

Snail Girl, a Navajo Story

Long ago, it is said, there was a mighty flood, and the People left their world, the Fourth World, the Underworld, and came up into the Fifth World, the world we live in today. They found themselves on the shore of a great ocean.

The People broke into groups by clan and went out to find new homes. But at the end of four days, they came back to the place by the ocean.

"There's no fresh water to drink in this world," they said. They stood by the biggest body of water they had ever seen, but it was salty and they couldn't drink it without getting sick. "What are we going to do?" they asked.

First Woman stood in front of the People and spoke. "Someone will have to go back down to the old world below, back through the hole from which we emerged, to find some fresh water. If I could have just a little water, I could sing my water song and make many streams and rivers grow."

First Woman was the first human being ever made. She was tall with strong arms and hands and a gentle, kind face. Her eyes shone with wisdom and strength. She looked at the People, and her eyes fell on the group that was the Water Clan.

"One of you should go," she said. "You should have brought the water with you when we left the old world."

Then First Woman made a beautiful water bottle out of sea shells. She put a stopper made of red coral in the opening and she wove some rainbow into a loop to carry it. When she finished, she held it up in front of her and faced the Water Clan.

"So, who will go?" she asked.

Out of the group came two Animal People, Otter and Beaver. Long, long ago, before the world was finished, they say there were Animal People. Otter and Beaver walked upright on two legs, but they had wide tails like paddles, just like the tails they wear today, and they were great warriors.

Otter said, "We're from the Water Clan. We're the best swimmers, and we should be the ones to go."

First Woman smiled at them proudly. She hung the water bottle around Otter's neck. Together, Otter and Beaver jumped into the water. They went down, down, down until they reached the bottom and walked along the ocean floor.

Soon they came to a valley of water lilies. There were lilies of every color. It was so beautiful that Otter and Beaver decided to stop.

Beaver said, "We should take some of these flowers and plant them in our new world!"

"Good idea," Otter agreed.

So Otter put down the bottle, and soon they were both covered from head to toe in water lilies, roots, and vines. When they had gathered all they could, they journeyed back to the world above.

When they came out of the water, the People waiting on the beach were amazed. Otter and Beaver looked like two trees coming out of the ocean.

"It's us!" Otter yelled.

The people cried, "Otter and Beaver have come back!" Everyone was excited.

"Look what we found!" Beaver said. "We're going to plant these here in our new home!"

First Woman anxiously waited for the water bottle.

Otter pulled and tugged at the roots and vines. "I've got it," he said. "It's here somewhere." But he looked and looked and couldn't find it.

"You have it, cousin Beaver," Otter said. Together they pulled and tugged on the vines and flowers, but they didn't find the bottle.

"Oh, no!" Otter cried. "I think we forgot it... down there... ." Otter's voice got smaller as he realized what they had done.

First Woman's eyes narrowed. "This won't do at all. You two go away from here. I don't want to see you for awhile."

So Beaver and Otter waddled away, dragging their tails between their legs, to plant their vines and flowers. Today we know that Otter and Beaver still surround themselves with water lilies and roots and vines.

Next, First Woman sent Frog and Turtle to get water. They brought the water bottle back when they returned, but it was filled with salt water. So First Woman sent them away, too.

First Woman was growing weary of the Water Clan's mistakes. She was not used to being this upset. "We still don't have any fresh water," she said.

Someone tugged on her dress. First Woman looked down and saw a thin little girl with long, raven-black hair.

"I am Snail," the child said in a small, squeaky voice. "I'm from the Water Clan, and I'd like to help my people. I want to go get the water."

First Woman looked at the People and the People looked at each other. Everyone knew that Snail was the slowest swimmer of the Water Clan. Nobody thought she would make it, but nobody else wanted to go. First Woman nodded. "You are very brave, Snail," she said. And she tied the bottle to Snail Girl's back. Snail slowly slipped into the great waters. She went down, down, down to the land at the bottom, her long black hair flowing behind her.

Snail Girl went past the valley of water lilies, past the place where Turtle and Frog had gone. Finally, Snail came to a hole in the sand with bubbles coming out of it. She went into the darkness of this hole, deeper and deeper, back to the Fourth World.

There she found some pure water. She tasted it, and it was delicious and fresh. There was just enough to fill up the water bottle. She carefully placed the coral stopper tightly in the bottle. She went back up through the hole and made her journey home.

The full moon was shining when Snail Girl came out of the water. She had been gone for such a long time that no one waited for her at the seashore.

Slowly, Snail Girl walked up the hill where she made her home. She was so tired that she didn't feel the rainbow loop coming loose and the water bottle falling off her back. She was so worn out that she didn't hear the bottle dragging in the dirt and rocks. She was so sleepy that she didn't notice the water trickling out.

Snail Girl went to her home and took the bottle off her back. She looked at it and couldn't believe her eyes. There was a hole in the bottom of the bottle.

"Oh no! It's empty!" she cried.

She was so exhausted that she couldn't even cry. She fell to the ground fast asleep.

First Woman woke up from a dream. "I dreamed Snail has returned!" she whispered. First Woman believed in the power of dreams.

She ran down to the ocean's edge. She followed Snail Girl's trail up the hill. Halfway up she saw something shining at her feet in the moonlight. She stopped and reached down to touch it. It was wet. She tasted it. "Fresh water!" she said, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Snail did it!"

Long ago, they say, everyone had a magic song. First Woman began to sing her magic song, and the small drops of pure water began to grow. They turned into a trickle at first, then a stream, then a river. The river got longer and wider and deeper and faster, and soon the biggest river anybody had ever seen rushed into the ocean.

First Woman looked at the river and smiled, and then she remembered Snail.

First Woman ran to Snail Girl's home and woke her up. Snail opened her weary eyes and saw it was First Woman, and she said, "All the water is gone. Look at the bottle. There's a hole in it." She began to cry.

But First Woman's eyes lit up. "Come with me, Snail," she said, and they went outside. A beautiful river ran down the hill to the ocean.

"You did it, Snail," First Woman said. "You carried the water all the way back from the old world, and even though a hole wore through the bottle as you walked up the hill, I got here in time to take a seed of water and make it grow." Snail smiled.

Snail Girl and First Woman stood together near the top of the hill and watched the sun rise over the river. As the People awoke and came out of their homes, they were amazed at what they saw. They whooped and hollered with joy and happiness.

The people held a giving thanks ceremony. Everyone sat in a circle and Snail was the Honored One.

First Woman spoke. "Snail, you are very brave, and we thank you. From this day on, you will carry the water bottle on your back as a symbol of your great journey. You will leave a trail of moisture behind you every place you travel. This will be a message to everyone that our pure water is precious and we must take care of it."