



MAUMEE & RED FEATHER

DISCOVER

MAPLE SUGAR

AS RETOLD BY

KEEWAYDINOQUAY

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So! You would like a story, eh? Bindige, bindige, nin abinodjig! Come in, come in. Sit down my children. I believe your Nokomis can find a story for you. What else are Grandmothers for? No, not too close to the fire there. That's right. Make yourselves comfortable.

Now, no story is about just one thing, or just one person -- for stories are a little bit of true life remembered and retold. And life is about many things that fit together in harmony. Great Spirit has made it that way. Migwaej!

This is the story of Maumee, the field mouse, the tiniest of our four-footed brothers. It is a story of mercy, and a story of justice. In that sense it is a telling of how one goodness leads to another goodness, if only you are clever enough to see the truth of its being that way.

This is also a story of one Red Feather, a child of the Anishinaabeg, just like you are. You will like that, eh? Today you have helped carry many buckets of sap from Ninautig, the Maple, our good tree. So you should know about this, for it is the truth of how maple sugar, Anishinaabeg-sisibakwat, was first discovered.

But that is not all. It is two stories in one; one which took place in the autumn, the Moon-of-the-Falling-Leaves, and another which happened in NitaZigwan, the early springtime, in the Moon-of-our-Good-Tree, the very time of year that it is now, NinAutig-Gissis, when the life-sap rises up in the sturdy trunks of all the Tree-Beings.

**Hey-O-Whey
I tell a story,
A story from the Ancient Ones,**

**Hey-O-Whey
I place Asseymah for their Spirits.**

**Hey-O-Whey
I tell a story,
A story from the Ancient Ones,
Listen.... and learn....**

It was the Moon of the Falling of Leaves. All day long young Red Feather had tramped among the wonders of the forest delighting in the crisp autumn air, gathering nuts for his Grandmother, and watching the animals prepare their winter homes. And now he was tired. He took off his shirt and hung it carefully on the pegs of the wigwam. Then he took a good long drink from the cold water in his muhkuk and laid down beside the fire. But, before he put his moccasins beside the fire, he dropped a few goodies from the forest trip into the toe of one... you know, for nibbles, while he was lying there.

Red Feather loved this lazy time beside the fire in his Grandmother's lodge. He liked the dream-pictures he could find in the red embers of the fire. He stretched out and soon became dreamy in the beaverskin robes. He was just about to reach into the toe of his moccasin for one of the goodies... when he heard a sound!

He froze still, as every good Anishinaabeg child should, for it was a sound he was not accustomed to hearing. Then, in the gleam of the fire, his sharp eyes went wandering around the wigwam. Pretty soon, at one end of the fire where the ashes were cold, he thought he saw a little whirlwind. But it wasn't long before he also saw the little whirlwind had two tiny, very shiny, little black eyes.

When he saw what it *really* was, Red Feather nearly laughed out loud and scared it away! For it was the tiniest, the very smallest, little field mouse that Red Feather had ever seen. It was so small it looked like a little ball of fluff with two great ears sticking out of it, and a very long tail. So tiny was this little fellow that he didn't walk to well in the ashes. But, as little as he was, he had a good nose. He was snuff-snuff-snuffling along in the ashes looking for a crumb of something to eat. When he came up really close to Red Feather's moccasins he smelled the goodies there, and with one jump he was over the side.

Red Feather was about to say, "*Hey! Those are mine!*" Then he thought, "*Perhaps the little one is hungry as I was this morning when I went to the forest.*" So he waited. Pretty soon, back out of the moccasin came the wee one, his little innocent eyes sticking up over the edge and a big blueberry in his mouth. He sat there in the firelight eating that berry, and it seemed as if he were looking at Red Feather.

