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The Wings of the Butterfly

A Tale of the Amazon Rainforest

ON THE BANKS of the Amazon River, in a clearing in the forest, there once lived a girl named Chimidyue. She dwelt with her family and relatives in a big pavilion-house called a maloca.

While the boys of the maloca fished and hunted with the men, Chimidyue and the other girls helped the women with household chores or in the farm plots nearby. Like the other girls, Chimidyue never stepped far into the forest. She knew how full it was of fierce animals and harmful spirits, and how easy it was to get lost in.

Still, she would listen wide-eyed when the elders told stories about that other world. And sometimes she would go just a little way in, gazing among the giant trees and wondering what she might find farther on.

One day as Chimidyue was making a basket, she looked up and saw a big morpho butterfly hovering right before her. Sunlight danced on its shimmering blue wings.

"You are the most magical creature in the world," Chimidyue said dreamily. "I wish I could be like you."

The butterfly dipped as if in answer, then flew toward the edge of the clearing.

Chimidyue set down her basket and started after it, imitating its lazy flight. Among the trees she followed, swooping and circling and flapping her arms.

She played like this for a long time, until the butterfly passed between some vines and disappeared. Suddenly Chimidyue realized she had gone too far into the forest. There was no path, and the leaves of the tall trees made a canopy that hid the sun. She could not tell which way she had come.

"Mother! Father! Anyone!" she shouted. But no one came. "Oh no," she said softly. "How will I find my way back?"

CHIMIDYUE WANDERED anxiously about, hoping to find a path. After a while she heard a tap-tap-tapping. "Someone must be working in the forest," she said hopefully, and she followed the sound. But when she got close, she saw it was just a woodpecker.

Chimidyue sadly shook her head. "If only you were human," she said, "you could show me the way home."

"Why would I have to be human?" asked the woodpecker indignantly. "I could show you just as I am!"

Startled but glad to hear the bird talk, Chimidyue said eagerly, "Oh, would you?"

"Can't you see I'm busy?" said the woodpecker. "You humans are so conceited, you think everyone else is here to serve you. But in the forest, a woodpecker is just as important as a human." And it flew off.

"I didn't mean anything bad," said Chimidyue to herself. "I just want to go home."

More uneasy than ever, Chimidyue walked farther. All at once she came upon a maloca, and sitting within it was a woman weaving a hammock.

"Oh, grandmother!" cried Chimidyue joyfully, addressing the woman with the term proper for an elder. "I'm so glad to find someone here. I was afraid I would die in the forest!"

But just as she stepped into the maloca, the roof began to flap, and the maloca and the woman together rose into the air. Then Chimidyue saw it was really a tinamou bird that had taken a magical form. It flew to a branch above.

"Don't you 'grandmother' me!" screeched the bird. "How many of my people have your relatives hunted and killed? How many have you cooked and eaten? Don't you dare ask for my help." And it too flew away.

"The animals here all seem to hate me," said Chimidyue sorrowfully. "But I can't help being a human!"

Chimidyue wandered on, feeling more and more hopeless, and hungry now as well. Suddenly, a sorva fruit dropped to the ground. She picked it up and ate it greedily. Then another dropped nearby.

Chimidyue looked up and saw why. A band of spider monkeys was feeding in the forest canopy high above, and now and then a fruit would slip from their hands.

"I'll just follow the monkeys," Chimidyue told herself. "Then at least I won't starve." And for the rest of that day she walked along beneath them, eating any fruit they dropped. But her fears grew fresh as daylight faded and night came to the forest.

In the deepening darkness, Chimidyue saw the monkeys start to climb down, and she hid herself to watch. To her amazement, as the monkeys reached the ground, each one changed to the form of a human.

Chimidyue could not help but gasp, and within a moment the monkey people had surrounded her.

"Why, it's Chimidyue!" said a monkey man with a friendly voice. "What are you doing here?"

Chimidyue stammered, "I followed a butterfly into the forest, and I can't find my way home."

"You poor girl!" said a monkey woman. "Don't worry. We'll bring you there tomorrow."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Chimidyue. "But where will I stay tonight?"

"Why don't you come with us to the festival?" asked the monkey man. "We've been invited by the Lord of Monkeys."

They soon arrived at a big maloca. When the Monkey Lord saw Chimidyue, he demanded, "Human, why have you come uninvited?"

"We found her and brought her along," the monkey woman told him.

The Monkey Lord grunted and said nothing more. But he eyed the girl in a way that made her shiver.

Many more monkey people had arrived, all in human form. Some wore animal costumes of bark cloth with wooden masks. Others had designs painted on their faces with black genipa dye. Everyone drank from gourds full of manioc beer.

Then some of the monkey people rose to begin the dance. With the Monkey Lord at their head, they marched in torchlight around the inside of the maloca, beating drums and shaking rattle sticks. Others sang softly or played bone flutes.

Chimidyue watched it all in wonder. She told her friend the monkey woman, "This is just like the festivals of my own people!"

Late that night, when all had retired to their hammocks, Chimidyue was kept awake by the snoring of the Monkey Lord. After a while, something about it caught her ear. "That's strange," she told herself. "It sounds almost like words."

