know it also.

His use of language crossed back and forth between our own Keres tongue and the broken English he used for emphasis and added understanding. "Keep your eyes peel it," he'd tell me, softly waving his firm, dark, and weathered hand in front of his face indicating some imagined far horizon or space I was to see. Over and over I heard him tell me, "Keep your eyes peel it." I knew he meant "keep your eyes peeled," stay watchful, be alert. Or so my mind told me, until one day, as I trailed along behind him trying to match his stride by stepping into the prints he made in the soft earth, he stopped abruptly, and in Keres asked me, "Are you tracking me, stepping in my footsteps?" I nodded, yes. We sat down, right there in the sand, and he gestured with his mouth, puckering his lips to point the way we had just come. "See the tracks; it's clear that's the way we got here, to this place, this spot. Stand up. What'dya see ahead, toward the way we're going?" I looked off toward the distance. "No tracks," I said. He responded, "That's right, until we walk that way there are no tracks. And when we go that way we must leave our own trail. You make your tracks, and I make mine." Then in English he added, "Keep your eyes peel it."

He rose from the ground, and his eyes scanned the whole space before us and I saw from the way his eyes moved that his vision took in the entire land and the distance to the far horizon. His words confirmed what I glimpsed in that look, "We follow in the footsteps of the men of old, all those grampas gone on before us. Their paths are here, but we keep our eyes off the ground, to watch ahead and all around us, to seek what they were looking for." In my heart a voice said, "What were they looking for?" The question was caught in the next beat as grampa reminded me, "Keep your eyes peel it," and he began making his tracks across the land once more.

Grampa wasn't the only one to teach me to accept without question the words of elders. During the winter months when he stayed at sheep camp alone, and I was at home in the village going to school, there were nights I will never forget. Looking back on them, I see how important they were in learning to listen carefully.

In the long winter, the people celebrate and come together to hear the songs and see the dances that tell the drama of our lives. There was a special house near the center of the village. It was a large house with a long wide room. All the people would gather at this old house.

When it was dark and after we had eaten our meal, we would put on our coats and caps, and dressed warmly, leave our home, stepping into the brisk wintery night to walk along the pathway through the village to the special house.

My shoes crunching the fine new powder snow made it squeak. The air didn't

feel cold, yet tiny flakes swirled about my face. I imagine I could have reached up and pocketed a fist full of stars, they were so close overhead in the night's frozen sky. When we reached the house, people were already there, patiently waiting.

Waiting doesn't come naturally to little boys. In the long clean room, children shuffle restlessly, squirming in their seats. Mothers whisper back and forth visiting with sisters, aunts, and other relations. An older man nods off in seeming sleep, propped against the wall in the back. On the long bench where he droops, two men carry on a steady conversation, first one speaking then the other, each of them punctuating the telling with loud confirmations or acknowledgments. Their voices are the loudest sound in the room. Catching my restlessness, my grandmother motions me to sit beside her, and even better, up on her lap. Quietly, her breath tingling and warming the smooth surface of my ear, she reminds me about patience, with a story. In her voice, time slips away, reaching like a steady hand to pull me effortlessly through the long night.

"Ponci wanted to dance. The grown-ups only laughed, saying he was just a funny little boy. All day long in secret he made up songs, and when no one was around he would dance and sing. Day by day songs grew inside him and stayed in his imagination. Then something wonderful happened that helped Ponci discover the extraordinary.

"His uncle Dan, a man with many songs, and who was always singing, came to visit. Ponci liked Uncle Dan's singing and all the stories he would tell. He could sit on his uncle's lap and bounce to the rhythm of a song or listen quietly for hours as his stories were told."

"There's a lizard who lives where it is very dry and dusty. It's so hot where he lives that the sun has scorched two gray dirt lines down his green back. This lizard always has its eyes open hoping to see a cloud so he can run to it and lie cool in its shadow. That's why you see Lizard always hurrying over the parched earth, running here and there. He's seen and found many places where the clouds gather," Uncle Dan, explained. With brightly shining eyes, Ponci held his breath as Uncle Dan went on. "When you see him lift his chest up and down and see his throat moving, he's singing, calling clouds."

"But lizards don't make any sound!" Ponci burst forth wide-eyed. "Oh, sure they do," Uncle Dan tells him. "A true-hearted person who wants to hear will be able to hear. The Lizard People make beautiful songs, and they're good dancers. You've got to be careful though; never tease Lizard; he's a powerful person."

"The next day, Ponci was awake and up without being called. He ate his blue corn atole, never touched his eggs, and before his mother could question his rushing about, he was out of the house running toward the dry, flat lowland.

