

THE MEANING OF LUCK

A story about finding your way home

- Stan Willenbring -

Chapter 1

Mud. Warm, soft, luscious mud.

Wapiya's stomach prodded her to start the day's foraging. But the sun was so warm and her murky bed so snug. She dug her claws into the pond's oozy ledge, pulling herself down until only her eyes and nose remained above the surface. She blinked at the sun and drifted into a pleasant dream.

In her dream, all the many creatures of the forests, fields and swamps had gathered on a bright spring day. Festival!

Everyone was talking, each in their own language. It sounded like Babel. But no one cared because camaraderie is contagious. Fun was in the making and, of course, everyone was feasting on strawberries!

When she awoke, she had to laugh, for up in the top of the tree above her, a mockingbird was calling out his many sounds. Chirrrdip, chirdip, keeooo, keeooo, eeeip, eeeip. Two of this and two of that, like all the many languages in her dream.

She knew it was a mockingbird, not a thrasher. They both speak all the calls of all the birds, but the mockingbird always echoes his calls. Not so with the thrasher. If you didn't hear it on the first call, well, don't expect him to repeat himself.

She wondered if the mockingbird ever tired of his constant task. Hello, hello: she called up to him as she pushed off, for now it truly was time to arise from her cozy nook and begin her daily search for food.

A stomach can be a very insistent thing.

She thrust herself up with her strong little legs and felt the mud squeeze between her toes. Small eddies of swirling brown silt trailed off from her shell as she drifted out into the clear open water.

A swarm of polliwogs fled from in front of her and she wondered why they feared her so. I would never eat them, she thought. Especially here in summer, when there was only one food on her mind: the tangy sweetness of wild strawberries.

It seemed so difficult to befriend some creatures. Her mind turned back to the mockingbird. "That's it!" she exclaimed, setting a new goal for herself. "I will learn how to say hello in the language of every creature." That way, no matter whom she might meet along her journey, she could greet them in their native tongue.

True, the creatures have a common language by which they communicate basic interactions. But each also has its own special sounds that only its own kind can understand.

If you want to find common ground, Wapiya thought, hello just seemed like a sensible place to begin.

As she plowed her way across the pond, she felt her legs pushing against the water and saw the wake rise up before her, curving in an arc past her shell. I certainly feel strong today, she thought. I must have grown while I slept last night.

And indeed, she had. For that is how all the creatures of the earth grow: at night, while you are asleep, while your muscles and bones are resting.

During the day, our bodies are busy, roaming about, gathering nutrients from the foods we eat, building up supplies of them in the blood. The muscles and bones are active, burning fuel. It's not the best time to work on growing them bigger.

However, at night, when the body is still, the dreaming brain sends out chemical signals to all the cells of the body, to take in those nutrients and use them to grow. All through the night, millions of cells are stringing proteins together, building and repairing the body's tissues.

In this way, each day when you awaken, you are a tiny bit bigger and a tiny bit stronger than you were when you went to sleep.

Still, it seemed to Wapiya that she was quite a bit bigger and stronger. And indeed, she was. She did not know it yet, but magical things were happening already.

It must be the strawberries, she thought. I know they must be good for me. How could something so delicious not be inherently good?

She hoped she would find more today.



At the far end of the pond, she entered a small thicket through which she eventually reached a long downward sloping meadow. The meadow was kind to her, for all the way down she nibbled on one patch of delectable strawberries after another.

At the bottom of the hill, she crossed a small creek and came to a busy spot with animals of various kinds going in and out of an opening in the side of a hill.

An old turtle greeted her. She asked him "What is this cave?"

"It's not a cave," he informed her. "It's called a culvert. It's a tunnel, a way to get to the other side."

"The other side of what?" She had barely spoken those words when a vehicle went roaring by on the road above them.

The startled Wapiya looked at the old fellow and exclaimed "What was that?!"

"That! . . .was a car," he told her.

The kindly old terrapin could tell that Wapiya knew nothing about these things; so he proceeded to educate her, explaining about roads, about the many types of vehicles and their often-erratic behaviors.

He cautioned her about their large paws. "They'll crush you just as soon as look at you."

"Oh my," Wapiya worried.

"The vehicles are always in the company of humans," her teacher pointed out.

"We don't know if the vehicles capture the humans or if the humans somehow tame and control the vehicles. But whatever the case is, you should avoid them at all costs. And that's why you should always use a culvert if you can find one."

"I guess if you can't find a culvert, you could just go around the road," Wapiya contemplated.

The old fellow patiently explained how that simply might not be possible, how the road might go on virtually forever.

"So you see," he concluded, "You might spend a lifetime walking and never find the end of it."

He escorted her through the culvert as he offered a few more insights on how to deal with roads and vehicles. As they emerged from the other end, a large slow vehicle rolled by with a human riding on top of it.

"What kind of vehicle is that?" Wapiya asked.

The old fellow explained what a tractor is and how she might sometimes see them not just on roads, but even out in fields near farms.

"They are usually quite slow," he said. "And not at all aggressive when you see them in a field. But they are rather clumsy, so you still need to be careful."

They blinked at each other in the dust that the tractor had created. The old fellow coughed.

"By the way" he added, "You see that dust? This road is made of dirt. A dirt road is likely to be small. Only a few vehicles, usually slower ones. But there is another type of road, larger with a hard black surface that gets hot in the sun. The vehicles on those roads are exceedingly fierce. You should never try to cross such a road. If you do, you are taking your life in your hands."

Wapiya thanked him for sharing his wisdom. He bid her a safe journey and she was off, thankfully past the strange and fearsome road.



From the road, Wapiya climbed again, up a long sloping meadow that matched the one she had just come down. The strawberries were fewer, smaller, and rather tart. Nevertheless, they pleased her tongue just the same.

When she reached the crest, she entered a deep shady forest with frequent swampy stretches. No strawberries here! Continuing her eastward course, she

spent several berry-less days skirting the north edge of a small mountain until at last the woods broke out into a large hay field.

The marshy thickets of the forest had been tedious and challenging at times, but at least she could usually see where she was going. Pushing her way through this tall grass was truly a chore. If not for the clear skies that allowed her to see the sun above, she might not have known if she was simply walking in circles.

But persistence pays its premium and eventually her hard work did too. She emerged near a small house with a fenced garden. She would have to detour around this little compound in order to continue travelling east.

As she skirted the outer edge of the garden fence, she could see a rather agitated older human moving about inside the garden. He was working furiously with his hands, all the while muttering over and over: "No, No, No."

After a time, the man threw some trimmings toward the far end of the fence and withdrew into his house.

At the far corner of the garden Wapiya was pleased to find a nice compost pile that she could pick at through the fence. After her arduous efforts, shouldering her way through massive thatch of the hayfield, she was indeed hungry. She feasted on deep green collards, hearty chunks of yellow summer squash, and a few bites of sour rhubarb that made her wince.

But alas, there were no strawberries in this pile.

Nevertheless, her belly was full. Being already late afternoon, following a day of such strenuous work, her tired muscles bid her to settle here for the evening. Besides, in the morning she could have a generous breakfast before setting out for another round of tunneling through endless hay.

After all, why let this lovely buffet go unappreciated.

She quickly fell into the kind of deep sleep that comes to those who work hard. And of course, she dreamed of strawberries.

Chapter 2

In the morning, Wapiya stretched out her neck from the confines of her shell. She blinked in the misty early light. She moved her neck left and right, readying her bones and muscles for another day's journey.

With luck, there might even be strawberries somewhere along the way. However, for now she would gather some fuel from the compost scraps and ready herself for the start of the day.

Turning her head one more time as she completed her mini-yoga session, she spotted something out of the corner of her eye. She craned a bit further, as far as she could, trying to see back over her shoulder.

There was something stuck on the left side of her shell. She shook herself to wiggle it loose, but it seemed somehow adhered to her. She was about to scrape herself against the wire fence when suddenly the "something" spoke!

"Oh my, please excuse me," said a timid voice. "I'm terribly sorry. I was. . ."

Wapiya interrupted. "It's quite all right. I was just surprised."

They blinked in bewilderment at each other. Wapiya then realized that this "thing" stuck to her shell, this new acquaintance as it were, was a snail.

The turtle broke the momentary silence. "My name is Wapiya. What is yours?"

The poor snail was so flustered she hardly even heard the question.

"I hope you can accept my apology," the snail gushed. "I'm just so embarrassed. You see, I thought you were a rock. And... Oh, I know that sounds ridiculous. I certainly meant no harm."

"I guess my camouflage works better than I thought," Wapiya said humorously. But the poor snail was so befuddled, she totally missed Wapiya's subtle wit.

"I'll get right down, just as quick as I can. Although it may take me several minutes, as... well, you can see. I'm a snail."

She said it as though she felt embarrassed to be such a slow creature.

"Really. You needn't hurry," said Wapiya. "I never do."

"And besides," Wapiya continued, "It's a lovely morning. Perfect for getting to know a new friend."

The snail finally understood that her inadvertent presence truly did not disturb or offend Wapiya in any way.

"You are very kind," said the snail. "I believe you asked my name."

"Yes, do tell me," said Wapiya.

"My name is Suerta," the snail said softly.

