

# The Desert's Gift



Danny spent summers with his grandparents in their desert home in Arizona. Life there was very different from his city life. He loved the desert and enjoyed exploring its cliffs and caves, but he missed his city life back home. His grandparents said Danny loved the desert because he was Tohono O'odham. In the language of Danny's ancestors, *Tohono O'odham* meant *Desert People*.

One June morning, Danny and his grandparents met all the neighbors at the saguaro forest to cut and gather the plants' fruit. The saguaros were cactus plants with spiny arms that reached toward the sky. At the top of the arms were ripe, red fruits.



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Everyone sang as they hiked to the place where the giant cacti grew. The neighbors all tied wooden blades onto long poles. They used them to loosen the ripe fruits and knock them to the ground. As the fruits fell, Danny and others peeled them and dropped the juicy centers into buckets.

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After a while, Danny complained that he was bored and hot. He quit working and started kicking aside fruits that had been pecked by birds.

"That is good fruit," said Grandmother, frowning.

Danny wrinkled his nose. "Who wants to eat chewed-up fruit?"

"The birds left us the largest share," replied Grandfather. "It is disrespectful to waste it."

Just then, a white bird landed on one of the saguaros. Danny picked up a rock and hurled it at the bird. The bird flapped away unhurt, but the rock chipped the saguaro.

Grandfather looked at Danny sternly. He motioned for him to sit down and listen. "I will tell the story of the saguaro and its gift, so you will never harm the special plant again," he said.

Danny squirmed, sensing that the story would be long. But the tale soon had him spellbound.

*The saguaro's gift to us came through a little girl who lived in the desert many years ago. The little girl lived outside the village with her mother and father. Her parents worked in the village, so she was often left alone to play in the desert. Her only friends were the desert animals—the birds, coyotes, and even the lizards.*





*One day she was playing in the afternoon sun when she came across a white-winged dove that had been injured. She picked up the dove and the dove spoke to her. "Kind girl," said the dove, "I am hurt. Please take care of my baby birds. They are young and cannot get food or water for themselves. I will reward your kindness someday."*

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*The girl tried to nurse the injured bird back to health, but it was not to be. She buried the mother dove near her nest and cared for the baby birds until they were old enough to fly. Once they flew away, a strange cactus grew right where the girl had buried the mother dove. It was a tall cactus with blossoms the color of the dove. Each year, delicious fruits grew on the saguaro's long arms. The people came to depend on it for food during the dry time.*

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*Birds loved to eat the fruit, too. But people yelled at the birds and shooed them away. The birds continued to come, and the people became angry. They wanted the fruit all to themselves. They began to throw rocks at the birds, and the birds gave up and flew away.*

*Soon after this, the cactus disappeared. The people were heartbroken by the loss of their food source. The people searched far and wide for the cactus. After many days, they all gave up except for the little girl, who kept looking.*



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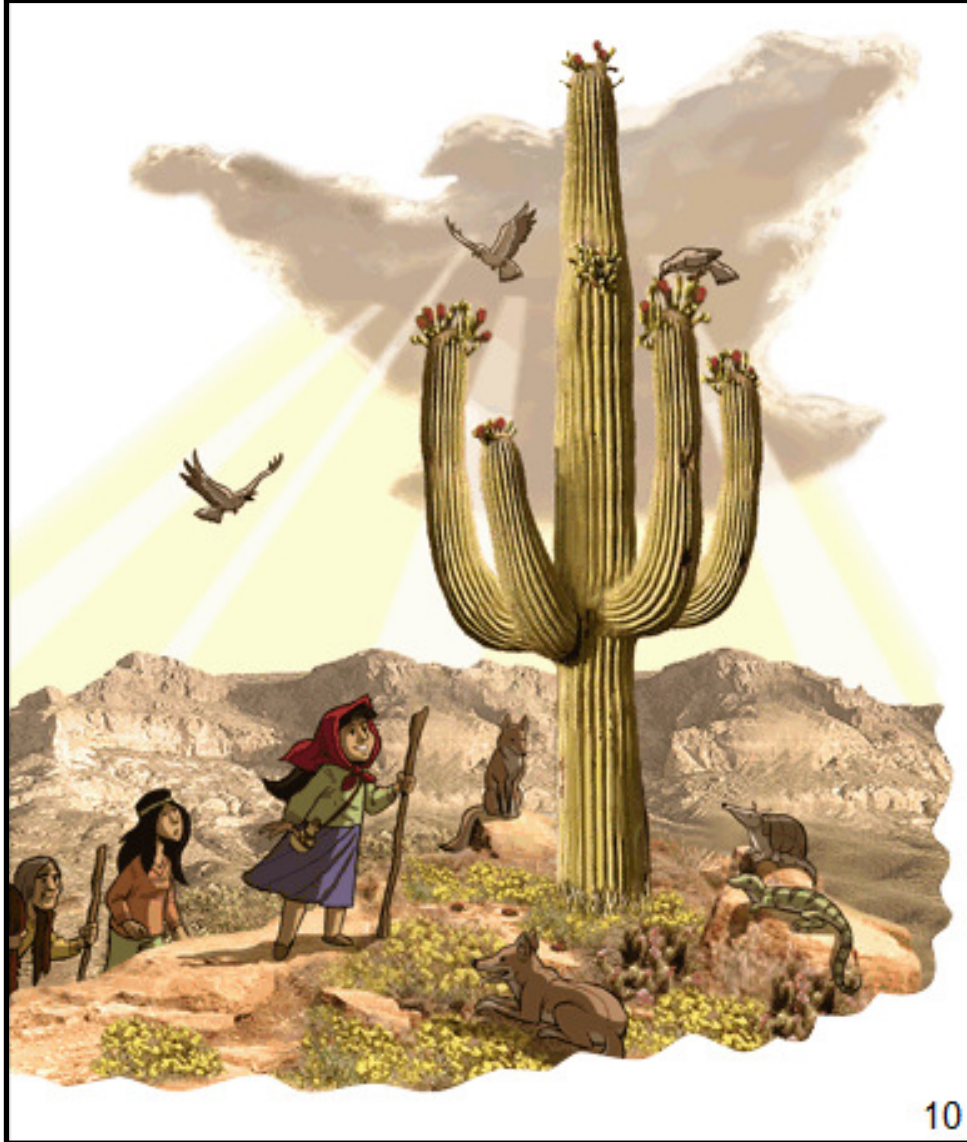
*Weeks passed. Finally, the little girl rushed to the village. She announced, "I have found the saguaro cactus on a high mountain!" Everyone rushed to the place to see it for themselves.*