Red Feather just couldn't decide. Was he really looking at Red Feather? Was he worried that he was going to take the berry away? Or, was he saying, "*Migwaej for this nice food. I realize that you're sharing it with me.*"

Red Feather was never to know. Outside the lodge he could hear the shuffling footsteps of his Nokomis coming through the door. He knew that something would have to be done, for Nokomis, like most grown-ups, didn't care for the Maumeeg. They said they were pirates, and stealers, and took away food they had not garnered, and that they ought to be taken away and killed; in fact, Red Feather had seen many people go around with big clubs, hitting at the Maumeeg.

This one was so tiny... and so hungry... and so small... and so cute... Red Feather didn't want that to happen to this baby Maumeeg. So, quick as a flash, he folded the toe of his moccasin right over top of the heel, and made a little hiding place for the Maumeeg. When his Grandmother came in and put down the wood he didn't say a thing, and she didn't either, except to give him a kindly look as she went out again.

Then Red Feather leaned over and put the moccasin up to his ear. He could hear the little one going squeak-squeak-squeak inside. He said, "*Little Brother, a people wigwam is no place for a Maumeeg. Some of our people would even step on you, or hit you with a club. Go seek your food in the forest. It is a safer place for you.*" He shoved his moccasin underneath the flap of the tent, and then he watched as the little Maumeeg scampered away.

And Then....

And Then....

Then Came WINTER!!

It was one of the hardest winters that Nokomis, in all of her years, could remember. It was absolutely the worst winter that little Red Feather, who had not very many years, could remember. Oh! Kabbibonodin roared out of the North, and blew and blew, and everything was stopped by his piercing cold. Piibowin stalked the forest, and PawpawKiiwis stalked the hunters even as they stalked their prey. And PawpawKiiwis rattled his skeleton in the dark. And The People, all The People, were hungry, very hungry indeed. It was, in fact, so bad that many times many people had nothing in their stewpots, nothing in the pot at all.

Now, Nokomis was a very wise woman, and she had put away many good foods. So Red Feather and Nokomis did rather well. Red Feather, being a beginning-hunter, often went off to the forest to find a few things. But at last the cold became so great, and the ice so deep, that no one could break out to go to the forest. When they did get to the forest, if they could, there was nothing there to find. It was all of very thick ice.

One day... one day, when Red Feather awakened he found his Grandmother sitting by the fire shaking her head. She said, "*Grandson, today there will be nothing in our stewpot. Nothing at all, do you understand? Nothing at all. It is the first time in my whole life that I have not been able to provide for the family I should take care of. I am sorry.*"

"*Oh, not to worry, Grandmother.*" Red Feather took up his little bow and arrow, put on his heavy leggings, and pulled his shirt over his head. "*I will go to the forest, and I will find something for us to eat.*"

Grandmother just looked at him and shook her head. She was going to say, "*No, don't bother going. There's no sense in it.*" But instead she thought, and then said, "*Well, perhaps. Who knows? Perhaps in their goodness the Spirits of the Forest will show you something for us.*"

So Red Feather took off. I couldn't say he went down the path, or walked down the path. Oh, no! He skidded down the path -- just as if he

were on a toboggan, only he wasn't! He came to the place where the forest paths crossed in the middle.

He thought, "*This would be a good place to hide myself. I will watch and see what animals go by.*" So that he did. From his hiding place he watched, and saw two poor, skinny little snowbirds, hardly good enough to fill a pot. They were so cold, and mostly feathers and bone. Then down the path came a skunk. Only he wasn't the brave, bragging old self that he usually was. His fur was dull, and his skin hung on his bones like he was the skeleton of PawPawKiiwis himself. Red Feather thought he would just as soon go without eating altogether as have the taste of skunk in his pot.

And he waited.... and he waited.... he was getting cold. Suddenly, skidding down the path zippety-zap!, as though he had a little wee toboggan underneath him, came a field mouse.

The field mouse went sliding by. Red Feather had to laugh. It looked so funny. All of a sudden he sat up straight in his hiding place. That field mouse.... that field mouse wasn't gaunt and skinny. His skin wasn't flopping on his bones. Oh, no! That field mouse was sleekit and shiny and plump. He had a ruff of fur around his head and his ears stood up alert and stiff and animated. He was having a good time -- with plenty of energy to enjoy himself. How did that field mouse do this?

