



Guided by the
Moonlight



Killa Ch'aska Mitchell-Atencio

Mi'gmaq Writer's Award

Back in 2008, the Chiefs and Councils of Gesgapegiag, Gespeg and Listuguj decided that there was an urgent need to uncover and reward talented Mi'gmaq writers within Gespe'gewa'gi. They noted that it is imperative for the survival of the Mi'gmaq as a people that we identify members who possess a special aptitude and a keen interest in pursuing writing as a hobby or as a career. We have been an oral story telling people for thousands of years, and a number of our ancestors were some of the greatest storytellers, keeping our culture and traditions alive. This tradition of story telling must continue; however, we must be mindful of the use of today's digital technology inherent in the written word and the benefits this can accrue to future generations of Mi'gmaq.

Prix d'auteur Mi'gmaq

Les chefs et les conseils de la nation Mi'gmaq de Listuguj, de la nation Micmac de Géspeg et des Micmacs de la bande de Gesgapegiag ont établi qu'il y a un besoin urgent de dénicher et de récompenser les auteurs Mi'gmaq talentueux. Il est impératif pour la survie des Mi'gmaq, en tant que peuple, qu'on puisse identifier les membres ayant une aptitude et un intérêt pour l'écriture, que ce soit pour le plaisir ou pour en faire carrière. La transmission orale a fait partie de notre culture depuis des millénaires. Plusieurs de nos ancêtres étaient d'excellents conteurs. Cette tradition doit continuer. Par contre, nous devons être conscients de l'usage de la technologie inhérente aux paroles écrites, et des avantages que cela procure aux générations à venir.



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We present to following selection for your reading enjoyment and hope that you become inspired to write with creative style and continue the Mi'gmaq tradition of storytelling.

Nous présentons les textes suivants en espérant que cela vous donne le goût de la création littéraire et le goût de continuer la tradition Mi'gmaq des contes.

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She was born strong. Determination was a virtue she was graced with from the day she was born. That is how she entered this world. Spirited. Resilient. Fighting to stay alive from the moment they welcomed her.

She has reminders. Reminders of how life is so fragile and how hope is never a promise or plan. Her destiny is etched in her skin like a permanent memoire of how heart-strong she was even on day one of her journey- little, now faint, nicks where the needles went in to keep her little heart beating. Today, her wrists bare the exhibit of these faint scarred petroglyphs that tell her story of tenacity.

From her abrupt arrival on a clear full Moon lit night, two months early, she was taken from the arms of her parents and put in a room with wires and tubes, bright lights and confinement. The room was sterile and clinical and her eyes, too sensitive still, were draped over with medical gauze, heightening her other just as delicate senses. Surrounded by a constant stream of doctors and gasping for the oxygen being given to her by machines; touch was the only thing feeding her spirit. From that day, she started her fight. For two months, she was kept in a transparent chamber regulating the atmosphere in her limited world. The simple touch from her sources of life, whose hands could entirely cover the four-pound strong-willed being, gave her the vigor and determination to grow stronger each day. Little did she know, this was a lesson that would keep repeating itself throughout her life. This is what Mother Nature does, this is what, we, as

humans do, and this is what, we, as First Nation's people have done for thousands of years, because our ancestors have fed us resistance and have always taught us to survive.

Tepgunsateg is her name, meaning Moonlight. Named after the light from Grandmother Moon that illuminated her first night in this beautiful world. She is the little light of Grandmother Moon. There is a reason as to why she arrived early. There is always a reason for the moments where life challenges us. On that chilled fall evening, her mother, suffering from emotional shock after a break-and-enter in her home, went into labor prematurely. The thievery could have cost them the life of their anticipated baby girl, but much like unexpected forest fires that rape the lands, eliminating wildlife from their habitat, as awful as it is, it will always find a way to bring about change and bare new life.

