

The Sickness of Ojibwe

A historical fiction short story

The fire was warm against my back as I wove birch bark into baskets. It was fall, and my mom was collecting food for the winter. My grandma was tending the flames with a stick, while my brother was out with my dad on his first hunting lesson. I sighed, putting down my basket and looking at grandma, extremely bored.

“When can I go back home?” I asked her. Being shoved out in the middle of nowhere being taught how to be a “proper Ojibwe lady” after someone returned with a disease was scaring me. I was the youngest, after all. Birch, my brother, was two years older than me. I was ten and he was twelve.

Grandma hesitated, then answered, “My dear Tiger Lily, someone stole all our food, so the head of the huntsmen went out to hunt more. He didn’t think he could get smallpox, and now he brought it back here.”

I gasped. The hunter had smallpox? It can’t be! Papa’s a huntsmen, and he went to look for food with that huntsman! He couldn’t have it, could he?

Grandma’s tears slid down her cheek and into her lap. My papa was her son, so I could see why she was trying not to cry. “We don’t know about mama yet, but papa and Birch have a bad case. Mama sent you away so you can’t catch it. She took my hands in hers, and said “I-” The chimes outside our wigwam chimed. I could see a shadow of someone hunched over in the bitter wind outside. “I’ll get it,” Grandma said, wiping the tears from her eyes. She stood up and opened the door to find the same hunter that spread the disease to our tribe.

Coughing and wheezing, he barely made out, "Petal, Bearclaw is dead and Blossom and Birch are sick. The pitcher plant...we need to cure with...pitcher plant... east on mountain..." he said, collapsing on the dead leaves and not getting up.

Grandma gasped and clutched her hand to her chest, her bear claw necklace rattling.

My heart skipped a beat. Papa is dead? My eyes filled with tears and I couldn't concentrate on my basket. Suddenly, the fire didn't feel so warm anymore. I knew I had to find the pitcher plant and brew enough for everyone.

Grandma just stared at the little dead huntsman and said, "We have to find it. We have to, Tiger Lily. For mama and your brother."

"I know grandma. I know." I replied, even though I didn't want to. It was almost December, and the temperatures would surely drop below forty degrees! I finished the birch bark basket, winding the last piece over and over again, trying to calm down over the fact that my father, Bearclaw, was dead.

I slipped on my beaver coat and waited for my grandma to come outside. Some corn spilled out of my basket and into the dry leaves and dead grass. My grandma came out, holding half a dozen baskets, all filled with food, furs, straw, and sticks for the month. The bitter wind ripped through my hair as I stepped out of the warmth of our wigwam. Would I ever see the place again?

"Tiger Lily," grandma said, noticing my worried face. "We'll be back soon."

I shivered. "Well," I said unsurely, "Let's go." I started trudging through the deep wads of leaves, water soaking my shoes. We truded on until the wigwam was a speck in the distance. Finally, I broke the silence by asking for a handful of corn. Grandma sighed; being under the weight of the food was hurting her back. She nodded, grabbing a moose skin out of her basket and laid it on the leaves. She gestured for me to sit down and did the same. We each had a handful of corn and a fish after offering the first piece to our tribe leader. We devoured our food

as the snow fell. It started soft, but then slowly but surely turned into a blizzard. I could hardly see my grandma through the snow.

“We need to take cover before the storm get’s worse, Tiger Lily!” my grandma said. The wind bit into my coat and I shivered. We packed up our moose skin blanket and the food. We covered the baskets in birch bark and set off to find a dry place to sleep. We traveled for hours, but the storm only got worse. My hands were shaking just as we found a tree trunk with a hollow area. I stumbled inside, unaware of my surroundings. The tree trunk had mold growing on the sides and decaying rabbit in the corner. I set my bags on the opposite side of the rabbit guts. I shivered and settled in, laying out the moose skin and made sure it didn’t touch the dead rabbit. I got out our basket of corn and called to grandma.