The girl listened carefully and heard, "I will devour Chimidyue. I will devour Chimidyue." "Grandfather!" she cried in terror.

"What? Who's that?" said the Monkey Lord, starting from his sleep.

"It's Chimidyue," said the girl. "You said in your sleep you would devour me!"

"How could I say that?" he demanded. "Monkeys don't eat people. No, that was just foolish talk of this mouth of mine. Pay no attention!" He took a long swig of manioc beer and went back to sleep.

Soon the girl heard again, "I will devour Chimidyue. I will devour Chimidyue." But this time the snores were more like growls. Chimidyue looked over at the Monkey Lord's hammock. To her horror, she saw not a human form but a powerful animal with black spots.

The Lord of Monkeys was not a monkey at all. He was a jaguar!

Chimidyue's heart beat wildly. As quietly as she could, she slipped from her hammock and grabbed a torch. Then she ran headlong through the night.

WHEN CHIMIDYUE HOPPED at last to rest, daylight had begun to filter through the forest canopy. She sat down among the root buttresses of a kapok tree and began to cry.

"I hate this forest!" she said fiercely. "Nothing here makes any sense!" "Are you sure?" asked a tiny voice.

Quickly wiping her eyes, Chimidyue looked up. On a branch of the kapok was a morpho butterfly, the largest she had ever seen. It waved at her with brilliant blue wings.

"Oh, grandmother," said Chimidyue, "nothing here is what it seems. Everything changes into something else!"

"Dear Chimidyue," said the butterfly gently, "that is the way of the forest. Among your own people, things change slowly and are mostly what they seem. But your human world is a tiny one. All around it lies a much larger world, and you can't expect it to behave the same."

"But if I can't understand the forest," cried Chimidyue, "how will I ever get home?" "I will lead you there myself," said the butterfly.

"Oh, grandmother, will you?" said Chimidyue. "Certainly," said the butterfly. "Just follow me."

It wasn't long till they came to the banks of the Amazon. Then Chimidyue saw with astonishment that the boat landing of her people was on the other side. "I crossed the river without knowing it!" she cried. "But that's impossible!" "Impossible?" said the butterfly. "I mean," said Chimidyue carefully, "I don't understand how it happened. But now, how will I get back across?"

"That's simple," said the morpho. "I'll change you to a butterfly." And it began to chant over and over,

Wings of blue, drinks the dew.

Wings of blue, drinks the dew.

Wings of blue, drinks the dew.

Chimidyue felt herself grow smaller, while her arms grew wide and thin. Soon she was fluttering and hovering beside the other.

"I'm a butterfly!" she cried.

They started across the wide water, their wings glistening in the sun. "I feel so light and graceful," said Chimidyue. "I wish this would never end."

Before long they reached the landing, where a path to the maloca led into the forest. The instant Chimidyue touched the ground, she was changed back to human form.

"I will leave you here," said the butterfly. "Farewell, Chimidyue."

"Oh, grandmother," cried the girl, "take me with you. I want to be a butterfly forever!"

"That would not be right," said the butterfly. "You belong with your people, who love you and care for you. But never mind, Chimidyue. Now that you have been one of us, you will always have something of the forest within you."

The girl waved as the butterfly flew off. "Good-bye, grandmother!"

Then Chimidyue turned home, with a heart that had wings of a butterfly.

AUTHOR'S NOTE The story of Chimidyue is one of a genre of forest odyssey tales found in many parts of Amazonia. This version is from the Tukuna (TOO-koo-na) people who live along the upper Amazon River and its tributaries, in adjoining sections of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru. It is unique in having a female protagonist. The Tukuna do not live in villages. Instead, groups of relatives share a large, open-walled house called a maloca. This spacious communal dwelling can be more than 100 feet long and 40 feet high--big enough to accommodate several hundred people and their belongings during the festivals that are held inside.

Like other Amazonian peoples, the Tukuna have suffered terribly from the encroachment of modern civilization. Still, they have survived better than most, because of their geographic isolation, their respect for their own traditions, and their peaceable nature.

SAY CHIMIDYUE: CHIM-ID-YOO-A.

MALOCA IS PRONOUNCED: MUL-O-KA

A MORPHO IS A LARGE TROPICAL BUTTERFLY WITH LUSTROUS BLUE WINGS. SAY IT: MOR-FO.

A TINAMOU IS A SOUTH AMERICAN GAME BIRD SIMILAR TO A PARTRIDGE. SAY IT: TIN-A-MOO.

SORVA IS THE FRUIT OF THE RUBBER TREE.

SAY IT: SOR-VA. (WHO'DA GUESSED?)

GENIPA (JEN-IP-A) IS A SMALL GREEN FRUIT LIKE AN APPLE. ITS COLORLESS JUICE DRIES BLACK AND IS USED AS A SKIN DYE.

THAT MONKEY LORD IS A STRANGE ONE...

AND A HUNGRY ONE! (SHIVER) LUCKY HE TALKS IN HIS SLEEP.

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Retold by Aaron Shepard

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