

Gidjie



and the
Wolves

Gidjie and the Wolves

VOLUME ONE of
THE INTERMEDIARIES

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all children; the young and the young at heart. Let us speak words and commit to actions that uplift and free one another always.



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Prologue



When humans first began to walk the Earth, the other bipeds of the era, pondered at the lack of animal features these new beings displayed.

Sharing both animal and human characteristics, the older bipeds became known as the Intermediaries, and took up the role of watching over humans and animals alike.

Over time, a communication gap grew between the humans and the other beings. Hostilities developed, and the Intermediaries—many who were more powerful in physical form than the humans—soon became regretful of the brief warfare that had occurred between them. As a result, they decided to hide their dual nature from the humans, until a time comes when all of the beings are able to understand one another.

From then on, the customs and cultures of the Intermediaries developed to bridge the gap between animals and humans, and they continue to work hard to position themselves to be of service to both accordingly.

This story is about a human girl, adopted into a family of Intermediaries. Immersed in this hidden world, she seeks to understand where she fits in, and what her role will be.

Three Stories Down, Not Up



The baking floor is on the third story down—not up, beneath the gentle piney-sway of a boreal forest nestled near the shore of Gichigami.*

Above ground, late spring is abloom with an abundance of white forest flowers. Below however, we arrive into our story, beneath moss and humus, stone and root, into the season of the young councils.

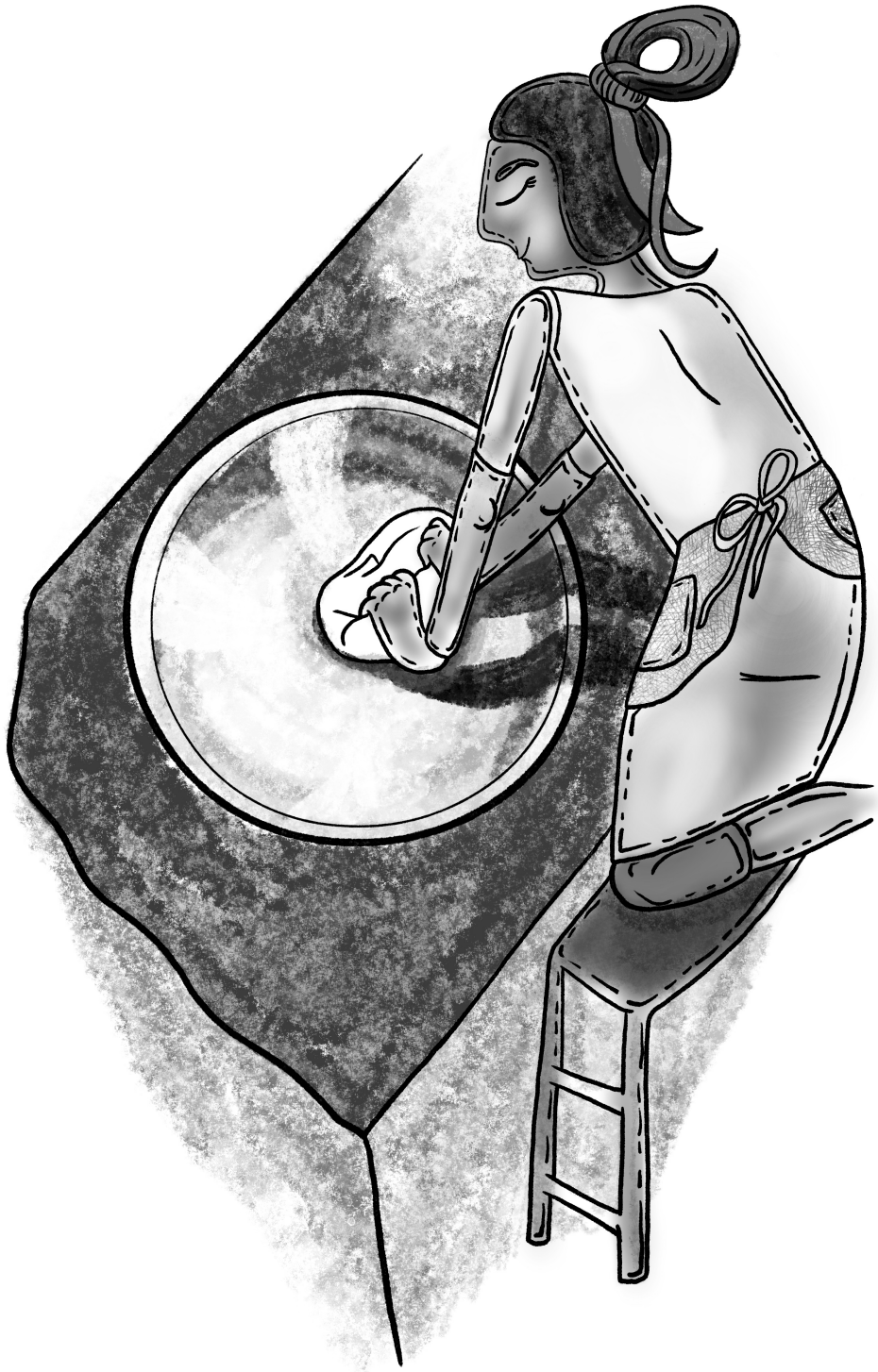
Just like everything that is born, grows and lives in harmony with Maamaa Aki, the Earth, the Intermediaries have a rhythm to their coming of age. Setting off to form one's council of peers is the first step towards self-determination.

During this time of year, the head of every young Intermediary in the Northern Hemisphere is in a tizzy—for any moment might be the one to start them off on their adventure.

Their nervousness and anticipation are understandable, as a council is a bond and station that lasts a lifetime.

As it happens, the head of one—just one—young human is also preoccupied with such matters.

*Gichigami means 'a large lake' and more specifically, refers to Lake Superior.



We find Gidjie in her favorite knee-length, bright red dress with a nettle-twine apron tied at her waist. A flat, square stone, black on one side and white on the other, hangs about her neck. And the humming. She is humming a very old hum, the kind that makes slime molds ooze and sway this way and that; the kind that can make water ripple—if ever just so slightly. Her black, waist-long hair is pinned on the top of her head, and she is covered nearly head to toe in light-blue mineral dust.

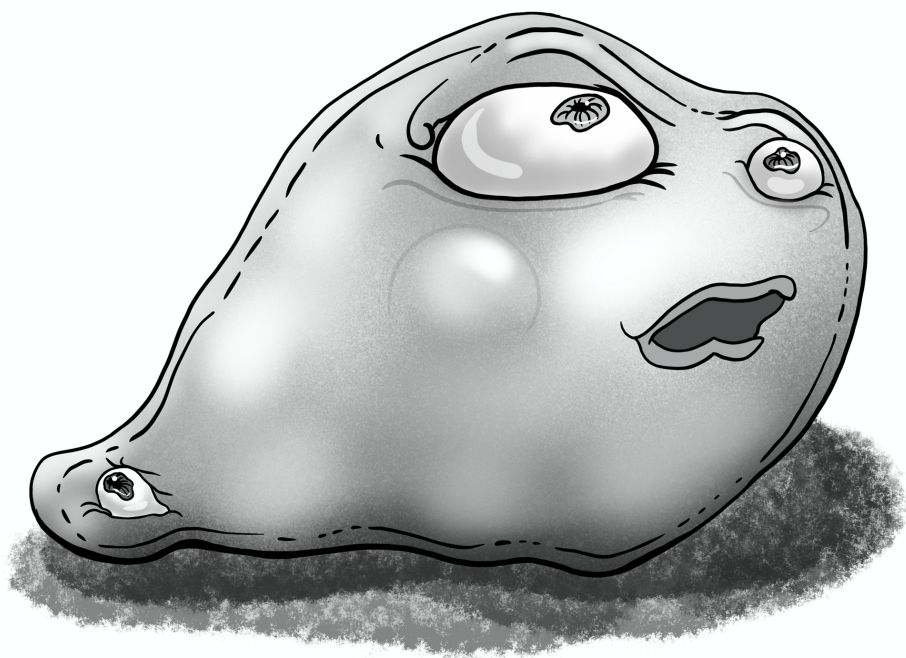
This oughta do the trick. This time, it'll work for sure, she thinks to herself as she kneads gingerly.

