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Makusaní's Lesson

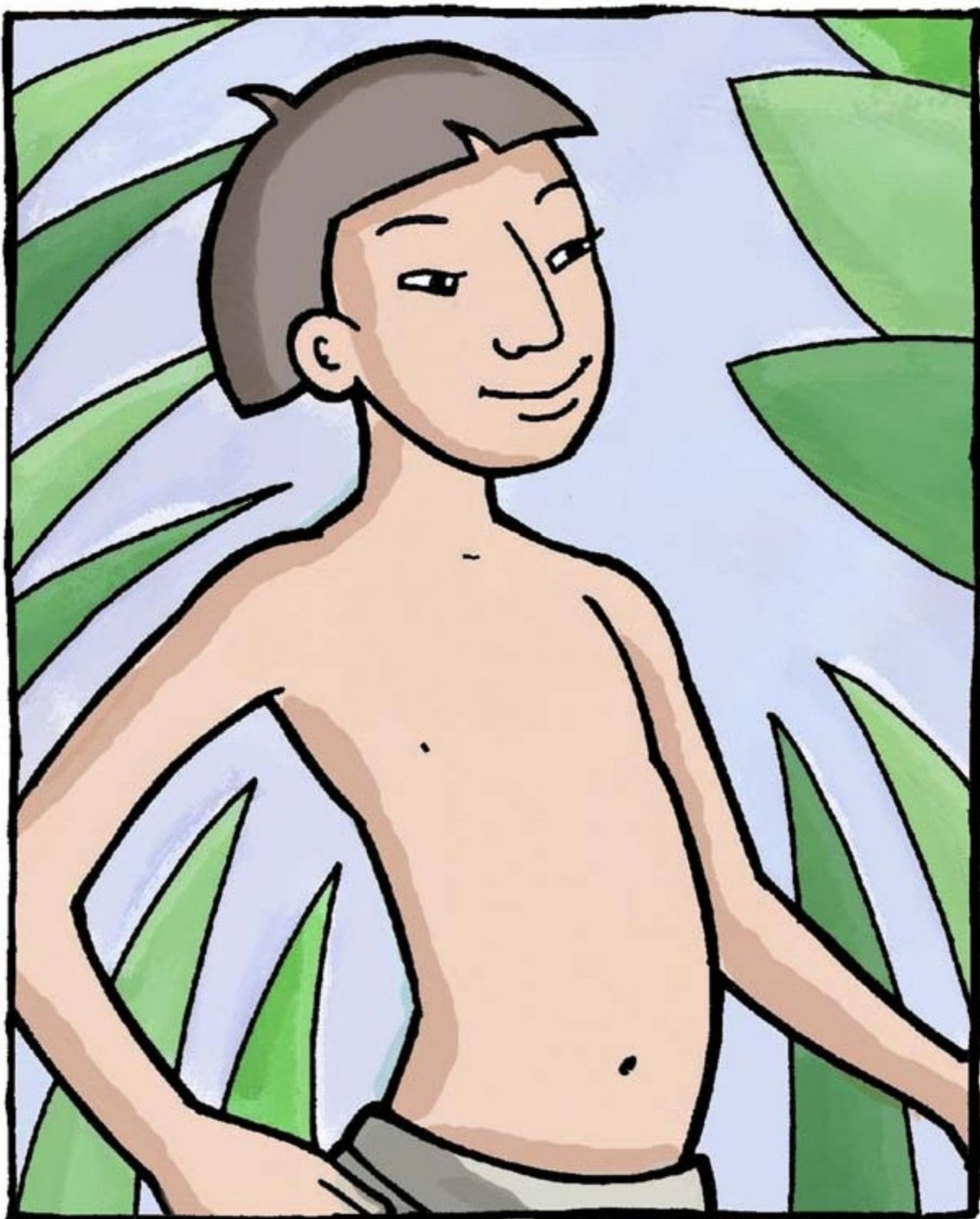


A Folktale of the Yekuana of Venezuela
Retold by William Harryman • Illustrated by Maria Voris

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The older people tell a story of a boy named Makusani. He was usually a well-behaved boy and always meant to be good. But somehow he managed to get himself in trouble without even trying.

