

# The Storyteller's Bracelet



Smoky Zeidel

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by Smoky Zeidel

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## **Dedication**

*For Scott, who will never give up on me.*

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## Prologue

*Here are the creation stories, the stories our people have passed on from generation to generation, from storyteller to storyteller. I, Sun Song, now pass them on to you:*

*In the beginning the people emerged into a world of water. Water was everywhere; there was no dry land. The people thrashed about in the water, begging the gods for mercy, when suddenly a giant turtle appeared. The people climbed on the back of the turtle, and they remained on the back of Turtle Island until the earth dried out and they were able to crawl off the turtle's back and onto the newly formed dry land. The people built hogans, built pueblos. They planted the sacred corn, beans, and squash, and all was well.*

*Other people, other tribes, tell a different story, where the Original People were created by Spider Woman. Both man and woman She created, in the four colors of the medicine wheel, red, black, yellow, and white. A different language was given to each color, and the people scattered to the four corners of the earth, each color to its own direction. The Original People were happy and multiplied, covering the earth.*

*Other stories are told by other tribes. The white people say God created the heavens and the earth in seven days, and that woman came from man, not man from woman. The world was given to these people, the Others, to do with as they would. They tore tribal peoples asunder and forced them onto smaller and smaller patches of wasteland. They tried to force us to accept their god as the only god, to abandon Turtle Island, to abandon Spider Woman.*

*But as long as the Tribe—and our sister and brother tribes from across the nation—had storytellers, we did not forget from whence we came.*

*I, Sun Song, am a storyteller. I pass on our stories through my voice. Otter, the Boy Who Survived the River, is a storyteller, too, telling your personal stories in pictographs, on silver. Many of you have worn your stories on your wrists, your own storyteller's bracelets.*

*Here, now, in our first days in the Fifth World, the Realm That Follows, listen to our story, Otter's and mine. We tell it together, me in words, Otter in silver. This is our story. This is our Truth.*

## Chapter 1

He wasn't supposed to go to the river alone. His mother would be angry if she learned he had once again disobeyed her wishes. He couldn't help it; the river was as much a part of him as his legs, his heart, his spirit. The river was his brother. His father understood this, and bestowed the name Otter on him after the river nearly killed him.

He didn't want to worry his mother. But he was seventeen years old now and no longer a boy. He knew now to look for signs before entering the canyon. Black clouds to the north or a hint of moisture in the air meant it wasn't safe. So, too, did strange behavior from the animals that called the canyon home. A fox out when the sun was at its high point in the sky, or the sound of birds not singing, meant something wasn't right.

When the bright blue damselflies had swarmed out of the canyon four years earlier, he hadn't understood it to be a sign. If he had, he wouldn't have been caught by surprise by the flash flood that swept him downstream and left him for dead, tossed on a pebble beach like a broken bit of driftwood. There he had lain for two days and two nights, shivering, praying, drifting in and out of consciousness, until he awakened on the third day on the back of his uncle's horse.

He leapt from rock to rock with the fleet-footed assuredness of the weasel, across the river and up the far canyon wall to a small cave etched out of the limestone by water and wind and time. He shared this sacred space with only one other person, a person who would be waiting for him to arrive: Sun Song, the girl he loved.

He crawled into the cave; she was there. Otter took her in his arms, kissed her but once, lovingly, respectfully. They both then turned toward the cave opening; they sat, he cross-legged, she hugging her knees, as they looked out over the river, toward the ancient cedar they called Grandfather Five Fingers because of its strange array of branches. A clay pot was to her left, filled with ground blue maize. To his right were his drum and her gourd rattle. The drum had once belonged to his grandfather, the tribe's healer. His grandmother had given it to him when his grandfather entered the spirit world. Sun Song had made the rattle from a gourd she grew in her own garden. She had filled it with tiny white river stones from the beach where he was found alive.

The sounds of the river echoed below. Sun Song peered out the cave entrance at the water below. "I want to remember the sound of the river, but I don't know how to describe it," she said slowly. She pointed to a large boulder leaning against the far cliff wall. "Look at the rock across the river."

"I see it," he said. "What about it?"

