

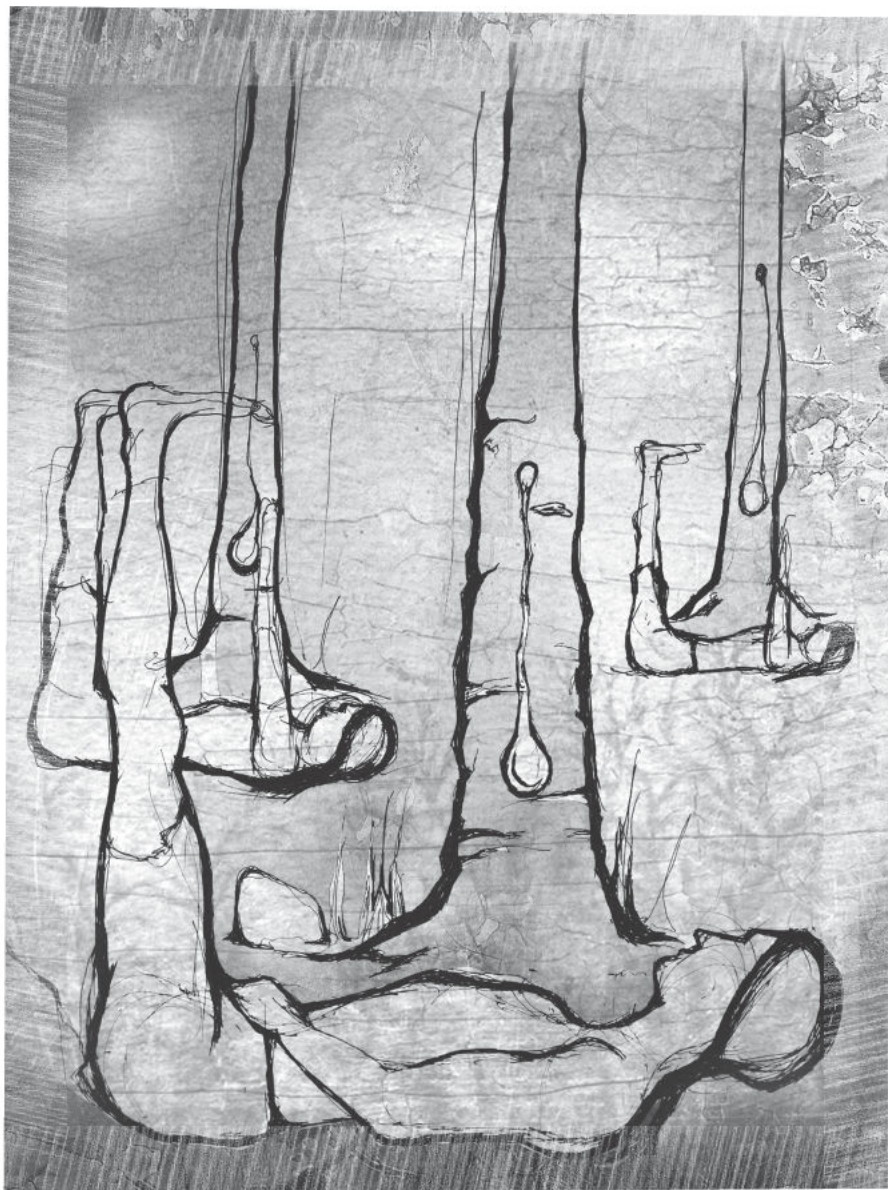
THE GIFT IS IN THE MAKING

In the old days, it was important to take care. It was important to nurture, and to love with all your heart. Nanabush taught us that one. Oowah. He used to walk all over, visiting with us, making sure we had enough food, water, medicine. Making sure our kids weren't sick. Making sure we were all getting along. Visiting. Why did we stop visiting?

One *ziigwan*, long time ago, that Nanabush is out visiting, walking all around Nishinaabe Aki, and he comes to the part in the east where the Mississauga live, where the Eagle, Crane, and Caribou clans live in the south. That part. And he comes to their place in the bush, where those ones live. He comes to visit. Oowah. It's a good thing to visit, to take care. It's a good thing to love.

