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THE SUBJECT IS Story

Essays for Writers and Readers

Edited by
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and
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The Stories We Are

Old Meshikee and the Winter of 1929

Michael Spooner

Among many First Nation cultures, the time for telling stories is winter—at least after the first frost. Of course, some stories are sacred and can be told only during certain ceremonies, but the stories that Grandmother or Grandfather might tell the children—about animals, ancestors, events in history, how things came to be—these are traditionally told on a winter's evening.

My Ojibwe relatives tell me that the old people often built their winter lodges (or wigwams) in a circle, and the snow was piled high between and behind them so that the center of the circle was kept clear for work during the day. In the evening, members of the family would gather inside to play or to work around the fire at small tasks like repairing clothing or tools. If you've ever camped outside in the winter—or even simply enjoyed time on a winter evening with your family inside one small room without a television—then you know how cozy such a moment can be.

After a while, Grandfather might call you over to him.

"Little one," he'd say. "Come here." And reaching into a pouch, he might draw out a long pinch of *kinnick-kinnick,* and he'd close your child-sized hand around it tight as a nut. And he'd say, "Go now; you can tell them this time." So this was how the word would go around: you would stop at each lodge in the family circle, and you'd give the grown-ups a pinch of tobacco, and you'd tell them to come, bring the children: Grandfather is telling the stories tonight.

> Old Meshikee is living on an island, maybe not too far from here, in the middle of a beautiful lake. Old Meshikee is a happy fellow. He loves his life on the island and he loves to swim in the lake. And in the evening after a warm summer day, he loves to play his drum and sing.
>
> Now, Old Meshikee is a big old turtle, so he has a big old drum; and when he plays it, it makes a big sound.

> DRUMDRUM DRUMDRUM DRUMDRUM
>
> You can hear him for miles around.
>
> On the shore of his lake live the little *shagizenz* (sand crabs). They're such busy people, the *shagizenz,* always working in the sand, always digging, always building something. But not always too smart. And on a summer evening, after working hard all day, the *shagizenz* like nothing better than to pull out their drums and have a good dance and sing.
>
> Now, the *shagizenz* are little people, you know, so they have little drums, that sound like this:
>
> drumdrum drumdrum! drumdrum drumdrum!
>
> Not too loud, but it's fine for them.
>
> Trouble is, every time the *shagizenz* get out their little drums (drumdrum drumdrummmm), Old Meshikee starts up his evening racket (DRRRUMDRUM DRUMDRUMMM), and the *shagizenz* can hardly hear their little drums at all.

When the old ladies in my family told me about it, they called 1929 in northern Wisconsin "the winter of all that sickness and all that snow." By February, the snow was to your thighs in the forests, to your waist in the fields. The cows stayed close to the barns; the horses struggled to pull a wagon or a sleigh or a car down the lane. It was impossible to keep the few roads clear for long. As soon as the plow went through, the breeze would throw a drift across the road. It snowed until the train from Minneapolis couldn't get through. It snowed until only people like Uncle Paul Babcock, who delivered the mail on his '23 Ski-Doo, or those with snowshoes, like my Ojibwe relatives, could get around much at all. And still the snow came down. And sickness? All that sickness—influenza, pneumonia, croup, measles, polio. More than one family lost a baby or an elder. It was the winter of 1929, and the darkness and snow descended with a steady leveling.

Late in February, in the upstairs bedroom of the farmhouse (such a cold room, the old ladies told me), a woman in her thirties labored with a difficult birth. Her name was Estelle. She was tall, with black hair modestly pulled back and large light brown eyes. And she was a sweet woman, kind and practical, devout and patient and serene. More than seventy years later, they still speak of her gentleness and her joy. They speak of how she could sing and how beautifully she played the piano. But her struggle in the upstairs bedroom was not beautiful. Maybe it was a breech birth—no one can remember now—but it was a very difficult one. Someone went for the doctor, but it was a long way to town, and the drifts were deep, and the snow still falling. So Estelle gave birth without the doctor, in a cold upstairs bedroom, while the winter of all that sickness and all that snow descended outside her window.

One of the women who told me this story was Aunt Signe, the wife of Estelle's brother Paul, who carried the mail on his '23 Ski-Doo. The other was Lolita, Estelle's niece by marriage. Lolita made it, probably on snowshoes or by horse and wagon, from her home on Connor's Lake to Estelle's home on Devil's Lake. Things did not look good. The child was fine—a healthy boy named Robert, who was getting all the attention that newborns deserve. But Estelle was not fine. An infection had set in, and apparently for a while she was the only one aware of it.