Red Feather was just about to leave his place to try stalking -- yes, stalking a field mouse -- when zippety-zoom! Back the other way came the very same field mouse. Red Feather set his foot, like the foot of a giant, in the path. "*Wait there Little Brother! I would know something from you.*"

The little field mouse cowered, afraid of that giant foot, and looked slowly up the long length of the giant being who was was Red Feather. All of a sudden, instead of looking afraid and scared, and worried from fear that he might be killed at any moment, the little field mouse gave a jump right up into the air and down again into the powdery snow. Poof! His little squeaky voice said, "*Red Feather! Red Feather! My friend Red Feather!*"

Red Feather stared... he could hardly believe this. He said, "*Oh Brother Field mouse, Little Maumee, you know my name?*"

"Oh yes," said the little field mouse. "*I think you probably remember me. Remember last Moon of Falling Leaves? I was a baby mouse then, and you saved my life. You hid me in your moccasin, and you let me go underneath the tent flap. I remember you.*"

Red Feather said, *"Can it be? Are you, the big, strong, sleekity, gray field mouse that you are, the same as that little ball of fluff? All this happened in these few months? And in winter, Little Brother, when the food is the scarcest, when it is hard for us Indians, we who have learned how to hunt, we who have been taught all about the forest, you, a field mouse, have been able to find food? All winter long?"*

The little field mouse waggled his tail, and he flapped his little ears, and he grinned. He said, *"Isn't it great?! I feel great! It looks great! I am very happy!"*

Red Feather put down his head. He said, *"Little Brother, would you... would you share your secret with me? I... I need some food for my Nokomis. She is old, and not too strong."*

The little field mouse said, *"Don't be silly! Of course I will tell you my secret. Sit down here Big Brother."*

So Red Feather got down on his knees in the ice and the snow, and leaned down to hear what the little Maumee had to say.

"My secret... my secret, Big Brother... is the sap of NinAutig, our good tree, the sweet sap of the Maple."

Red Feather put up his head, shook it back and forth, and said, *"It cannot be. It cannot be. The sap of a tree? Food for an animal?! Are you very sure Little Brother?"*

"Oh, yes, yes! Come this way and I will show you! I will show you everything I did. You see, it was like this... I became hungry, probably before you did, because I had no one to look after me, like your Nokomis looks after you. So one day in the dead of the winter when it was very cold, and I thought I might freeze to death, I was going along and I said to myself, 'Not a seed, not a crumb, not a fragment of anything anywhere. All the fruits, if they are there, are frozen under the snow. What shall I do? What shall I do? I am hungry enough to eat a tree.' And then I sat up straight, and said to myself, 'Eat a tree? Ennh. That's what I shall do.'

"So I looked around where I was, and I saw the great giant Ahiiab, the Elm, standing there straight and tall, and very strong indeed with his furrowed trunk. I went over to him and I said, 'Giant Ahiiab, I'm a very little field mouse, and I eat very little. I am hungry enough to eat a tree. May I nibble some of your bark?' So I opened my mouth and took a big bite of his bark and... I was... it was... like somebody had put a giant cork in my throat. I chewed and I chewed. I got nowhere at all, even with all of my sharp teeth. Nothing happened.

Nothing went up, and nothing went down. Nothing tasted like anything except wood!

"I thought I heard the Elm tree laughing. But I sure couldn't get anywhere with that wood so I spit it out, and said, 'Thank you, Elm tree, but I don't think I can use you.' That night I went home with my tummy very flat.

"But the next day... the next day when I got up I was so hungry I went skidding across the snow and said to myself, 'I'm so hungry. I'm so hungry. I could eat a tree.' When I looked up, there was Apple tree. Now, you know that the Apple tree has always been a very good friend, a good friend to your people, and a good friend to my people, and a good friend to all the four-leggeds.

