

Iktomi and the Muskrat A Native American Tale

Beside a white lake, beneath a large willow tree, sat Iktomi on the bare ground. The heap of smoldering ashes told of a recent open fire. With ankles crossed together around a pot of soup, Iktomi bent over some delicious boiled fish.

He feverishly dipped his black horn spoon into the soup, for he was hungry. Iktomi had no regular meal times. Often he went without food. Not knowing when the next meal would be, he meant to eat enough now to last some time.

"How, how, my friend!" said a voice out of the wild rice. Iktomi was startled. He almost choked on his soup. He peered through the long reeds from where he sat with his long horn spoon in mid-air.

"How, my friend!" said the voice again, this time close at his side. Iktomi turned, and there stood a dripping muskrat. He had just come out of the lake.

"Oh, it is my friend who startled me. How, how, my friend!" said Iktomi. The muskrat stood smiling. On his lips hung a ready "Yes, my friend," in response to when Iktomi would ask, "My friend, will you sit beside me and share my food?"



That was the custom of the plains people. Yet Iktomi sat silent. He hummed an old song and beat gently on the edge of the pot with his spoon. The muskrat began to feel awkward before such lack of hospitality.

Iktomi stopped drumming, and looking upward into the muskrat's face, he said, "My friend, let us run a race around the lake to see who shall win this pot of fish. If I win, I shall not need to share it with you. If you win, you shall have half of it." Springing to his feet, Iktomi began at once to tighten the belt about his waist.

"My friend Iktomi, I cannot run a race with you! I am not a swift runner. You are nimble as a deer. We shall not run any race together," answered the hungry muskrat.

"Yes, yes," said Iktomi, suddenly turning his gaze upon the unwelcome visitor. "I shall carry a large stone on my back. That will slow my usual speed, and the race will be a fair one." Iktomi pried about in search of a heavy stone. He found one half-buried in the shallow water. The muskrat helped to lift the heavy stone upon Iktomi's back. Then they parted.



Each took a narrow path through the tall reeds fringing the shore. Iktomi found his load a heavy one. Perspiration hung like beads on his brow. His chest heaved hard and fast.

Iktomi looked across the lake to see how far the muskrat had gone. Nowhere did he see any sign of him. As he scanned the tall grasses on the lakeshore, he saw not one stir. "Has he gone so fast ahead that the disturbed grasses in his trail have quieted again?" exclaimed Iktomi. With that thought, he quickly dropped the heavy stone. It was too much of an impediment. "No more of this!" he said, patting his chest with both hands. Off with a springing bound, he ran swiftly toward the goal.

Soon he reached the heap of cold ashes. Iktomi halted stiff as if he had struck an invisible cliff. His black eyes showed a ring of white about them as he stared at the empty ground. There was no pot of boiled fish!

"Oh, if only I had shared my food like a real Dakota, I would not have lost it all! Why did I not know the muskrat would run through the water? He swims faster than I could ever run! That is what he has done. He has laughed at me for carrying a weight on my back while his webbed feet propelled him hither like an arrow!"