"What a lovely name!" Wapiya remarked. "Does it have a meaning in your language?"

"Yes," the snail replied. "It means luck. Or to be lucky."

"What a coincidence!" exclaimed Wapiya. "My name means all is well, good fortune for everyone."

"Why, I think this meeting was meant to be," she went on. "Two of the lucky ones. And we were lucky enough that one of us sleeps so soundly that the other might actually climb up on them thinking they were a rock."

Suerta broke into a smile for the first time. "So, do you live here?" she asked.

"Oh, no," replied the turtle. "I'm just passing through. But after filling my belly on this heap of scraps yesterday, I just thought I'd had enough travel for one day. So I settled in here for the night."

"Besides," she continued, "Why turn down a good breakfast? In fact, if you don't mind, I think I'll snack on some of this tasty stuff while we chat. I'm still a bit hungry after yesterday's long hike."

She looked at the new friend still perched on her shoulder. "Can I hand something up to you?"

She paused. "Although I'm not exactly sure how I would do that."

"Actually," said Suerta, "I must confess. This is a little embarrassing. I was grazing on some algae here on your shell and. . ."

Before she could finish, Wapiya let out a hearty laugh. "I'm growing algae, am I? Well, that's what I get for wallowing in the warm mud."

"But it is rather tasty," Suerta remarked. "At least we snails like it."

"Well, be my guest," said the comical turtle, pretending she was reading from a fine menu. "I think I'll have the carrot peels."

They chatted over breakfast about this and that, about the nature of being turtles and snails.

"If you don't mind me asking," Wapiya queried, "How do you get around without legs or paws?"

"Oh," said Suerta, "I'm a gastropod."

Wapiya looked at her quizzically, obviously unfamiliar with the term.

"It means belly-foot," Suerta offered as a way of explanation. "Down along the surface of me that touches the ground, my belly, is a large muscular pad that serves as my one and only foot. The front edge can reach out and grab on to the surface. Then I can relax the back end and pull it forward. And repeat."

"I see," said Wapiya. "It's kind of like how an inchworm moves."

"Yes, very much the same," answered the snail.

"But, if I might ask again," said Wapiya. "How does your front end hold onto the surface if you have no claws or fingers?"

"I have glycoproteins," answered the very articulate snail.

Wapiya raised an eyebrow, figuratively of course, because turtles don't actually have eyebrows. "I have no idea what those are," she said, "but I'm eager to find out."

"Well," Suerta began, "They are a chemical that is secreted by cells at the front of my belly-foot. They can act like a temporary glue that helps me stick to any surface. Even upside down."

It was obvious to Wapiya that her new friend was an expert in many topics.

The snail continued. "I can also glide along on a sheet of these chemicals, so I don't scratch my belly-foot on rough surfaces. When you see a snail or a slug, you will often see a shiny trail behind them. That is a trail of glycoproteins."

"So much to learn in this world," said Wapiya. "How could anyone ever be bored?"

Their conversation wandered through various topics, when Wapiya asked if Suerta had heard the ruckus of the older man in the garden on the previous afternoon.

"Oh yes!" Suerta declared. "I was grazing on some discarded leaves that were lying in the garden path. A group of slugs were being boorish, cutting the stems of leaves on some large beets. When the man came outside, he became greatly upset, yelling 'Not my beets. My precious beets!' Then he began attacking the slugs. He took the damaged leaves and threw them on top of the ones I was sitting on. Then he grabbed the whole lot and tossed it here on the compost pile. Me included."

"Well, that must have been a startling experience," Wapiya exclaimed.

"And rather unceremonious," the snail rejoined. Then they shared the first of many laughs together.

"So now, if I may inquire of you," asked the snail. "Is there a purpose to your journey?"

"Well," said Wapiya, "lately my primary purpose is to hopefully run across a patch of strawberries each day. It's important to have priorities!"

"Oh, I've only eaten them once," said Suerta. "But they were so delicious." Then she inquired further. "But are you headed anywhere in particular?"

"Nowhere really," Wapiya replied. "I just head east each day, toward the rising sun. That way I know I'm not just going in circles."

"That sounds so exciting!" Suerta declared. "As you might guess, a snail would never even dream of such a journey. I could probably not travel in a whole lifetime what you can travel in a single day. You know. Being a snail and all." Her voice trailed off a little.

"Well, why don't you come along with me?" Wapiya suggested, as much to her own surprise as to Suerta.

"Oh, I couldn't," said the shy snail.

"Oh, yes," said Wapiya, thinking she might have overstepped her bounds. "I guess this is your home here."

"No," Suerta replied sheepishly, "My home is my shell. I just carry it with me wherever I go. I have no particular home."

Her voice trailed off again. She thought how bold and marvelous it would be to go on such an adventure. But now she had just turned down the only chance she would ever get.

"Well, that's the same as me," said Wapiya, comparing their shells. "I just carry my house with me wherever I go."

"Oh, yes, I guess that's right," said the snail.

Then, much to Suerta's surprise, the plainspoken turtle proposed her idea again.

"Well, it's not my place to decide things for others, but I think you should come along. There could be strawberries," she hinted.

"You have convinced me," Suerta said. "But I worry." She paused, looking for the right words. "I'm afraid I could not keep up for very far."

"Oh, no, no," said the turtle. "You will ride on my shell."

"But wouldn't I be a burden to you?" Suerta worried.

"I didn't even notice you were there this morning until I caught a backward glimpse of you," said the turtle. "I'd just be thrilled to have the company and conversation."

"Then, yes, let's do it!" Suerta declared.

"Allons-y!" proclaimed the intrepid turtle, in her only little bit of French.

She turned to her passenger with bold anticipation. "I promise you. There will be strawberries."

Wapiya was just about to set foot to trail, when she stopped in her tracks. "Oh. I'm feeling full and ready to travel," she said. "But perhaps you are not quite done yet with your meal."

Suerta looked at Wapiya with as straight a face as she could hold. "Well, I'm bringing my lunch with me."

Wapiya laughed at her new friend's perfect deadpan. "Now I know we'll get along."

And with that, the journey of the new companions was under way.

Chapter 3

They took their bearing toward the risen sun and set out to cross the remainder of the hayfield. How big, they did not know.

You see, for a turtle - or a snail as well - there is not much of a long-range view of the world ahead. The lowly turtle - and of course, we mean low to the ground; certainly not lowly in our esteem - but the lowly turtle can only see as far as one can see being barely inches above the surface of the land. So changes in the upcoming terrain are often encountered totally unannounced.

Pressing on through this tall thick grass, Wapiya's muscles were quick to remember what a tedious task it could be.

The two travelers occupied the morning with much conversation, getting to know each other as the day wore on.

After a few hours of labor, a heavy chore for even Wapiya's sturdy legs, they came to an oak tree that offered an oasis of rest. By this time, Wapiya was hungry from her work, so they decided to stop for a bit and refuel.

Suerta had dismounted and they began filling their bellies from the abundance of nutritious acorns beneath the widespread limbs of this prodigious old tree.

Suddenly, with the noise of a freight train, a group of raucous blue jays came swooping down, intent - as blue jays are wont to be - on a lunch of whatever these two travelers had found. Suerta withdrew into her shell and Wapiya ducked halfway into her own.

One particularly vocal bird hopped around squawking and grabbing at every nut in sight. Then, to Wapiya's alarm, he picked up Suerta. Thinking she was an acorn, he bit down hard on Suerta's shell.

Frustrated, the brassy bird tossed the poor mistaken snail to the side, grabbed an actual acorn, and flew off. As quickly as they had arrived, they were gone.

Wapiya was relieved that at least he hadn't flown off with Suerta in his possession. She hurried - as fast as a turtle can hurry - across the shady space to where Suerta had landed near the trunk of the tree.

"Are you alright, my friend?" she called out as she got near.

"Yes, I'm fine," Suerta answered. "Albeit upside down at the moment. I'm just glad he didn't crack my shell."

Trying to lighten their situation, Wapiya quipped: "You seem to be making a habit of being flung through the air. Are you by chance planning a career in the circus?"

"Certainly not," Suerta laughed. "Believe me. I would be the most reluctant of acrobats."

Wapiya drew up next to her friend. "Let me lean a bit and perhaps you can grab the edge of my shell and right yourself," she said.

Suerta reached, and pulled, and contorted herself, and finally was able to climb back onto Wapiya's shell.

"Thank goodness for glycoproteins," Wapiya declared.

"Sorry that took so long," said Suerta.

"Not a problem," Wapiya replied. "If there's one good thing about a turtle and a snail travelling together, at least we both know that neither of us will ever be in a hurry."

They chuckled, dusted themselves off, and considered their good luck to escape with nothing tarnished . . . not even their dignity.

"Should we get back on our way?" asked Wapiya.

"Allons-y!" replied the plucky snail.



In a few more hours they made their way close to the bottom of the hill. There they found a small marshy spot with some sweet watercress to snack on. As the late-day shadows drew long from the west, they decided this would be a good spot to rest for the night.

They grazed on the nourishing tender greens and chatted, sharing stories about their early lives. As darkness set in, they saw an unusual wave of light sweep across the field and a rumbling noise from the direction of their intended route.

"Was that some kind of shooting star?" Suerta pondered.