"But by this time its old fruits were well covered by the snow and ice. So I went up to the trunk of the Apple tree, and I said, 'Good tree, I am a very little field mouse, and I am very hungry. I thought if only I could eat a tree... may I have a mouthful of your bark?' So I went up the trunk of that tree, and I looked around very carefully to find a place where the bark wasn't thick like the Elm, and I took a bite. You know... it wasn't so bad. It sort of had a faint sweet taste, but it... it... wasn't so good either, because it was so dry. I mean, it wouldn't go up, and it wouldn't go down. I felt like someone had stuck a wooden cork in my mouth. I tried and I tried. I chewed and I chewed. Nothing happened. Finally, I said, 'Thank you. Thank you, Apple tree, but I'll wait for your fruit. Your bark doesn't seem to be the same for a field mouse.' I tried to put it back over the patch I had nibbled. That night I went home with my tummy very flat and very hungry.

"And then... and then... the next day... here, I will show you where I went. I went skimming across the snow over here. You can see the mark on the bark where I gnawed. I found a great towering Hemlock tree. It is so majestic, singing to itself here in the forest. I like its red-brown trunk, and I like its little cones, if I can find them. But by this time there wasn't a one left anywhere. So I looked around and I found a place close to the ground where the Hemlock tree was chocolaty brown. I sat down and I said, 'Hemlock tree, Big Brother, I am a very little field mouse, and I am very hungry. Could I have a chew from your bark? Just a little chew from close to the ground?'

"So I took a bite. Ugh! - pfaw! - but it was bitter! The taste of it went up my throat and into my ears. It made my nose wiggle, and my tail jiggle. I had to spit and spit and spit, and even go over and take a big mouthful of snow from the littlest snowdrift I could find, and swallow, and swallow... it was that puckery. I could barely crawl home that night. At least my stomach was full of snow. But it hurt, and I hurt all the way down, the bitterness of it was so bad."

Red Feather had to put his hand over his mouth when he heard that part, because, although it was pitiful, it was also very funny. *"Little Brother, I like your story. But could you get to the point? Could you tell me how you found something that was good?"*

"Wait!" said the field mouse, *"I must tell you all. The next day I said, 'No more trees for me! No sir. I am going to find something good to nibble. Some good seeds and good fruit. Some good field mouse food.' I went skimming across the snow. I was just so busy looking for something sticking out of the ice that I didn't see so well where I was going, and I ran, bam!, right into the smooth gray skin of NinAutig the Maple.*

"It seemed to me as if it were saying, 'Try me... try me... try me, Little Brother.'

"So, although I had suffered before and said I would never again, I crept close to that good tree and I nibbled a little bit close to the ground. It was faintly sweet. It didn't come out by itself, if I chewed real hard to keep down some of it. So I took another small nibble. And that one was better than the first. So then I took another nibble. And that one was definitely better than the first. So then I took another nibble, and that one was very much better than the first. And then, what do you know, oozing out of the little hole where I had nibbled came this clear, big, ooze, the sap of the Maple tree. When I took a taste... Ha!... my ears quivered, and my tail swiveled! I just jumped up and down for joy! It was delicious!

"Here... here... look, Big Brother. Now I share with you: this is the secret of my good health in the winter, this is the sap of the Maple tree."

Red Feather knelt down at the foot of the Maple tree. He put his finger to the hole where the little field mouse had gnawed. It came away shining and glistening with the sap of the Maple. He put it into his lips. *"Mmmm. Mmmm. Mmmaumee!"* It was good. He took another taste, and another, and another.

Maumee watched his friend's delight. *"It is very good indeed, is it not?"*

"Good?!" said Red Feather. *"It is more than good. It is a great delight. Excuse me, Little Brother, and I thank you. I must quickly get some of this for my Nokomis."* Away went Red Feather, slipping and sliding and skidding across the ice and snow until he came to his Grandmother's lodge. He snatched a mukuk off the wall. If his Grandmother had been well, she would have asked him what he was doing, and where he was going, but she

was so weak. All she did was stir a bit. Off went Red Feather again, with a birchbark muhkuk to hold the sap in.