He comes to that place where those Nishnaabeg live, and he can't find any of them there. No children. No fish smoking. Empty lodges. That Nanabush, he knows something is wrong, something is not right. It's *ziigwan*. The Nishnaabeg should be mending nets, setting nets, smoking fish. The ice is off the lake. The winter is in retreat. There should be woodpiles, fires, but, instead, there is nothing.

So, that Nanabush, he goes walking, looking for those Mississauga Nishnaabeg. He looks by the river. He looks by the lake. He looks in the bush by the rabbit trails. Nothing. He start to feel scared. He starts to feel real worried. Something is not right. The Nishnaabeg are missing. Nanabush's heart starts to rip open a bit. His heart starts to beat too fast.



“Calm down,” he tells himself. “Breathe.”

He sits down and he thinks. He thinks about how much he loves those Nishnaabeg. How he doesn't see them enough. How, maybe, if he had just come earlier instead of spending so much time hunting with Ma'iingan, that this might not have happened. He feels really, really bad. He feels really, really bad in his heart, and his eyes make tears that run down his face onto the snowy ground.

Nanabush sits with that sad, and then he makes it into something else. “NISHNAABEG! NISHNAABEG!”

No answer.

“NISHNAABEG! NISHNAABEG!”

Silence.

Nanabush gets up onto his feet now, and he starts to do some thinking. He starts to do some walking, and he starts to do some more looking. And he looks for a long time.

Sometimes, in a story like this, Nanabush looks and right away he finds what he is looking for. But not this time. This time, he looks for a long time. A very, very long time.

After a few days, he sees something funny off in the distance amongst a stand of Ninaatigoog. He sees something, and at first he thinks he is seeing things from all the looking, but, as he get closer, he starts to understand. He sees brown feet and brown legs sticking straight up in the air. He gets closer. He sees brown back lying flat on the snowy ground in fact the snowy ground is kinda melty now, but brown back doesn't care. He gets closer. He sees a big mouth wide open. Like that big mouth is at the dentist.

But that big mouth is not at the dentist. She has ziiyaagmide dripping right in! That's right. This story takes place so long ago that our Ancestors did not have to make ziiyaagmide out of sap. Nope. The Ninaatigoog gave that syrup right out of their bodies, right over to whoever wants to drink it. And those Nishnaabeg, they always wanted to drink it.

Nanabush looks around the forest. Every tree is the same. Every tree has its own Nishnaabe, lying on his or her back, feet

in the air with his or her mouth really, really wide open, and that maple syrup dripping right in.

“Bozhoo, Nishnaabeg!” yells Nanabush.

Nobody looks up. Nobody answers.

“Bozhoo, Nishnaabeg!” yells Nanabush.

Again, nobody looks up. Nobody answers.

”This is worse than I thought,” thinks Nanabush. He gets an idea. He sings and dances and stomps and yells. But, nobody even notices.

Everybody is still flat on their backs, with their mouths really, really wide open with that ziiyagmide dripping right in.

Oowah, that ziiyagmide tastes good! That sweet brown syrup. That’s the good stuff. Oowah.

But enough of that. This is a big problem, and Nanabush has to think up a big solution. And sometimes even Nanabush doesn’t have any ideas. But he knows who does: Nokomis. That old lady will know what to do. That old lady will know how to solve this big problem. Those Nishnaabeg are going to get sick. They are not eating good food. They are not taking care of each other. They are getting weak just lying on their backs with their furry feet up in the air all day. They’re getting soft in the mind, not thinking ahead, not looking ahead.

Everything is going to go in the wrong way if the Nishnaabeg get sick. Nanabush knows this. So he walks. He walks and walks and walks and walks. And finally he reaches Nokomis’s house.

“Nokomis!” Nanabush yells. “NOKOMIS!”

“Holy!” that old lady says in response. “Why you yelling like that? Why you yelling like I’m not here?”

“Sorry,” said Nanabush, giving her his semaa. He’s not used to things being where they are suppose to be. But, this one, she where she suppose to be. He feels a bit better, and he sits by her fire in her lodge, and he explains his problem.

Nokomis just listens. And then she says, “Nahow. Aambe.”