She holds up the little piece of dough, looking proudly at it for a moment, before slipping it into the glass jar that sits in her shoulder bag beside her.

She wipes her hands on a towel and gives them a good loud CLAP! before digging into one of the pockets of her apron. She pulls them out, and they are bright green.

She climbs onto the bench next to her and reaches out, picking up the dough-ball that was crawling towards the edge of the counter. She pulls it towards her and into the clean basin.

She pauses her humming to look straight down at the dough she is now kneading.



“Oh, I don’t know Bluebelle. *If* I was permitted, and *if* it was anything like what aunt Flaurinzia does, I could wind up just about anywhere,” she says, trying hard to imagine the future, “*if* I wasn’t a human, of course.”

A few bubbles pop up from the surface of the dough-ball named Bluebelle.

“That’s true, some people find themselves closer to home, like aunt Molandoras. But she never seems happy. I suspect that’s the reason she’s aged faster than Flaurinzia, but who knows.”

Gidjie resumes kneading Bluebelle in the carved-into-the-stone-counter basin that’s big enough for her to curl up and hide in, if she so wanted.

“You’re right, Molandoras is characteristically pessimistic about nearly everything, not just her work,” she sighs, “I really am perfectly happy right here with you and Nookomis.”

It is in the next moment, that she finds herself making a declaration to stop the curiosity of these ‘what-ifs,’ “I will live here for the rest of my life, with you and Nookomis, working in the shop like I always have. And I do have Carver,” her brow furrows the moment the words come out.

Carver is like Gidjie’s adoptive family—he’s an Intermediary. She can’t bear to think about being without his company if—when—he is called off to form his council.

More bubbles from Bluebelle and Gidjie can’t help but smile, “Yes, I know I’m your favorite human,” a pause and then, “Of course you’re my favorite dough-ball.”

Bluebelle is in fact the only living dough-ball Gidjie knows, but after years of her questioning, she can’t help but wonder if there might be others out there.

She also can’t help but wonder—with the right recipe, is it possible to *create* one, so that Bluebelle might have a companion?

In an attempt to answer that question, Gidjie has been spending long nights working on such a recipe and wondering about the properties the dough might have when baked into bread.

She looks to the glass jar in her shoulder bag that holds the little piece of dough, and smiles.

The most prominent feature on the baking floor is a cluster of 7 ovens, each large enough to hold a dozen loaves of bread at a time.

Atop every carved stone dome lives a gem the size of a large dinner plate, that shines brightly when the bread inside reaches peak deliciousness—and potential, for that matter.

Let it be known that not all fires are the same. Those that dwell in these particular ovens are of individual natures.

If you had the good fortune to look down from above upon fires and gems aglow, you might believe you were peering into an illuminated corner of space, for the glimmering cluster resembles a gathering of stars.

Truth be told, one might also say the ovens appear arranged haphazardly. Story has it, Gidjie's adoptive grandfather, being an unusually large and excitable rabbit, had ran around digging fire pits for the first time in his life, when his newly wedded wife had pondered, "Where shall I do my baking?" The stone ovens were a later addition, built where the original pits had been.



“Gidjie, I’m ready for Bluebelle,” the voice of her grandmother arrives from the little stone grate on the far side of the room.

“Coming, Nookomis,” she answers, looking down at the bounding-back-in-to-shape dough-ball who’s starting to ripple and casually wander off again.

“Okay Bluebelle, it’s time,” she addresses her. She reaches out her hands. Bluebelle turns to meet Gidjie’s gentle embrace.

Gidjie hops down from the stool and carries Bluebelle across the wide, circular baking floor, passing through several of the wind rush areas. These are places where drafts are constantly upwelling from deep within the Earth, and up, up, into the levels above and outwards to the forest floor. If you were above ground and happened to witness the expulsion, you’d probably assume that the ground was settling, or a fish was gurgling, or that it was simply an average discharge of the wind. However, the peculiar smells that can accompany these discharges, might leave you second-guessing.

On her way to the door, Gidjie stops to plunge an arm elbow-deep into a hanging weaverbird basket. Her aunt Flaurinzia had brought back several of these baskets from the island where she lives and works most of the year.

Weaverbirds, having exceptionally nimble feet, weave the baskets out of volcanic-gas-cured squid tentacles. They hunt the squids and then hang them to dry, deep in the volcano. The baskets are special, for they hold a perpetual heat.

What does an underground-dwelling, grandmother-granddaughter baking-team-extraordinaire, store in such a basket, you might ask?

She pulls out a green, glowing cube.

“And throw more peat in the oven on your way over please,” Nookomis adds.

Gidjie smiles and walks over to the green-gem-adorned oven. She tosses the little cube to the flames.

As they slowly make their way down the hall towards the rising room, Gidjie stops to admire the way the ancient, carved-in-stone-stories that line the hallway, are illuminated by the flickering light of the baking room. Shadows cast by the ridges in the carvings, dance and play, and pay visit to each other from the corner of her eye.

Nookomis’ voice sounds in the near distance, “I saw what looked like a dead opossum on the fourth floor.”

Gidjie grins wide, “We haven’t had one of those in a while,” she says.

Opossums Make the Best



Best Friends

“Carver, is that you?” Gidjie lifts her head an inch to give the slightest glance in the direction of the commotion. She knows it’s him. It’s always him.

A pink nose pops up above the counter across from her. Then a long furry snout, with teeth poking out each side. Finally, an entire furry head is sitting there.

“Hey Gidjie, did you finish it yet?” Carver asks, notably hungry.

“Oh good. It’s my opossum friend, Carver,” she says, avoiding his question on purpose.

“Very funny. So, did you?”

“And he’s *alive*,” she adds, giving him a stare.

“Your grandmother startled me this morning,” he says before turning to look over his shoulder, “Sorry about that, Nookomis.”

Nookomis doesn’t seem to hear him, as she is minding to Bluebelle in a large, dry basin built into the floor of the rising room nearby. It is of sufficient size and depth so as to completely conceal the goings-on within.

Vents along the bottom of the basin, provide warm airflow, allowing for the quick rise of Bluebelle’s many forms of dough.

Nearly-neon-green, floury dust is flying up in poofs from out of sight every little while, accentuating the air.

They can hear Nookomis talking to Bluebelle, getting her ready for her rise. A quiet lullaby begins. It is a song of love and thanks.

Bluebelle has given many loaves of bread over the course of her lifetime, and for every loaf of bread, she works hard to rebuild her dough stock.

Why, at this very moment, while Bluebelle is here in the rising room, she is *also* in the incubator room, enjoying recuperation time with special minerals and

spices to keep her healthy and growing until her next divide.

It is an old arrangement, this giving and receiving of companionship, love, and bread between her and them. One that Gidjie isn't aware the origin of, given she's never had the notion to ask about such things.

Just out of sight, Nookomis is sporting a slick suit with a hood and rainbow-colored goggles. Covered in oil, and slippery but for her boots—she is kneading Bluebelle as she rises.

