

self-acceptance

## Two Hungry Bears

OUR PEOPLE HAVE A SAYING that when all is quiet under a blanket of Snow, *Makwa* (Bears) wake up. Now these are not ordinary *Makwa* who hibernate when the Snow lies deep. No, I'm talking about the *Makwa* who wait to come out *during* the White Season, when the nights are long and cold and virtually all of life is snug asleep in warm, sheltered places. On nights like this, only the far-off call of *Ma'eengan* (Wolf) or *Gookookoo* (Owl) remind us that anything at all might still be moving about.

On one such night, a young Boy named *Nigig Inzow* (Otter-Tail) sat up late by himself. His family was long asleep, snuggled into a pile of plush furs, and yet his fretful mind would not let him join them. He could find nothing to do but stare at his faint shadow, which was cast on the wall by the pale, yellow glow of the fading *Shkode* (Fire) in the center of the Lodge.

He was a carefree Child, always clear in what he thought and felt. Only now, as he approached his tenth Winter, his life began spinning in a confusing web of feelings. Tonight he stared at the wall as though searching for something in his silhouette that he couldn't find inside himself.

The wailing chorus of nearby *Ma'eengan* shook Inzow out of his trance. As the howls trailed off to rejoin the stillness, Inzow's eyes opened wide in a sudden realization: "I'll go and see *Mishomis* (Grandfather)! He is wise like a Mountain; perhaps he can help."



It was all Inzow could do not to awaken his family. He quickly tended *Shkode*, snatched his *Wagosh* (Fox) fur robe, and darted out the door. Even before he got the robe fully wrapped around him, he was across the clearing and entering *Mishomis's* Lodge.

"It is very late and you are awake, Honored *Mishomis*," Inzow said in a surprised voice as he entered the cozy Lodge. The Elder was not only up but he was building up *Shkode*, as though he were expecting someone.

"*Mishomis* is also opposite the door: the place for greeting visitors," thought Inzow. "Perhaps the doorway was drafty and he wanted to sit where it was warmest." Out of respect, Inzow kept his confusion to himself and sat in the traditional place for Children: to the left of the door, from where they could easily run errands for their Elders—or as they saw it, scoot out quickly to play.



“Honored Mishomis,” spoke Inzow straight away, “*this Boy’s* belly is being torn apart; it feels like two hungry Makwa battling each other. Often they fight in his dreams; and sometimes even in the day when he feels impatient or sad, they wake up and claw at each other.”

Mishomis looked intently into Shkode. “I know them well,” he replied. “They live inside me also. And perhaps inside everybody. One is the Makwa of *Balance*, who comes when we trust in the *Gifting Way*; the other is Makwa out of Balance, who comes when we trust in ourselves.”

Mishomis said no more. He stirred the coals, and they both sat in silence.

After a while the Boy spoke: “Mishomis, can you tell me which one will win?”

“The one you feed, my Child.”

“How would I feed the Makwa of Balance? I want him to grow strong!”

“With your heart,” was his Mishomis’s simple reply.

Before another voice was heard, Shkode had

burned down to deep orange embers, casting just enough light into the blackness to mark the features of their faces.

“But Mishomis, they’re both me—if I don’t feed one, I don’t feed myself.”

“Yes, my Child. You are wise beyond the turns of the seasons you’ve been blessed to know. In truth there is only one Makwa. Just as Cloud and Sun come together to make the day, the two fighting Makwa join to help us see both the dark and the light. Go now to be with your family under the sleeping robe, my dear Grandson, so that your two Makwa might find their place of rest within you. Together they will guide you through love and battle as you walk this Journey of Life, and they will help you find vision in blindness.”

“Mishomis, you speak in riddles,” Inzow said with a lightened heart. “And yet they bring me comfort. Sometimes I understand the wisdom of your smile better than the wisdom of your words. *Meegwetch* (Thank you) dear Father of my Father. I shall carry your smile into my dreams.”

## ORIGIN

GOOD STORIES HAVE A WAY of traveling. I find the same ones not only in the expected places where there is a history of cultural exchange, but also in diverse and isolated cultures around the world. The original version of this story came to me from the Cherokee people by way of my Irish–American friend Patty Miller, who received it from her sister in England.

In the original story from Patty, the two Animals were Ma’eengan (Wolves). I chose Makwa instead, to break from civilized culture’s false *vicious Wolf* stereotype.

Also, in the original story, the Ma’eengan remained two and opposed to each other. That fit for the Cherokee because they are agriculturalists, who typically draw a line between domestic

and wild, cultivated and untended. When this line exists in a culture, it usually cuts through the People of the culture as well. Life gets divided between the polarities of good and evil and becomes an eternal struggle between the two. This division is allegorized by the two Ma’eengan in the Cherokee version of the story.

With hunting–gathering Peoples, the line between good and evil, as between domestic and wild, is not so well defined. While living in intimate relationship with all of life, Native People find little reason to categorize. This was probably reflected in the original “Two Hungry Bears” when it was a hunter–gatherer story, and my intent in revising the story was to restore it to something approximating the original.







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