"No," Wapiya said solemnly. "I think there is a road. With vehicles."

Suerta had no knowledge of roads or vehicles. So Wapiya, who herself had only seen one road in her life, described for her companion as best she could the nature of these strange and unnatural things.

"I don't know what kind of creatures these vehicles are," she said. "And it is somehow all connected to humans. But I do know this, something that the old turtle told me. The vehicle has two large paws that can crush an animal. And no one seems to know when or why they will come running along a road. So, there is some risk to be considered in crossing a road."

"Perhaps we can go around the road," suggested Suerta.

Wapiya explained to her friend about how a road can go on forever and take you endlessly out of your way. "You simply cannot get around it."

"What do you think we should do?" Suerta queried.

Wapiya pondered a minute, then spoke with an earnest tone. "Well, we certainly don't have to do anything this late in the evening but simply rest and be ready for whatever we choose to do tomorrow. But, if I..." Her voice trailed off. "If we plan to follow the rising sun, then we would have to cross the road."

Wapiya thought that her companion might be having second thoughts about joining this journey.

Wapiya broke the silence. "If you should choose not to continue, I would fully understand. I can take you to wherever you need to be on this side of the road. Even back to the garden where we met. I would not be at all put out to do so. Really, it's the least I could do."

"That won't be necessary," Suerta said quietly. Wapiya looked at her friend. Suerta continued. "I have embarked on a journey with you and it is a gift that I could never have otherwise dreamed of. If you wish to cross the road, then I wish to cross the road with you."

"Are you certain?" Wapiya asked. "I don't want to pressure you to do something you wouldn't choose except for my wanting to do it."

Suerta looked at Wapiya. "I'm having a grand adventure. And sharing it with the best of companions. But adventures are not without risk. So I am willing to take my chances in order to continue with you, to see all that awaits us."

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Suerta spoke again. "Besides, I have a strange sense, an inner confidence, that says we will be OK."

They decided on a plan. They would rest up for the evening, keeping a watch for more lights, to see how often vehicles come along on this particular road. As the night deepened, there seemed to be no more of them.

It was the time of the waning moon, so there should still be some moonlight in the wee hours just before dawn. They determined that they should start out very early, before most humans are awake. If they could discern any pattern to the vehicles, they would try to time their crossing as best they could.



When the tiniest smidge of light appeared in the east, so they had their bearing, Wapiya grabbed a few mouthfuls of food for strength. Then they set off by moonlight.

It was not long until they came to the edge of the field. But there, standing between them and the edge of the road, was a deep mucky ditch. This unexpected obstacle would have to be negotiated before they could even begin their crossing of the road.

Now a roadside gully might seem nothing more than a mere inconvenience for some animals. A cat or a fox could simply leap across it. But for a stubby-legged turtle, crossing a gully is an arduous task. And this one was made all the more difficult by a tangle of branches that clogged the bottom.

Of course, it was Wapiya whose efforts must carry them through. But Suerta proved her value to this partnership with patient encouragement that strengthened Wapiya in her task.

They virtually tumbled down in, then wrestled through the jumble of sticks like a pair of monkeys. Slowly they made their way up the slippery far side of the ditch.

But all of this had cost them much of their precious early morning time. It was already full light by the time they emerged at the edge of the road. Yet still not a single vehicle had come by.

The road was a strange place: made completely of dirt, yet as hard as stone. And dusty in the morning breeze.

"One more thing," said Wapiya, "Something the old turtle told me. The vehicle can't hurt you if you stay between its paws. So, when a vehicle comes, if you are to one side of the road or the other, run for the edge. But if you are in the middle of the road, freeze in place."

"Then that is our plan," said Suerta. "And I am implicit in my trust of your judgment should that situation arise."

"No better time to start than immediately," said Wapiya. And with that, they were off.

The road had rises and dips, and they were in a low spot. So, from this vantage, they might not see a vehicle until it would already be coming above the nearest rise.

Wapiya's legs had never worked so furiously. She'd been feeling bigger and stronger lately, but right now she just felt small and anxious, and propelled by sheer urgency.

They reached the middle of the road. Halfway. Hurrah!

Then Wapiya was the first to feel it. Initially, just a faint buzzing at her feet. Then a growing rumble.

She turned to her companion. "A vehicle is coming. We should freeze in the middle. Pull in and anchor down to me, as tight as you can."

A pall of dust rose toward them as they ducked for cover.

Into their separate shelters.

Alone.

Chapter 4

"WATCH OUT, MAMA!"

The girl sat bolt upright in the seat of the old truck.

"I see him, dear," mother said calmly, as she slowed the vehicle and maneuvered its direction, so that none of its wheels would come anywhere near the little dome-shaped creature in the road ahead.

For Suerta and Wapiya, in their trembling darkness, the rumble became a deafening roar. And then. . . it was over. They had survived!

Wapiya peeked out cautiously from her hiding place. She could barely see through the choking dust. She could still feel the buzzing of it in her bones.

Then her eyes grew wide. The buzzing was NOT a memory in her bones. It was the vibration of a motor running right next to her. There looming above her was the vehicle! Like an enormous blue predator with giant white eyes, ready to pounce.

She could even smell its strange heated breath. Now what should she do? Stay put or run for it?

Mother had hardly taken the truck out of gear and set the brake, when the passenger door was flung open and the girl, nimble as a cat, bounded down to the hard-packed dirt.

Wapiya scarcely had time to consider her options, never mind to decide, when suddenly there was thumping. Footsteps? Then hands! She found herself being hoisted into the air.

Suerta, who was just now emerging, darted back under cover. Wapiya instinctively drew her head in halfway, thrust out her stubby legs and flailed her claws.

"Now, now," said a small human voice. "Let's get you out of here before you get hurt."

Despite her predicament, Wapiya couldn't help but wonder: This must be what it's like for a bird to fly. She marveled at how her body felt weightless as they floated magically above this peculiar place called a road.

"Might as well get you over the ditch too," the soft little voice spoke again.

In one powerful stride the girl spanned the gully. Wapiya considered the gully she had just spent an hour contending with, and now they soared over this one effortlessly in seconds.

The girl swung her arms forward and placed the two travellers in a bed of soft grass, just beneath the lower railing of a pasture fence.

"There. Now you'll be safe," the sweet voice spoke again. And just like that, the little human was gone.



In one well-practiced motion, the girl hopped up the rusty step and into her seat with the door latched firmly behind her.

"Thank you," said Mama. "You did that just right."

"I know," said the girl, proud of her expertise. "Always move a turtle in the same direction they were already going."

Mama's smile approved.

"And don't kill snakes!" the girl rejoined. "Why do people do that? It's so thoughtless."

"Because people don't understand snakes," said Mama. "When people don't understand something, they make up stories about it to fill in the parts they don't know. Then they wind up worrying about the untrue ideas in their stories."

The girl frowned and crossed her arms. "They're just scarin' themselves for no reason," she said.

Then her mood perked back up again. "But, Mama, there was the funniest thing. There was a snail sitting on top of the turtle."

"Really!" said Mama. "How strange."

Then mother reached over and gently poked her daughter's lowest rib. "You're trying to prank me," she said.

The girl squirmed and giggled. "No, Mama, it's real. It's like the turtle was giving the snail a ride across the road."

"Well, that's pretty unusual," said Mama. "I doubt many people have ever seen a thing like that."

"I know," said the girl. Then she mused, "Maybe they're going on a long journey together."

Mama reached over again. With her thumb, she softly stroked the corner of her daughter's jaw, just below the ear. The girl scrunched her neck and laid her cheek against the smooth back of Mama's hand.

Mama glanced at her daughter and said, "You are so lucky."

Chapter 5

WE. ARE. SO. LUCKY!!

The two travelers blinked at each other and grinned with near giddy excitement. Not only had the girl carried them out of harm's way. She had set them down right in front of a giant patch of red ripe luscious strawberries!

They were certainly both ready for some nourishment.

Suerta looked at her friend. "You must be famished after all of your efforts," she said.

"I would have been happy with a mushroom," Wapiya replied. "Or even acorns."

"Well, the fates have smiled upon you, my friend," Suerta exclaimed.

With that, they began to fill their bellies with these little morsels of liquid sunshine.

It had been several days, including this particularly hungry morning, since Wapiya had seen a strawberry. After a few bites had calmed her grumbling stomach, she looked up, with strawberry juice on her chin, and said to her companion: "I told you there would be strawberries."

And then she burped.

The two broke into hysterical laughter. Suerta, always a fountain of odd facts, declared how some cultures consider a burp to be high praise for a fine meal.

"Well, my compliments to the chef," Wapiya declared as she took another bite. Then she burped again and they roared with delight.

After the stressful morning, it felt good to laugh, for sometimes laughter is just the sound of worry leaving the body.

They sat in the sun, chatting and laughing, and feasting on their good fortune. Given their hurried early morning departure and the strenuous work trying to cross the road, they decided that they had earned this leisurely brunch . . . and perhaps even a nap.

They could see that the meadow sloped downward for a long stretch, to a small pond with some woods just beyond it.

They watched a large pileated woodpecker darting in and out among the trees by the shore, clucking his loud call as he claimed his territory. They laughed at how, despite this royal-looking fellow's handsome appearance, he actually sounded a bit more like a rather noisy chicken.