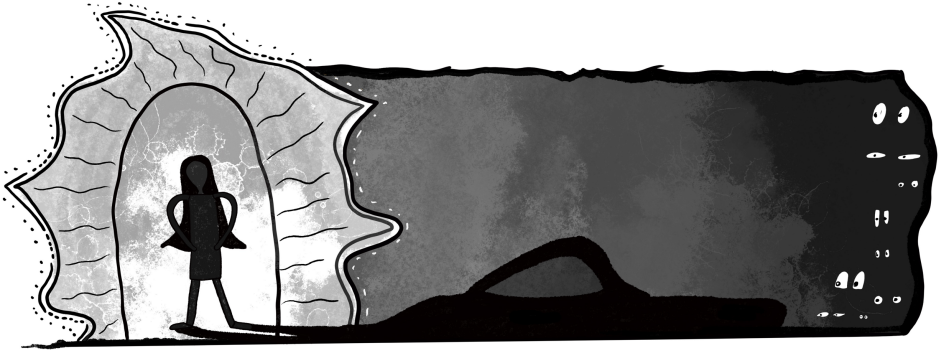
Gidjie loves that job. It's fun to bounce and do belly flops on Bluebelle as she grows. It always feels a little like a farewell party however, for once Bluebelle reaches her peak rise, she takes on a more regular dough-like form.

The task of rising Bluebelle isn't suited for Nookomis' animal form of blue jay—at least not yet. The part that *is* suited for a bird, is one of Gidjie's favorite things to watch her grandmother do. But it's not time for that yet.

Her attention is brought back to Carver, "I'm sure you probably startled her too, seeing how she found you dead on the fourth floor," she says, stalling the answering of the original question he had asked.

She wasn't actually upset for any other reason than the fact Carver has always had more access to the fourth floor where the Ancient Traders Market is.

The fourth floor is also home to the middle door, as well as the trade tunnels that lie on the other side of the door and extend into the beyond Gidjie has never stepped foot in.



She knows she shouldn't get mad at him for it. It's not his fault she's human and has thus far been forbidden to use the middle door. She would get less upset however, if he weren't always brushing her off about what's in the tunnels when she inquires. He doesn't seem to think it's a big deal she's never been beyond the middle door, and his answers are usually along the lines of, "It's just tunnels and spiders and stuff."

"Again, sorry," he says, his little furry hand reaching up onto the counter to grab at things before turning his palm upwards in question, "but what about that dough?"

"Which one would that be again?" she raises an eyebrow and looks up to the ceiling, feigning a memory lapse, but unable to stop a smile from creeping across her face.

The dough in question isn't ready yet, but she's not about to tell him that. Not with all of her previous boasting about being so close. And not that she's ever been one to boast—she just really wanted to get it right—but hasn't. Yet.

"You know, the one you've been working on all winter, and all spring and is finally, *finally* ready to go into the oven. That's what you said yesterday. And the day before, and the day before, and it would be really great if I could get a taste sooner than later..."

“What were you doing down there, anyway?” Gidjie interrupts him mid-pestering, getting the feeling there’s something he’s not telling her.

Being that she’s only ever allowed on the fourth floor when there’s a delivery too big for Nookomis to handle alone, she’s genuinely curious. When she is allowed down there on such occasions to wait by the middle door, she tries her best to get a good look at whoever the delivery person is, and anything notable about them.

“Uhhh...tail fishing?” he says with a toothy, nervous smile, holding up the tip of his tail.

Gidjie leans forward to inspect it for bite marks, which would be a sure sign he’d been using his tail as bait.

“But then I got tired,” he drops his tail before she can get a good look, “and your house was closer than mine, so I thought I would...”

His weird behavior makes her give him a good sideways squint, but she moves on, “Thought you would scare an old woman?”

A skittish chuckle pops out of his lips, that tighten quickly to contain it.

She reaches across the counter to wipe a little flour on the tip on his nose. He sneezes mightily. Flour flies up and settles onto both of their faces.

They laugh until their sides hurt, pointing at each other, and decide not to pressure the other to talk about the things they obviously don’t want to talk about.

A Few Things About Intermediaries



To most humans, opossum Carver looks like just that, an opossum. Nothing more, nothing less. To Gidjie, however, he looks like an opossum—standing a little above her knee—but with *movement* inside of him. Or, at least that’s how she’s explained it to him. In human form, he’s barely a smidgen taller than her.

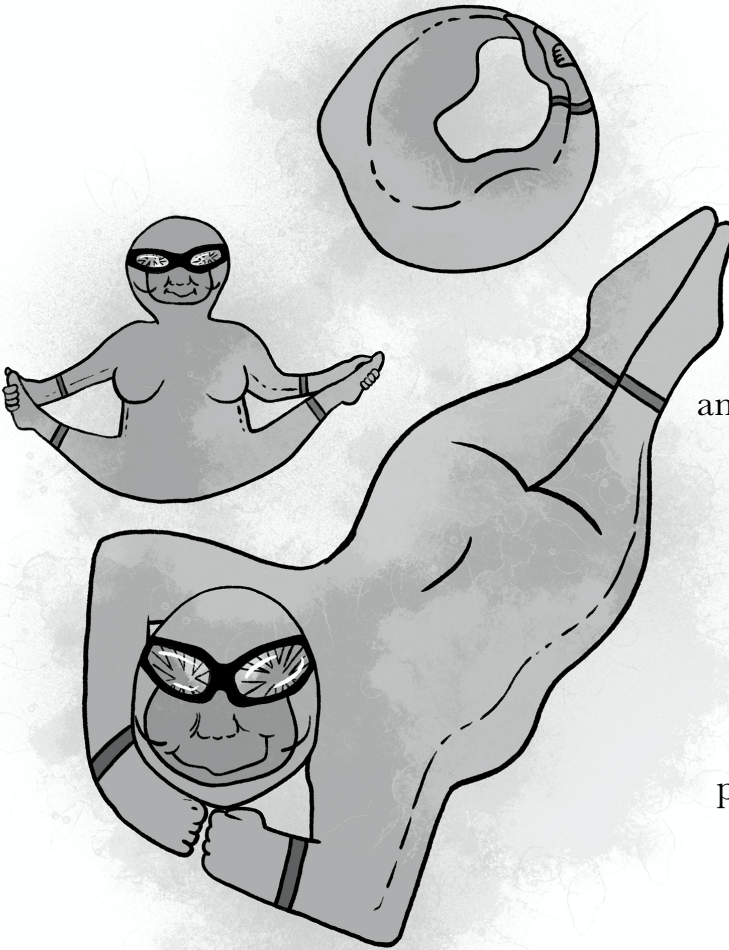
She's not sure why or how she sees Intermediaries in this way. Maybe it’s because she’s grown up around them. In any case, it’s fun to watch them doing things in animal form. Like now.

Gidjie can’t help but laugh in delight at the appearance of her grandmother, who’s reached the part of the rising process suited for a bird.

She soars
up out of the basin,
a few feet higher
than the rim,



before
turning
back
into
human
form,



and free-fall
diving

while
holding
various
positions,

to land on

and better
knead

Bluebelle.

“Hey, that’s a new shirt,” Gidjie tells Carver, noticing how nicely made it is. His mother has made a few clothing items for Gidjie over the years, including her favorite red dress, which fits more like a long shirt these days.

Carver’s family members are mostly raccoons. They live in a giant, hollow-yet-still-alive tree near Gidjie’s house, with a nice burrow extending underground, safely tucked among the roots. They also have access to the trade tunnels by means of the deepest arm of their burrow.

A few years ago, she had tried following him into his home—at his request—to play. To make a long story short, 3 raccoons and a passer-by badger had to dislodge her from the tree by pulling her out by the ankles. She remembers the day clearly because of the incident, but also because afterwards, an assembly of sapsuckers—who no one had noticed were watching the ordeal—had flown off in a black and white and red all over ruckus after she was freed. Anyhow, she’s been nervous of tight places ever since.

When Carver and his mother arrive together at Gidjie’s home for a visit, they greet the household in formal custom, by announcing themselves with a tune on the melody stones beside the middle door, and then wait to be attended.

Many of the doors in the Between World* have such musical devices; whether percussion, wind or some other particular family favorite. Intermediary families along the trade tunnels, maintain melodies unique to their family, that are used to verify a person’s identity and whereabouts.

* The upper underground that is connected by trade tunnels. As opposed the Below World, which is much, much deeper.

