

Abenaki Cinderella Story

There was once a large Indian village situated on the border of a lake. (*Nameskeek' oodun Kuspemku*). At the end of this place was a lodge, in which dwelt a being who was always invisible -- a mighty hunter, whose *dodem (teeomul)* was the Moose, Stupendous Deity of the spirit world. He had a sister who attended to all his wants, and it was known that any girl who could see him might marry him. Therefore there were indeed few who did not make the trial, but it was long ere one succeeded.

And it passed in this wise. Towards evening, when the Invisible One was supposed to be returning home, his sister would walk with any girls who came down to the shore of the lake. She indeed could see her brother, since to her he was always visible, and beholding him, she would say to her companions, "Do you see my brother?"

They would mostly answer "Yes," though some said "Nay."

Then the sister would say "*Cogoowa' wiskoboosich?*" --"Of what is his shoulder strap made?" Or, as some tell the tale, she would inquire other things such as, "What is his moose-runner's haul?" (the runners or harness of his sled).

They would reply, "A strip of rawhide," or "A green withe," or something of that kind. Then she, knowing they had not told the truth, would reply quietly, "Very well, let us return to the wigwam."

When they entered the place, she would bid them not to take a certain seat, for it was his. After they had helped to cook the supper, they would wait with great curiosity to see him eat. Truly he gave proof that he was a real person, for as he took off his moccasins they became visible, and his sister hung them up; but beyond that they beheld nothing, not even when they remained all night as many did.

There dwelt in the village an old man, a widower with three daughters. The youngest of those was very small, weak, and often ill, which did not prevent her sisters, especially the eldest, treating her with great cruelty. The second daughter was kinder and sometimes took the part of the poor abused little girl, but the other would burn her hands and face with hot coals. Yes, her whole body was scarred with the marks made by torture, so that people called her *Oochigeaska* (rough-skin or burnt-skin girl).

When her father, coming home, asked what it meant that the child was so disfigured, her sister would promptly say that it was the fault of the girl herself, for that having been forbidden to go near the fire, she had disobeyed and fallen in.

Now it came to pass that it entered the heads of the two older sisters of this poor girl that they would go and try their fortune at seeing the Invisible One. So they clad themselves in their finest and strove to look their fairest; and finding his sister at home went with her to take the wonted walk down to the water. Then when He came, being asked if they saw him, they said, "Certainly," and also replied to the question of the shoulder strap or sled harness saying "A piece of rawhide." In saying which they lied, like the rest, for they had seen nothing and got nothing for their pains.

When their father returned home the next evening he brought with him many of the pretty little shells from which *weiopeskool* (wampum) was made, and they soon were engaged in *napawejik* (in stringing the shell beads).

That day, poor little *Oochigeaskw'*, the burnt-faced girl, who had always run barefoot, got a pair of her father's old moccasins and put them into water that they might become flexible to wear. And begging her sisters for a few wampum shells, the eldest did but call her "a lying little pest", but the other gave her a few.

Having no clothes beyond a few paltry rags, the poor creature went forth and got herself from the woods a few sheets of birch bark (*moskwe*). She made herself a dress of this, putting some figures on the bark by scraping it. This dress she shaped like those worn of old. So she made a petticoat and a loose gown, a cap, leggins, and handkerchief, and, having put on her father's great old moccasins -- which came nearly up to her knees -- she went forth to try her luck.

For even this little thing would see the Invisible One in the great wigwam at the end of the village.

Truly her luck had a most inauspicious beginning, for there was one long storm of ridicule and hisses, yells and hoots, from her own door to that which she went to seek. Her sisters tried to shame her, and bade her stay at home, but she would not obey; and all the idlers, seeing this strange little creature in her odd array, cried "Shame !" But she went on, for she was greatly resolved; it may be that some spirit had inspired her.

Now this poor small wretch in her mad attire, with her hair singed off and her little face as full of burns and scars as there are holes in a sieve, was, for all this, most kindly received by the sister of the Invisible One, for this noble girl knew more than the mere outside of things as the world knows them.

As the brown of the evening sky became black, she took her down to the lake. And ere long the girls knew that He had come. Then the sister said "Do you see him?"

The other replied with awe, "Truly I do -- and He is wonderful !"

"And what is his sled string?"

"It is," she replied "the Rainbow." And great fear was on her.

"But my sister," said the other, "what is his bow-string?"

"His bow-string is *Ketak' soo wowcht*" (the Spirits' road, the Milky Way).

"Thou hast seen him," said the sister. And taking the girl home, she bathed her, and as she washed, all the scars disappeared from her face and body. Her hair grew again, it was very long and like a blackbird's wing. Her eyes were like stars. In all the world was no such beauty. Then from her treasure she gave her a wedding garment, and adorned her. Under the comb, as she combed her, her hair grew. It was a great marvel to behold.

Then, having done this, she bade her take the wife's seat in the wigwam -- that by which her brother sat, the seat next to the door. When He entered, terrible and beautiful, he smiled and said "*Wajoolkoos !* -- so, we are found out !"

"*Alajulaa.*"

"Yes," was her reply. So she became his wife.

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