"I can describe it," she said. "It's orange-red in color and as tall as my father on a horse, as wide as our hogan. It has tumbled down from the bluff above at some point in the past. It's mottled with gray-green lichens and dark moss. I can see the shadows cast by the branches of Grandfather Five Fingers; they are the same color as the moss, and I realize I cannot tell the difference between the shadows and the moss until the breeze sends the shadows dancing across the rock. I wonder if the moss wishes it, too, could dance."

She stopped, looked at Otter, squeezed his hand. "I can describe the rock, but I cannot describe the sound of the river."

Otter thought a moment. "You just did. It sounds as if the water is dancing down the canyon. A fast dance, the water droplets tapping and slapping against the rocks in the riverbed like five hundred feet dancing at once, drums and rattles shaking, the spectators of the dance humming and talking among themselves. Loud laughter in the crowd."

He kissed her again, this time with a little more passion. "My Sun Song, who wants to put everything in words. My storyteller."

She smiled. "That was your story. You made that up. But I like it. I will remember the sound of the water dancing across the rock, downstream, as if in a hurry to get anyplace but here."

Her smile faded. "If only the river knew how wonderful here is. I do not want to leave here. I wish to stay here forever. To become one of the Tribe's storytellers, and when I turn eighteen, to become your wife."

Otter picked up his drum and began tapping out the rhythm of his heart beating. This was the last time he would play this drum, probably, for many years. Sun Song took the rattle and matched the rhythm of the drum, of her heart now as well as his. It was right; their hearts were one.

Tomorrow they were being sent to the East, to school, to learn the ways, language, and trade skills of the white people, the Others. His drum, her rattle, every precious reminder of their Indian heritage, would have to be left behind.

He didn't want to go. His mother had protested, as had his grandmother, but his father had been firm. "All the families are sending children and young people," his father had said. "The Others are here to stay; the day of the Original Peoples is over. You will be a man at the next celebration of your birth. You must learn to live in this white man's world, for it is rapidly becoming the only world there is. Only if we are able to communicate with them, and live among them, can we live in peace."

Otter had wanted to ask his father why the Others could not learn the language and ways of the Tribe. They were here first; they were descended from the Original People. But he held his tongue, knowing better than to cross his father in front of the women.

Sun Song, too, was loathe to go. She was Indian, a member of the Tribe. The old ways were the best ways; she even refused to ride in the rickety horse-drawn wagon her elder brother had recently brought onto the reservation, won in a poker game from a man too drunk to realize he'd lost his most prized possession to an Indian. But her father, like Otter's, insisted.

"You are seventeen, Sun Song," he had told her. "Since your mother's death, there is no one to teach you the skills you need to be a woman in this new world of ours."

"But this is not the way the new world was to come," she had protested. "The Realm That Follows will not come until the door in the sky opens, and the stairway to the next world drops down, and the Original People climb into the sky and through the door. That is supposed to be the beginning of the next world."

"You must go," her father had been firm. "Don't you see our stories, our legends, are no longer real? They are not true. There is no next world beyond the sky, and you must learn how to survive in this world, the world of the Others, because the Tribe will not last long if we don't adapt."

The drumbeat and rattle slowed as if they were one instrument. Gently the pair returned the instruments to their place in the cave. On impulse, Otter removed a silver cuff from his wrist. Engraved in the cuff were an image of the steep canyon wall and the river below, his body floundering in the raging foam. The next image was of his broken body on the pebble beach where he had lain those two long days. The third image depicted him draped over his uncle's horse, approaching his family's home. The fourth showed his mother standing outside the home, arms wide open in greeting. The final image was of him and Sun Song, embracing.

This was his storyteller's bracelet, the first he ever crafted. So expert were the images other members of the Tribe began coming to him, asking him to tell their stories in silver. He happily obliged, and for sixteen months now he had been the unofficial tribe silversmith.

This, too, he would have to forego, replacing long hours hammering and etching silver with long hours of learning the strange ways of a strange people.

The bracelet was tingling on his wrist, and Otter pulled it off his wrist. "What came from the river is now returned to the river," he said. He took one last look at the cuff, then hurled it into the water below.