Search for the Sacred Seeds

a novel

TOM JERNIGAN

Author's Statement

This work is a product of the author's imagination. Any reference to cultural practices or to physical places is not intended as a definitive or scientific study.

The author has the utmost respect for the tribal culture presented as the background of this story and has tried to represent it in a respectful manner.

The elements of the novel started out piecemeal beginning with a vision or dream of an isolated and beautiful place. Next came a trip to Germany and ideas about an East German visitor to the southwest. Then came a very impressive trip to a ceremonial dance at second mesa on the Hopi reservation.

These ideas mixed with my feelings of spirituality, permanence of my marital commitment, and lifelong travel experiences in the high desert of Northern Arizona and Southern Utah to form the final elements of the story.

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Prologue

Indian reservations occupy thousands of square miles of high desert land in NE Arizona. It is a harsh land. People from other places, where there is more rainfall and it's green, wonder why anyone would want to live there. But some tribes, like the Hopi, choose to live there because they believe the very harshness of the landscape is part of what keeps them humble and in tune with Maasaw, the guardian of the land. Religion for these native Americans is not a separate thing that they think about only at certain times; it is life itself and part of everything they do.

US authorities marched in years ago determined to change these native Americans, send their children away to new schools, and make up tribal councils modeled after their own government. To make them more like themselves.

The tribes were under a lot of pressure from the authorities and the surrounding culture to change their ways, but they bravely resisted. The Hopis, for instance, never signed a treaty with the US government.

In spite of these outside pressures and the intrusion of Anglo society on the reservations, these native Americans continue to protect their important ceremonies, keeping many of them private to preserve their sanctity. And secrets that have been passed down over millennia are still held close to their heart.

Chapter One

It was so quiet that you could hear the scratch-rustle of the lizard's feet as it scurried across the sand. The old man ignored the lizard as he kneeled down in the middle of a dusty field alongside a dry arroyo. The arroyo was a branch of another larger, usually dry, streambed called Wepo wash on the Hopi Indian reservation of northeastern Arizona.

His name was Bonavi and he was about eighty-six years old. He was born at his parent's modest adobe and rock home, and there was no official record of the date of his birth.

He was poking holes with a pointed stick in mounds of dirt and sand, each of which contained a small corn plant. The holes would help direct water to the roots of the plants whenever the land was blessed with a sprinkle of rain, which was not often. When he finished with the holes, he laid the stick down alongside his hoe and took the paper bag, which sat at the edge of his field, and jiggled a small piece of dog poop at the base of each plant. Rabbits would shy away from anything that smelled like a dog.

Each mound with its corn plant was spaced about five feet from the other in rows making about thirty plants in one direction and thirty in the other for a total of nine hundred plants. This was the main food that he lived on throughout the year.

He had no gloves on, but his brown wrinkled hands were like leather. Alongside the hoe and stick lay the shovel that he used to make little channels that guided the occasional stream of water from the wash onto his rows of

corn. The wash was normally dry except when the clouds favored him and released a storm of water which would rise up and flow down the wash. A farmer from Iowa would fall down and weep bitterly if he dreamed that his fields looked like this one. Yet this is how the Hopi have lived and thrived for more than a thousand years.

He stopped working from time to time to rest his old bones. To the north and east, the dry land rose gradually and burst into a series of rocky cliffs, some small and some rising abruptly several hundred feet above the surrounding land. Below the cliffs and around the old man, there were a few widely spaced clumps of bunchgrass; and even more intermittently, a small juniper bush, growing to maybe chest high, could be seen. Above the cliffs on the flattish tops of the mesas, the bushes became trees, growing more closely together and taller. Up there at the higher elevation, more rain fell and pinon trees joined the junipers to make a kind of forest. He used to hike up there sometimes when he was younger to gather the tasty and nutritious pinon nuts and to just sit in the little forest and look at the forever views of his homeland.