Nanabush is not quite sure what is going on. He was hoping for some medicine. He was hoping for a snack. Nokomis always has good snacks, or maybe a good story. Maybe a nap on that nice warm sleeping mat. Oowah. That is what he needs. Maybe some soup and that warm blanket wrapped around him. Sit by that fire. Get warm. Feel good. Oowah.

But here we go. “Aambe,” that old lady say, and out the door she goes. Nanabush is not happy. His makazinan are wet. His feet are sore. He’s been out walking for days. But out the door Nokomis goes, so out the door Nanabush goes.

Nokomis is an old lady, but she is fast, and she is strong, and she is all the way down the path by the time Nanabush gets out of the house.

“Bekaa!” yells Nanabush. “Wait.” He thinks he hears her laughing under her breath, and she doesn’t slow down. Nanabush has to pick up the pace a bit. His feet hurt. “Bekaa!” he yells again.

But Nokomis doesn’t pay any attention. She’s all the way down the path and around the corner. Nanabush is not happy, maybe he even starts crying a bit. Maybe he’s feeling sorry for himself a bit. All this work. No one is paying attention to Nanabush. No one is taking care of Nanabush. But Nanabush doesn’t have any time for feeling sorry.

“Aambe!” yells Nokomis.

So, Nanabush keeps walking. He goes around the corner, and Nokomis is standing at the bottom of Ninaatig, and she is already busy. She tells him to go to the south side of the tree and to make a hole. Nanabush does. She makes a spigot and attaches her akik. They hear the heartbeat of the liquid dripping into the bucket.

Beat. Beat.

Beat. Beat.

Beat. Beat.

Beat.

Nanabush feels better. Next, Nokomis tells Nanabush to taste the liquid, and Nanabush gets excited for that sweet, sweet taste of ziiyaagmide. Maybe he didn't get a fire, and maybe he didn't get any soup and that blanket, but, oowah, he is going to get ziiyagmide.

Except, when he dips his finger into that liquid, it isn't ziiyagmide.

"GAA GAAWIIN!" yells Nanabush. He can't take it any more. "This tastes like Nibiish."

Nokomis smiles a tricky smile. "Get a hold of yourself," she tells him. "Hang onto your shirt, young one. We're not done yet." She dips her cup into the akik and tells him to drink the sweet water, and then comes that big important part. This part is so important that those Nishinaabeg still do it today, even though everything nearly got all ruined.

Nokomis tells Nanabush that the sap, the zisbaakdaaboo, is medicine, that it cleans us out. It cleans our bodies out for spring. "It's spring cleaning," she says, laughing under her breath. Zha-ganosh thinks that means wash the curtains. Oowah. Washing your curtains don't clean out nothing. Drink zisbaakdaaboo every day of Zisbaakdooke Giizis. Then you'll be ready.

"Ready for what?" asks Nanabush.

"Ready for what happens next," says Nokomis.

Then she says, "Back to work," and she gets Nanabush to tap all the trees. She gets him to collect up all the dead wood and chop it into firewood. Then, she gets him to make a big fire. Nanabush is working so hard, he doesn't have time to feel sorry for himself. And makwag, amikwag, waawaashkeshiwag, all those animals help out. Soon everybody is busy, and that Nokomis is smiling a big smile.

And then she shows them how to concentrate that ziibaakdaaboo to save all its good for the niibin, and the dagwagin, and the next bboon. And they work hard with the fire and the stones, and finally they get their thirty buckets of ziibaakdaaboo

down to one bucket of ziiyaagmide, and then finally they get it down to sugar.

And Nanabush is happy, because he's ready for a big party. After all that work, he knows Nokomis must have a big party up her old-lady sleeve.

But those old-lady sleeves are tricky, and Nokomis doesn't say anything about a party. She says, "Nahow, Nanabush. Back to the Nishnaabeg."

Nanabush's party face falls right off. He forgot all about those Nishnaabeg. And he doesn't have any solution to their problem, and they are far away.

And he needs a party.

"No party," says Nokomis.

He needs a party.

"NO PARTY," says Nokomis.

He was kind of looking forward to a party.

"Life is a party," says Nokomis. "Party down the trail and go make things right with the Nishnaabeg."

Nanabush knows when he been beat. So he party down the trail to go make things right with the Nishnaabeg. And he walks and walks and walks and walks, and he figures maybe those Nishnaabeg already got things all worked out. After all, how long could you lie on your back with your feet in the air?

