

# The Rising Sun

By Anders D.

Runner Up | Most Heart Award

It was a typical morning in the desert. The yucca rippled in the wind, the cactus blossoms closed, and the roadrunner called to hail the rising sun. It was the same way every morning, always so beautiful and calm, and that was why Sunitha came to this spot every morning to watch the sun rise. It gave her soothing regularity in the haphazard hustle and bustle of daily life. She remembered when, 9 years ago, her grandmother had brought her up the steep, rocky trail of the mesa to watch the desert sun shed its light on the Earth Mother. It was so beautiful, and so peaceful, that she had come here every morning since then. It gave her time to collect her thoughts, and contemplate her role in the ever growing world.

And so many thoughts she had, for tomorrow was her fifteenth birthday, the day she would enter adulthood, the day she would become a woman, be given a husband, and do a woman's duties. She didn't want to, but such was the way of the Zuni. It was not her choice.

As for the woman's work, her mother, Meli, had been teaching her to wash clothes, weave cotton cloth, and sew for the past year. Sunitha hated it. "I know you don't like it," Meli had told her, "but you will have to learn. I did not like it either at first, but it is fate. You are my little sunbeam. You will learn, I know you will." Sunitha just nodded, skeptically.

And now, as the sun rose higher in the sky, Sunitha stood up and peered over the edge of the mesa down to the pueblo, where her eyes locked upon the small dwelling on the southern edge of the pueblo; the humble abode where she lived with her mother. Those four clay walls had sheltered her and her family for generations. But they couldn't shelter her from adulthood. Accepting her fate, she steeled her nerves, turned around, and began the trek down the trail to the pueblo.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Here's how it's going to go: today you will be sent out into the world." Meli said, barely holding herself together. "Go around the pueblo, meet people, discover the things you didn't know about our home." To Sunitha, this was shocking. She didn't know that she could do this! She didn't want to either, but she didn't want to be hard on her mother. "Okay," she said. And she stepped into the blistering heat, into the unknown world.

She had barely passed through her door when a voice called out "Hey!" She turned around. A man, not much older than herself, was calling to her.

"You turn fifteen today, right?" he said, not bothering with introductions.

"Yes," responded Sunitha, caught off guard.

"I'm Kwam'e." said the man. "I live over there." He gestured in the general direction of the entire pueblo. "We should hang out sometime."

Now Sunitha understood his question of her age. He wanted her to be his wife. "No thanks," she

said.

“Well, let me know if you change your mind,” he said, disappointed. “You know where to find me.”

As Kwam’e stalked off, Sunitha bit her lip. One squandered, only a few left. He wasn’t right for you, she reminded herself. Not him. But every time she remembered his smiling face, she thought of her mother’s disappointment. Not him, she told herself.

The sun was now high in the sky, and the air was hot and dry. She still had yet to find herself a partner, the one she knew her mother wanted her to find. It wasn’t Lonyn, or Ke’wha, or Halian.

“Girl, you are much too thin!” Sunitha jumped. “Come in and have a bite to eat.” A fat woman was leaning out of a doorway to her left. Sunitha was about to decline, when she realized that she was famished. She thanked the kind woman, and followed her into the home.

The woman, who turned out to be Tiwa, ladled Sunitha a big bowl of steaming hominy soup. Tiwa sat down with Sunitha and began to talk with her. “You’re Sunitha, right?” the woman asked. Sunitha was stunned. The whole pueblo knew about her. Tiwa chuckled.

“When you live in a pueblo this small, news travels fast.” she said. Sunitha shook her head, smiling inwardly. She looked up, and for the first time, she noticed a boy in the corner, sweeping the floor with his head hung. “That good-for-nothing’s Lusio,” Tiwa said, following Sunitha’s gaze. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t birthed him.” Sunitha tried, but she couldn’t pry her eyes from the boy in the corner. She felt drawn to him, for some reason.

“How old is he?” Sunitha couldn’t help but ask.

“He’s fifteen, since last month,” Tiwa informed her, “though he isn’t worth a cup of nixtamal.” Lusio’s breathing became ragged, and Sunitha could tell he was trying not to cry. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go replenish my stock of hominy at the west end of the pueblo. I’ll be back soon.” Tiwa said.

Sunitha knew it wasn’t polite, but even after Tiwa had left, she stayed in Tiwa’s kitchen. She was staring into space when she heard Lusio mumbling something to himself. It was then that she had a revelation. After peeking out the door to make sure that Tiwa wasn’t returning, Sunitha cautiously walked to the corner where Lusio was working.

“Lusio?”

“Go find someone else,” Lusio said, his voice trembling. “Find someone else who’s worth more than a cup of nixtamal.”

“No,” Sunitha said. “Your mother is too cruel to you. This is your chance, to escape the brutality of your mother’s household. I think you are a good person, and I want to know you.” For the first time, Lusio looked up at Sunitha, and his hazel eyes were wet with tears.

“Do you mean it?” he asked her.

“Of course I do,” Sunitha said gently. She offered him her hand. “Let’s take a walk.” Lusio took her hand, and together they strode off into the pueblo.

\*\*\*\*\*

5 years later

The sun was rising, and as the warmth spread across the mesa, Sunitha smiled. She looked at Lusio, and he smiled back. They clasped hands, and as they turned back toward the rising sun, something stirred in Sunitha's belly. Her grin widened, as she thought of the child to come. The cactus blossoms closed, the yucca rippled in the wind, and the roadrunner called. It was a beautiful morning in the desert.