Spirit Story Pete Leki

One night

In the month when the first frost comes

I was sleeping in my bedroom

in my house

by the Chicago River.

On this night it was especially quiet in the City.

You couldn’t hear any sirens, or motorcycles, or garbage trucks.

I’ll tell you why I noticed this in a minute,

But I did notice it.

After we turned out the light

the cool, blue moonlight fell into our room.

The moon was there, ripe and full in the window

behind the branches of the catalpa tree.

It was there.

And while I watched the moon,

Tufts of clouds would flow in its path,

Looking like stretched out dancers,

and the light in the room would flicker from that.

And it was pretty quiet, for being in the city.

I fell asleep.

When I woke up, the moon was gone from my window.

I woke up because I heard a sound.

It was a quiet sound.

First I thought it was just the wind talking to the trees.

But then I thought, “How quiet it is,”

this gentle talking of the wind.

And then I heard this other sound.

It went, “Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk… “

Very quiet.

And again, “Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

I wondered, “What was that?” And I sat up in bed.

Again, “Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

I went to the window and tried to see where it came from.

The moon was still there, but farther to the western sky,

Held up in the air now

by the black branches of the willow on the riverbank.

And crowds of clouds now danced around the moon.

It peeked and poked out between their arms and legs and flying hair.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

I heard this sound but I cold see nothing.

So, I pulled on some clothes and hurried downstairs.

I opened the front door and stood on the porch.

The breath was falling out of my mouth in puffs of white smoke.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

I stepped out to the sidewalk.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk…” It came from the river!

I walked that way, slowly and quiet as I could.

I ducked under the mulberry branches and took a step down the riverbank.

It was just quiet now. No noise.

Just once in a while a howling, hurt little noise from the wind.

I stepped down and down, till I came to the bench at the water’s edge.

I sat there in the darkness, with the blinking moon and the dancing clouds bouncing off the water,

and puffs and dragons of mist and fog streaming south to Mississippi River.

Then I heard it. Just to my left.

Under the gnarled trunk of the willow.

Two eyes like crescent moons, cool and blue, shown out of the darkness.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk…” It was a voice.

A human voice.

And as it made this sound, the eyes motioned back and forth, like a head shaking “no.”

My eyes got used to the dark and I could see the face, the wrinkled face of an old woman.

She was wrapped in a blanket. The blanket had patterns on it, stripes that looked grey and white in this foggy dark.

Her head was wrapped in a scarf, with curls of flowers and bits of leaves and vine trailing down her back and shoulders like hair.

“What?” I asked this to her, though at times I wasn’t sure she was there. It seemed I could see through her, sometimes, through to the shaggy willow bark, the flicker of moonlight on the surface of the water.

“What are you saying?”

And she raised out the longest arm. On the end of this arm was the longest finger, with again a long, long fingernail.

She pointed in to the fog, the river.

And when I looked there, I saw a turtle floating on its back.

Floating on the river, spinning ‘round and ‘round.

Flowing south in the water.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

I turned again to face the grandmother. But now her eyes had changed and burned like the little blue pilot lights on a stove.

And from her head two great racks of antlers stood out, velvety and ochre-colored.

She raised her arm again and from under her blanket came the black feathered wing of a crow, glimmering like polished steel in the night.

I looked to where the grandmother pointed with her wing, and across the water, in the scrabble of branches on the other shore,

I saw the silhouette and flashing teeth of a coyote, who reached its nose up the sky and bellowed –

“Whooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.”

For some long moments this coyote spoke, until all at once it was gone and quiet and I shook myself on the bench and heard again:

“Tsk, tsk, tsk…”

And, I looked for the woman. But there was none. Just a clatter in the branches. A rustle overhead. The flutter and crack of twigs around me.

The water splashed. Then all was still.

I crawled on my knees to the water’s edge.

And tried to pierce the surface with my vision.

There, in the muddy weeds, a catfish looked up at me.

Its mouth was open and it spoke.

“I’m your water brother. Be true to me.”

Its eyes glowed with the blue light of the moon.

Its whiskers hung low and long.

And then, I don’t know how, but this fish came to look just like me.

“I am your water brother,” it said to me. “I will be true to you. Be true to me.” It said this to me.

Now the earth was turning, the sky was brightening on the dawn of a new day. The dancers that circled the moon had vanished. So did my water brother.

And I was so tired. I stumbled back to my bed and slept until the sun woke me with its heat.

I lay in the sun and wondered about that Grandmother by the river.

Why was she going, “Tsk…?”

Why did she shake her head?

What did that coyote say?

And how should I be true to my water brother?

Do you know?