Wapiya noted that, while it might be nice to have a home, "I certainly wouldn't want to have to claim an entire territory. It seems like so much work."

"But do you ever think that someday you might find a home?" Suerta asked.

"I don't know," Wapiya pondered. "I've never known one place as my home. Not like you at the garden."

Suerta clarified. "That's where my life began. But I never knew it as I should think one would know a home. It's simply where I happened to be."

"Well. Certainly neither you nor I would need to look for a house or a burrow." Wapiya observed. "We carry our own."

The woodpecker clamored again, which prompted Suerta. "And we sure don't need an entire territory."

Wapiya pondered why it is that shelter alone, just a house, seems not enough for defining a home. "There are times when I look at one place or another and think what it might be like to live there. Perhaps it has a nice view or abundant food. But no matter how lovely a place may be, it seems as though just a place by itself is still not complete."

Suerta offered an insight. "Yes, sometimes it can seem like even though you are already looking for something, you still might not be quite sure exactly what it is you're looking for."

Wapiya struck a note that resonated with both of them. "Perhaps because it's not WHAT one is looking for, but WHO. I think perhaps home is not the place itself, but rather the community who occupy it."

Suerta smiled. "Yes. Really, any place would be fine if the right group of friends were there to share it with you. A place to belong."

Wapiya contemplated. "I think, for me at least, the search for a home would actually be a search for kindred spirits. Companions."

"I like that word," Suerta said softly. "Companion. Do you know where it comes from?"

Wapiya looked at her friend with interest.

Suerta continued. "It comes from two olden words. Com, which means with. And pan, which means bread. Our companions are those with whom we share our bread."

"I like it," said Wapiya. "You know, some poets say that bread is life. So perhaps what we truly share with our companions is our lives."

"Indeed," Suerta agreed. "Just being alive. It's what we share with the whole world."

After dozing in the lazy heat with full bellies, they began to make their way down the long slope toward the edge of the pond. By the time they reached the tiny beach, the day had worn on into early evening. The sun felt warm on their backs but the shadows were quickly overtaking them from behind.

Wapiya waded into the shallow edge of the sandy shore. "That feels so good on my feet," she exclaimed. "I could soak here all night."

"Well, you should," Suerta responded. "I'm sure you are exhausted from your efforts today. And this seems like a fine place to spend the night."

The refracted rays of the setting sun behind them made a palette of colors on the ripples of the pond. Wapiya settled in with the warm water encircling her like a small island.

As Wapiya slipped into a well-deserved sleep, Suerta watched the mists forming on the water's surface. Bit by bit, the darkening sky filled with stars.

Suerta pondered what a grand and curious thing this life is. Then she too drifted into a most pleasant dream. And little did she know: it was the exact same dream that her companion was already dreaming.

Deep in the night, after their happy afternoon of feasting, the strawberries worked their magic on our intrepid explorers. They awoke to find that they had both grown a bit bigger.

Chapter 6

The pond was shrouded in thick fog as the first light of day illuminated the pastel sky. The sun itself was still quietly sneaking up behind the trees across the pond, when a group of cows with steaming breath approached them.

The snail and turtle were still barely waking up as the visitors waded in around them, lapping at the cool water. When one inquisitive calf came close to inspect them, the cold water dripping from his snout splattered around them.

"Well, now I'm awake," Suerta remarked.

Then, to their startled dismay, the young onlooker dropped a large wad of cow slobber right on their heads.

"Eeeyuk!" Wapiya squealed. However, poor Suerta was so encased in the goo that she couldn't see a thing, never mind was she able to hear her friend.

Wapiya knew what to do. "Hold on tight," she shouted as loud as she could, as she turned to prepare for a dive.

But when she turned, the young cow startled and jumped aside, making a wave.

Suerta felt her whole world pitch to one side. She clamped her belly-foot to Wapiya as tightly as she could.

It was good she did. For when the one cow leaped back, all the others jumped with her.

In a moment, they were being battered with waves from every angle. They rocked so furiously Suerta thought they might capsize.

Unable to see and having never met a cow before, Suerta wasn't sure if perhaps the cows were attacking them.

Then a tower of water came crashing over her and the whole world became a giant blur.

In a moment, however, she found herself emerging back above the surface, thankfully rinsed clean of her sticky mess. She glanced around trying to get her bearings.

Wapiya looked back to check on her as she rode the waves out toward the deep water.

Soon the ship steadied itself and Suerta assessed that all was safe.

It was only then that she realized she was sailing on water for the first time in her life. The wake curled past on each side as the grinning Wapiya paddled with her powerful legs.

Suerta marveled: yesterday flying, today sailing. She wondered what could possibly be next.

"Are you all right?" Wapiya called back.

By this point, now feeling safe and thrilled at this new experience, Suerta was standing tall, face into the breeze. She shouted her answer. "Hoist the sails and set our course for the high seas. Adventure is ours!"

When they reached the middle of the pond, Wapiya ceased paddling, and they drifted lazily as the sun burned away the fog. Wapiya gently steered them in large circles, so they could take in the views in every direction.

Back at the shore, the cows were listlessly drinking, having already forgotten the entire incident.

But Suerta would never forget. What snail had ever been so lucky to experience such adventures?!



"Land ho," Wapiya announced as they approached the edge of the wooded shore.

She lumbered out of the pond, dredging a small canal through tangles of water lilies and arrowhead plants. As she maneuvered between clumps of tall grass, stepping over mounds of thick sedge, she was aware of how much larger she now was.

This narrow border, where dry land transforms into open water, is called the riparian zone. It is a magical place where tall fuzzy reeds grow out of murky knee-deep mud.

The riparian zone is rich with a great diversity of ancient plants. It teems with swarms of the tiniest animals. It is the cradle for multitudes of water creatures. Cattails and sedges, and bryophytes older than the dinosaurs, form hiding places for the young of seemingly every type of fish and amphibian.

Suerta marveled at the tiny snails climbing up single blades of marsh grass. She thought: I might have been small enough to do that long ago but not anymore.

An old bullfrog croaked his loud displeasure as the travelers came bursting through a wall of grass into his private pool. With all his noisy crankiness, the only thing he earned for himself was a narrow escape from a heron whose attention he had attracted.

They scraped their way out of the soup, sloshing and dripping. Keeping their eastward bearing, they set off into the shadowy swamp.

Caught up in their conversations, they hardly noticed that now, with each few minutes of walking, their surroundings became cooler and dimmer. Soon they were engulfed in a world of unbroken primeval twilight.

Evening comes early in a swamp. It was not long before they were settling in for the first of what would become more than a week of damp nights.

Wapiya brought up the topic of the old man in the garden. "I only caught the last little bit of that," she said. "But you were there for all of it. Did you notice anything particular about the old man's voice?" she asked.

"Well, he certainly was distressed," Suerta observed. "And he did seem angry. But that isn't quite it."

"Do you think perhaps he was frightened?" suggested Wapiya.

"You know," said Suerta, "It seems, more than anything, like he was heartbroken. As though he were grieving."

"Well, I've thought about how he cares for his garden," Wapiya observed. "And of course, his garden provides for him as well."

The turtle continued. "It's as though he and his plants are a small community, caring for each other. Perhaps that is what's most important about a community,

about being part of a kindred group. Not so much that someone cares for you, but that you have the opportunity to care for them."

Suerta agreed. "Maybe a home is not measured by what you get from being there, but rather by what you are able to give."



On the next morning, threading their way between tangles of fallen limbs, Wapiya kept feeling that her shell was snagging on the overhanging brush.

"I think I may have something stuck to my shell," she said to Suerta. "Can you see anything from where you are?"

Suerta shifted position and stretched out for a look. "Yes," she said. "But I think all of this is actually attached."

"Do you mean more algae?" Wapiya asked.

"No," said Suerta, "This is more. There are some lichens. And even some fluffy moss."

Then, they both thought of the same thing at the same time and spoke it practically in unison. "Maybe we can get some strawberries to grow there."

They laughed at how their brains thought alike.

Then Suerta surmised. "But without spores that can just blow in the breeze, like the lichens and mosses use, I don't know how strawberries could get there. Unless a bird dropped some seeds on you."

"We can keep it on our wish list," Wapiya suggested with a grin.

Then suddenly Suerta gasped. "Oh my!"

"What is it?" asked Wapiya.

"We have a passenger," Suerta whispered.

"Some insect?" Wapiya speculated. "A caterpillar?"

"No," Suerta said softly. "It's a newly hatched tiny black snake."

"Well, he would be my little cousin, you know," Wapiya said, feeling a sense of watchful care for her tiny kin.

"Yes," said Suerta. "He can't be more than a day or two old. And he's just charming."

"What is he doing?" Wapiya asked.

"Nothing," said Suerta. "Nothing at all. Just sleeping. But he's even charming when he's only doing that."

"I guess he might have thought I was a large warm rock," said Wapiya.

"Well, we certainly know that can happen," Suerta said with a grin. "But I'm sure you are warmer and undoubtedly a much safer place for him than to be alone on the floor of this dismal swamp."

"True," said Wapiya. "So perhaps it is best that we continue to carry him for as long as he wishes to accompany us. Until he finds a path that suits him in this world."

