



# TURTLE TEACHINGS

## CHAPTER 2 - EKO-NIIZHING GINJIGAN

Ziigwan read the note over one last time as the bus turned off the highway and pulled into the stop in Parry Sound. With a smile, she put the piece of paper into her backpack, nudged her brother Noodin awake, and collected her belongings. Their adventure was about to begin!

Nokomis was waiting at the bus stop and gathered the children in her arms with a big welcome hug as soon as they got off.

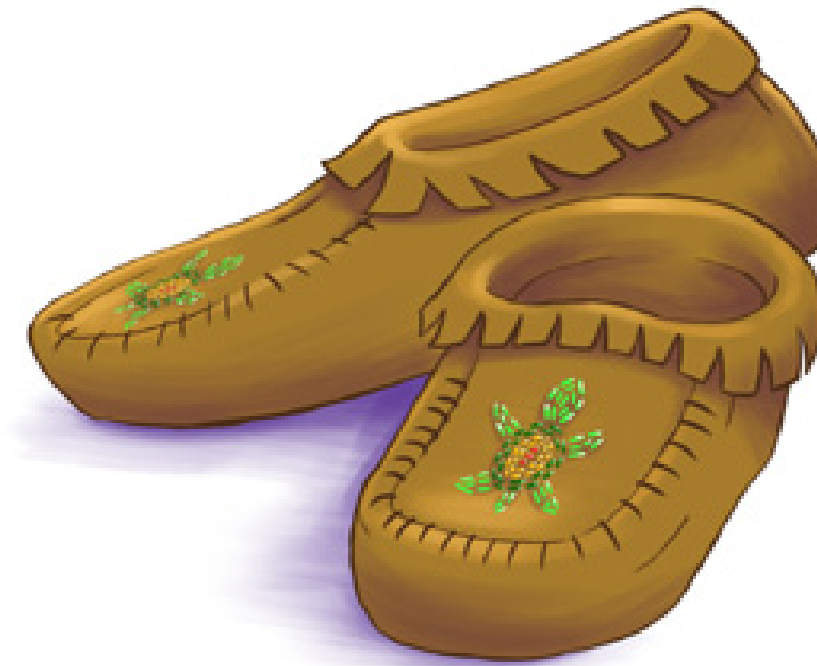
“*Aaniin! Aaniin!* My beautiful grandchildren, I am so glad that you have come. We will have a wonderful summer together!” she exclaimed.

When Nokomis Annie and her grandchildren arrived at her house, there was a fresh pan of baked *bannock*, fish, and *odeminan* waiting for them. These were some of their favourite foods and the children could already tell it was going to be a great visit!

After supper, everyone enjoyed watching the colourful sunset over the western edge of the *nibi*. The children played the listening game and they tried to count the many different sounds they could hear as the birds and other members of Creation sang a goodnight song to the sun. Ziigwan and Noodin noticed that there were more sounds at Nokomis Annie’s house than there were in the city. Just as the mosquitoes started to buzz, cousin Waaban rode up on his bike.

Aaniin, my grandchildren!  
Are you coming to spend  
the summer with me and  
your cousins here at  
Wasauksing?  
I need your help with a  
special project. Everything  
is ready for you. I will  
meet you at the bus stop.

Love, Nokomis Annie



"Aaniin Nokomis, are my cousins here yet? Oh great! Hey there, Noodin. I am so excited that you are here! Ziigwan, how are you? Did your Nokomis tell you about the work she is doing this summer down at the marsh? You should see her up to her ankles in mud! Nokomis, tell us about your dream again!" Waaban urged. The other children were excited to hear a story from their *Nokomis*.

As the sky began to darken and evening arrived, Nokomis Annie pulled her shawl up over her shoulders and settled into her favourite chair. Noodin and Ziigwan curled up at her feet while getting comfortable on colourful cushions.

Ziigwan noticed that Nokomis was wearing a nice pair of moccasins with turtles beaded on each one. She hoped to have a pair like that some day.

Waaban leaned on the railing, impatiently waiting for Nokomis Annie to share her dream.

"You know my children," Nokomis Annie began, "when I was young, my grandparents told me that dreams are very important. They hold special significance and we should listen to them carefully. I would like to share a dream with you that I had about Turtle Teachings. Do you remember the Creation Story I shared with you last summer?" asked Nokomis Annie.

"Yes!" exclaimed Waaban. "That was my favourite story. It is about Turtle Island, right? Can you share it again?" he asked.

"Of course, my grandson! It is one of my favourites as well. I would love to tell you the story shared with me by my grandparents."

High in the heavens there lived alone a woman, a spirit. Without a companion she became lonely. Gzhe Minidoo took compassion on the Sky-woman and sent her a companion.

She became pregnant and gave birth to twins. Sky-woman remained content but weary.

The water creatures below observed what was happening in the heavens and pitied the spirit woman with compassion. They began looking for ways to help her and eventually persuaded a giant turtle to rise to the surface of the waters to offer his back as a haven for Sky-woman. The water beings then invited Sky-woman to come down and visit with them.

The Sky-woman accepted the invitation and left her home in the skies and rested on the back of Mishiikenh. When she had settled on Mishiikenh, she asked the water animals to get some soil from the bottom of the great seas.