"Leave the child," she whispered to Lolita. "Someone should tend to me." But this was 1929, winter in Wisconsin, and there was nothing the family could do for her. The doctor arrived, but too late. Estelle died of what the old ladies called "childbed fever," in the winter of all that sickness and all that snow.

Estelle was my grandmother. The child she would never know was my father.

Lolita was a young woman, unmarried, and she moved in with my baby father's family to help raise him and his two older brothers. Their cousin, but the little boys thought of her as an aunt: Aunt Lite, they called her. Years later, she would tell me Robert was a quiet child. He spent a lot of time outdoors, never seemed to mind the snow. Aunt Lite was Ojibwe on her mother's side, and on winter evenings in the Great Depression, she would gather those three boys around the stove, and she would tell them stories she had learned from her Ojibwe grandfather.

"DRUMDRUM," she'd say, and "drumdrum drumdrum," they'd answer.

> One day the *shagizenz* decide that something must be done about Old Meshikee and his big old drum, so they call a meeting in the big wigwam. When they come out of the meeting, the *shagizenz* are clapping their hands and singing:
>
> "That's what we'll do! That's what we'll do!" and some of them are dragging a long rope they have made from the inside bark of an elm tree. Very quietly, they push off in their big canoe and paddle across to Old Meshikee's island. The day is warm, and the *shagizenz* are not surprised to find Old Meshikee dozing in the sun. Quickly, quickly, they tie him up and throw him into the big canoe.
>
> Back on their own shore again, the *shagizenz* tumble Old Meshikee onto the yellow sand, where all their children play. But what will they do with Old Meshikee now that they have him? They gather in the big wigwam for another meeting.

Old Meshikee doesn't mind the children teasing him. But what are the *shagizenz* saying in their meeting? Old Meshikee smiles. He can just imagine.

Now the *shagizenz* are coming out of the big wigwam, very pleased.

"That's what we'll do! That's what we'll do!" they sing, and they spread out immediately to gather wood for a fire. Some pluck tiny dry twigs from the lowest branches of a pine tree; some gather middle-sized sticks from the forest; and the largest of the *shagizenz* are going down the beach to drag an old gray drift log to the fire. Old Meshikee makes his voice sound worried.

"What you gonna do?" he asks. "What you gonna do?"

"Oh," says one of the *shagizenz,* "we're gonna fix you good, Old Meshikee. We're gonna make this big old fire, and then we're gonna throw you in! Then you won't be playing your big old drum anymore!"

Old Meshikee shrugs at this, as if he doesn't care.

"*Mah-jon, mah-jon,*" he says in a loud voice. "Throw me in your silly fire. But don't you know I'll kick, and I'll thrash, and all these burning sticks will scatter on your children?" Well, that makes the *shagizenz* stop and think.

"Hmmm," they say, looking at all the children digging in the yellow sand near Old Meshikee. "Can't do that. Can't do that."

"Anyway," shrugs Old Meshikee, "I don't care about fire; it's only water that worries me." So, off go the *shagizenz* to have another meeting. But they don't take too long. They come out of the council meeting just as pleased as before, but this time the largest of them are dragging an old copper kettle, and they're singing:

"That's what we'll do! That's what we'll do!" Some of the *shagizenz* settle the kettle on top of the firewood. Other *shagizenz* are going down to the lake with baskets made of birch bark, which they dip full and carry back to the kettle.

"What you gonna do, little *shagizenz?*" Old Meshikee cries. "What you gonna do?"

One of the *shagizenz* stops a moment to boast. "Old Meshikee," he says, "we're gonna fix you good this time. You see this kettle full of water? We are gonna heat this water till it's boiling hot, and then we're gonna push you in! Then you won't be playing your noisy old drum anymore."

Old Meshikee shrugs. "*Mah-jon, mah-jon,*" he says. "Drop me in your silly kettle if you want. But don't blame me when I kick and I splash and when boiling water goes splattering all over these fine children of yours!" Once again the *shagizenz* have to stop and think.

"Hmmm," they say, scratching their chins and counting the children who are still playing in the sand around Old Meshikee, around the kettle—in fact, all up and down the shore of the lake. How can there be so many children? "Can't do that," they mutter, "can't do that." Then, of course, they go off to have another meeting.