And so, two became three.

Chapter 7

The swamp proved to be large and the going a bit slow. Nevertheless, the conversations were so engaging that days seemed to pass without notice.

Late in the afternoon of their third day. . . or was it the fourth, a large black snake slid smoothly across their path. They marveled that their tiny companion could someday be such a powerful figure in the wild.

As the day's light began to fade, they came to rest a little distance short of a small glade. Between them and the clearing, a well-used north-south trail ran crosswise to their own eastward route.

Just before the evening became too dim to see, they watched a young bear come ambling through the clearing. They knew by his round ears and soft belly that he was young. This was probably his first season on his own, without his mother.

He stopped and snuffed at the ground for several minutes. It would not be until the next morning that they would discover that he was eating all the berries in an entire small patch.

As more days passed they would further understand that this was the only patch of strawberries they would have found on the entire trek through the long dusky swamp.

Still they knew they would not suffer for having missed one meal of berries. Surely, there would be others. So, they were happy to share . . . because young bears need to grow too.

The moon rose up to where it could shine down through the trees. As they enjoyed their rest, a possum wandered into view along the trail that crossed their path.

She stopped in a well-lit spot, just a short distance in front of them, crouching down looking at the ground around her, as the bear had done earlier. After a minute or so she stood up, ready to proceed on her way.

"Osiyo," Wapiya called out the word for "hello" in the possum language.

The possum looked over and noticed the two travelers for the first time. "You speak my language," she said.

"Just hello," Wapiya responded. "It's the only one of your words I know."

"Well," said the possum, "I guess if you're going to learn a new language, hello is probably the best place to start."

She turned in their direction and came waddling - as possums do - toward them. As she drew close enough for them to see details in the shadowy light, the travelers noticed a small pair of pink feet hanging from her back.

"Oh, you have a passenger!" Wapiya exclaimed.

"Yes," said the possum with obvious delight. "He's the only little one still in the saddle."

"Lucky you," Wapiya declared.

"He was a bit small and slower to grow," said the possum. "But he has a brother who was like him, from my first litter. And in the end that brother did just fine. So I'm sure this little one will as well."

This, of course, prompted Suerta and Wapiya to tell the visitor about their own little passenger. And that, of course, then required a full round of inspections, with plenty of ooh-and-ahh.

When they were finished, the decision of the committee was unanimous. All three members were in full agreement that it was impossible to tell which one was more precious.

As they chatted a bit, Wapiya mentioned "We noticed a young bear in the clearing earlier. He was looking closely at the ground, as we noticed you were doing also. We wondered what everyone was looking at."

"Well," said the possum, "I don't know what the bear was doing, but I was just removing a few ticks from my tail."

"Oh no," Suerta exclaimed. "We hear they can make the animals very sick."

"Especially the humans," Wapiya noted.

"Well, that's true," their visitor replied. "But not us possums. Our body temperature is lower than that of the other mammals. Not as low as yours of

course. But low enough that we are not affected by the diseases that bother the others."

"Still, ticks must be annoying," Suerta noted.

"Well, it's not so bad," the possum explained. "You see there are a lot of things that people don't know about ticks. I mean, for one thing, we give them wrong names. We call them deer ticks and the poor deer are blamed unfairly. Deer are not the ones who spread ticks. They are just victims of the ticks like everyone else."

The possum went on. "You see, most of the ticks come from rodents, like mice and rats. They're the ones who spread the ticks to everyone else. Now just back there along the trail I passed a large black snake who had obviously just had a meal. Now, when a snake swallows a rodent, he also swallows and destroys all the ticks they carry. This is why all the animals of the forest respect the snakes."

"How interesting," Wapiya noted, thinking of their little passenger. Curled up in his favorite mossy spot on Wapiya's back, her young cousin listened with interest to all this talk about mighty snakes of the forest.

"But, you see," the possum continued, "Even the snake doesn't get every single tick. Some always manage to jump off. And that's where I come in."

"How so?" Suerta queried.

The possum continued her lesson about ticks. "When I pass through a spot where a snake has had a meal, all the ticks that escaped from him jump onto my tail."

"Well that must be a problem," Suerta worried.

"No," the possum explained. "It's part of our very clever system. You see my tail is the ideal tool for collecting stray ticks. It's just warm pink skin and a few coarse hairs. The skin is tough; so they can't bite into it easily. There's no fur to hide in. They just get trapped among the coarse hairs."

The two travelers were intrigued.

"Then you see," said the possum, "I have these teeth." She showed them her 52 teeth.

"Oh my!" Suerta cried out. "Very impressive," Wapiya echoed.

The possum continued. "Now these teeth are perfectly designed to scrape the ticks off my tail and *Crunch Them Up*." She said the last part with dramatic flair.

Well this conjured up all sorts of questions from the two travelers. "Are ticks nutritious?" "Do they taste good?" "Do you actually like eating ticks?"

"Well, not really," the possum laughed. "But because they can't hurt me, it's something I can do to help the others, so they won't get sick. My small contribution to the overall well-being of our forest community."

"And I must say," the possum went on, boasting a little, "The snake and I are very good at this. We make a great team. Between the two of us, we get them all."

"How generous," Suerta exclaimed. "The others must appreciate you no end!"

"Well," the possum hesitated. "Most of them do. Except the humans. They don't like us very much."

"Why ever not?!" Suerta decried. "They're the ones who get the most sick."

"Well you see," the possum stammered. She looked at the ground, a bit embarrassed. "They think we're ugly."

She noted the look of surprise on the two travelers' faces. "Oh, but not you," she reassured them. "They like both of you. They put your pictures on lots of things. But not possums. They wouldn't. . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Now let me see if I get this straight," Wapiya insisted. "They don't like you, with what I would describe as rather stylish pink toes."

"And ears to match!" Suerta chimed in.

"But they like me," Wapiya continued. "With my dinosaur beak."

"Well, you see. . ." the possum struggled to explain. "You see, they don't like our tails. And they're afraid of our teeth."

Suerta and Wapiya stared at each other in disbelief. It was the rare moment when they were both speechless.

Wapiya finally found her tongue. Her voice was incredulous.

"You mean the *SAME* tail and the *SAME* teeth that you use to protect the humans from the ticks!"

"I know," the possum said softly. "Ironic, isn't it?"

"Sadly so!" Suerta intoned.

"Oh. But I must admit," the possum added, almost as if she were apologizing. "This tail is no thing of beauty. Not soft and inviting, like a rabbit or a fox."

The three exchanged looks of frustration. They could all see what the problem was. It was Suerta who put it into words.

"Perhaps if they could see that not all tails need to be measured as things of beauty. If only they could see your tail for what it really is. A formidable weapon in the battle against a dangerous foe. Why, I should think they would want to anoint you as a warrior."

"If only that were true," the possum said sadly. "But I would just be happy if they would simply be more careful with their vehicles. So many of my kind are harmed trying to cross the roads."

Well, this brought up another entire topic of conversation, as the two travelers then recounted their tale of how just days earlier they had been rescued from a road by a human.

When they finished their story, the possum remarked. "Well, I'm glad to hear that at least some of them are thoughtful."

"You know they are a fairly young species," Wapiya noted.

"Yes," Suerta concurred. "Perhaps we can hope that humans are evolving to become better members of the natural community."

"But, oh well," Wapiya sighed. "Not even I will live long enough to see that occur."

"Certainly not me," said the possum. "My kind only live long enough to have just two or three litters."

She paused, then added. "But I will be happy if at least our offspring might be lucky enough to meet the kindhearted humans."

Once again, they all agreed.

And now it was time for the possum to be off, to finish her nightly rounds. They wished each other well and said their goodbyes.

As Mama possum turned to leave, her little passenger opened his eyes for the briefest moment. He let out an enormous yawn and promptly fell back to sleep.

But as he did, he wagged his little pink tail. Twice.

Just before the darkness swallowed them up, Suerta called out behind them.

"Buena suerte, vaquerito."

She turned to her companion. "It means: good luck, little cowboy."

Chapter 8

In a few more days. . . or was it several, they finally arrived at the end of the seemingly endless swamp. With a light rain falling, they decided to make camp under the trees at the swamp's edge.

The landscape was about to change dramatically. Looking out from the forest edge, as far as they could see before them, until the view faded into the evening drizzle, lay a large open meadow. And a meadow, of course, hopefully meant strawberries!

With tired bodies and eager taste buds, it was only minutes before they drifted into dreams as deep as the foggy night around them.

They awoke to the eastern sun gleaming through the swamp fog. It looked as though the trees were growing out of a pool of light.

As the thinning mist began to reveal their surroundings, they realized they had made their bed beneath an ancient pecan tree. Wapiya busied herself scavenging among the fallen nuts, as well as sampling some tasty spongiform mushrooms.

For wild creatures, it is always wise to take advantage of provisions whenever you find them.

However, with Wapiya's shell now well stocked with various greens, not to mention plenty of tasty algae, Suerta was not as needful of a hearty breakfast. So she was taking advantage of the swamp water, rich with tannin and minerals, for a relaxing organic bath.

"Well, I guess I'm about full enough," Wapiya announced. "I need to save some room for strawberries."

"Yes," replied Suerta. "Let's hope today is our day."