Growing up, she felt at peace among strong-willed women that often mirrored her life and her circumstances. Even at the age when words did not exist to her, she read the faces of the women around her. They told her stories with their eyes and comforted her with their smiles. It is said that when Grandmother Moon's light is the fullest, we as women come together and no matter when the women gathered, the luminance of the Moon radiated with intensity and solace.

In her first ceremony as a child, she was introduced to a grandmother of many and a respected elder in the community. The wrinkles in the woman's dark complexion were deep from a long life of laughs, and her dignified face contrasted beautifully against her hair, whitened with age, that she wore loosely in a braid. Only few called her by her name, but the rest knew her as Nugumi. She knew of all the medicines of the land and could skin a moose faster than any hunting man using only a knife. She was wise and well respected. Chiefs and dignitaries from all over had titles, but what she possessed was much more powerful, so the people sought her.

Nugumi, who prayed for Tepgunsateg while she was still in the hospital, after smudging her before the ceremony asked aloud in Mi'gmaq:

“Na mijua'ji'j taluisit?” meaning, “what is this little girl's name?”

A proud and grateful mother replied, “Tepgunsateg.”

As if she had already known, Nugumi smiled and softly said, while resting her eyes on the child, “That is a strong name. I prayed often that Grandmother Moon protect her and illuminate her path in life. I see she already has that deep connection to Grandmother Moon...May she continue to guide her journey.”

It was in those times, consciously and subconsciously that Tēpgunsateg shared and reveled in the inherent strength of the nation's finest: the backbone of our people, the givers of the gift of life. It is in the bright light of Grandmother Moon, that she was able to connect with her own inner light throughout the years, to heal and to celebrate womanhood – to celebrate the strength and power and to honour woman's unique gifts so that she could keep walking her path in life.

Nugumi had always said that it is the spirit of Grandmother Moon that hears our deepest prayers, so not only does Tēpgunsateg celebrate her birthday on the exact date of her birth, as well as appreciate her connection to the Moon every month, but also with every passing full Moon she celebrates her life by saying prayers of gratitude and giving thanks, because just like Grandmother Moon, her brilliance is a contrast to the darkness.

Maybe Tēpgunsateg took after her father, the dusty foot warrior who walked many roads with aim ...or maybe, wrapped in humility and grace, she took after her mother who in quiet splendor carried the wisdom of all living things... or maybe, nourished by the teachings and love of her parents, and carrying the strength of the women in her family, she was creating her own path and leaving her own trail, one that would ultimately be steered by her thirst to want to know more about her own story, which wasn't only limited to her years walked on earth, as none of our stories are, but were a continuation of her Mi'gmaq roots.

The story of how our way of life, in one way or another, has been preserved and how we continue to live and carry on traditions today.

Tepgunsateg, growing up away from her Mi'gmaq community, often felt different. While she was well liked and accepted by her peers at school and she had a handful of close friends, there was still a reality that separated her from others. This was apparent one day when one of her friends asked if she was going to Catechism, a Catholic ritual held at the church, that weekend. While she understood the reasoning behind why her friends attended. She didn't understand the looks she got from those friends when she explained to them that she wasn't baptized and didn't follow religion.

“My people have our own story of creation, with Gisu'lg, the creator of everything and Glooscap, the man that came from nothing.” said Tepgunsateg, eager and ready to share the teachings of her people.

Her friend perplexed, responded “but that's just a legend and myth...isn't it?”

Unsettled, Tepgunsateg replied “And the story of Adam and Eve isn't? They are both stories of our people. We should all have our beliefs respected.”

Tepgunsateg carried the teachings of the Mi'gmaq Creation story in her heart, as well as many others that she picked

up from Elders along her journey. She would always ask questions after they spoke at gatherings and ceremonies or if she saw them sitting alone a conversation would always arise, teaching her something new and valuable every time. Little gems she cherished and carried with her along her journey. Her mind was like an eager sponge craving the wisdom that was deep in the hearts of her elders, her ancestors and of the spirits.