Gladly all the animals tried to serve the spirit woman's request. Amik was one of the first to plunge into the depths. He soon surfaced out of breath and without the precious soil. Ojig too tried, but he too failed. Waabizheshii went down, came up empty handed, reporting that the water was too deep. Maang tried. Although he remained out of sight for a long time he too emerged, gasping for air. He said it was too dark. All tried to fulfill Sky-woman's request. All failed. All were ashamed.

Finally the least of the water creatures, Zhasgkoonh volunteered to dive. At his announcement the others laughed in scorn, because they doubted this little creature's strength and endurance. Had not they, who were strong and able, been unable to grasp soil from the bottom of the great seas? How could he, Zhasgkoonh, the most humble among them, succeed when they could not?

Nevertheless, the little Zhasgkoonh was determined to dive. Undaunted he disappeared into the waves. The onlookers smiled. They waited for the muskrat to emerge as empty handed as they had done. Time passed. Smiles turned into worried frowns. The small hope that each had nurtured for the success of Zhasgkoonh turned into

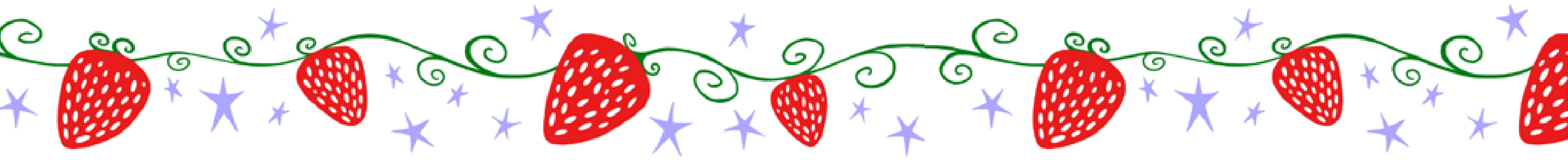
despair. When the waiting creatures had given up, Zhasgkoonh floated to the surface more dead than alive, but he clutched in his paws a small morsel of soil. Where the great had failed the small had succeeded!

While Zhasgkoonh was tended to and restored to health, Skywoman painted the rim of Mishiikenh's back with the small amount of soil that had been brought to her. She breathed upon it and into it, the breath of life. Immediately the soil grew, covered the turtle's back and formed an island. The island formed in this way was called, Mishee Mackinac, the place of the Great Turtle's back, now known as Michilimackinac.

For his service to mankind and the spirit woman, the turtle became the messenger of thought and feeling that flows and flashes between beings of different natures and orders. He became a symbol of thought given and received. Mishiikenh, slowest of all creatures, represented speed and communication between beings.

The island home grew in size. The waters subsided, the animal beings brought grasses, flowers, trees and food bearing plants to the Sky-woman. Into each she infused her life-giving breath and they lived.

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When Nokomis Annie finished the story, her grandchildren began to shuffle restlessly.

"Gosh, I love that story," said Noodin. "I remembered the turtle in the story, but I did not know that turtles could teach us so much! Are there other things we can learn from Turtle Teachings, Nokomis?" Noodin asked.

"I am so happy you asked that. As a matter of fact, just the other night I had a dream about an old turtle. This turtle's name was *Miskwaadesi*. She spoke to me about her turtle troubles," Nokomis Annie explained.



The first stars were beginning to sparkle in the night sky when Nokomis Annie started to share her dream, "The *Miskwaadesi* family and turtle cousins have lived in the waterways and wetlands of Turtle Island since Creation. As keepers of stories and knowledge about the *nibi* and wetlands, they have responsibilities to communities and to the Creator. Turtles live very long lives and tell the stories of wetlands and waterways. *Miskwaadesi* asked me, who will take over those responsibilities when the turtles are gone? There are fewer of them to fulfil the responsibilities given by the Creator," Nokomis Annie said quietly.

She paused for a few moments with her eyes closed, remembering the words and the sad voice of the old turtle. "*Miskwaadesi* reminded me about a traditional Turtle Teaching. Her shell is our calendar. In my dream, she used her claws to draw a turtle shell in the soft sand at the edge of the marsh. She then cut the shell into thirteen parts, which represent the thirteen full moons of every year. With each changing moon, there are different seasonal activities. For example, during *Odemiin Giizis*, which is Strawberry Moon, we gather strawberries." Nokomis explained.

Noodin asked, "Nokomis is that in June? I remember going to the strawberry farm with my class to pick strawberries in June."

"Yes, that is right Noodin," said Nokomis Annie with a smile. "*Miskwaadesi* also told me about thirteen challenges for each moon. The *first challenge* is something we do daily, and that is to *give thanks for all that exists in Creation*. Her *second challenge* asks us to *understand Turtle Teachings*, such as the calendar she carries on her back and the Creation Story. The rest of the challenges will help us to show respect for Mother Earth. That will help to make the world a better place! As you can see my grandchildren, there are many things to learn from *Miskwaadesi*. Walking in her footsteps may be challenging, but it is important so we can learn that there are different ways of knowing."

"Wow, Nokomis, there is a whole lot to learn," Waaban said as he yawned. "But gosh, I am tired! This has been such a great day and I am looking forward to learning more about *Miskwaadesi* and what her challenges can teach us," said Waaban.

"We should get ready for bed," Nokomis Annie said.

Waaban hopped on his bike. Noodin and Ziigwan said their goodbyes and scurried off to brush their teeth and change into pajamas.

"Goodnight my grandchildren," said Nokomis Annie. "Tomorrow will be a busy day."

Each of the children said their goodnights and crawled into bed, looking forward to the exciting day ahead.