"I'm feeling lucky," Wapiya exclaimed with an air of certainty.

Suerta agreed. "If I had fingers, I'd cross them."

A cardinal in the tree above was announcing his morning call. Sugarbeet!!
Sugarbeet!!

"Sugarbeet," Wapiya called back in a neighborly tone.

She was just about to rise and turn so that Suerta could climb onto her shell, when all of a sudden, with a clatter and flurry of feathers, a bird landed on the log between them.

He stared straight at Suerta and puffed up his feathers. Without taking his eyes off of her, he pivoted and took two steps to the right. He preened the feathers of his left shoulder.

Without breaking his gaze at Suerta, he did an about-face, took three steps to the left, and preened his right shoulder.

He pivoted again, took one step back to the spot where he had landed, looking straight at Suerta the entire time and announced with a nod: "I'm in a contest!"

Suerta shot a bemused grin over the bird's shoulder to her companion behind him, whom the bird had not yet even noticed.

"Pray tell," Suerta implored, "What kind of a contest?"

"To see who has the best feathers," the visitor replied.

"Ah," Suerta acknowledged. "And what do you get if you win the contest?"

"Well. . . Um. . ." the bird stammered for an answer. "To. . . to have the best feathers. To be the winner!"

"I suppose so," Suerta replied in full agreement. "I guess that's the purpose of any contest."

Then she offered her guest a reassuring compliment. "Well, you certainly have very nice feathers. So I'm sure you will be a prime contender."

"Yes," the bird replied. "And that's where you come in. I could use your help."

Suerta regarded the bird with cautious interest.

"You see," he went on, "Most folks don't know it, but sugar beets are the secret to having feathers like THESE." He made a grand gesture, spreading all the bright pink pinnates of one entire wing.

Then he continued, "I was up in the tree calling out, when I heard someone down below say sugarbeet. Well, anyone who knows about sugar beets is someone I want to know."

"Oh, that was me," Wapiya spoke from behind him.

He turned, having not realized until now that anyone was there. He found himself looking straight into the giant face of this now enormous turtle. Her head alone was twice the size of himself. His eyes grew as big as coffee cups. He stumbled backward a couple of steps and fell off the log into the mud behind him.

Suerta and Wapiya exchanged looks that were a mixture of alarm and amusement.

Wapiya craned her neck to look behind the log, to see if he was all right. Perhaps he needed some help.

"DON'T EAT ME! DON'T EAT ME!" he pleaded.

Wapiya chuckled. "I wouldn't dream of it. Here, let me help you." She used the side of her beak to scoop him out of the mud and boost him back up onto the log.

Suerta leaned over to help him gain his balance. "Of course we wouldn't eat you," she told the stranger. "We're strawbetarians."

Well, this caught Wapiya's sense of humor by surprise. She let out a roaring laugh that rippled the swamp waters and shook the entire surroundings.

The poor bird jiggled on the quaking log. They were afraid he might fall off again. The bird wondered if he should take flight . . .but for the possibility of sugar beets.

Wapiya regained her composure and assured him that they could help.

The bird fumbled with his words, trying to apologize to Wapiya. "I'm sorry. It's just that... Well, I mean... you're so enormous. And covered with moss and. . . Well, I thought you were just a large boulder."

"Oh yes, that happens," Suerta responded in her matter-of-fact tone. She shot another grin at her companion.

Wapiya, not wanting to shake the whole world with her laughter again, bit her lip . . . figuratively, of course, because turtles don't actually have lips.

Then Wapiya drew the bird's attention. "We can tell you where to find beets that are the finest in all the land."

"I'm all ears," said the bird.

Now the two travelers were both staring at a bird who had absolutely no ears whatsoever that anyone could see. Wapiya looked hesitantly at her companion and braced herself to restrain her laughter at whatever wisecrack was coming. Fortunately, Suerta let this one pass.

"I'd be happy to make it worth your while," the bird offered. "If there's something I can do."

"Actually there is," Wapiya replied. "Let's walk out toward the clearing as we talk."

She then explained how they were hoping to add a few strawberry plants to the growing herbarium that she was sporting on her shell.

"So," she explained, "If I can dig up a few rhizomes, and you can carry them around to the back of my shell, then Suerta can direct you where to wedge them in among the other plants."

They quickly found a small patch of strawberries that were beyond the season's prime. As Wapiya dug out each sprig, the bird ferried it back and tucked each one into a crevice in the plant collection.

"So whereabouts will I find these beets?" the bird inquired.

Wapiya considered the distance. "Well," she stated, "It has taken us several days to travel from there to here."

The bird chuckled. "No offense, ladies, but the distance you could travel in several days is just a matter of minutes for me. But then, you wouldn't know what it's like to fly."

"Oh, yes," said Suerta. "We fly sometimes."

The bird regarded the snail with a puzzled look. He turned to Wapiya for clarification, but she was already busy digging and had missed that comment. He turned back to the snail.

"Of course, I prefer sailing," Suerta added nonchalantly.

The bird looked askance. He was beginning to wonder if the snail might be not quite right about things sometimes. He decided that he had better get all the important information from the turtle.

They quickly transplanted a small bed of berries. Then Wapiya turned to their visitor. "Now, before I tell you the location, I must ask you to make me a promise."

The bird was hoping he had not just been tricked. "I'll do what I can," he replied.

Wapiya continued. "The man who owns these beets prizes them above everything else. The largest ones are his pride and joy. You must promise me that you won't harm his large beets, the ones that bring him his happiness."

"Well, I certainly have no use for something so big," the bird replied. "All I need, indeed all I can handle, would just be a small beet that I can pull out and carry, like the tiny ones that grow at the edges of a garden row."

"Then we have a deal," Wapiya declared happily.

She continued. "Now we have been traveling toward the rising sun, due east. So the beets will be found by flying due west. You will pass over a small farm with a pond. And perhaps they also have beets, but the ones you seek are directly across the road. At the top of a large hay field, you will find a small white house with a fenced garden behind it. And that is where you'll find the finest beets."

The bird was elated. Preparing to make his departure, he hopped up several branches into a tree behind them, thanking them repeatedly from each branch.

Wapiya could see some large mountains in the distance, but could not make out any details of what lay between here and there.

"Say," Wapiya inquired. "From up there can you tell us what we are coming to as we head east?"

The bird responded. "First you will cross this very large meadow. It will surely take you a whole day, probably two. At the far end is a river that you will need to cross. The river is low right now, so it shouldn't be difficult. On the other side, you will reach the base of that mountain."

"You don't happen to see any patches of strawberries, do you?" the turtle asked hopefully.

"As matter of fact," said the bird, "if you go straight ahead, due east, you'll run into a very large patch in just a short distance."

With that, they bid each other farewell.

"Adios!" the snail called up to him. "Buena suerte," Wapiya joined in.

Suerta turned toward her companion and laughed. "You learn quickly, my friend."

Chapter 9

The woman scooped a soft handful of flour from the open canister. She sifted it through her fingers into the bubbly yeast water in the large bowl.

She liked this spot: this small section of butcher block set several inches lower than the rest of the counters. Just right for a not-so-tall person.

For food on a farm is not just the mixing of ingredients. It might involve wrestling cabbages the size of basketballs. And those few lower inches afforded a much better angle for leaning into the task of kneading a large bread dough.

If, as is true for most people, a home is one's anchor in the world, then a farm kitchen is certainly the hub of an entire small universe.

It was here, in this room, at that large table, where plans were made, and revised. Then revised again as the weather held sway.

Yes, for all of us, our fortunes rise and fall with the fates. And farm life is no different. Yet farm life more than any must defer to weather's fickle mood.

It was in these chairs where abundant years were celebrated. And even in the meager years, it was here that tired shoulders could rest on an elbow as weary bones were soothed and nourished.

Even in the leanest of times, the land always gives enough for at least a bowl of sustenance. Enough to rise up and try again for another day, another season.

But if this room was the core of their social gravity, then this small wooden counter must be the wellspring of life itself.

There was a bedrock character to this old chunk of wood, smoothed from a century-long parade of hands fixing generations of meals. A legion of hungry bellies all fed from this tiny spot in the universe.

She sifted more handfuls of flour into her bowl and reached for her favorite wooden spoon from the collection in an urn. Just an ordinary utensil but sturdy enough that it might serve as canoe paddle in a pinch.

Although the spoon had no direct connection to her grandfather, for some odd reason she thought of him each time she picked it up. Maybe because he was

also plain, rugged and timeworn. Such a humble hard-wearing tool evoked his nature.

She remembered how he always honored his work horses with praise and caring. She thought: just like his horses, he was a fielder.

There were just a handful of mentors who had taught her about food, from the garden to the table. And she had learned as much from him as anyone, both outdoors and in the kitchen, for he was proficient in either place.

She marveled at how our thoughts can conjure up the sound of a voice that isn't present. She could still hear him say it as if she were once again standing at his elbow. "Take good care of your tools and they'll take good care of you."

So much of life's journey is mundane. We hardly think much of the days as they pass. Yet no one could ever prepare enough to travel across the expanse of emptiness that occurs when a voice, once so familiar, no longer chirps amid the clatter of chores and routines.

