

THE SACRED GIFT

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Tamarack! The very word nourishes my soul. Tamarack! The syllables dance upon my tongue. The fetters that bind me to the present slip away. And I am young again. I feel the warmth of sun upon my skin and I see trees that touch the sky. Blue jays call their greeting and the wind whispers my name. It only takes the scent of wood smoke to know that I am home.

Tamarack is the name of my birthplace. Amid blue lakes and verdant forests, my people live a full and productive life. At the dawn of existence, Earth Mother smiled down upon creation and proclaimed that men would be hunters and women would nourish the people in body and mind.

I do not recall when my instruction into womanhood began. Girls of my tribe learn through observation and through hands-on experience. I do know that from the moment of my birth, Mother carried me with her wherever she went. Could it be that as a tender babe I was already absorbing the skills for life in Tamarack?

My earliest recollections involve scenes of women performing daily tasks. I can picture Mother crouched beside a small fire. From a tripod, a cauldron dangled over leaping flames. The water within bubbled and steamed. It was time to cook the first meal of the day.

“Come, Willow. Help me grind the corn.”

Mother handed me the wooden pestle that Father had carved for me. She threw dried corn into the hollowed out stump of a log and together we ground the kernels into cornmeal.

“Now pour the water and the cornmeal into the small pot,” said Mother.

With this mixture, we fashioned small loaves of bread. We added cooked beans into some and red berries or crunchy nuts into others. And then came my favourite part.

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“Drop each loaf into the boiling water,” Mother said.

I followed her instructions. I held my breath. As each loaf popped to the surface, I scooped it out and placed it into a clay vessel. Mother nodded as she cut meat and vegetables for a stew. One by one, the other women gathered outdoors to cook, to eat and to plan the day ahead. The sound of their voices enfolded me in the intimacy of sisterhood.

Life in the village varied. On some days, Mother and I wove grass baskets. On others, we worked in the garden. As a child I tilled the soil and removed the weeds. Only those initiated into the Society of Women Planters could cultivate the crops that sustained the village.

But regardless of the day, I always looked forward to dusk, for it was then that my extended family gathered. Sometimes the Master Storyteller visited the tribal lodge but on most evenings, the Elders taught important lessons through tribal lore.

One evening, Grandmother assembled the little ones around the fire. I sat off to the side, stitching porcupine quills onto a jacket of deer skin.

“This is my story. Do you wish to hear it told?” Grandmother asked.

“Yes!” we all answered. “Tell us your story.”

Herein I have attempted to reproduce her words with the accuracy they deserve.

“Long ago, there lived a girl named Magena. She lived with her family in a home made from branches covered in bark. In the year of her thirteenth summer, the weather changed. The cruel winter forced animals to leave. Magena’s father and two older brothers donned snow shoes and trekked far beyond their usual hunting grounds, but they returned with no more than a few rabbits to add to the thin soup that simmered over the fire.

One morning in early spring, Magena sat outdoors. She mended moccasins while Mother

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and Grandmother prepared a meal. The women conversed in lowered tones. “There is little meat in this stew,” Grandmother said, adding water and a few herbs to the large cooking pot.

“Let us hope the hunters bring home a deer,” Mother said.

“It could be many days before they return.”

Magena wandered into the lodge. The clay pots once filled with dried meat and fish held very little. Leaning over a storage pit, she came nose to nose with a mouse. “I guess you have to eat,” she said, “but leave enough for us.”

“Magena, where is Neve?” Mother stood in the doorway.

“She has taken her medicines to White Dove’s lodge.”

Mother nodded. “The old woman is very sick. I hope your sister can help.”

Magena’s stomach clenched. She had heard the word *starvation* whispered around the village. Other times when food sources dwindled, families dismantled their homes, gathered their belongings and moved. This time was different.

There was nowhere to go.

A feeling of helplessness hung over the village. “There must be something I can do,” Magena thought. She picked up two reed baskets and headed outside.

“Mother, I will go in search of nuts and berries,” she said.

“That is a good idea. Our supplies are running low.”

“Perhaps you will also find some mushrooms for our stew,” Grandmother said. The old woman smiled but Magena could see the worry within her eyes.

Magena walked beside the sluggish river. By the time she gathered enough berries to fill her baskets and unearthed a handful of succulent roots, a feeling of exhaustion overtook her.

“I will rest for awhile,” she thought. “Then I will look for mushrooms.”

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Magena settled beneath an ancient oak tree and soon fell asleep. And while caught within the web of her dreams, her spirit rose from the forest floor. With a sense of wonder, she looked around. Tall evergreens stretched above her. Rays of sunshine filtered through the branches and the buzz of insects filled the air.

Drawn by a mysterious power, Magena followed a trail to the edge of a large plot of land. Long furrows ran from one side of the field to the other. She admired the tall green plants that flourished there. In the distance, an old woman tilled the soil. The matron waved and approached. Her long white braids swayed and yellow butterflies circled her head. Her smile radiated warmth. “Child, your presence is welcome. My name is Yarrow and I have a sacred gift for you.”

Magena bowed her head. “I am honoured,” she said.

Yarrow drew a deer skin sack from the sash around her waist and removed three seeds. “These will allow your people to resist starvation.”

Magena frowned. How could seeds improve their situation? But out of respect, she did not express her thoughts. “What kind of seeds are they?” she asked.

“This is corn, this is squash and this is a bean seed. The three are linked together. They are a source of nutritious food.” The matron paused. “No longer will your people need to move when the animals move.”

All that day, Yarrow instructed Magena in the proper method for planting the three crops. “First, the women must hold a planting ceremony,” the matron began. “They will place the corn kernels in mounds of earth. Later, they will plant beans that will wrap around the corn stalks and squash and will keep the ground shaded and moist.”

Magena nodded.

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“While they are planting, the women will sing praise to the spirits of these crops.”

“What happens once the seeds begin to sprout?” asked Magena.

“The girls must water the seedlings and remove unwanted plants.”

Magena listened with attention to her mentor’s instructions. As shadows crossed the field, the old woman placed her hands on Magena’s shoulders. “Now you must return to your village,” she said. “Take this sack of seeds and teach your people all that you have learned.”

Magena awoke beneath the ancient oak tree. She smiled when she saw the clump of mushrooms that grew at her side. As she studied the play of light and shadow within the canopy of the tree, the memory of all that had happened rushed into her consciousness. Looking down, she discovered the small brown sack of seeds clasped in her hands. She knew then that what she had experienced was no ordinary dream and that Yarrow was no ordinary being.

“Do not worry, Yarrow,” she whispered. “I will teach the women of my tribe.”

Grandmother paused. “And that, dear children, is how Agriculture came to our people.”

The women in the lodge nodded. The story met with their approval.

“I wish I could plant some seeds,” my youngest cousin said.

Someday,” said Grandmother, “when you are as old and as responsible as Willow. Then you can join the Society of Women Planters.”

Many moons have come and gone. I walked the trails in many lands. But that spring in Tamarack shaped my soul. I joined the women in the fields to touch the fertile earth, to plant the

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tiny seeds and to praise the spirits with our songs. And thus, dear friend, when autumn came with a generous harvest, we could nourish the people in body and mind.