However, the feeling of being different never subsided. Moving to a new city to attend university, the feeling cloaked over her like an unconventional shadow. A shadow that drew attention and one that singled her out from the rest. It was a strange, new feeling of being different, but all the while not being recognized for that difference that made her who she was. She didn't understand how people she met could have never heard of her proud nation, of her prosperous people, or of their long-standing history. The first people of these lands whose language gave names to the mountains, creeks, rivers, lakes and cities all around us. Or if they did, she felt the need to be hushed as to not draw any more attention to that fact- to who she was. She often wondered; if we are such a strong and proud nation, why must I feel the subtle need to avoid mentioning who I am and where I come from? She felt as though she was living two distinct worlds on a one-way straight and narrow highway where one person is always having to pick up speed to get in front and gain momentum, otherwise it would be left trailing the other moving at its pace and going wherever they were going not being able to

create their own path or their own destiny.

For a few years, she kept her identity tucked away in the pocket she held closest to her heart. Afraid of the judgment she could be subjected to, her exterior bore not the expression and sentiment of her vibrant people and her walls were bare and desolate. White washed with the subliminal expectation of those around her. The spirit of everything that she once expressed so proudly was now imprisoned in the walls of her chest, her heart protesting and making noise against her ribs to let herself be heard. But silenced they became. It was an internal conflict within the core of her being.

Tepgunsateg didn't understand how she could live in this predominant world while still allowing the eagle in her to soar freely. She was tired of having to explain the why's and the how's. She was tired of the looks of anger, confusion, pity and ignorance. Jaded, she had become. Her once sharp persona, was dulled by the lack of understanding of those who made her feel inferior and of those who made her feel as though she was different... and that being different was a mistake.

On a cold night, when the stars were out and shining, Tepgunsateg was walking home from a long night of putting work in at the campus library. Spending hours learning the history and ‘triumphs’ of those who colonized her people only to be tested on the basis of ‘His’story, and not ‘our’story. She felt like a vessel of empty and clouded capacity. Head down and shoulders slumped, she felt a feeling of defeat.

The road was glistening from the earlier rain and her route was an obvious one, straight down one road until she arrived home. There was no scenery, just concrete and streetlights. The occasional car whirled past, but the night was mostly quiet.

Her body was tired and her mind was exhausted. The long nights and early mornings of studying were finally catching up to her. She felt the need to cry but could not understand why and so she shrugged it off as pure exhaustion keeping the tears at bay in the same place where she lay many of her emotions and feelings to rest. She had been working so hard and at the library for so long that she wasn’t even sure what time of the night it was. She stopped in her tracks to tie her shoe. She paused and took the time to look around. The buildings were dark with electric signs whose hums broke the silence of the night and the streetlights lit a stage where there was no one around to dance.

The night was still as she continued walking, but she could hear the faint sound of a gu’gu’gwes (owl) in the distance.

Tepgunstateg remembered back as a child how her mother would explain the teaching of how the gu'gu'gwes represented wisdom and that they were seen as helpers because they could see through the shadows. She wondered how many other people the gu'gu'gwes had watched prior to her tonight, and then chuckled at the thought remembering how empty the streets were.

All of a sudden, she felt a powerful light shine down on her. She looked up in amazement to see that Grandmother Moon was the brightest she had ever been. The aura was enrapturing and although the autumn air was crisp, Tepgunsateg felt a deep-seated warmth inside her as if a fire had been lit from the embers of her once bright burning spirit. Without thinking twice, Tepgunsateg goes off the straight path and heads towards the wooded trail away from all the city's artificial lights and empty stages. She knows where she's going. Tears begin to crawl down her umber-toned cheeks as she begins to realize her revelation.

“Grandmother Moon is guiding me with her light...” she reminds herself,

“This is the path that she wants me to take. This is the journey that's meant for me.”

