A picture containing broom, clothing, skirt, tool

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The Birch Bark Girl – By Laureen Lessard

Long ago when the land and waters of the Great Lakes of Michigan were young and pure, the animals could speak, and spirit gods lived among the people. This was so on the Island of *Michilimackinac*, also known as *Big Turtle Island*, home of the Chippewa people. The island was also the home to mischievous giants, or fairies called *Manidoons* who lived in the forest and ridges along the beach at *Fairy Arch*. *Michilimackinac* is situated in *Naadowewi Gichigami* (Lake Huron) between the upper and lower peninsula of Michigan. It was the center of the world for the Chippewa trade and home to an island spirit god Minisi and his sister Ahki. This is the story of a young Chippewa girl named Miigwan who lived with her father and two older sisters on the ancient isle of *Michilimackinac*.

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The afternoon sun was waning on *Michilimackinac* as Miigwan filled her basket with wild herbs and roots by the *Fairy Arch*. The island was shaped like a giant turtle and home to the fairies called *manidoons* who could be very mischievous. The people of the village were afraid of them and attributed any trouble or misfortune to the *manidoons*. Miigwan was not afraid of them. They were her friends. They knew where all the best berries and roots were. She had spent the better part of the afternoon romping in the forest with them and would be late getting back to camp to prepare dinner. The *manidoons* had tricked her to take several wrong paths and now she was late. They loved Miigwan and hated to see her leave. Her sisters would punish her with more work.

Miigwan’s mother had passed during the previous Winter as they were harsh on the island. She and her two older sisters were left to care for their father. It was Miigwan’s chore to prepare the daily meals and maintain their cabin near the longhouse. That included chopping wood, cooking over a campfire and anything else her pampered sisters told her to do while father was away hunting. She was always a mess with her face and torn dress covered in black soot and fish scales. Sometimes she would be to be exhausted at the end of the day to go to the water and bathe. The people in the village would make fun about her. They thought she was loco. Miigwan not only was unkept but smelled bad and spoke to the animals. It was an embarrassment to her sisters. So, they kept her busy by abusing her with work.

It was close to Autumn and *manoominikewin*, the time to harvest the manoomin (wild rice). The women would gather in their canoes and travel to the marshes on the mainland where the tall rice grass grew. They would collect the kernels by beating the tall ripe blades with sticks so that the seeds fell into the bottom of the canoe. It would be brought back to camp to dry in the sun, then parched by either smoke drying or scorching in large metal kettles.

There would be an annual trade festival too, where the rice and other wares would be sold or traded. It was a time for celebration of the fruitful blessings of harvest bestowed by the great spirit guardian of all, *Gitche Manito*. The island became a circus of activities in preparation for weeks. It was always hopeful that one of the great spirits would make an appearance during this time. It was during the annual announcement of the celebration at the tribal council meeting that Spirit Mother Ahki came forward and said that her spirit brother and island guardian Minisi would attend the trade celebration. Minisi remained invisible to the people of the island. He would walk the beaches every evening, but no one had claimed to see him. Ahki said that Minisi would choose a wife from one of the young maidens during the festivities. This caused a flutter of sensation among the women who rushed home to eagerly prepare for the challenge.

Migwiin was too busy working at her family’s camp and was late to attend the tribal council meeting that evening. Her long black hair was a mess, and her dress was full of soot and grease. She was tired and forgot to take a bath. The girls in the village made fun of her. They were not her friends. This was embarrassing for her sisters.

Migwiin’s friends were the birds and creatures of the forest who helped her to forage for food. They would speak to her in a way she could understand. This only contributed to problems with the other village girls, in their belief that she was not sound of mind.

The chatter in the long house continued to annoy her when she had to stop and ask what was going on. It was *Waawaataysi* (firefly) who spoke the loudest and told Migwiin about the marriage challenge. Migwiin began to laugh. How did this have anything to do with her? She was the island urchin and not fit to compete in a marriage competition to anyone much less than a sky spirit. She could hardly wait to tell her forest friends about it.

Migwiin went to the forest to forage more roots and fruits to stock up for the festival the next morning. The *manadoons* were excited when she told them about Ahki’s announcement that Minisi would seek a bride among the village girls. Although they did not speak literally to each other, there was an understanding. They would do everything in their power to help her prepare, it was her destiny. Migwiin just went on with her foraging. It was getting late, and she had to prepare dinner for her father and sisters before they returned from their days labor.