One morning, Makusani was leaving his house to hunt up in the mountains. His mother told him to be careful and to stay on the trails. “I worry about you,” she said, as he walked out the door.





"I'll be fine, Mom," he shouted back,
carrying his blowgun at his side.

So Makusani left the village and
traveled toward the mountains.
There were many small animals to
hunt where the forest grew thick.

As Makusani was following the trail up into the mountains, he approached a river. He had passed by this place many times before. But on this day there was a canoe tied to the shore. As he walked closer to the canoe, he noticed there was a girl in the boat.





He forgot about hunting and decided he wanted to play with the girl.
He yelled, “Hi. My name is Makusani. What’s yours?”

“Leave me alone,” she said. “My father won’t let me talk to boys.”

“But he won’t know,” Makusani replied.
“Why can’t we play?”

She didn’t answer. In fact, she ran away.

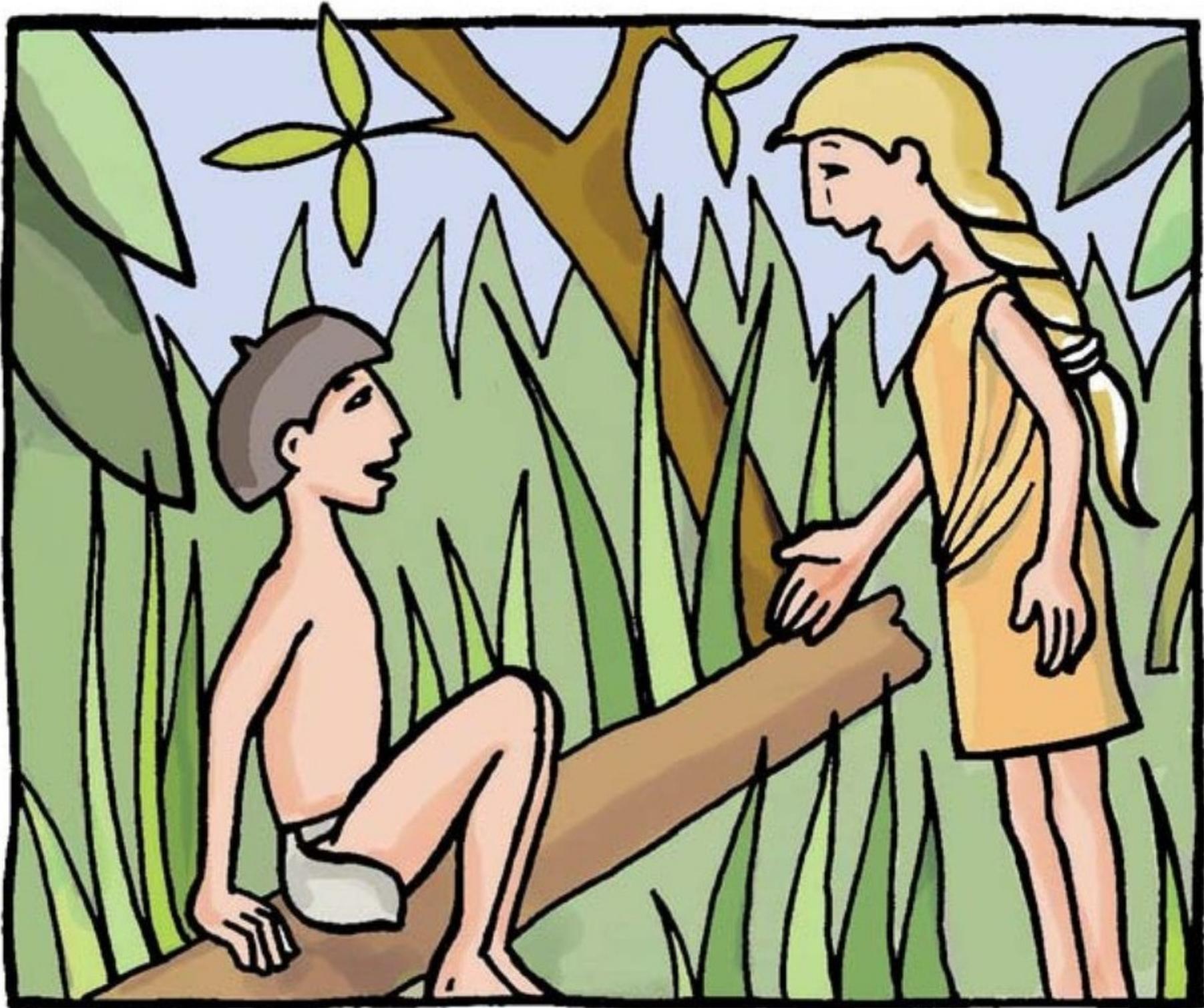


Makusani thought this was an unusual kind of game, but he followed her. As he chased her, though, she turned into a frog. She hopped and hopped, and he couldn't catch her. Makusani ran as swiftly as he could, dropping his blowgun along the way, but she escaped.

He was out of breath. He had wandered far from the trail and the rain forest was very thick. He was unsure of how to find his way back to his village.

Makusani sat on a log and thought, “What should I do now? How am I going to get back home?”





As he sat there, another girl walked out of a grove of tropical trees. “What are you doing here, so far from your village?” she asked. She was a few years older than Makusani.

“I’m lost,” he said. “I was chasing a frog, but she got away. Now I don’t know how to get back home.”

“My name is Huenna,” she said.

“I am Makusani,” he replied.

"We'll go to my father's house," Huenna said. "He'll know how to get you home." She liked Makusani. He appeared to be a nice boy.

The two went walking off into the forest. After they had traveled for a long time, Huenna stopped to rest. "I'm weary," she said. "Let's rest here for a while. I want to take a quick nap. You stand guard, and don't play any childish tricks on me while I am asleep."

"Okay," Makusani said, wondering how long she wanted to rest.