When he came to the Maple tree he knelt down, and he let it sit there until many oozes from the many holes he made in the side of the Maple tree made a good pool of the sap in the bottom of the muhkuk. Then, thanking the Maple tree, and calling out another thank you to Maumee, should Maumee be there and listening, he raced back to the lodge. He held the muhkuk with the sap in it to Grandmother's lips.

At first she just laid there. Then she said, *"I do not need another drink of water."*

"This is not water, Grandmother. This is the sap of the Maple tree. Taste. You will see that it is good. And if it does not seem good to you... let me say, I know there is health in it."

So Grandmother took a drink. It was good. So she took another. And then another. And then another. And as surely as the sap rises in the trees every spring, so did the strength and the energy rise in Nokomis, the Grandmother. So did the strength and the energy rise in Red Feather. Soon they were both up and bustling about, looking out after themselves and the lodge.

The people who saw them go by, so filled with energy and so bursting with health, said, *"Hmmm. Is it not strange that a little boy and an old woman have so much energy and so much health in a very bad winter when the winds are so cold, and the ground is so frozen? Look at the two of them! What kind of a spell has the old woman made?"*

So the people of the village began to watch. And of course, you know, and I know, that they never did see what kind of a spell the old woman had made that they should be strong and healthy. All they ever saw was that every day a little boy slipped away into the forest. And every day he came back to the lodge with a very small muhkuk containing some, well, what they thought was water.

One day the muhkuks were so full, and the sap was running so fast, that there were not enough containers in which to put it all. So Red Feather looked around and he saw the old iron kettle that his Grandmother used on the fire, the one, you know, where they *used* to put the stew in the days when they had some stew. Since there was no other place to put it, he dumped the contents of three of the muhkuks, four of the muhkuks -- well, it turned out to be six, into the old iron kettle.

Bet you know what happened! Sitting there by the fire, the sap began to boil!

When Red Feather came back from the forest with the very last of the muhkuks for that day, his Grandmother was so excited she could hardly remember to act like a Grandmother! She was dancing around the inside of the wigwam, and she cried, "*Oh, taste! Taste, my Grandson. Taste!*"

Red Feather looked, and he said, "*Nokomis! What has happened to you?! What is wrong?*"

"*Oh!*" she said. "*Nothing is wrong! Biné! I am so happy, I am so healthy, I am so full of energy! I am dancing everywhere! Look there! In the old iron kettle, my Grandson. Taste! It will be the delight of your life.*"

So Red Feather leaned over, and just as he had done before, not too long ago, tasting the sap from the side of NinAutig, he tasted the sap from the kettle. It was thick and gooey. "*Oh! Mino!*" He licked his finger. "*Oh, Mmmaumee!*" It was a delight from the Gitchi Manitou. "*What is this Grandmother?! What is it?!*"

"*Aha!*" said Nokomis, and her old eyes twinkled. "*It is the sap of NinAutig. It is the sap of our good tree, boiled away to sugar. Do you realize, Grandson? Do you realize that this way it could be saved. It could be saved up against the hard winter. It could be saved for a long time. Do you realize that never again... never again!... due to your friend, the little Maumee... and due to our friend, the Maple... the Anishinaabeg will never starve in any winter... not ever again.*"

And this is the true story of how Anishinaabeg sisibakwat, Maple Sugar, first came to be.

Shall we celebrate the sugaring-off by singing the Maple Sugar song together?

Nimikwaan, ninde mikwaan,
Gahgo wey-hey-whey-hey-yah,
Nimikwaan ninde mikwaan,
Gahgo wey-hey-whey-hey-yah,
Niniimooshenso.

Anishinaabe sisibakwat,
Gahgo wey-hey-whey-hey-yah,
Nimikwaan ninde mikwaan,
Gahgo wey-hey-whey-hey-yah,
Niniimooshenso.

Mmmmm!