She stirred the thickening batter in the bowl. There was a contentedness to any time spent in this spot.

What she loved the most was the large wide window that came all the way down to the wooden surface. From here, she could gaze down across her shady little yard, where crocuses would push their way through the last snows of early spring and leaves would chase each other in circles on a sunny autumn day.

She could see down to the large hickory tree at the corner of the driveway. A venerable old specimen, spreading its limbs like a mother hen, taking in all whose paths bring them to this sheltered place.

She watched an old truck turn south out of the driveway onto the dusty road. Her gaze lifted to watch the birds, darting to and fro above the arching hay field across the way. The field rose up toward its north end, surrounding their neighbor's garden and home near the crest of the hill.

Her eyes ran beyond the field to the dark cool mountain rising to the west. There, in its quiet hollows, the deer slept in the afternoons as the woodpeckers busied themselves, drilling every hollow trunk in their endless search for termites.

There, along that edge where the field meets the forest, the creek cuts a silent swath, carrying the answer for all who thirst. There, where the cool shade of late afternoon creeps down the mountainside long before the sky above turns pale, the secrets of the world lay open for all to see.

She thought how this small stretch of land surrounding them holds so many habitats, each one its own little universe. Each one provides the nurture for myriad creatures, whose lives are as intertwined as the threads of sturdy cloth.

The insects who hijack flowers to nurture their larvae. The songbirds hunting the insects in the tall grass. The night creatures who clamber down the mountain at sunset to search for crayfish in the creek. The cattle, the chickens, the humans who tend them. And all the tiny creatures who nibble at the edges of life. All find ways to make a living in each other's shadows.

In her studies of biology they had a name for this single place that held so many niches for so many neighbors. They called it a community. And no other term could have fit it better.

Her gaze trailed back across the glistening hay. That hay would need mowing again soon, perhaps today. If the weather held for the next few days, if you can trust such predictions, they would be busy: cutting, then turning and drying, then baling.

It was just the three of them for baling again this year. But that was OK. If they started early and worked until dusk, it could be done in a day.

On such warm days as this, with the window open, no glass barrier muted the hum of life that buzzed just outside. The world was always singing, always telling its story, a story as old as the mountain that watched over them all.

For a moment, she thought of her mother. Her eyes turned toward the stout ceramic mug, older than her own bones, resting on the windowsill. She watched a small wisp of steam wafting toward her with its burnished scent.

It must be the coffee, she said to herself with a grin. It was the same grin she would have made if she had said that aloud with her mother sitting right there. The patter of their shared humor was embedded in her like an instinct.

Her reverie was interrupted by the squeal of the hinge on the porch's back door. The voice of the girl who had been down beneath the hickory tree, who had disappeared momentarily behind the old blue truck, called out through the open inner door.

"Papa's going to Oliver's to get something."

"Well, I'm surprised you didn't jump in," the woman replied. "Eggs and all."

The girl set down her chore bucket and plopped into the chair next to the large mat full of boots and shoes. "No," she said. "He's picking up Leo on the way. But I'm going with them later when they work down by the pond."

"Ah," said mother. "Never one to shirk a chore that involves going to the pond."

"Ha Ha," said the girl as she tugged at one of her chore boots.

"Did you rinse out Mo's bowl?" mother inquired.

The girl set the first boot on the mat and began tugging at the other. "Yes," she replied. "But I hardly needed to. He licks it as clean as if we'd washed it."

She paused. Then added. "And then he washes his little hands and face."

"Possums are such polite guests," said mother, in her most dignified tone, one befitting visitors from high society.

Then her tone turned matter of fact. "Besides, you don't want to be walking around out there at night smellin' like fried chicken."

The girl straightened her boots on the mat and picked up her pail. "All I know," she said as she entered the kitchen, "is I'm just glad I don't have to pick so many slugs in the garden anymore."

Chapter 10

Little Mo had come to them in spring of the previous year.

It was one of the first evenings that was warm enough to sit out on the porch, their favorite place after supper.

The girl was the first to spot him: a sleek silvery wisp, flitting in and out among the dappled shadows beneath the towering tulip poplar in the driveway.

He came wobbling - as we know possums do - along the back walkway and disappeared near the porch steps. He emerged again into the side lawn and wobbled over to the apple tree, poking his nose into every nook and crevice of its roots.

He turned and came weaving his way back toward them, then disappeared right below where they were sitting. In a moment, he reappeared from the end of the porch behind them. He ambled around the front of the house and off toward the garden on the other side.

Mama said he looked like he was wandering in the wilderness. So they called him Moses. But he was small as possums go, never grew to be very big. So the name Moses gradually evolved into Little Mo.

Those first few weeks, he was only an intermittent guest. But then, as spring wore on into early summer, he became a consistent visitor at the nightly festivities.

At the girl's insistence, they found an old bowl in the milking shed: one of many from a collection that had served a long history of barn cats. It was solid and weighty, with sturdy straight sides, not easily tipped over.

A faint outline of faded letters harkened the name of some illustrious feline who held prominence among the generations of mouse hunters.

They placed it in the lawn between the porch and the apple tree, where they could leave him a scrap from dinner each evening, a small offering to this soft-natured messenger from the wilds.

It soon became apparent that he had a routine. First, he would head straight to the bowl for his treat. Then he was off around the house to the garden, where

there were always scraps of vegetables, but of greater importance, a plentiful supply of a possum's favorite delicacy: slugs.

From the garden, he would wander off to wherever possums go when their bellies are full.

As far as the girl was concerned, this was a partnership that merited her full support.

However, it wasn't long before he changed his routine, heading home from the garden past the porch again, the same way he had come. This way he could check the bowl a second time, in case the magic of the bowl might be strong enough to produce a second treat.

And sometimes the magic was powerful. Because sometimes, somehow, a small piece of a raisin cookie would appear there.

Winter came early and sharp that year. The winds were biting cold and the trees were stripped of leaves sooner than usual.

It was then that they realized Little Mo had made a nest for himself up in the corner underneath the big shed off the back of the barn. It was a serviceable hideout, but with bitter winds and no snow yet piled against the shed's undersides, it was minimal.

Now the thing with possums is that they face a dilemma each winter. With sparse fur and bare skin on their ears and feet, they are at great risk of dying from hypothermia. Even those who make it through a bitter season might lose toes or the corner of an ear to frostbite.

However, during the winter, they are also at risk of malnutrition. In a long cold season, they can easily burn up all their fat trying to stay warm. But this is the fat that they also need to insulate them from the cold. Yet, if they venture out to seek for food, which many times they might not even find, then they risk the deadly dangers of frostbite and hypothermia.

One afternoon, the girl gave in to her curiosity. She crept quietly down behind the barn to peek in where he had his dark little nest. When she got there, she saw that her father and Leo had taken old hay bales and stacked them along the open side, blocking the wind that might threaten their little friend.

Then Papa's old jacket with the torn sleeve disappeared.

Only later did the girl and her mother find out that on a previous evening, as little Mo was busily distracted with his nightly treat, Papa had used a long rake handle to shove the worn-out coat up into the corner where Mo had his nest.

He knew that the possum might at first not like this unfamiliar thing. But it would only take a few days of sleeping on it until it would feel, that is smell, like his own.

Helping Little Mo through the dangers of winter had become a whole family project.

As the weather grew increasingly fierce with patches of ice, they decided to move the bowl down to the lower end of the driveway near the shed. This way, they could leave regular meals that their little friend could get without risking much time out in the cold with his small pink feet on the frozen ground.

During a few particularly bitter spells that winter, when they went to deliver the daily ration, they found the previous evening's meal was still in the bowl. Then they would wait, holding their breath with worry . . . and sigh with relief each time the rations started disappearing again.

When the second spring came, all was successful. Little Mo appeared again, whole and intact, ready to resume his duties as defender of the garden.

The bowl came back to the side yard where they could once again smile upon his nightly visits.

They even painted his name on it: Lil'Mo.

It covered up most of the old writing, but you could still make out the hazy letters of the previous owner's name: L U C K Y

Chapter 11

The girl set her bucket on a chair by the table and began placing eggs into some well-used cartons.

"Well," said mother, "I don't begrudge him a roof over his head and a few scraps of gristle if he's going to help out with the chores around here."

"It's like he gets paid to work here," said the girl.

Mama grinned: "Little Mo the farmhand."

"Why, he can be Leo's assistant!" the girl announced.

Mother turned and tipped her head. She peered at her daughter from beneath her eyebrows. "No, that would be you, my dear," she said with a smirk. "Little Mo will just have to be your assistant."

"Well, I guess he is," said the girl. "He helps me battle the slugs."

She placed the cartons in the fridge and poured herself a glass of milk. She hopped over next to her mother and reached to steal a small spoonful of mother's sweet dark brew, just enough to flavor her drink.

"There's strawberries, you know," said mother.

"I'll have those for dessert," the girl giggled, and stole her spoonful of coffee.

"There's enough to make something to have after supper tonight," said mother.

"Remind your dad to bring some cream from the shed."

The girl slid onto the end of the bench, at the corner of the table, next to the half of a biscuit she had left from breakfast. She tore off a corner of it and nibbled it with her drink. "How long has Leo been here?" she wondered aloud.