To his mother's chagrin, Carver is less formal on his daily solo visits. He likes to sneak in through gaps in earth and stone in the trade tunnels that only he knows about, emerging on the fourth floor before making his way to find Gidjie. Other times, he'll scramble in from the forest floor of the Above World* by means of abandoned animal dens and tunnels. In any case, he's made a game out of finding new ways in over the years.

"Carver—that you?" Nookomis says from atop a giggling and ever expanding Bluebelle, who has risen high enough so Nookomis can see them over the rim of the basin.

"Hi Nookomis, sorry about earlier," he blushes, being embarrassed anytime he gets discovered mid-sneak.

"What?" Nookomis says, rolling back and forth, digging her elbows into the now ginormous dough-ball.

"It's always him, Nookomis. He says he's sorry," Gidjie raises the volume of her voice a bit.

"Tell him his mother's looking for him."

"She always is," Gidjie looks at Carver, who shrugs.

His mom's recently taken to making a habit of constantly worrying about him. Apparently, unusual visitors have been stopping by at all hours of the night to try and pay him a visit. She thinks they're trying to... well, Gidjie's not exactly sure what his mother thinks, but she's got *her* suspicions. *She* assumes it has to do with Carver getting called off to form a council, and his mother's worried something bad might come of it.

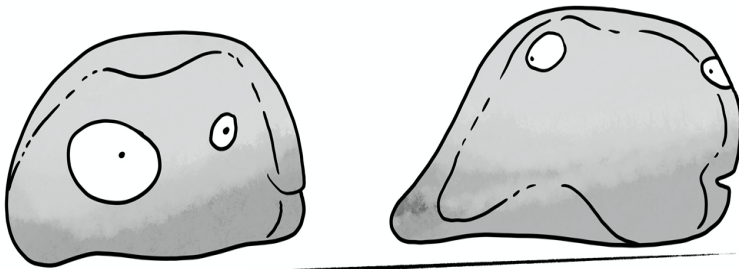
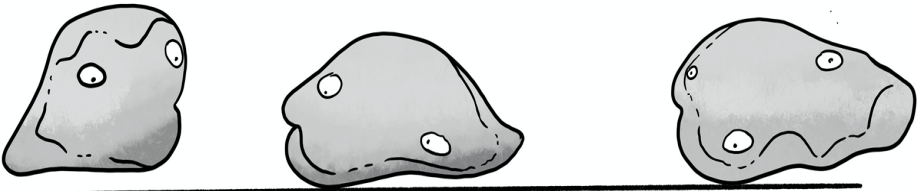
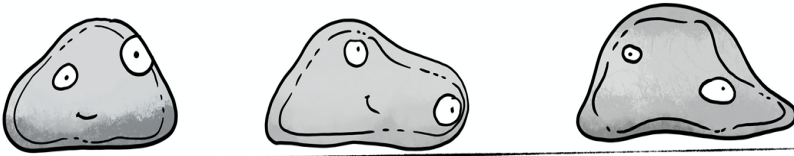
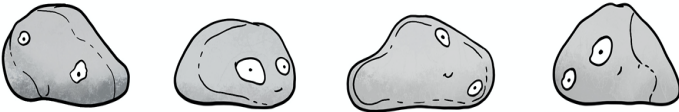
*The level of the Earth that humans inhabit.

Like what happened to their parents. Carver's father went missing around the same time Gidjie's mom and dad disappeared.

When questioned about their parents, all Nookomis says is that she misses them and, "Good people," she'd say; and she says even less about her estranged husband, Gidjie's adoptive grandfather, whom Gidjie doesn't remember ever meeting.

Gidjie and Carver have sat together many a time, trying to recollect things about their parents. It was so long ago, that neither recalls what they looked like. Gidjie sometimes dreams of her parents' voices, but that's about it.

Change



“Take Carver on the lift with you when you go okay, so his mother doesn’t get upset about him not using proper doors like she did last week,” Nookomis tells Gidjie.

“You know he can hear you, Nookomis?” Gidjie inquires, as Carver is standing nearby, but her grandmother isn’t addressing him directly.

“I’m sorry, Carver,” she says, “I’ve been having a hard time hearing your quiet opossum voice lately and I’m afraid it’s getting worse. I might need a good ear cleaning.” She grabs and rolls up a piece of birch bark lying next to the basin and sticks it to her ear like an ear candle, while making an exaggerated face expressing strained listening.

They laugh.

“Are you having a hard time hearing anything else?” Gidjie continues her query.

“It’s normal for things to change, older ya get,” Nookomis replies, giving her a curious side eye.

A long moment passes, and Gidjie begins to wonder if her grandmother is talking about herself, or if she’s now talking about Gidjie, “In fact, it’s normal for things to change your entire life. Be weird if they didn’t, I reckon. As for my ears, I got something coming that’ll fix’em right up.”

Carver gives Nookomis a look of amusement and Gidjie trails off in thought, her gaze settling on Bluebelle, who was changing right before her eyes.

“How old is Bluebelle?” she wonders aloud.

“Well, let’s see,” Nookomis is standing next to the basin, holding a bucketful of glowing, green powder. She flings it up, vivid green cascading all about the top of the ever-rising Bluebelle.

She climbs onto her and begins rubbing the powder vigorously, as if the motion of it is helping her remember.



“She’s been in the family 100 years, plus or minus mhphfhhmphfh,” her answer tapers off inaudibly, as she drops deep into thought.

“Plus or minus...*what?*” Gidjie asks. Nookomis has always had a hard time answering questions relating to the tracking of time in a linear fashion.

“It was around the human year 1870 when your grandfather brought her home to me, hoping I’d be able to nurse her back to health. She came to me in the form of a dough that was being fried, during a hard time for the Anishinaabeg. I suspect before that, she lived multiple lifetimes as various dough-balls. As you know, they take on different forms depending on how they’re fed, as is the case with this here batch of dough,” she says, tenderly patting the top of Bluebelle, “It takes a lot to change a dough-ball’s nature entirely though, as our Bluebelle’s always alive in the variations we help shape her into.”

Gidjie notes that it is currently the human year of 2020 and is about to ask where the other 50 years in Bluebelle’s timeline went since 1870, when Carver steers the conversation.

“Wow,” he says, “Bluebelle’s older than my mom.”

“How old is your mom, anyway?” Gidjie asks him, her last question lost as her curiosity about his mother takes over. Carver and Gidjie are both 11, and she takes comfort in hearing about his mom. It makes her feel a little closer to her own mother, in a way. It’s not often he talks about her. He doesn’t like to rub it in Gidjie’s face that he has a mom.

“I think she’s...80, but that’s a guess. She’s said she’s 36 with every full change of seasons, and has for as long as I can remember.”

“Your mother’s well over 100,” Nookomis chimes in, now standing next to them at the counter, “She’s nearly half my age.”

Gidjie and Carver gasp at in surprise; both at the reveal of Carver's mom's age, and also because they've never heard Nookomis suggest at her own age in terms of numbers before. She'd always say she was as old as a tree, or as young as a spry jellyfish, or something along those lines.

"So, you're at least 200? Is that a normal age for an Intermediary, Nookomis?" Gidjie asks. She's grown up learning standards about life from Intermediaries. She's been told that humans are more vulnerable to the affects time has on things, but everything seems blurred when she tries to understand what it means that she's human and they're not.

Soon enough, I won't have my best friend. And I'm not going to live as long as anyone else in my family? Why am I a human? What am I supposed to do? Gidjie thinks on the subject, having only a moment to concern before Nookomis answers her question.

"Well, I reckon it is, being how I'm here now, normal as I'll ever get," her hands on her hips.

Gidjie and Carver look to Bluebelle, who is losing her liveliness with each moment. They know what happens next in the rising process.

"Should we head up?" Gidjie asks him, looking down from her roost on the bench to meet his attention.



“She’s right you know, things are meant to change,” he looks serious, and then says, “but some things don’t!” and in an instant he’s in opossum form and running towards the closet, where his not-so-proper escape route is.