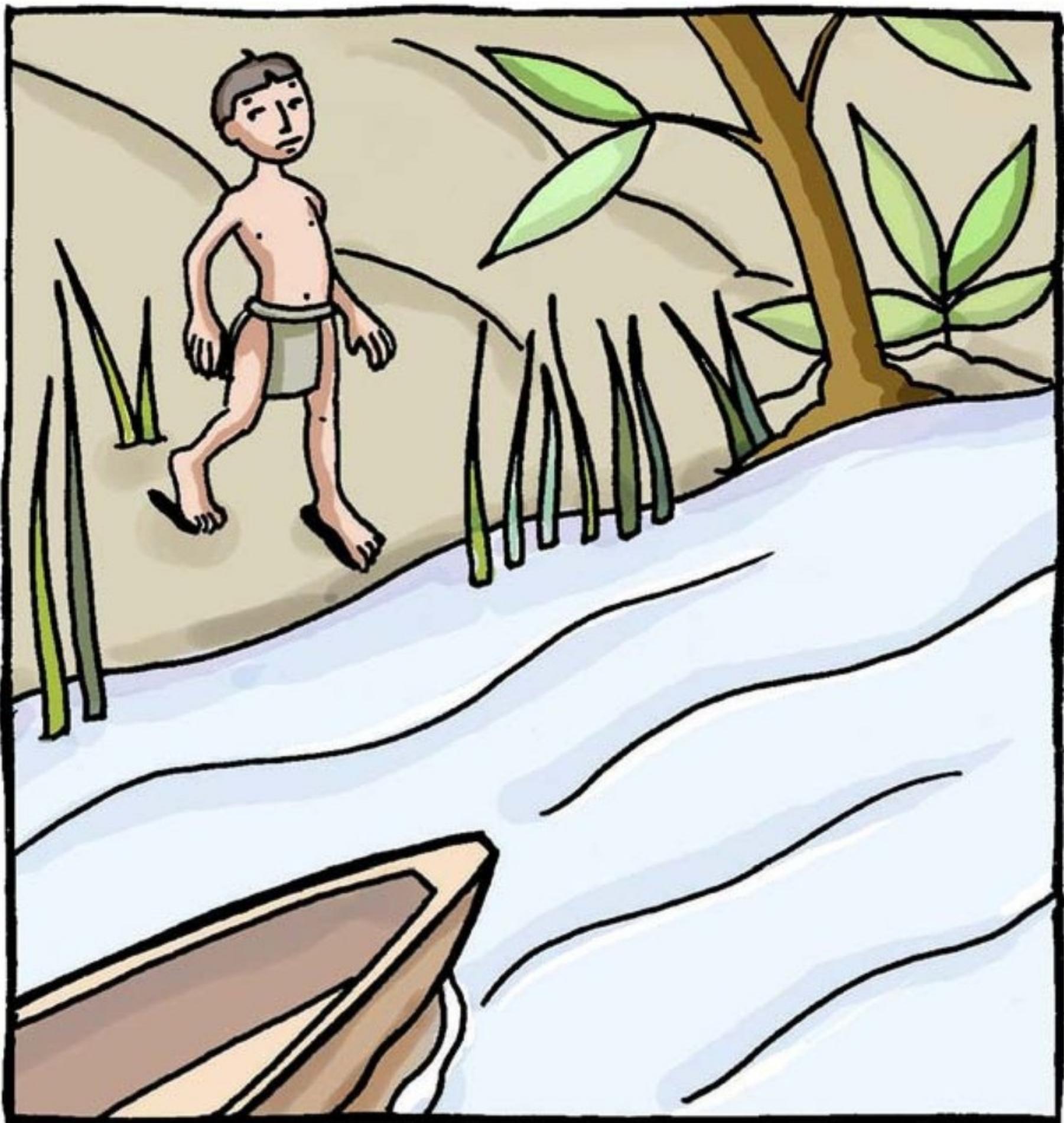


But after only a few minutes, Makusani was restless. Huenna appeared to be asleep already. He dug around under a fallen tree and found a little green beetle. He thought it would be funny to put the bug on her arm while she slept.





As he quietly laid the beetle on her arm, she woke up. “I told you not to play any tricks on me,” Huenna said. She was very angry. While Makusani was trying to explain that he was only playing, she turned into a tinamou bird and flew away.



Makusani was alone again. He was even more lost than before. He thought, “How am I going to find the trail? How am I going to get home?”

He decided to walk down the hill, hoping to find a trail. After walking for a while, he found another river. There was a canoe floating by on the current.

"I'm lost," yelled Makusani to the man in the canoe. "I want to go home."

"Get in," the man said, steering the canoe to the edge of the river. "My name is Nanudi."

"I am Makusani," the boy said.