"He came to work for your grandpa Russell when your father was about as big as you are now," said mother. "Your dad and I were still little kids at the corner school and Leo was already a grown young man."

"It's funny how he came here," said the girl.

"Well, he wasn't from here," said mother. "He came to town with the crews that come each year for harvest. Grampie needed a helper to stay on for a couple of weeks."

And as sometimes happens in this life, weeks turn into decades.

The girl considered the years gone by. She did the calculation in her head. "He's probably lived here longer than anywhere he ever lived before," she said. "Most of his life. It's almost like he's part of our family."

"He IS as far as I'm concerned," said mother, in the surety of tone she reserved for things that are indisputable. No one has the authority to question proven facts.

"But I mean it's funny," said the girl, "how he came to live on our farm, with our family."

Mama stopped kneading for a moment. She rested her hands on the ball of dough and stared out the window. "For some people in this life," she said, "family are just the ones you gather along the way." She turned toward her daughter. "And home is just wherever you happen to find them."

The girl gathered up her dishes, along with Papa's cup with the last two sips long grown cold, and headed for the sink.

"You know possums don't live very long," she said. "Only a few years. Little Mo has already lived here most of his life too."

She paused. "So I guess if Leo is family, then that means Little Mo is family too."

"He IS as far as I'm concerned," said mother, purposely repeating her tone for the emphasis.

The girl began rinsing her utensils and placing them in the drain board. "But, Mama, there was the funniest thing outside."

"Well, I saw you looking up in the tree," said mother. "What was it?"

"It was a bird," said the girl. "A cardinal. And he was carrying a beet."

"A beet!" said mother in shocked surprise. "Well he better not be pecking at Henry's beets. Poor fellow has had enough trouble already with slugs this year."

"Henry needs an opie," the girl admonished.

Mama grinned. "Maybe we should ask Little Mo if he has a brother who needs a job." They laughed together.

"But this wasn't one of Henry's prize beets," said the girl. "This was just one of those little stragglers that grows at the end of the row. But he sure did look funny, sitting there on that branch, with the beet hanging out one side of his mouth and the floppy green leaves dangling down the other."

"I wonder if he has to eat beets to make his feathers turn red," said Mama.

"I thought maybe he rubs them on his feathers," said the girl. "Like gettin' your hair dyed."

They laughed together again, partly at the jokes, but mostly because of how they always think of the same kinds of silly things.

The girl grabbed a towel to dry her hands. "But he sure was the brightest red little cardinal you ever did see," she said. "Why, I bet if there was a contest for the most handsome bird, he'd win."

She hung the towel on its peg and grabbed a strawberry from the bowl in the fridge. One good sliding skip carried her across the kitchen. She wedged herself between the low counter and Mama's side.

She liked this spot.

So many of her favorite things to eat came into being right here.

Papa says Mama can make anything out of anything.

Where once she would have hung by her fingertips barely peeking over the edge, now she could easily rest her elbows on the old block of wood.

She liked the way it looked and felt: smooth, and as solid as if it were history itself. As if all the stories ever told in this kitchen were written down in its grain. Stories older than Mama and Papa, even older than Leo.

And she liked the big window that comes all the way down, because then you can look out through it and see the whole world.

But most of all she liked to watch Mama's hands turning the dough. They were like two little birds when they dance together in springtime.

If there was company, she could say: I bet you could do that in your sleep, Mama. Then Mama says: I bet I already do. And then everybody laughs.

To the girl her mother's hands were all the proof that anyone needs to know that something can be both strong and beautiful at the same time.

She watched the now-satiny ball of dough, turning over and over easily. No longer sticky. "Almost time to go in the bowl," she said.

"Yep," said Mama, "Time to rise."

With that, Mama tossed the wiggly wad into the giant grandmother bowl and pulled a towel over it in the sun.

The girl slipped one arm between Mama and the bowl and joined hands with the other one coming around from behind. She was big enough now, she could pull Mama toward herself if she wanted to.

Mama looked down approvingly and said, "Well, this sure has been your summer for seeing unusual critters."

The girl tilted her head and grinned back up at her mother. "I guess I'm just lucky."

Chapter 12

Well, the bird proved true to his word. In just a short time of plodding, the two travelers ran into the most enormous strawberry patch they could have imagined.

The berries were large and lush, at the peak of their prime.

They considered their weeklong berryless trek through the swamp. And ahead of them, rivers to cross. But mostly they considered the fact that they were not on any kind of schedule.

So, no point in rushing your way through a feast. Certainly, their valiant swamp efforts deserved a day off. But how to make this decision official?

Why, declare a holiday, of course. And so they did.

They set down to determine a good name and theme for the holiday. In the course of the afternoon, they came up with several dandy ones.

The sun was just right and the menu superb. There was napping, and burping, and laughing. Even a few visitors.

As they lolled away the afternoon, their conversation turned again to that now familiar topic: home.

Suerta looked off in the distance, as if speaking it might enable her to see it. "I wonder if at some point our journey will bring us among a group of kindred creatures that might become our home."

Wapiya suggested, "Perhaps it is not so much that one finds a home, but that your home finds you."

"I guess we will know it if we see it," Suerta pondered. "Or perhaps not see it, but feel it."

Wapiya ventured an idea. "In that we are two individuals, I guess we would really find two homes."

Suerta looked down toward the ground in front of her. She didn't want her companion to see her expression, for it saddened her to think that they might live in separate places.

"But of course," the ever-observant Wapiya continued, "that doesn't mean that those two homes wouldn't be the exact same place. Just that it would fit each of us differently, according to who we are."

Suerta's smile returned. She looked up and whispered softly. "Compañeras"



The day wore on with happy taste buds and blissful bellies, until the sun got lost in the swamp behind them.

The waxing three-quarter-moon rose early and high. In the evening breeze, the moonlit grasses ran in silver ripples, as though the two explorers were surrounded by an illuminated sea.

"We are like islands," Suerta remarked.

"Yes," Wapiya noted. "And what people forget about islands is that they are actually mountain peaks. And beneath the water, even though you can't see it, they are connected."

Threads of fog rose from the meadow and the sky faded to deep indigo, as the two tired travelers drifted softly into contented slumber.

As they slept, they dreamed. And though you might not believe it, again they both dreamed the exact same dream.

In their dream, they lived in lovely community, where field and forest and river all lay together. And, of course, there was a generous patch of strawberries.

All the creatures pooled their efforts to tend their communal garden. The deer scratched and tugged at the grasses while mice and moles burrowed through them, keeping the thatch aerated. Skunks were happy to dig out any troublesome grubs.

Birds spread seeds of every kind. The possum kept the ticks at bay, while crows kept a watchful guard over everyone, especially any young ones. Even the humble cow did his part, providing the fertilizer to keep the soil rich.

And the squirrels: well, certainly they planted many acorns. But as near as everyone could tell, the squirrels were mostly there just for entertainment.

When the evening grew dim, the scruffy owl hopped out on his perch and convened a lively discussion of everything and anything of no importance.

Each one found a way to contribute. Everyone found a place to belong.



Yes. As they slept, they dreamed. And as they dreamed, they GREW.

Now true, they had been feasting the entire day and their bellies were brim stock full with the magical nutritiousness of strawberries.

But it wasn't the strawberries that made them grow. No.

Because strawberries don't really have any magical powers. Do they? No.

You see, the magic that makes us all grow inside is simply belonging.

EPILOGUE

Down in the heart of Appalachia, there's a valley with three rivers. And a mountain that watches over it all. A massive rounded turtle-shaped pile of iron-rich boulders left from the birth of the planet. And a long spiraling snail-shaped foothill nestled between the mountain and the river.

It is here, after the serviceberry blooms, that the whippoorwill comes home each spring to cry his lonesome tale along the river banks.

Here, where the patchwork meadows grow shoulder high, the diminutive bluebird balances on a single stalk of grass. And here, when dusk creeps across the foothill, the deer come to nuzzle and browse beneath the stars, as ghosts of fog rise up from the thatch.

Those vaporous spirits of the night will lead you, if you are willing, to the swamp: where the croaking things chant their deafening chorus and the slithering one wends his solitary way.

The swamp holds many secrets, secrets that will test you. For you must be tested before you enter the sanctuary of the mountain, before you walk among the pillars of that timeless cathedral: the gnarled oaks, the brooding pines and stately poplars.

They spread their canopy above the sassafras and mountain laurel, sheltering all the humble thicket dwellers who make their homes in the tangle of roots and rocks.

In the forest, even in the heat of summer, the cool shade beckons you: follow the mossy stream, upward, into the canyons, where the towering jagged walls reach up to touch the incandescent clouds.

Here you can witness the crows as they tumble and play on the hazy updrafts. Now you can learn the wisdom of the inscrutable lizard, meditating on his warm rock.

Only the lizard is bold enough to witness when the sky leans down and breaks itself over the mountain, pouring out waters of life from the storms of a small planet's existence.

Waters that curl down through creek beds to rivers, that flow across the piedmont of our history to the sea, from where we all came.

And they say,

Away up in the craggy headwaters of Little Daughter Creek, along the east ridge of the mountain, there's an ancient boulder that looks just like the face of a smiling turtle, peeking out from under her shell, looking straight toward the rising sun.

If you're lucky, you can find it.