“Hey!” Gidjie laughs, knowing exactly where he’s headed. She runs past him and closes the closet door. He grunts, running head-first into it.

“See, what’d I tell ya! Some things never change!” he yells out into the hallway after her, rubbing the top of his head. He turns back into his human self to reach the doorknob before beginning his opossum shimmy up the crack in the stone.

“Don’t forget to flip the sign!” Nookomis hollers at the both of them.

Gidjie runs into the lift down the hall and begins stepping up and down on the press plate in the corner that makes it go up. To go down, you use the plate in the opposite corner. Rumor has it—rumored by her aunts—that if you step on both plates at just the right time, the lift will divert to a secret room.

Gidjie and Carver have tested this, to Nookomis’ annoyance, who would be left waiting to use the lift for nearly an hour while they played. They have yet to cause the lift to stop anywhere but along its normal, vertical path within the five stories of the dwelling.

Going down beneath ground level, the stories are as follows: floor 1 is the sanctuary; floor 2, the living quarters; floor 3, the baking floor; and floor 4 is the Ancient Traders Market.

The lift makes it up to the very top floor, the sanctuary, and then one more, to the one and only Above World level: The Animals-R-A-Wares shop, which sits

on top of them all like an umbrella, Gidjie likes to think. The shop is also the only place in the residence where she gets to interact with other humans.

Dancing with anticipation, her foot comes to a stop on the push plate as the door slides open. She peers around the dark, early morning atmosphere of the shop. It's completely quiet.

"Beat ya!" Carver's voice rings down from the top of the lift as she takes her first step out.

"Cheater!" Gidjie squeals in surprise, turning to watch the lift slowly lower itself down to align perfectly with the rest of the floor, leaving no sign of a lift at all, just a beaming opossum Carver in a 'ta-dah' pose in the middle of the shop.

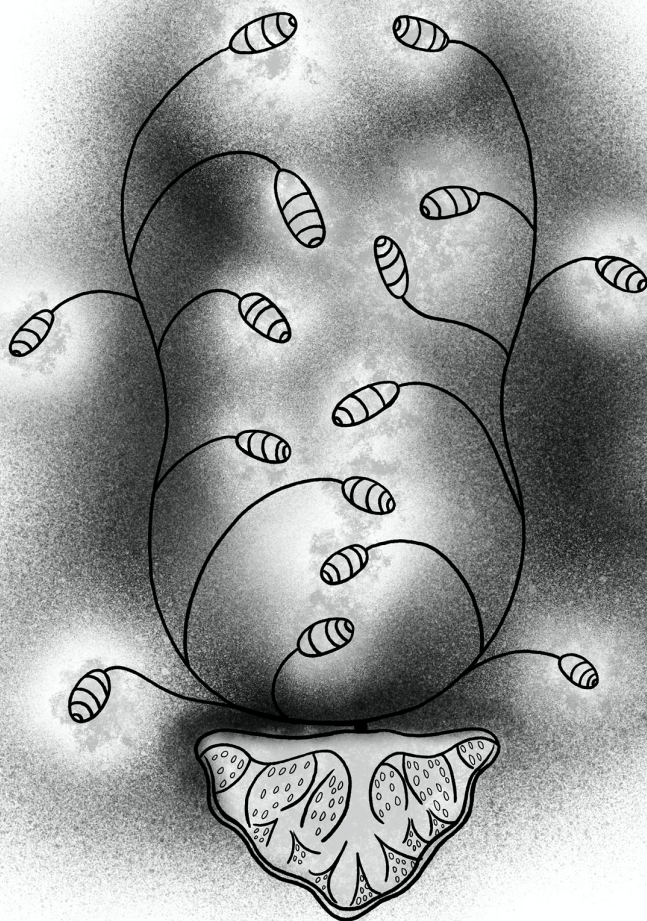
"Cheater has to unlock the gate," she lifts her eyebrows up and down, motioning out through the covered window nearby a couple of times, "Besides, Nookomis said you're supposed to use proper doors, so your mom doesn't..."

"Fine," he says, walking towards the front door of the shop. He pushes his opossum self through the small animal door built into it, and then re-enters after a moment and says, "Oops, forgot. Let me try that again." A second later, he is grinning humanly at her.

He unlocks and walks through the door like an average human, then down to the gate at the end of the driveway. He waves back at her, a dopey grin on his face, making sure she sees him doing everything as a human would. He knows Nookomis expects her human customers to not be scared off by wild, roaming, albeit adorable opossums.

"You forgot to flip the sign!" she yells as he's nearly halfway back up the driveway.

Animals-R-A-Wares



“Can you tidy up on that side, and I’ll work over here today?” Gidjie asks, physically blocking Carver, who’s got a hungry look in his eye and is galloping in her direction. She points with her lips and tilts her chin up at the opposite side of the shop.

“Really?” he asks, “Again?”

“Did you forget what happened last time I let you *help* over here during fizzlit season?”

He peers around the front, and then back of her, to gaze longingly to where the plump, purple fizzlit berries that come once a year are kept.

She leans back to meet his gaze, “We had to spend the better half of a week accounting for and paying back the...”

He sighs, “I know, I know. You’re right. They’re just soooo good.”

“That’s why I’m looking out for you and letting you work elsewhere, so you’re not fighting the urge to dive in head-first. Again.” In an attempt to cheer him up, she adds, “They’ll be done for the season soon, only a few more days to go,” she reassures him.

Fizzlit berries come from a place Gidjie has never been and only heard little about. They grow underground in small quantities, high along the walls of the Confluence—a place where traveling barterers, storytellers, and hands-for-hire set up camp along their routes. It’s also where the Elder Councils meet.

Now, you’re probably wondering how berry bushes are able to grow underground. Thanks to a supply of ecosystem-supporting gasses—similar in importance to those pumped out of hydrothermal vents deep in the ocean, where no sunlight reaches—life in the Confluence

thrives. And there are many similar places within the Earth where unique life forms flourish.

Gidjie's been told that on occasion, the mixture of gases in the Confluence is such that they could have an unpredictable effect on her physiology. It's one of the reasons few humans have ever set foot there over the millennia. It's typically forbidden.

Getting back to the fizzlit berries. To acquire them, you either have to be a fizzlit fruit bat, or be in good standing with the Fizzlit Harvester Society—a society of bats that collects and decides how to distribute the fruit. It so happens that Nookomis is in very high standing, on account of helping them recover from an awful case of blighted berry bushes.

As the story goes, a sleepwalking fungal mass had wandered into the cave and bedded down in the soil behind where fizzlit plants were growing. As he dreamt, he exuded a substance, that while comforted him, was toxic to the berries, causing them to rot.

After an investigation, Nookomis found and woke him up. He was disoriented, apologetic, and required help finding his way home.

The circular Animals-R-A-Wares shop is made of stone from floor to ceiling, including the rows that extend inward from the edges toward the center. To the untrained eye, the rows appear to be solid structures.

However, if you know where to stand and how to look, you might glimpse one of the many hidden openings along the stone cupboard spaces.

The interior of the rows is hollow and full of ramps, stairs, storage units and pulley devices, just the right size for the various providers of goods—Intermediaries and full-time animals alike. At any given moment, a parade of tiny purveyors is streaming in from the Above World, as well as the depths below.



Carver begins moping towards his designated work area for the day, until he sees the family of skunks piling out of the stone wall and forming a line to the bin where they store their goods.

The first, and largest skunk, carries a birch bark basket full of insects. He pours them out and quickly covers the bin while the others scramble to pick up stray, fleeing insects. They pass them from one skunk to the next, before the first in line places the miniature, skunk-deemed-goodies into the bin. A few crunches can be heard as the littlest in line decides the insects are easier to eat than wrangle.

Bugs have the tendency to wander off, so there are always little skunk hands reaching out from behind the wall to get them back into their bin.