Would you please tell me what it is about children that they are so infatuated with stories? When my son Isaac was small, he couldn't even get through breakfast without making up some kind of narrative. "I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be back as soon as I can and do my homework." He was three when he said that; don't ask me where he heard about homework. Then there's the one about when he grows up, his parents will be babies: "When I get ten, from nine, then Dad will be little and I'll have to carry him." I've met lots of kids who believe that one for a year or two. (And in one sense, of course, they're right. Parent-child roles do seem to reverse as we get older.) Isaac's version of the Jonah story from the Old Testament was a keeper, too.

> Well, Jonah didn't like the city, so he ran away to a big ship. And he fell down, down, down into the water, and he saw a big fish. And the fish ate up him. And inside the fish were hearts, broken hearts. And then the fish spit him out on the shore. And Jonah let go of his fishing pole, because he didn't want to be eaten up again. The end.

Creating those kinds of stories is important, because they show a child's imagination at work and because they develop flexible minds. But, obviously, children like to hear stories as well as make them up. They like the stories in books, in movies, and in television (many of which I would just as soon they *didn't* enjoy), but even more fundamentally, they like stories about their own world, their own family, themselves.

When I was a child, the time I heard the best stories about my parents was after supper while my sister and I did dishes with my mother. We loved her stories about when she was little. How she lived in the city (unlike us). How she cut her ankle on the sprinkler. How she broke her nose. How she used to escape into books. And then her stories about other family members, like her grandfather, who worked for the railroad briefly in South Dakota and was shot by some bullies who wanted his paycheck. (He lived.) And we always loved the one about her sister Elayne, whose boyfriend was stationed in the Pacific during World War II. The navy would censor any reference to the location of their troops, but the boyfriend managed to let Elayne know where he was by using a different middle initial in her name on the address each time he wrote to her. She could put several envelopes together and spell out the name of the island where he was stationed.

And you have stories from your family, too. Do you have favorite ones about family members? It's through stories like these that, as children, we gradually build our understanding of who we are, who our family is, where we come from.

We know what English teachers often mean by *story.* There are some formal ideas, like "a story must have a beginning, middle, and end," and "a story proceeds through the stages of conflict, climax, denouement," and "it has five equal parts: introduction, complication, crisis, resignation, and resolution."

These are useful formulations for when we're telling or writing a story, but they're too formal and formulaic for just thinking about story. In the way I'm using it, *story* isn't formal terminology. If I tell you the story of Old Meshikee and the *shagizenz*, it will have a plot and characters and a point of view and other elements we recognize. If I tell you the story of my father's birth and how he first heard "Old Meshikee," that narrative, too, will have plot and characters and point of view and so on. But those things probably tell us the least important meanings in the story. Instead, we need to listen to personal narratives like that one—and like those from your own family and your own experience—for what they tell us about pain and passion, humor and courage, disappointment and desire . . . in short, about life.

Ultimately, some researchers say, we understand life itself as a story. And maybe we think of life this way because we're so used to hearing and telling (formal and informal) stories, or maybe when we tell stories, we're just creating small versions of life, the world, and time. Either way, storymaking and storytelling is powerful and important work. The writer Ursula LeGuin reminds us that "there have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been *no* societies that did not tell stories."

This is no surprise, of course. We're used to thinking of societies telling stories—especially societies from the past, or cultures that we might call ethnic or traditional or tribal. And we know a little about the function of storytelling in culture: how it conveys values and history and tradition and lore from one generation to the next, how it passes on wisdom about the world, about nature, about interpersonal relations. Just as stories work with children to tell them who they are, stories also work to help a society or a culture build and convey a sense of who it is: a cultural self-image that becomes the transcending story of who we are to ourselves. Not only that, but our cultural stories can become the voice by which we are known to other cultures and other times. Are there traditional stories you learned in childhood that came from your cultural heritage? What do they tell you in subtle ways about yourself?

At a sidewalk cafe, a disheveled man pulled out a chair at the table next to me. "Can I sit here if we're very quiet?" he asked. I made room, and he sat down. Very soon, he was whispering, then muttering, then speaking aloud. We all talk to ourselves, but this man had several selves that were talking to one another. In a whisper, he would insist that you can't trust them. In a "normal" voice, he would answer that they were only trying to help. A sarcastic voice would interrupt, and then the moderating normal voice would reply. The issue seemed to be whether it was wise or not to go back to Saigon, though I never understood why Saigon, what it meant to him, whether he'd ever really been there, or whether anything about him could be taken at face value. But one of his voices saw Saigon as the only answer; another voice advised against it; another kept cracking jokes. In all, I counted four different personalities in the argument.

