

Susan of the Nisenan

by Brigid Amos

Susan crunched the leaves under her feet, releasing a scent of dry oak. She peered into the brown curls, but it was not these dead castoffs that interested her. What the girl sought were the tasty acorns that hid in the forest litter, and she brushed away the leaves to reveal a few plump specimens. These were the acorns of the black oak, the staple of the Nisenan people. She and her mother would boil them into a nourishing soup that smelled of autumn sunlight. It was a woody aroma, as familiar to her as these mighty trees preparing themselves for winter, from a soup cooked not in metal but in baskets that her mother wove from tule. They would mash the acorns on a stone metate and leach out the acids. Then, they would mix the meal with clear water from the stream and drop hot rocks into the basket to cook the soup. Susan's mother wove baskets so tightly that not a drop of the rich mixture oozed out.

The white men who came here for gold were not like her father. They ate food carried up from the valley in carts. The food was often wrapped in metal. This seemed strange to Susan, for food was all around for the taking: spring greens such as wild lettuce, clover, and fiddleneck, wild currants for jelly and manzanita berries for cider, sourberries in the winter, and pinenuts saved in the spring and savored all year. When they had a hunger for meat, there were rabbits and quail to be trapped. Sometimes the men went hunting and brought deer back to the village. And acorns were plentiful in the fall and were stored all year.

Susan's father had learned to love acorn soup. He had grown strong on it after her mother had found him lying in a gorge with a broken leg, abandoned by his trapping party. If her father, who was as white as any of these prospectors, could eat acorn soup, why couldn't they? There was no reason to starve in these hills.

Soon, her basket was half full. Her father had warned her not to wander too far from home, but the acorns drew her on. The further she strayed, the more abundant they became. Out here, they had not been picked over quite so much by the other Nisenan women.

Susan reached down to pick up an acorn that rested on a fallen branch. As she straightened up, she heard a sound different from the light pattering of leaves and tiny branches that fell like a soft rain in the senescent forest. It was the crunch of a footstep, and her woodland ear told her it was not the gentle touch of a deer or the frantic hop of a rabbit. It was heavy and human, and the absence of a greeting made her skin tingle with fear.

She turned around to see a man standing out in the open, watching her. He was heavysset and dirty. His tangled black beard lay on his chest like a dead animal. Above it, his eyes gleamed like those of a hungry predator. He stared at each part of her body in turn, taking in her feet, her hips, her chest, and finally her face. Each part of her anatomy turned cold under his scrutiny.

Susan tried to plan an escape, but fear clouded her brain. The man stood between her and the village. She had to run, but not that way.

The man suddenly lumbered toward her, shaking her from her cloud, and she took off in the opposite direction. All her life, she could run like a deer. And she fled not knowing where to go, but confident that she could keep ahead of this filthy man. Young and light-footed, she skimmed over the crumpled leaves. Trees flew by as if they were running in the other direction. She heard labored breathing behind her, but far enough back to know she was putting distance between them.

As she passed the trunk of a large cedar tree, something white and indistinct flashed in the corner of her eye. Strong arms clasped her upper torso as the putrid stench of a neglected body filled her nostrils. They fell to the ground together. The attacker landed on her hip bone, pounding an anvil of pain into her pelvis.

Susan realized that this was a different, smaller man. The heavy man had run her like a deer into a trap. Now she wished she had run the other way, toward home. Maybe she could have eluded the

heavy man and reached safety, but it was too late now.

"Let me go!" Susan screamed into the flaccid face that hovered above hers. The man's hot breath stank of rotting digestion, and she turned her own face away. A dirty straw hat lay upside down on the ground just inches from her nose, and she realized that was what she saw flying out at her from behind the tree.

"The Digger talks English," the man said, still lying on top of her and pinning her wrists to the ground. He spoke to the heavysset man who had just arrived, panting and flushed.

"I don't care what she talks," the heavy man replied. "It ain't her conversation that interests me."

Susan screamed and struggled under the thinner man's weight. The man crooked his skinny neck and looked up at his partner.

"Hold her arms," he said calmly. As his partner lay his meaty palms over her wrists, the other man reached over, picked up the straw hat, and popped it onto his head. Then, with his hips still plastered to Susan's, he arched upwards, reached back with his hand, and brought it crashing down onto her face.

Susan stopped screaming, and for a few seconds forgot to breathe. The men drifted away from her while she felt herself sinking heavily into the soil. But the respite was momentary, and their watery faces came back into painful focus.

"If you want to do this the hard way, missy, that's all right with me," the man in the straw hat said. "But I wanted you to know what all that squealing's gonna get you. Now, why don't you do yourself a favor and keep your mouth shut?"

Susan felt something warm and wet flowing over her lips. She didn't want the man to hit her again, but what the two of them were threatening to do to her was so much worse that she had to risk it. She took a deep breath and screamed out for help in the Nisenan language.

The heavy man looked down at her with disgust. "Damn it, Jack. If there was a few whores up this way, we wouldn't have to go through all this."

The man in the straw hat prepared to hit Susan again, when suddenly his tight, angry expression melted into one of shock. His hand froze where he had raised it for the blow. Susan thought at first that he was having some sort of fit, but the heavy man had also gone still with the same fearful look.

"Get off that girl, or I'll blow your head off. But slowly. You don't want to make me jump."

As her attacker rolled off of her onto the ground, Susan found herself staring up at the barrel of a pistol. The pistol followed the movement of the man in the straw hat, allowing her to see some of the beautiful shell work on the handle. Such an object of beauty would be prized among her people, and she found great comfort in it. She followed the long finger twitching on the trigger, up the arm to the shoulder, neck, and finally to the face of her rescuer. Not even the fear that had gripped her heart could lessen the feeling that face evoked in her. It was the most beautiful face she had ever seen, and in that moment, she knew it was the one that would occupy her thoughts for the rest of her life. These smelly, quivering men no longer had any power over her. Only this man with the black wavy hair and dark eyes could have that power.

"I should kill you both right now," he said.

The smaller man carried a pistol, but it was too late for him to draw. Neither of them had seen the stranger creep up behind them.

"We wasn't doing nothing. We was just having a little game with this here Indian girl," the heavysset man said.

"I know what kind of games you play. Now turn around and start walking. Don't even look back."

"How do we know you won't just shoot us in the back?" asked the heavysset man.

"You have my word. Now get going."

"Your word," sneered the smaller man.

The stranger lifted the pistol and aimed it at the man's chest. "If you won't take my word, perhaps you will take a bullet instead?"

At that, the men turned around and started walking. The stranger watched them until they were gone, then turned to look at the girl. Her full lips were marred by a flow of blood from her nose. He pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and gently dabbed at her mouth.

"Thank you," she said, looking into his face for a response.

"You speak English?"

"My father is white."

He wiped the blood from her face. She stood before him like a meek child.

"Which way is your village?" he asked.

"This way," she said, and to his surprise, slipped her hand into his and began to lead him through the woods toward her home.