But now he moved slowly as befitted his age. He looked around his field at the mounds he had worked on that day. Later, when the time was right, he would select a handful of corn kernels from each plant, seeds to save for next year's crop, seeds much the same as those planted by his ancestors thousands of years ago. The thought caused a flashback to last fall when he had picked the smallest ears of corn off his plants and had taken them to his wife to lay in the bottom of the storage basket before placing the other seeds on top. His wife had sung softly as she aligned the ears carefully. Her song was a reminder of how at the beginning of time, the Hopi were left with the smallest of all the ears of corn that the Creator offered to the tribes of mankind. It turned out to be a blessing. The little runt ears were the hardiest and most nutritious of them all, able to grow with little water in the sandy soils of Hopiland.

He finished placing the dog poop. The sun had not yet fallen behind Nuva Tukya Ovi, the 12,700-foot mountain to the southwest that the white men call Mount Humphreys when its shadow would race across Wepo Wash

faster than a man could run. He had just picked up the hoe to continue digging when he suddenly heard the faint sound of car tires on the dirt road behind him. He turned to look, wondering who could be driving up the two-track road to his house. He seldom had a visitor. Whoever it was drove rapidly, raising a little cloud of dust behind.

He dropped the hoe, took his shovel, and turned toward the long hill to his house; as he climbed up the hill, thoughts of his wife continued in his mind. It renewed the pain in his heart, pain that would not go away. His wife had passed not long after last year's harvest. Alone now, his life didn't have the same meaning anymore. But she had wanted him to continue planting their field and caring for their home as long as he was able.

He climbed as fast as he could and by the time he got to the house, he was almost out of breath. He stopped for a moment. He saw the car that had created the dust cloud, but no one was in it and he could not see anyone around. He moved up close to the front of the house. Through the front window, he saw a small light near the back of the room. It moved back and forth from bright to dim and jiggled around like a flashlight. Who would just go into his house, he not being there? His muscles tightened and a sense of caution swept over him. His closest neighbor lived over a mile away. He didn't have a cell phone. There was no reception at this location anyway. He wondered what they were doing here. He didn't have anything of value. An old chainsaw, a radio full of static, a few photos, and his old Marine Corps uniform from the war. He grasped the shovel between his hands like it was an M-1 and moved through the front door which had been left partly open. He didn't know whether to call out or to sneak up and catch them in whatever they were doing. If he called out, they might turn and pretend they were just looking for him.

He moved quietly across the familiar room in which he had spent much of his life. The storeroom door was partly open and in the dim light, it looked like someone was bent over throwing something into a bag, like a shopping bag. He stepped into the doorway pushing the door all the way open, shovel

in hand. “What are you doing?” he demanded. In a sudden whirlwind of movement, the person cried out and turned the flashlight to shine directly in Bonavi’s face. With the light in his eyes, he barely caught sight of the person’s arm reaching into his jacket. Bonavi brought the shovel and his arm up to shield his face. A shot rang out. The noise of the gun and another loud clang resounded simultaneously. He felt pain in his shoulder. He turned and started back out the door. As he swung the door shut behind him, he felt the pain surging in his arm. His mind flashed back to the war when he was in Iwo Jima when he was bent over running and dodging. Leaping through the front door now, he headed down the driveway as fast as his old legs would carry him. He felt the sickness of his wound sapping his strength. If he could just get to the highway and flag someone down. But then he heard the roar of a car engine. The headlights illuminated the ground all around him, his own desperate shadow bouncing in front of him.

He came to the highway and turned down into the borrow ditch. His legs were getting wobbly but he kept running down the ditch. He stumbled and fell. His hearing and vision were getting dim. Something was wrong with his heart. He heard the sound of a car on the highway as if it were far away. Was it someone who could help him? He tried to crawl up to the pavement edge but a fierce pain swirled through his chest. He fell on his side as consciousness slipped away. His last thoughts were of his wife. He could see her. She looked young. Her arms were reaching out to him.