



TURTLE STORIES

CHAPTER 6

Wari and Sewatis were back from the city to visit with Tota Ma over the winter holidays. There was snow in the bush and the snowbanks were getting high. Sewatis was looking forward to using the old snowshoes and spending some time on Uncle Buddy's trapline. The swamps and marshes were frozen and it was time to set traps on the muskrat push-ups. After supper, Sewatis eagerly looked in the shed for all the equipment he needed for the morning when Uncle Buddy arrived. Everything was ready for their big adventure! It would be fun to travel over the frozen marsh and the swamp without getting wet feet.

When it was time for bed, Sewatis had trouble falling asleep because he was so excited about the next morning! He turned over and over on the mattress, pulling the covers off his cousin, Sose, and making noise that bothered his sister Wari.

"Tota, Sewatis will not settle down. I cannot go to sleep. He will not stop rolling around and making noise!" complained Wari.

Tota Ma came into the room. "What is happening in here?" she questioned calmly.

"Tota, I am having trouble getting to sleep. Will you tell us a story about the animals and the plants?" asked Sewatis.

Tota had her old journal tucked under her arm. She settled down in the big rocking chair and opened her journal to the page where she had drawn a turtle shell. She looked at the drawing for a few moments thoughtfully and started to speak in her quiet, calm voice. "Winter time is *Akohserake*. This is the time of stories and teachings," she began. "Our People say that we should wait until the snow is on the ground and the plants and animals are sleeping before we begin telling stories about them."

"Yes Tota, I remember. Can you share a story about the animals that live in the marsh? I am looking forward to going out with Uncle Buddy tomorrow. It will be the first time I have been out on the marsh in the winter time," said Sewatis.

Tota Ma nodded and was quiet for a few moments while she gathered her thoughts. "I can remember the stories that my grandfather used to tell us in the winter time when we were small. He and my grandmother lived in a two-room log house. We used to sleep in one room and the other room was our kitchen. The wood stove in the kitchen kept us nice and warm in the winter time. There was always a line of mittens and socks drying behind the stove. I also remember a big table and benches to sit at and a cupboard for our food and dishes. In the day time, we rolled up the mattresses and sat on them like a couch. We went to bed when it got dark, used a coal oil lamp for light in the house, and carried our water from the well down the road. There was

always a pot of white pine tea on the stove and a fresh pan of corn bread to eat. At night, when we were all tucked into our blankets, my grandfather would tell us stories about the animals and plants.”

Tota Ma recalled one of her favourites her grandfather used to tell.

Long ago, Turtle lived in a small pond. It was a fine place. There were Alder trees along the banks to provide shade, and a fine grassy bank where Turtle could crawl out and sun himself. There were plenty of fish for Turtle to catch. The small pond had everything any turtle could ever want, and Turtle thought his pond was the finest place in the whole world. Turtle spent his time swimming around, sunning himself, and catching fish whenever he was hungry. So it went until the cold winds began to blow down from the north.

“Ah,” Turtle said, “It is time for me to go to sleep.” Then he dove down to the bottom of the pond and burrowed into the mud. He went to sleep for the winter. He slept deeply, in fact, he slept a little later than usual and did not wake up until it was late in the spring. The warming waters of the pond woke him, and he crawled out of the mud and began to swim toward the surface. Something was wrong, though, for it seemed to take much too long to get to the surface of his small pond. Turtle was certain the water had not been that deep when he went to sleep.

As soon as Turtle reached the surface and looked around, he was surprised to find that things were not as they should be. His small pond was more than twice its normal size. His fine grassy bank for sunning himself was underwater! His beautiful Alder trees were cut down and made into a big dam.



"Who had done this to my pond?" Turtle said.

Just then Turtle heard a loud sound. WHAP! Turtle turned to look and saw a strange animal swimming toward him across the surface of his pond. It had a big, flat tail and hit the surface of the water with it. WHAP!

"Who are you?" Turtle said. "What are you doing in my pond? What have you done to my beautiful trees?"

"Hunh!" the strange animal said. "This is not your pond. This is my pond! I am Beaver and I cut down those trees with my teeth and I built that dam and made this pond nice and deep. This is my pond and you must leave."

"No," Turtle said. "This is my pond. If you do not leave, I will fight you. I am a great warrior."

"Hunh!" Beaver said. "That is good. Let us fight. I will call my relatives to help me, and they will chew your head off with their strong teeth."

Turtle looked closely at Beaver's teeth. They were long and yellow and looked very sharp.

"Hah!" Turtle said, "I can see it would be too easy to fight you. Instead we should have a contest to decide which of us will leave this pond forever."

"Hunh!" Beaver said. "That is a good idea. Let us see who can stay underwater the longest. I can stay under for a whole day."

As soon as Beaver said that, Turtle saw he would have to think of a different contest. He had been about to suggest that they see who could stay underwater the longest, but if what Beaver said was true, then he would beat Turtle.

"Hah!" Turtle said. "It would be too easy to defeat you that way. Let us have a race instead. The first





one to reach the other side of the pond is the winner. The loser must leave the pond forever.”

“Hunh!” Beaver said. “That is a good contest. I am the fastest swimmer of all. When I win, you will have to leave my pond forever. Let us begin to race.”

“Wait,” Turtle said, “I am such a fast swimmer that it would not be fair unless I started from behind you.”

Then Turtle placed himself behind Beaver, right next to Beaver’s big tail.

“I am ready,” Turtle said, “let us begin!”

Beaver began to swim. He was such a fast swimmer that Turtle could barely keep up with him.

When they were halfway across the pond, Turtle began to fall even further behind. But Turtle had a plan. He stuck his long neck out and grabbed Beaver’s tail in his jaws.

Beaver felt something grab his tail, but he could not look back. He was too busy swimming, trying to win the race. He swung his tail back and forth, but Turtle held on tight. Now Beaver was almost to the other side of the pond. Turtle bit down even harder. Beaver swung his tail up into the air, trying to shake free whatever had hold of him. Just as Beaver’s tail reached the top of its swing, Turtle let go. He flew through the air and landed on the bank! Beaver looked up, and there was Turtle! Turtle had won the race.

So it was that Beaver had to leave and Turtle, once again, had his pond to himself. With its new deeper water there were soon even more fish than there were before and Turtle’s Alders grew back once more. Truly, Turtle’s pond was the finest place in the whole world.

Soft snoring made Tota Ma look over at the sleeping children. She remembered A’no:wara’s words which described the challenge, “My sixth challenge asked you to listen to teachings and stories about turtles.” Tota was excited to share the stories that she knew, and stories she would learn, with her grandchildren.