“Grandma! I have corn!” I said, looking around for my grandmother. But she was nowhere in sight. “Grandma?” I called again, this time stepping out into the harsh storm, desperate to find her. After an hour of searching I finally found her in a heap, shivering and wheezing. “Grandma!” I called, desperate to not lose another important piece of my heart. I knelt down, and to my horror, found she was barely breathing. I picked her up in my arms and struggled to run back to our hollow hiding place. When we finally got there, I set her down on the moose skin and started a fire. There was barely enough heat, but it worked. I quickly put a stone pot over the fire and poured a bit of water into it. I would use it to warm her up. As I shook the remains of the water out of the birch bark basket, grandma gasped and her eyes fluttered open. “Grandma!” I called, rushing toward her, covering her in more pelts. I felt her pulse, and weak thumps answered.

“Tiger Lily,” my grandma said, breathing hard. “Find the pitcher plant for me...” and with that she trailed off, her eyes fluttering shut and heartbeat stopping.

“No, grandma, don’t leave me too!” I cried, hugging the dead body in despair. The frigid wind blew out the fire, as I tucked in next to my grandma, sobbing into her shoulder, only hoping that this wouldn’t be the way I died.

I woke up the next morning and looked at my dead grandmother. I must at least make a grave for her. I took her outside and found a pile of sand. I set grandma on the ground and ran back to our hiding place. I grabbed the stone bucket filled with water and a basket. I took the corn out and ate half of it and the other half I sprinkled around grandma. I drizzled a bit of the water over, so she would have some privacy when the corn stalks grew. I took the basket and scooped the sand out under grandma and buried her in it, then wrote: Grandma lives here. After, I said goodbye and went back to our hideout. I packed everything up and set off, this time hardly stopping. I knew I had to get there soon or else the whole town would have it. Finally, after what seemed like a month, I climbed the mountain. I had hardly any food left, only enough to last me a day or two. I saw the pitcher plant and immediately started picking. I picked about forty plants and got water from the stream nearby. Then I made a fire, put a stone kettle on and poured the water in. While the water was warming, I crushed the pitcher plants and poured them into the boiling water. I then poured the mixture into more stone baskets and then covered them in birch bark. When I got everything packed up, I looked down at my village. I could see grandma's wigwam and my longhouse. The town looked so close! Feeling confident, I jogged carefully down the hill, making sure I didn't spill any of the medicine. I jogged for a week, only stopping to eat and sleep. If I was too late, I would have no family left. I had to get to mama and Birch on time. I had to.

I ran into our village, where it was chaos. There were people banging on doors, asking if anyone had the pitcher plant for their family. I stood in the center of town and yelled "SILENCE!!" Everybody turned towards me, probably thinking why a little girl was yelling for attention at a time like this. "I have the pitcher plant!" I announced, and everybody ran towards me like a pack of wolves. I yelled again, to find people backing away from me. "I have enough for the whole town! Me and my grandmother went out to find it, but unfortunately, she passed

on. I will give five doses at the most to your families, on one exception! I will give my family the treatment first!" I yelled and everyone started making a line. I ran to my longhouse, and burst through the door. "Mama!" I yelled. "Birch!"

"Tiger Lily, is that you?" a familiar voice said. I spun around to see mama, shuffling along with the help of our neighbors.

"Mama!" I yelled, running to her. I quickly took out a stone cup from my baskets and submerged it into the medicine. "Here drink this!" I thrust it in her hand, and she took a sip. A little color returned to her face and her hands stopped trembling. Before I knew it, she had drank the entire thing. She was almost better! She just had to rest for a day and be as good as new. I did the same thing with Birch, and then the other families in my longhouse. Pretty soon, mama was asking me questions. "Where's grandma?" was one of them. I had looked down and they understood. I told mama that everyone else was waiting, so I excused myself and headed out to the other wigwams and longhouses. Pretty soon, half the town was better. After a week, we had a powwow and I got to sit next to the tribe leader. Even though papa and grandma were away where I would never see them again, I knew I was still ok. After all, I did save my Ojibwe tribe from a terrible, terrible sickness.

Works Consulted:

*Native-languages.org