The wooded trail was dark, but the light from the Moon illuminated her path. The air had a powerful smell of cedar and rain and you could smell the sap from the trees. She

took a deep long breath, breathing in the nature around. She walked a little taller, her shoulders no longer slouching. The moss under her feet cushioned her steps and her walk created a song of rustling leaves and snapping twigs. She listened a little closer. She held on to the trees as she made her way through the bush, her soft hands grasping the rough damp bark. She held on a little tighter. She looked up at the sky, remembering that this was the same Grandmother Moon whose brilliance welcomed her into this world and who has been with her every night that she has walked home with that feeling of defeat and emptiness with her head held down, not recognizing the guidance that was above her. She looked a little closer. The spirits inside of her were being fed by the reconnection that she made and what her senses were taking in. Each breath felt like new life. She could feel her heart beat strong with the steady beat of a drum like the day she was born.

Tepgunsateg stops to understand what her body and mind are communicating to her. She quickly realizes that although to many it would seem that the wooded trail was more treacherous than taking the easy straight route walked by millions before, lit by city lights and concrete paths, she would make it to home because Grandmother Moon and the spirit of her elders would always light her path and guide her. It is often the roads less wandered that take you where you need to be, she thought to herself. She then remembers Nugumi and one teaching comes to her mind like dew at dawn. One she never really understood, until now.

“It’s only your path if you walk it.”

The fire in her heart began to burn bright once again and spirits danced when she thought back to the beginning of her journey. From birth, her journey was never one straight road and even as a child she knew, her path by simply being Mi’gmaq was going to be a different one. One less wandered, she thought. But it’s easy to get pulled off track and stuck on those congested paths that have seen the soles of the majority. She reignited the pride in who she was. “If what I am, is what’s in me, then I’ll stay strong. That’s who I’ll be. I’ll just be me”, she repeated to herself confidently. She understood that her journey in life would be different simply because of the fact that she was Mi’gmaq, but instead of suppressing her identity, she realized that what people needed was to understand it and she thought,

“How could they understand if I don’t show them? I need to be that voice and I need to be that fighting spirit that I was born with”, she continued.

Tepgunsateg realized that life is a long journey and there will be many battles to be fought. But the only way to keep fighting to survive is to live and learn in a culture that is threatened by assimilation and to carry your culture not only in your heart but also in every step on your journey as ambassadors of our people. To keep the walls of your core painted with history and draped in tradition so that you never forget who you are as a Mi’gmaq person. Life is walking

the path carved by the torrents of ever-changing uncertainty, much like the dam of the beaver that gave out under the pressure of powerful currents and overwhelming rains, creating change, new life and new habitat, in its course.

Tepgunsateg learned that with every change, and every move we make, our destiny is altered and takes shape in what is meant for our lives. Take the time to listen to the night, to smell the trees and to feel the earth under your feet. We might think that there is a determined and ultimate fate that is intended for us, but it is very much our power and our creation that guides it. Much like the rising of Father sun (Naguset), and the setting of Grandmother Moon (Tepgunset), we cannot stop the day from starting or ending, but we can determine what our presence of mind will be met with, and we can decide how we will act and react to the situations that arise moment to moment, breath to breath guided under the light of Grandmother Moon...

About Killa Mitchell-Atencio

Community: Killa Mitchell-Atencio, (Listuguj, Gespe'gewa'gi) is a Dalhousie University graduate with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in International Development Studies. Her beliefs are deep rooted in her cultural identity and her inspiration is drawn from the need she sees to stay connected to the ways of her ancestors, while having one foot in today's evolving world.



Author's Acknowledgments: This story is about a personal struggle of identity that I have experienced, a common challenge for today's youth. My intent in sharing it is to encourage confidence, positive self-regard and pride in our identity as Mi'gmaq people. I dedicate this story to my ancestors, our elders and the new generations of leaders to come.

Author's Motto: Aim Straight, Stand Tall.

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