Long time, if you're drinking maple syrup. Long time. Nanabush knows this because, by the time he gets back, the Nishnaabeg are still lying on their backs, feet in the air, mouths wide open. Drinking that maple syrup.

"Bozhoo, Nishnaabeg!" Nanabush yells.

Nobody pays any attention.

Nanabush figures he's got to get tricky at this point. Otherwise, he's going to have to do a whole bunch more walking, and he's never going to get any soup or blanket, and his feet are still wet. So he gets tricky. And he needs a bucket to get tricky. And he goes out to the river and fills up that bucket and climbs all the

way to the top of Ninaatig, and he pours that bucket down the tree. He goes back and forth and he does this thirty times—one time for every day in Ziisbaakdaaboo Giizis.

And maybe that's how this story happened. Maybe. Maybe it was thirty buckets, or maybe Nanabush was way too tired to lug that heavy bucket up that tall Ninaatig. And maybe he is way, way too tired to do that thirty times. And maybe he has to go pee anyway. And maybe he decides to just whip it out when nobody is looking and do a big long thirty-bucket pee down the top of that tree. And maybe he saves himself thirty trips to the river and thirty trips up the tree, and he's a little closer to that soup and that blanket. Maybe it happened that way.

Whatever way it happened, by the time that “water” got filtered all the way through Ninaatig, and, by the time Nanabush did every tree in that sugar bush, the ziiyaagmide dripping into the mouths of Nishnaabeg wasn't ziiyagmide any more. It was more like Nibiish. It was more like tree pee.

Those Nishnaabeg noticed. And their mouths went shut, and their feet went back onto the ground, and they walked over to that Nanabush to find out what was going on. Now it was Nanabush's turn to be Nokomis. He told them he needed a big fire. They all got busy. He told them he needed a big stack of firewood. They all got busy. He told them he needed soup and a blanket and a foot rub.

They looked a little suspicious, but they all got busy.

Then Nanabush told them how much he loved them and how sad he felt when they forgot about the four sacred foods, and their responsibilities to each other and to the other clans. Nanabush drew them in close by the fire, and he told them how important they were. He told them how Gzhwe Manidoo had made them the most beautiful, caring creatures that ever walked the earth. He told them he wanted them to walk the earth a long, long time with them. He told them he needed them. He told them his heart knowledge, and they felt their hearts getting much, much bigger. They felt filled up.

The Nishnaabeg listened with their whole bodies. Then Nanabush took them to the south side of the tree, put his semaa down, and showed them how to tap the trees and collect the sap. He showed them how to cleanse themselves every day of Ziisbaakdaaboo Giizis. He showed them that, once the others found out what they were doing, everyone would come and help. He showed them how to boil that sweet water down into sweet sugar so they could keep that gift all year long.

The Nishnaabeg accepted that gift from Nanabush. And, every year, no matter how hard it is, they make sure their lips taste the sweetness of ziisbaakdaaboo, even if it is just once. Even if there isn't enough to make ziinzibaakwad, sugar. They take their kids. They tell the story of Nanabush. They listen for the heartbeat of their mother as that ziisbaakdaaboo falls into their pails. They cherish the gift given to their ancestors so long ago, and in their heart knowledge, hidden away in the most precious parts of their beings, they know that ziinzibaakwad wasn't the real gift. They know that the real gift was in the making, and that, without love, making just wasn't possible.

Nishnaabemowin: Ziigwan is the early part of spring; Nishnaabeg Aki is Ojibwe territory; ma'iingan is wolf; ninaatig is a maple tree; ninaatigoog means maple trees; ziiyaagmide is maple syrup; bozhoo means hello; Nokomis is Grandmother; semaa (asemaa) is tobacco; nahow means okay; ambe means come on! let's go!; makizinan are moccasins; bekaa means wait; akik is a pail; gaa and gaawiin both mean no; ziisbaakdaabook is sap; zhaganosh is a white person; Ziisbaakdooke-Giizis is March; makwag is bears; amikwag means beavers; waawaashkeshiwag is deer (plural); dawaagin is the fall; bboon is the winter; niibin is the summer; and Gzhwe Manidoo is the one that loves us unconditionally, the Creator; ziinzibaakwad is sugar.