



TURTLE STORIES

CHAPTER 6 - EKO-NGODWAACHING GINJIGAN

Noodin and Ziigwan were back from the city to visit with Nokomis Annie over the winter holidays. There was snow in the bush and the snow banks along the roads were getting high. Noodin was looking forward to using the old *aagimog* and spending some time on Uncle Buddy's trap line. The swamps and marshes were frozen and it was time to set traps on the muskrat push-ups. After supper, Noodin eagerly looked in the shed for all the equipment he needed for the morning when Uncle Buddy arrived. Everything was ready for their big adventure! It would be fun to travel over the frozen marsh and the swamp without getting wet feet.

When it was time for bed, Noodin had trouble falling asleep because he was so excited about the next morning! He turned over and over on the beds.

"Nokomis, Noodin will not settle down. I cannot go to sleep. He will not stop rolling around and making noise!" complained Ziigwan.

Nokomis Annie came into the room. "What is happening in here?" she questioned.

"Nokomis, I am having trouble getting to sleep. Will you tell us a story about the animals and the plants?" asked Noodin.

Nokomis Annie had her old journal tucked under her arm. She settled down in the big rocking chair and opened her journal to a page where she had drawn a turtle's shell. She looked at the drawing for a few moments thoughtfully and started to speak in her quiet, calm voice. "Winter time is *Atsokanan*. This is the time of stories and teachings," she began. "Our People say that we should wait until the snow is on the ground and the plants and animals are sleeping before we begin telling stories about them."

"Yes Nokomis, I remember. Can you share a story about the animals that live in the marsh? I am looking forward to going out with Uncle Buddy tomorrow. It will be the first time I have been out on the marsh in the winter time," said Noodin.

Nokomis Annie nodded and was quiet for a few moments while she gathered her thoughts. "I can remember the stories that my *Mishomis* used to



tell us in the winter time when we were small. He and my *Okomisan* lived in a two-room log house. We used to sleep in one room and the other room was our kitchen. The wood stove in the kitchen kept us nice and warm in the winter time. There was always a line of mittens and socks drying behind the stove. I also remember a big table and benches to sit at, and a cupboard for our food and dishes. In the day time, we rolled up the mattresses and sat on them like a couch. We went to bed when it got dark, used a coal oil lamp for light in the house, and carried our *nibi* from the well down the road. There was always a pot of *giishkaandag-niibiishaaboo* on the stove and fresh bannock to eat. At night, when we were all tucked into our blankets, my grandfather would tell us stories about *Nanaboozhoo* and the animals and plants. Do you remember who *Nanaboozhoo* is?" asked Nokomis Annie.

"Of course we do! We love stories about him!" exclaimed Ziigwan.

Nokomis Annie recalled one of her favourites her grandfather used to tell.

"One time when *Aki* was new, *Nanaboozhoo* was out walking along the banks of a small stream naming all of Creation. His stomach was rumbling and grumbling and he was looking for something to eat. He just finished eating a small handful of ripe *odemiiinan*. As he walked, he sang a song of thanksgiving to the leader of the berries for giving its life to feed him. Still, his stomach rumbled and grumbled because *Nanaboozhoo* needed more than a sweet snack!"

"The rumbling and grumbling sounds got louder. The sounds woke a small green *mishiikenh*, who was hiding inside a hollow log nearby. The timid *mishiikenh* peeked out her head from inside the log,

trembling in fear that it was otter returning to catch the turtle for lunch. At that time, *mishiikenh* did not wear a hard shell as it does today and she had no way of protecting herself from danger. She heard someone coming along the path, making loud grumbling and rumbling sounds, just like thunder! Quickly, the timid *mishiikenh* pulled her head back into the shade of the hollow log before she was seen. Her little heart beat like a *dewegan*."

"She was so shy and used to hiding away because the other animals always made fun of her. At that time long ago, the little *mishiikenh* had a very hard time getting around safely. She had four legs, a beautiful tail, a long neck, and pretty face, but her body looked as though something was missing." Nokomis Annie paused for emphasis and continued with the story.



"The little green *mishiikenh* did not like to come out during the day because the hot summer sun burned the soft skin on her back. She had to hunt for food in the early morning and just before nightfall. Life was very hard for the shy *mishiikenh*. When she was looking for food, she had to be alert and listening for the sounds of danger. *Nanaboozhoo* passed very close by the old hollow log but he did not notice the little *mishiikenh* who watched him. Along the shore, *Nanaboozhoo* found an overturned bark *jiimaan*. How inviting it looked! This gave *Nanaboozhoo* an idea. He would catch some *giigoonh* and have a feast!"

"He got into the *jiimaan* and paddled up the stream. He had his spear ready, but he could not see any *giigoonh* swimming. Where were the *giigoonh*, he wondered? His stomach still grumbled loudly. He paddled around and around the stream

looking for his *giigoonh* supper. The sun was shining down on *Nanaboozhoo's* back as he paddled the *jiimaan* back to shore. He was just about to give up when the little green *mishiikenh* crept out of the hollow log and offered to help.