Humans never want them, although kids get excited, screech, and do an ‘Oh my god, it’s BUGS!’ dance when they see them. Occasionally, they’ll catch a glimpse of a furry hand or a striped tail, but their parents always chalk it up to an overactive imagination.

Now don’t think that because humans aren’t enthusiastic about insects, that they’re not highly sought after by a large portion of the animal kingdom.

Some insects are eaten, yes. But *all* insects are keepers of secrets, big and small. Think of the one secret you wish you could know; there is an insect out there that knows it.



After-hours and occasionally between human visits, other kinds of patrons visit the Animals-R-A-Wares shop. The insect bin is always one of the firsts to empty.

It helps that the skunks themselves are the friendliest you will ever meet. If you've never met a skunk, you should know that trouble tends to avoid them, thanks to their inborn, musky deterrent. This allows them the liberty to be cheery and high-spirited most of the time.

Carver is in an instant his opossum-self, rushing to help the skunks set things in order. Opossum Carver loves insects; human Carver, not as much. Gidjie has seen him eat a beetle on more than one occasion in human form, however.

“Carver!” Gidjie bellows, eyes wide, stomping her foot.

“Shoot. Forgot again,” he says, resuming human form and squatting down low to continue his assistance.

What's going on with him today? He's usually not so forgetful, she thinks, borderline worried.

Gidjie gets close enough to peer over his shoulder and checks the bin like she does every morning, wondering if it's possible that Intermediary insects exist. She's heard stories of them getting so caught up in life as a particular animal, that they forget they have the ability to assume a human form. She'd feel terrible if one came through the shop unnoticed as a tiny bug.

“Do you think Nookomis is getting forgetful?” she asks him after examining the bin.

“What do you mean?” he says, sitting on his haunches, holding up a caterpillar that's perched on the tip of his finger.

“Nookomis said Bluebelle's been in the family 100 years, but that she met her for the first time 150 years

ago. It doesn't make sense. She's either forgetful or she's keeping secrets from us."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, like...about *time travel*." She feels embarrassed the instant it slips out of her mouth. *Time travel? Ha!* She begins standing up so she can scurry off and hide on the other side of the shop.

"A relative said a strange thing to my mom once that I've never understood," he starts, "It was on her birthday. You know how she says she's the same age every year? Well one year, after she announced she was turning 36 again, my uncle said, 'maybe if you played the melody stones *backwards*, you could make it an *official 36!*' I've never seen my mom so mad. That was 5 years ago. He's still not allowed at our house."

"Did you ask her what your uncle meant by it?"

Carver raises an eyebrow at Gidjie, "You're joking, right? Didn't I just say she got madder than I've ever seen her?"

She shrugs, "Yeah, I guess I like having you around."

"Ha. Ha. You'd be lost without me, kid," he says, before erupting into real laughter.

Satisfied with his attentiveness to the skunks, Gidjie heads over to the wall behind the counter at the back of the shop and heaves mightily upon an old hand crank in a clockwise direction.

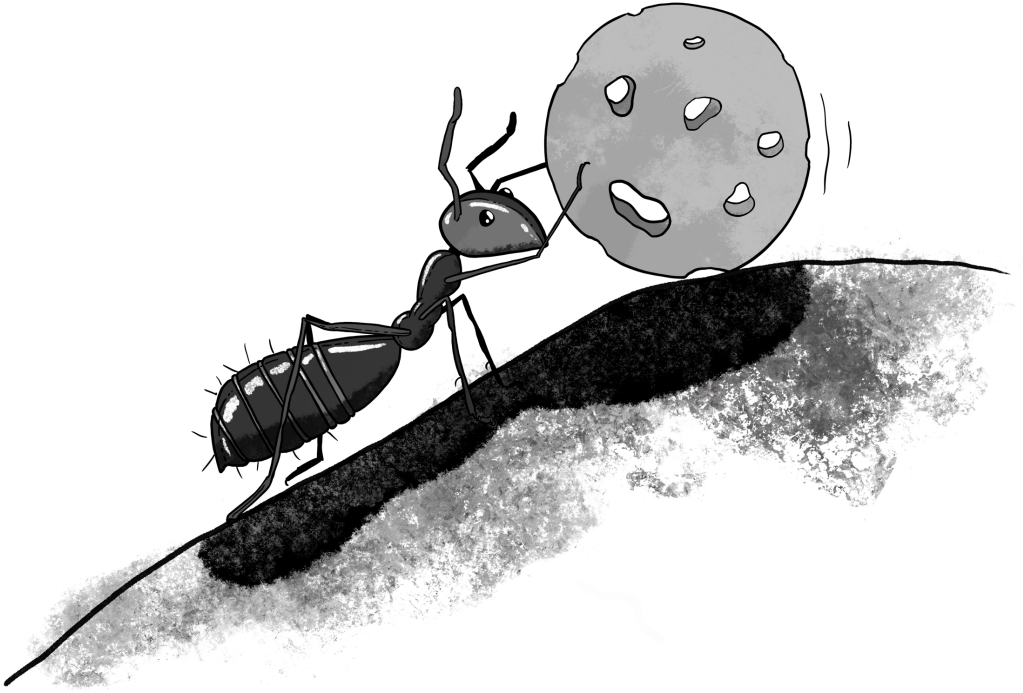
Stone slabs retreat down the walls, revealing glass windows and a sunny spring morning. Just to the right of the crank is a 'Do Not Open' sign hanging on a cabinet at eye level. She dusts it off before opening it, "Good morning!" she exclaims happily.

Behind this particular cabinet door, lies a busy world of ant, bee, and wasp purveyors.

Now, these are full-time insects, but unlike the ones hunted down by the skunks—a hunt that is based on an ancient pact between skunk and insect—they are here to stock their own goods in the rows of shelves lining the wall behind the counter.

Gidjie's noticed that insects from certain colonies seem to have a collective consciousness; that is, their behaviors are concerted, and their presence is that of one organism. She often wonders how large such an organism could be—how far down underfoot and wide across the world can one extend?

In any case, they bring in a dazzling assortment of things: cultivated fungi; a variety of honeys people fill recycled jars with—or in Carver's case, his mouth; as well as wasp-made papers that have fascinating properties. One of Gidjie's favorite foods is made by ants, deep in their underground chambers: cheeses made from wild nuts, seeds, flowers, and just about every other wild delicious thing you can imagine.



The ants that roll the cheese wheels up the many tiny ramps from way down and out of sight are brownish-red and shiny. The cheesemakers themselves, are tiny and covered with a colorful, squishy, crumbly, fuzzy coating. These smaller ants only come up every so often, to inspect the cheese in the shop for freshness.

Gidjie and her grandmother provide some of the items in the shop. You'd be surprised how many fascinating and nutritious cooking ingredients you can gather from a rocky cliff, or a tall, gangly tree, if you have the advantage of flight, as Nookomis does.

The two have developed an arrangement that works for them. Several times a week, Nookomis goes out to gather while Gidjie awaits her harvest. It's up to Gidjie to create recipes in the kitchen with the ingredients, decide how to best present them in the shop, and explain what they are and make suggestions on how to prepare them to curious patrons.

Because of this arrangement, Gidjie has become the main cook of the house. She's always eager to try the many ingredients that come into the Animals-R-A-Wares shop from all over. She also has a fairly wide knowledge of Above World wild foods that she knows how to identify and harvest herself.

Twice, however, she has accidentally made a sleeping potion of a meal that sent her and Nookomis to sleep for a week.

Each time she awoke, Carver was waiting by her bedside. All Gidjie could remember about what had happened right before the slumber, was that a hooded, amphibious merchant had delivered little roots by way of the middle door, a day before she had made each sleepy meal.

The third time the amphibian had returned, Gidjie remembered him and what the roots were responsible for.

She labeled the jar clearly, and rather than place it in the kitchen of their living quarters, she put it in a special collection of items in a pantry on the baking floor.