"In that stretch of long horizons, underneath the spiny, thin branches of a spindly tumbleweed, lay Lizard, watching the running boy approach. His out-stretched body had sensed the boy's footfalls, and he'd seen him pass back and forth several times already. Lizard smiled at the boy's seriousness.

"Ponci, disappointed at not finding Lizard as easily as he thought he should have, was turning to go when out of the dust Lizard presented himself. Lizard moved up and down in the pulsing motion Uncle Dan had described, and his

throat moved. The boy's whole being concentrated on the lizard before him. He stood still, trying to hear any faint whisperings of what might be a song. He stood like this for a long time. Finally, Lizard sighed; Ponci moved closer. Doubts crept into his thoughts about the truth of Uncle Dan's story. Laughter suddenly burst forth from the lizard on the ground with such force it caused Ponci to jump back. Lizard lay rolling in mighty shakes of laughter, his skinny belly rumbling. At last he quieted down enough to ask in a strangely melodious and resonant voice, 'So you want to dance?' The question set Lizard, twitching and convulsing, into hysterics once more. Gaining control, he wiped tears from his eyes as he spoke again. 'It's funny to me, a small fellow like you, wanting to dance so much that you would come looking for me. No one's been to see me or to ask for songs for so long. I don't know if I can even remember any. You see, this ground is so dry even tumbleweeds are few and small.' He slumped forward sadly, 'I don't know if I can help you.'

"All this time the boy stood frozen, eyes wide open, amazed and afraid of what he saw happening before him. Lizard cocked his head out of the dust, 'You were looking for me, weren't you?' Ponci nodded yes, then stammered, 'But, but I didn't know I'd really find you.'

"'Well you found me,' Lizard groaned. 'It might be very hard for both of us seeing how small you are and how old I've gotten.' His eyes blinked. 'Let's hear you sing.' Never having sung for anyone before, Ponci became unsure of himself, and as he started, his voice cracked so he stopped. Lizard smiled, gently reminding him, 'Anyone can be born with a beautiful voice. Look at Mockingbird. He makes some of the most beautiful sounds, but not a single song is his own.' Reassured, the boy started again, this time with one of his own songs. The range of his young voice was delicate and varied. His song ended in a high pitch only possible in youthful freedom. Hearing the song inspired Lizard and encouraged him for the task at hand. He didn't say anything about the song or the singing. He didn't have to, for in answer, a tiny white speck of cloud appeared over the top of the distant blue, west mountain. They saw it at the same time.

"'Quickly!' Lizard commanded. 'Take off your shoes and shirt!' Ponci did as he was told, and at once Lizard ran up the boy's legs, up one side of his back and down the other, leaving two grey dust marks identical to his own. Then he ran back and forth in front of him telling him to do the same and to follow wherever he might run.

"They ran south. After many minutes, Lizard began to sing. That's like my song,' thought Ponci, as they continued south while the song lasted. At the end of Lizard's song, Ponci sang one of his own. They turned north. Singing toward the north, they ran and ran. Although Ponci's legs were tiring, and he felt himself gasping for air, he ran and kept on singing, following the dusty little lizard.

"Beneath the desert stillness, out of the parched dirt, a low humming began to rise. Slowly at first, then the unflinching souging of their voices came together with a sound, becoming one sound emerging from the earth, a singular pulse beating with everything and everybody...then, as far as he could see, everything was dancing and everything was singing. The sound went forth, on and on.

“As Ponci sang, he felt a shadow move over his face. Drops of the first cooling rain splashed his skin. He opened his eyes to glance down onto the ground before him. Lizard was gone. Instead, looming out of the west, a huge dark cloud built skyward. Little spurts of dust rose in puffs as the rain began to fall. Ponci looked back toward the village and saw rain pouring in slanting silver sheets onto the thirsty fields in the distance. Their song had been answered. In his weariness, his feet continued to lift as he trotted toward home in the gentle wash of sweet rain.”

The breathing in my ear stopped, and slowly the room came back into focus with my nose smelling the moist earth. There's a man with a large watering can sprinkling the dirt floor to settle the dust. He has just finished, and the people in a shuffling of feet settle back again to wait, when a quickened keening brings all of us together at once. The door opens, and from somewhere in the darkness comes the unmistakable sound of metal bells. The deer, eagle, and butterfly dancers are coming. The drums are beating. The singing men's voices can be heard. The people's patience will again be rewarded, and life will be remembered, in the dance, in the song, in the story.