Each day the men and women of the island worked hard to set up their trade shops as the elders looked on with approval. They were planning the games of challenge too that everyone looked forward too each year. There was the rowing contest to see who could make the best time from the island to the mainland and back. The men decorated their canoes in beautiful colors and decoration for this. Then there was the archery competition. The ladies participated in that one as well as the men. The finale would be the marriage competition to the island spirit guardian Minisi.

It was just days before the annual trade festivities would begin and other tribal clans were arriving on the island as far away as *Gitchi-goomi*. Migwiin was out foraging in the forest again when the *manidoons* descended upon her. They presented her with a stack of beautiful shavings of birch bark. The silver squirrel gave her fur from his tail and the otters gave her shells from the beach. They lay their gifts before her in the form of a vest. Migwiin was surprised and inspired to work them into a lovely vest. There was no time to lose. She would have to make time after dinner and her night chores to prepare herself as best as she could.

The day of the trade festivities had arrived. Migwiin was overburdened with more work from her father and sisters who were participating in all the events, as well as selling their wares in their trade booth. She was totally exhausted as the evening time was near. The marriage competition was the last thing on her mind. It was the night owl who came and perched on her father’s trade booth to remind her it was time to get ready. The other girls had been walking around the village all day showing off their new dresses of buckskin and fur along with new beaded moccasins. Migwiin knew she did not have a chance against any of them. Her animal friends and *manidoons* had worked so hard to help her prepare she did not want to disappoint them, even if it meant ridicule. She closed the booth and hurried back to her family camp to prepare. It was already dusk and not much time to get there and back.

The Chief Warrior blew the bull horn to get everyone’s attention. Everyone gathered around the large fire in the center of the village. Ahki came forward and announced it was time. Her brother had arrived and was waiting patiently to begin. She had all the girls come forward. They were all giggling and eagerly looking about for the spirit warrior. They could not see him among the crowd. Where was he? Ahki tapped her walking stick on the ground and demanded their attention. They quickly obeyed as they did not want to endure her wrath. She began with the first girl.

“Do you see my brother?”

“Yes,” the girl replied as she looked about.

“What does he look like and what is he wearing?”

“He is very handsome and wearing a beautiful buckskin shirt covered in turquoise” she lied.

“That will be all, next,” said Ahki.

Each girl responded with similar answers, none to the satisfaction of Ahki.

It was at this time that Migwiin had finally arrived back to the village. She stood at the end of the crowd in her new vest of birchbark with silver fur collar. Her hair was braided and adorned with honeysuckle vines and she wore a necklace of polished seashells.

Ahki asked if there were any other girls present and one of the girls said they were all there. Then someone in the crowd noticed Migwiin.

“Over here! Here is another one.”

Ahki demanded Migwiin come forward from the crowd. The girls began to laugh at her and made fun of her birchbark vest. Migwiin turned to run when Ahki tapped her walking stick on the ground again and demanded her stop and all to be silent.

“Come forward girl. Are you not Migwiin, the daughter of a hunter?” she said.

Migwiin bowed her head and said yes.

“Tell me Migwiin. Do you see my brother here?” she asked.

Migwiin said yes.

“Describe him to me girl.”

Just then a soft breeze circled the island and swirled around the camp. The night owls hooted, and several shooting stars danced across the sky. The crowd took this as an omen and began to mumble among themselves. Maybe the *manidoons* were nearby. Ahki silenced them again with the tapping of her stick.

Migwiin began describing her brother in amazement.

“There is his giant steed.” She pointed to the constellation Pegasus in the night sky and went on.

“His bow is the rainbow over the waterfall at *Fairy Arch* and his voice is the soft wind that whispers across the island.”

She had no time to finish as the sky spirit Minisi appeared before her in front of the crowd to everyone’s amazement.

“I chose you Migwiin” he said and escorted her to the great lodge where the wedding ceremony took place that evening.

The people gathered and cheered.

Starman and Migwiin together continue to watch over the Chippewa people today. Their spirits are felt in the island breezes and seen in the beauty of the night sky over the island.