The
Tourist
and
the
Turtle



“This place is paradise!” the human in the khaki colored hat with a dangling rope under his chin says to Gidjie. He winks at her, his cheeks a little weighted from age but creamy and showing no sign of bug bites, yet.

By the end of the weekend, he'll be full of bites and stories about giant mosquitos and armies of wood ticks and ... Gidjie thinks.

“You’ve got it made, kid,” he adds, giving a second wink.

She *hates* it when people wink at her; she never knows how to interpret a wink.

Carver snickers as he tends a shelf nearby.

“If you love it, why don’t you move here?” Gidjie asks.

He gives a pause and then, “Nah, as much as I love the peace and quiet of the North Shore, the missus and I need our movie theaters and take-out food; and good beer of course!” He looks around and then shakes his head, “I’d go nuts with nothing to do for too long.”

Nothing to do? Gidjie reiterates the statement internally. Her mind leaves the conversation. Her head begins to spin, thinking about what might happen if people who bore easily were to move to the area. She envisions parking lots and gas stations taking over the forest, the shoreline littered with trash.

Am I really human? she puzzles, confused for the umpteenth time by the dramatic conflict of interests she has with most humans she meets.

Nookomis is standing beside her, and notices her face turning pale. She gently grabs the items Gidjie was about to pack, and places them safely in a bag for the man.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he says, “How much do I owe ya?”

Had Gidjie not spaced out, she would be excited in this moment, for her favorite part of working in the shop, is the bridge-building between animal and human needs. It's in these moments she truly feels a part of Intermediary culture.

“Let's see. One bottle of sunscreen and two wild herbal teas will be...” Nookomis looks down at the piece of paper in her hand, “well, I'll let you have a look at the numbers. My eyes aren't what they used to be,” she says, handing the man the piece of paper.

He scratches the side of his head, pushing the cotton hat off-kilter as he reads the receipt in disbelief.

Animals - R - A - Wares

Item:

1 bottle of sunscreen

2 bottles of wild herbal tea

Price:

Sunscreen: Ride a bike or walk to your destination 2 times this month instead of driving a vehicle.*

Tea: Only purchase organic produce for the next month.**

* Carbon emissions from vehicles are contributing to ozone depletion allowing more UVB rays to reach the Earth, resulting in the need for more sunscreen use + production. ** Insects that are vulnerable to pesticides commonly used in non-organic farming practices pollinate many wild plants we make our teas with.

ZOOBUG

THANK YOU for Your Business!

Animals - R - A - Wares Accountant

“Is this a joke?” the man says, confounded, “...ride a bike and only purchase organic produce for a month?”

He reads the slip of paper to himself again and then looks up, “So, you’re going to give me this stuff if I say I’ll do these things?”

“*If you do* those things, the trade will be fulfilled. Do the terms see fair?” Nookomis asks. The terms of the arrangement were fairly standard, seeing how nearly everything in the Animals-R-A-Wares shop is acquired in exchange for pledges. Oftentimes, trading for goods require pledges to rebuild or maintain animal habitats.

For instance, certain bees barter honey in return for a pledge to ‘plant so many native wildflowers near such and such location.’

“Well, I suppose they do,” he shakes his head, “the missus is never going to believe this.” He does a quick scan of his environment for indication of where he’d really wandered into, “I’ve never heard of anything like this.”

Nookomis smiles, nodding politely at him, “Thanks again for coming in. Oh, I forgot the bread. Everyone gets bread. Baked fresh this morning.” She takes a small loaf from the bread rack on the counter and adds it to his things.

“How much—I mean—what do I do for the bread?”

Nookomis smiles, “The bread is complimentary. A token of friendship.”

“Well, okay then!” He says happily, picking the bag up. He leaves the shop, chuckling in disbelief.

“First pledge of the day,” Nookomis says, sitting down in a chair behind the counter to talk to Zoobug, the shop’s accountant, “and we’ll be seeing more tourists every day now for the next few months—you better get your inkpads ready,” she says, teasingly.



As far as Gidjie can tell, Zoobug is both plant and animal—and then some—all in one.

During business hours, Zoobug sits in a pot under the countertop, creating receipts just out of sight from customers. She has extensive knowledge on all matters of trade, and Gidjie suspects that Zoobug may understand every language on the planet.

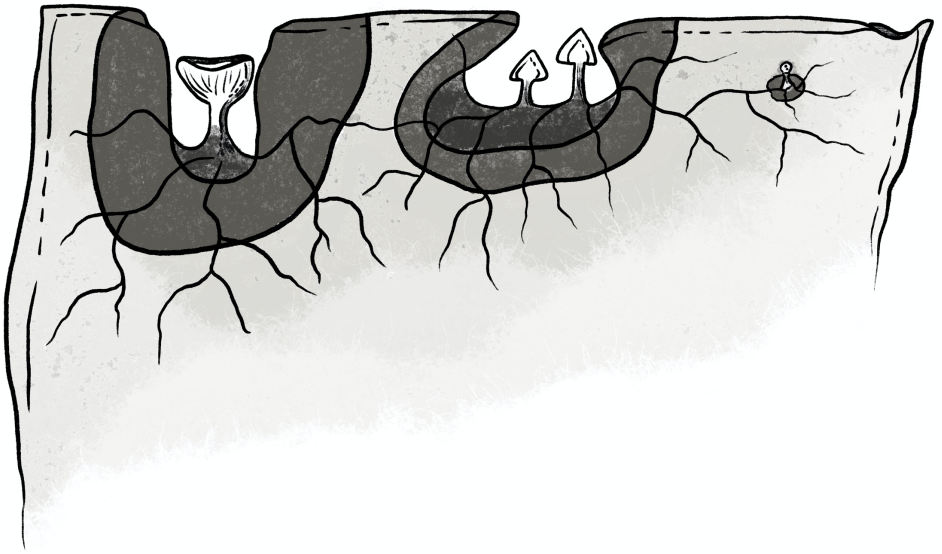
Between customers, she can be found listening intently to the needs of the shop's merchants, who pay her visits one by one.

Understanding Zoobug is another story, for she makes clicks and vibrations that Gidjie has mostly yet to decipher, apart from the basics like 'water' and 'thanks.' Nookomis, on the other hand, is stellar at interpreting Zoobug's every sound and gesture, and brings her almost everywhere she goes, after business hours. As far as Gidjie is concerned, Zoobug is her grandmother's best friend.

Animals-R-A-Wares only accepts the invention of human currency, by way of the donation jar Nookomis *had* to put on the counter—for safety reasons. A customer once got so angry that their money wasn't valued, that they threw it at Gidjie and stormed out of the shop yelling profanities. So now, if a customer gets excited in a not-so-good way about the trade-and-pledge system, Nookomis gives a nod to the jar, and that's where they put the money.

However, just because humans insist on putting money in the donation jar and walking out with an item from the shop, that doesn't mean they're off the hook for any ignored terms of the trade. Gidjie and Nookomis won't stop them from leaving, but an entire branch of Intermediary culture is built to *encourage* accountability.

Zoobug creates copies of every transaction using wasp paper and smart-spore ink, and places them in a cedar box under the counter. When pledges are carried out satisfactorily, they simply decompose, leaving tiny mushrooms from which spores are harvested for making more ink.



However, if pledges are neglected, those receipts remain intact and are collected at the beginning of the next lunar month by an Enforcer.

The means by which Enforcers procure results are little different today than those used by the first Intermediaries to hold the position.

Enforcers are like trickster bounty hunters, and are occasionally behind things that gremlins, ghouls, ghosts, curses or the like are said to be responsible for.

Each enforcer has a particular way they go about their enforcing—like a calling card, if you will.