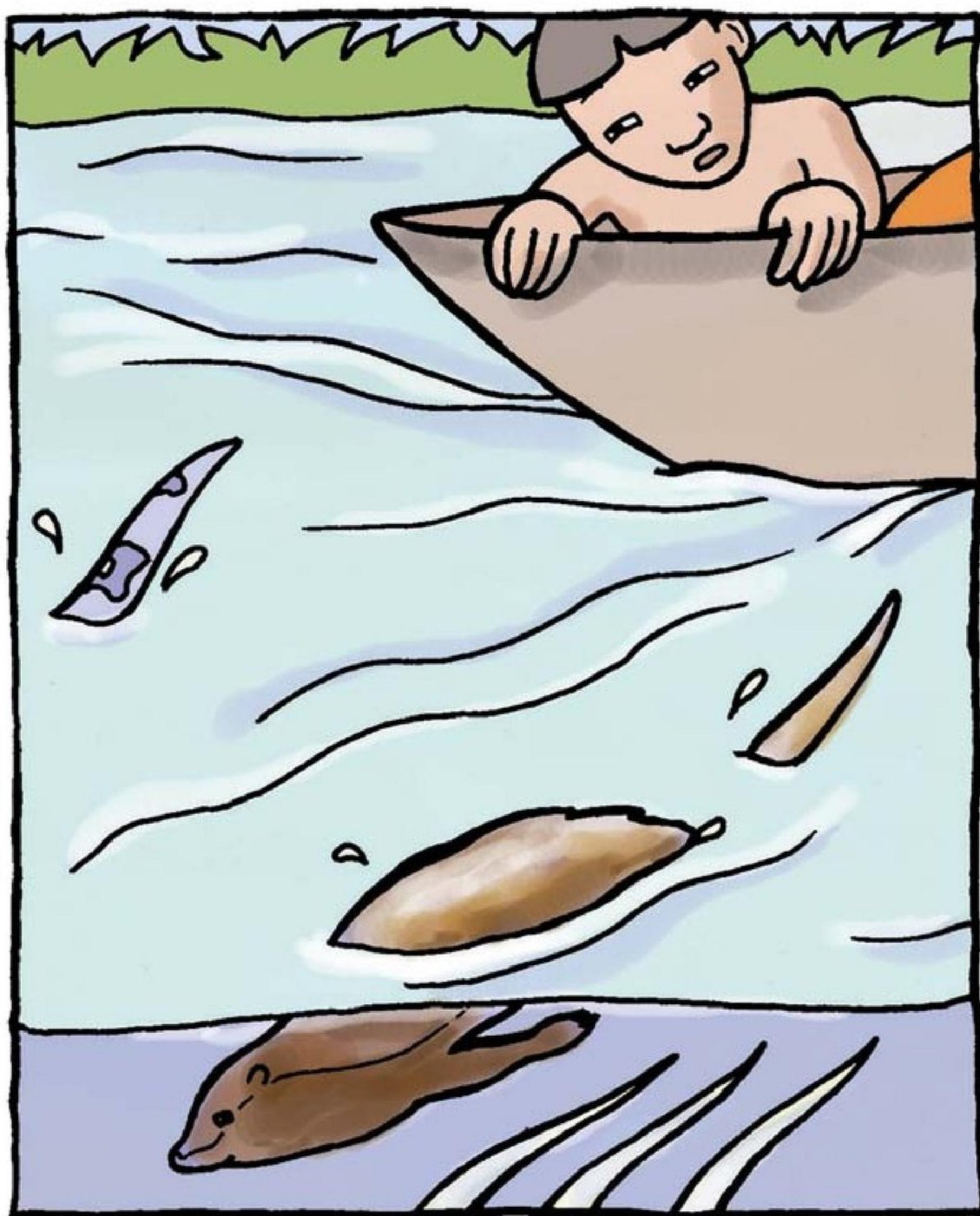
As they floated down the river, Nanudi told Makusani not to open the bag in the bottom of the canoe. Makusani agreed he wouldn't. But the bag was wiggling. Makusani was curious about what might be inside.





They came to a rapid where the river was swift. Nanudi had to paddle hard to control the canoe. Makusani thought he could sneak a quick peek inside the bag while Nanudi wasn't looking. When he opened the bag, a boa constrictor uncoiled from the bag and tried to wrap itself around Makusani.

"I told you not to open the bag," Nanudi yelled as he threw the giant snake into the water. He was very angry. Just as Makusani was trying to explain that he was only being curious, Nanudi turned into an otter and swam away.





Without warning, Makusani had to paddle the canoe. He didn't know how, so he just steered toward the riverbank. He was relieved when he hit the riverbank.

Makusani pulled the canoe out of the water and started walking downhill. It was getting late now, and he was feeling worried. He still didn't know where he was.

Makusani climbed up into a tree to rest for a while. He was getting hungry and he didn't even have his blowgun anymore. He had dropped it when he was chasing the frog. As he sat in the tree, wondering what to do next, the boa constrictor slithered up the tree. Makusani was afraid, but he was too high to jump.

Suddenly, the snake turned into a girl. She spoke to Makusani: "I am the daughter of the Sun. Because you released me, I will assist you in getting home."



"Thank you," Makusani said, relieved he wasn't going to be eaten.

"There is one condition, though," the Sun Girl replied. "You must always think about how your actions will affect others."

"Is that all?" Makusani inquired, relieved this time that he wouldn't have to do anything difficult.





“It’s very important,” she said. “Your mother has been worried sick about you all day. It’s almost nightfall, and she expected you to return home hours ago. Instead, you were getting yourself lost.”

“I promise,” replied Makusani. He felt bad that his mother had been worried all day. He also felt bad that he put a beetle on Huenna’s arm and made her angry.

So, the Sun Girl walked Makusani back to his village. His mother was excited to see him and thanked the Sun Girl repeatedly. Just as Makusani's mother was about to invite the Sun Girl to stay for dinner, she turned back into a boa constrictor and slithered into the forest.



This story is based on the character of Makusani, from the creation myths of the Yekuana, a small tribe living along the Upper Orinoco River in Venezuela.

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