"*Nanaboozhoo, Nanaboozhoo,*" called the soft voice of *mishiikenh*. "If you want to catch *giigoonh*, go down to the bend in the stream where the big beautiful *mitig* hangs over the *nibi*. Look under the *mitig* roots and you will find lots of *giigoonh*."

"Ah-ho," said *Nanaboozhoo*. "Gchi- miigwech, little *mishiikenh*! I will try there." *Nanaboozhoo* turned the *jiimaan* downstream. He paddled right down to the bend and there stood a great old black willow *mitig* with its branches tickling the surface of the *nibi*. The branches made little ripples as the *nibi* flowed past. *Nanaboozhoo* pulled the *jiimaan* into

the shadows of the *mitig* and spotted a fine rainbow trout resting in the shade of the *mitig* roots. Carefully, *Nanaboozhoo* aimed his spear and sent it through the *nibi*. Before you could blink, he was holding a fat trout on the end of his spear. *Nanaboozhoo* placed the trout in the bottom of the *jiimaan* and tried again. After a few moments he caught enough *giigoonyag* for a feast!"

"*Nanaboozhoo* returned the *jiimaan* back to the stream bank where *mishiikenh* rested. Then, *Nanaboozhoo* made a fire for his feast. Soon, the air around him was filled with the wonderful smells of *giigoonh* cooking. Delicious! *Nanaboozhoo* looked around, trying to spot the little *mishiikenh* who had helped him catch his supper. He found the little *mishiikenh*, still hiding in the hollow log."

"Come on out and share some *giigoonh* with me," invited *Nanaboozhoo*. The little *mishiikenh* could smell *giigoonh* and it smelled so good! She carefully looked to the left, and then to the right. There was no one else around. Cautiously, *mishiikenh* took a step out of her hiding place and scurried over to the fire to nibble on some *giigoonh*."

"*Nanaboozhoo* looked down at the little green *mishiikenh* and noticed the stripes on her body. 'Little *mishiikenh*, why were you hiding in the log?' he asked. *Mishiikenh* blushed and told *Nanaboozhoo* how embarrassed she was to have no way of protecting herself. She spoke about the other animals teasing her, poking her with sticks, and scratching her with their claws when they played games."

"*Nanaboozhoo* sat by the fire for a few moments deep in thought. He was grateful to *mishiikenh* for her help and he wanted to honour her. 'I have an



idea!' exclaimed *Nanaboozhoo*. He picked up a round, gray *siniis* from the edge of the stream and he set the *siniis* on the little turtle's bare back. It fit nicely. *Nanaboozhoo* took a stick and carefully carved the *siniis* so it would fit over top and under the little *mishiikenh* like a coat. *Nanaboozhoo* showed *mishiikenh* how to put her legs through the holes on the sides of the *siniis*. He helped her stick her tail out of the back and her long beautiful neck and head out of the front. She could no longer scurry and run about because the *siniis* was quite heavy. Now she had to learn to crawl and move slowly. The little *mishiikenh* cried tears of joy and felt gratitude as she moved in her new shell."

"*Nanaboozhoo* then took out his paint brush and his paints. 'Come here little *mishiikenh*. You have such beautiful stripes. I will paint the colours of the sunset on your back if you sit still.' *Mishiikenh* trembled with excitement. She dragged her shell over to *Nanaboozhoo's* side and sat patiently while he tickled her back and belly with the paintbrushes. *Nanaboozhoo* took a sharp stick and carefully scratched out thirteen large sections for each moon, and to honour each day of the moon, he marked out twenty-eight smaller sections on the back of *siniis*. He painted the edges of the shell with colours. The little turtle was now covered with green, brown, yellow, red, and orange stripes. When *Nanaboozhoo* was done, the little *mishiikenh* carried her shell down to the stream to look at her new covering. How beautiful she looked! The shell was as hard as the *siniis* had been and now she would not have to hide away in fear. This little *mishiikenh* would now be

known as *Miskwaadesi*. She would walk with great dignity and pride, thanks to *Nanaboozhoo!*"

"*Gchi-miigwech Nanaboozhoo!*' said *Miskwaadesi* happily."

"*Gchi-miigwech* to you *Miskwaadesi*, for your kindness has been repaid today! You will walk from this day onward with a new covering on your back. It will be called your shell. The sections I have carved on your shell are a calendar for everyone to see. There are large sections to represent the thirteen full moons every year, and the smaller sections represent the number of days between each full moon. You have earned this for showing me such kindness on this day."

"*Nanaboozhoo* went on his way, rubbing his full stomach because of the kindness of a little green *mishiikenh!* *Miskwaadesi* went on her way, wearing a new covering with dignity and a heart filled with gratitude."

The sound of soft snoring made *Nokomis Annie* look over at the sleeping children as she finished her story. She remembered *Miskwaadesi's* words which described the challenge: "My sixth challenge asks you to listen to teachings and stories about *mishiikenh*." *Nokomis* was excited to share the stories that she knew and stories she would learn with her grandchildren on their visit!