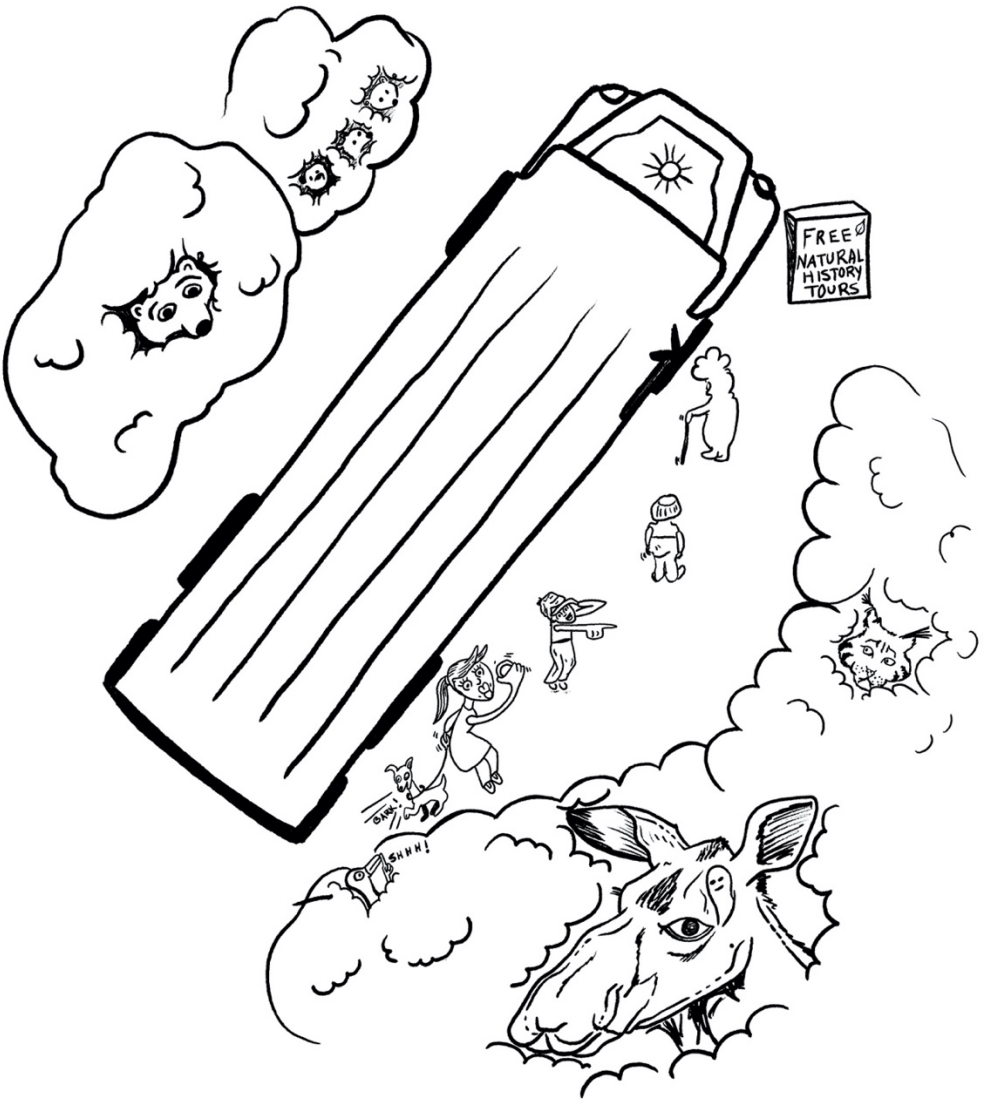
Gidjie's grandparents were Enforcers back in the day, until they ended up with a handful of Anishinaabe kids they rescued from a burned down boarding school. Gidjie's parents were among those who had no homes to return to, and so Nookomis and her husband started a learning camp of their own.

However, after a couple of years, they were met with opposition from one of the elder councils, and the camp was disbanded. By that time, Gidjie's parents were of age and chose to continue to camp with other young adults from the boarding school.

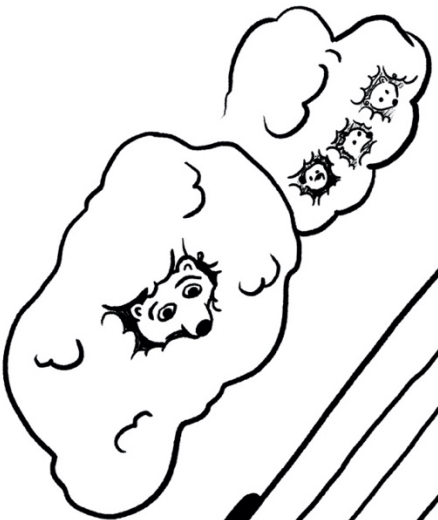
The disbanding of the school caused a disturbance between Nookomis and her husband, and they haven't lived together since. It wasn't until years later that Gidjie would come into the hands of Nookomis. These are all things Gidjie knows little about but has had a brief rundown of over the years by her aunts. Beyond this, no one will tell her what really happened to her parents, her grandfather, the other children, or why the learning camp was disbanded.

Getting back to Enforcers. Enforcers are nomadic by trade, and although retired, Nookomis still gets the itch to travel on occasion. Once or twice a year, they drive around in an old school bus giving educational tours.

The tour-bus-with-a-twist, as Gidjie likes to call it, relies on the concerted efforts of Intermediaries and animals to teach bus riders things about local natural and human history. It's not quite the same as enforcing, but the humans getting on the bus have no idea what they're in for. They leave the experience with a shift in their thinking, regarding the role humans play on the landscape. And that's always fun to see.



FREE
NATURAL
HISTORY
TOURS



As the man in the hat begins backing down the driveway, "Ow!" Carver yelps from just out of sight.

"Are you okay?" Gidjie stumbles out of her stupor and walks hurriedly towards him.

"Yeah. Agongos got me again is all," he says, "I took an acorn to the eye this time."

She rounds the corner to where Carver is and can't help but laugh. He's standing with one palm over his right eye, looking up at a high shelf where a tiny chipmunk is sitting, his cheeks stuffed with acorns.



“I was trying to pick up one of his acorns, after it fell onto a lower shelf, but he beat me to it, turned around and kicked it at me, and it hit me in the eye. Then he ran down here, picked it up, scampered back up to his bin, and now he’s grinning at me with it in his cheek!”

Carver’s still looking up angrily at Agongos, the chipmunk. He turns to Gidjie, who’s covering a snicker. He realizes how ridiculous it must seem and begins to laugh, “Do you ever think he’ll get the hang of store *and* trade? How will he trade them, if he can’t handle anyone even touching one?”

“Well, he’s got the storing part down at least,” Gidjie says, laughing, “his acorn bin’s always full.”

Just then, a snake courier enters the shop on a message track that runs along the floor behind the counter. It pushes the wooden beads strung along the track to spell out the code for ‘check road.’

“Oh no, not again,” Gidjie frets.

“A box, Gidjie,” Nookomis directs her.

She hurries to the storage closet and finds a box that is small-animal-sized.

The three of them run down the driveway to the main road. Sure enough, there is a turtle on its back near the ditch.

Nookomis kneels down and gently turns her over to see an inch-long shell crack, “We’ve seen worse,” she says.

Nookomis is right, but it’s bad enough that it makes Gidjie sad, and then angry. She turns towards the SUV in the distance. The man and his missus make their way unknowingly toward their vacation spot further up the lake. She roars out loud towards them, like a tiger might, she imagines.

Carver sees her in action and thinks she looks more like a tiger cub than a tigress. Even so, she's scary enough for him to not point it out.

The turtle is having trouble moving her leg closest to the crack, "The box, Gidjie" Nookomis says, motioning to her.

Gidjie hands her the box, dropping to her knee, "How's she doing?"

"We'll get her to the sanctuary, and I'll have a better look at her," Nookomis says, lifting the turtle gently into the box. She hands her to Gidjie, before picking herself up and brushing little pebbles from her knees.

Carver looks into the box and shakes his head, "You're gonna be okay, friend," he tells the turtle.