We can take story a step further. We can think of mental or spiritual health as the state of being well connected to our own story. There are psychiatric researchers who describe it just this way. Often, where something has gotten out of balance, it has to do with a disruption in the continuity of our personal narrative. A part of a person's own story—a story within the story—cannot be remembered or is yet undiscovered. In other cases, a fantasy becomes the substitute for a life story that has become disconnected from reality. And these disconnections affect us at our most fundamental level: our sense of our own identity. The suppression of story can cause a serious psychological wound. We can see this in broader ways, too. We know that historically, as one nation would conquer another, it often systematically destroyed and outlawed the cultural symbols that were important to the identity of the conquered people. For example, when the American army set out to destroy the buffalo, they were trying to break down the cultural identity of the Plains Nations. When sixteenth-century Christian priests and soldiers burned the books of the Islamic citizens of Spain, that was an attempt to erase a cultural identity. Of course, these are not the stories that Americans or Christians usually tell. But we know why that is: because these stories threaten their sense of who they are.

Is it possible that there's a part of your own story that you've come unglued from? Where's the empty place, and what do you think the story is that goes there? Who can tell it to you?

My father never told me the story of Old Meshikee. The death of his mother in the winter of 1929 was only one in a string of family tragedies: his father's father had died before her, and soon his father's brother died, too. Then the Depression struck, and the family lost their house and land and pretty much all their worldly goods. As sometimes happens, I think his family had no way to cope with these trials but simply never to speak of them. They did not allow themselves to grieve the loss of their loved ones, nor to seek help from well-to-do relatives for their financial problems, nor in a hundred small ways to acknowledge the heavy emotional toll this period of time was exacting from them. Instead, they pushed these things down inside and never spoke of them again. Consequently, my father never learned much about his own mother, and he never asked, as far as I know. His brothers (men in their sixties and seventies when I knew them) would leave the room if conversation turned to these subjects. Their generation, and their parents' generation, deliberately lost these crucial stories. I don't think they knew that they would lose their voice, too.

So I was twenty-six or twenty-seven years old when I heard "Old Meshikee" for the first time, and I heard it from Lite, the same woman who cared for my father when he was a child, who told the story to him and his brothers. Born in 1908, Lite was an adult witness to the generation of trouble in the family; she remembers the main characters vividly and fondly. But as a niece and cousin, she was far enough on the outside to maintain a perspective, to see what the family was losing. On the other side of her family, Lite is a member of the Eagle Clan, Fond du Lac Band in far northern Wisconsin—the land of Gitchi Goomi, Nokomis, and Hiawatha—and she treasures those family connections as well. She is old enough to have experienced the last years of the traditional life, to know the old people, to have lived for extended periods in wigwams made of birchbark. She married a man who would become a tribal chairman, and their son would later become chairman, too. As a child, Lite learned the old ways and the old stories from her grandfather, and she learned the importance of passing them on to the next generation. She pursued an education and became a teacher and a local historian. As sometimes happens when a person lives a long life in a rural area, there are now people from four generations who claim her as their mentor, their favorite teacher. And not least of all, in time she took on the mantle of oral historian to the family. Though my father moved away as soon as he was old enough to hitchhike, eventually settling in Alaska, Aunt Lite still lives in the same county where she was born.

She was one of the few people my father spoke of from his childhood, so when I went to visit her in 1980, it was like making a pilgrimage. I went to her seeking to reconstruct the stories of my family, and I think she enjoyed telling them to me, because finally here was someone from the Spooner side who was willing to hear and learn and pass on the stories of the family. It was from her that I learned about the death of Estelle, my grandmother, and about a dozen other important characters from the family's past.

And she taught me about the Ojibwe side of the family, too. She told me the children's stories that she learned at her grandfather's knee—the same ones she had told my father fifty years before. She told me about Winabozho and the gopher skin, about the Spirit of the Corn, about the gift of vision, which Great Spirit gave to the first people to see them through the trials of this life. And she told me the story of Old Meshikee and the *shagizenz.*

> Soon come the older *shagizenz,* marching out of the big wigwam.
>
> "That's what we'll do! That's what we'll do!" they are singing. Straightaway, they push Old Meshikee onto his back and start to drag him away.
>
> "What you gonna do, little *shagizenz?*" Old Meshikee cries out, "What you gonna do?"
>
> Someone holding down his head laughs and boasts.
>
> "Oh, Old Meshikee, we're gonna fix you for the last time. You see that hill up there—the highest sand bank on the lake? Well, that's where you're going, Old Meshikee, 'cause we're gonna pitch you off the very top. And when you hit that water, you're gonna drop straight to the cold and deep! Drowned Turtle, hee hee hee!"
>
> "Oh no!" cries Old Meshikee.
>
> "Then you'll never play that big old noisy old drum again!"
>
> Old Meshikee kicks and waves his arms, but it seems that the more he struggles, the more determined the *shagizenz* become. They drag him way up to the lip of the hill, where he can see nothing below but the beautiful lake itself. And when the *shagizenz* give one mighty push, over he goes, tumbling, tumbling down the great sandy hill, down toward the water, down toward the bottom of the lake.
>
> SPLASH!