*Once all of the people had arrived, the cactus spoke to all of them. She explained, "I will not grow where people chase away the birds. My fruit can be for everyone. It is for the animals. But I also give it to you because of the kindness of a special little girl."*

*The people humbly agreed to share the fruit of the saguaro with all living creatures. And so it has been ever since.*



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When the story ended, Grandmother added, "Today people buy food and medicine from stores, but it wasn't always so. In the past, people used the plants in their environment for many things. We ate the cholla cactus buds and prickly pear tuna. Nectar from the agave plant quenched our thirst when there was no water. We cured aches and fevers with tea made from needles of the joint-fir bush. Many plants gave us fibers to weave into baskets and sleeping mats."



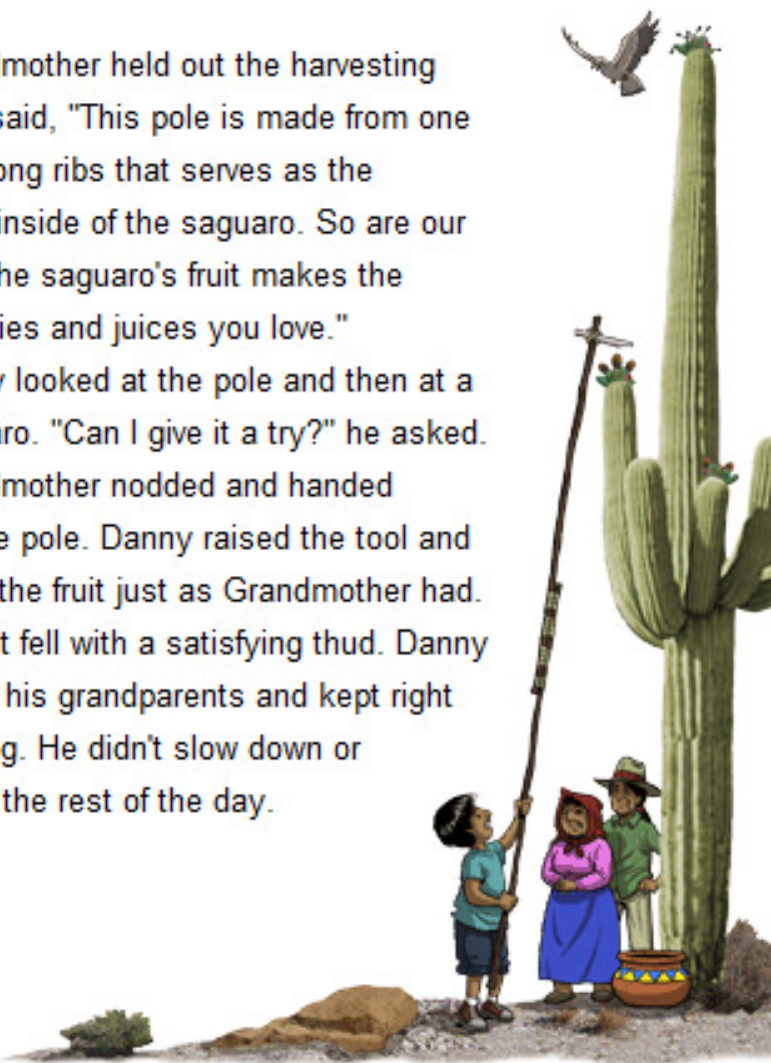
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Grandmother held out the harvesting tool and said, "This pole is made from one of the strong ribs that serves as the skeleton inside of the saguaro. So are our fences. The saguaro's fruit makes the sweet jellies and juices you love."

Danny looked at the pole and then at a tall saguaro. "Can I give it a try?" he asked.

Grandmother nodded and handed Danny the pole. Danny raised the tool and poked at the fruit just as Grandmother had. A ripe fruit fell with a satisfying thud. Danny smiled at his grandparents and kept right on working. He didn't slow down or complain the rest of the day.



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On the ride home, Danny looked at the plants along the road. *Is that the one that cures a fever? Is this one for making baskets?* Danny realized that the desert offered more to explore than cliffs and caves. He wanted to learn about the desert plants and animals. He also wanted to unlock the mysteries of how his ancestors had survived in this harsh and beautiful place.



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Thoughts of his life back home in the city slipped away as Danny planned tomorrow's hike in the desert. Perhaps Grandfather could go along and share another story with him. For now, though, Danny was interested in getting back to the house for supper, which would almost certainly include a serving of Grandmother's sweet, homemade jelly from the saguaro fruit.



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## TAB SHOWS OFF