My wife and I were hunting with my father in the Talkeetna Mountains. The peaks of red and gray thrust up at sharp angles, with aspen and blueberry and dwarf birch coloring the slopes and icy mountain streams crashing over boulders. Not far away, the Matanuska Glacier, a field of ice hundreds of feet thick, spilled among the canyons, valleys, and hollows for hundreds of square miles. We were hunting mountain sheep, but this area was also a gathering place for caribou herds in the fall. We saw them grazing along the ridges, their antlers outlined against the sky, and once in a while a roving band would high-step through the brush just a few yards beyond our camp.

In the evenings, we sat around the fire, talking quietly as we ate or repaired tools and dried our wet clothing. One night, the conversation turned to family things. I had been to see the old folks in Wisconsin more recently than he had (no surprise there), so I brought him up to date on their doings and their greetings. He asked about Aunt Lite, of course, who had turned eighty years old that summer. Finally, I had to ask him.

"How come you never told me the story of Old Meshikee?"

"Which story?"

"Don't you remember Lite telling stories when you were little? Especially a story about an old turtle and his drum?"

"I don't think so," he said. "How does it go?"

* * *

There are moments when you are given the chance to bring someone a chapter from his life story that he has lost entirely, or perhaps has not discovered. You'd think you could see such a moment coming, yet so often it's unexpected—you're into it and done before you know it. But if you've been on the receiving side of this exchange, it is such a gift. Not always life-changing, but something deep and full, like a small stone from another country passing from someone's hand into your own.

As the dark came down around our circle, I told my father the story of Old Meshikee and the silly *shagizenz*. "DRUMDRUM," I said, and "drumdrum." "What you gonna do?" I said, and "Can't do that, can't do that." I told this folktale to my taciturn father, and I felt absolutely foolish: imagine reciting a children's story to frowsy grown-ups against a mise-en-scène of mountains, rough brush and antlers, guns and gloves and wet wool socks—not a child within a hundred miles. But I felt the power of the moment, too; what a sacred nibble of time it was.

Of course, I couldn't read my father's thoughts one bit. When I was finished, he raised his eyebrows slightly, looking away into the dark. Then he smiled to himself. Yes, he said, maybe parts of that did sound familiar, and he stirred the fire gently with a stick.

* * *

The theoretical way to get at what I'm saying is that every one of us has a need to understand our self, whether we frame that understanding in terms of the traditional, unitary, authentic self or the postmodern, disintegral, shifting subject. We need to know who we are. And one important way we learn who we are is by telling ourselves about ourselves. We construct an autobiographical narrative. Some psychological researchers think it's an imperative natural process: we just do it—continually, unconsciously, we are working on this narrative. It's our life story. It's our drum. We play it because it's what we have.

If we turn this slightly and think about life as a story that we construct as we live it, then we begin to think of ourselves and other people as artists—maybe inadvertent novelists with a work in progress. Where our lives intersect with others, we become more aware of our own roles as characters in *their* stories and *their* lives. Usually, we'll be a minor character, but we want to be the sort of character who makes a difference. We can have an extraordinary range

in this respect. We want to offer them something they need, some small thi
perhaps as small as a children's folktale, that will help them connect to the
selves and enrich the telling of their own life story. We want them to hear
Meshikee's drum, which is the irrepressible power of the story that they ar

* * *

All the way back down the hill, the *shagizenz* are laughing and clapping their hands and telling each other the story of how they finally got rid of Old Meshikee and his big old drum. They're so happy.

And when they get back to their village, the first thing that the *shagizenz* want to do is to bring out their drums and have a dance. Some of them build a fire, and some of them put on their best moccasins and vests.

drumdrum drumdrum. The *shagizenz* are playing their drums.

Hey hey, hey hey! the *shagizenz* are singing their favorite songs.

Drumdrum. Hey hey! But wait . . . what's that sound?

DM DM

Is it coming from the island?

DRUM DRUM

Oh no, it can't be.

DRUMDRUM DRUMDRUM

But it is!

Safe on his island, Old Meshikee is playing his big drum and laughing very loudly.