

The Boy in the Moon

Story by Johnny Semple

Introduction by Sharon Snowshoe

Yi'ennoo Dàì', a long time ago ...

So begins the Gwich'in story about *Tsuk*, the Boy in the Moon, a story from long before the coming of Europeans to Gwich'in traditional lands.

At this time, the Gwich'in lived on the land, moving with the seasons and relying on resources such as caribou and other animals, birds, fish, and plants for food, clothing, tools, shelter, and medicine. Our way of life came from long experience and observation while living on the land, and stories passed down orally through the generations. Of all the animals, caribou have long been central to our lives. Indeed, we are still referred to as the 'caribou people' because of our special relationship with them. This goes back to the days when animals and humans could talk to each other and change form. When it came time for humans and animals to separate, this close relationship remained and is reflected in our belief that every caribou has a bit of human heart in them, and every human has a bit of caribou heart. It is because of this that we have partial knowledge of what the other is thinking and feeling. This makes it critical that we always show respect to the caribou.

This respect comes with expectations and obligations in how we hunt and treat caribou – never making fun or playing with them, never wasting the meat, and sharing what we hunt. Today, caribou remain central to our communities and are an important source of food and clothing. Caribou also provide the babiche and sinew used to make snowshoes to hunt and travel in winter. We share our caribou meat through kinship and other social networks which extend beyond our immediate communities. There are many old-time stories about caribou. One of the most important is 'The Boy in the Moon,' which speaks to the importance of sharing.

'The Boy in the Moon' tells the story of a young boy named *Tsuk*, perhaps not even more than a baby, but a special baby born with medicine power. He saves his people at a time of hunger and distress, and then travels to the moon with his puppy. They are still seen in the face of the moon today. If the pack on *Tsuk's* back is full, this means a good hunt to come, and a winter of plenty. But if his pack is empty, then hardship and hunger are to be expected. At the time of lunar eclipses, and the full moon of the spring and winter solstices, *Tsuk* gives his message to the Gwich'in. If the tidings were good, celebrations with song and dance would ensue. But if the message was bad, the people could turn to *Tsuk* for help in finding the caribou herds which he could see from his vantage point on the face of the moon above.

Many versions of the narrative have survived. All versions are honoured and respected as told. The one we give here is from Johnny Semple, a Gwich'in elder who lived from the late 1800's to the middle of the 20th century, experiencing the Klondike Gold Rush, the opening of Gwich'in lands to automobile traffic from the south, and television.

(A long time ago) – there was a very old couple who had a son born to them and this was very strange to the people. It was a winter without meat and the people were half starving and getting worried. Every medicine person tried to bring caribou but with no luck. By this time there was nothing to eat. The small boy, who was not even ready to talk, spoke up to his old father.

"Father, let me work with my medicine. It's winter and the people will starve."

His father was amazed to hear a small child speaking so well, so he answered, "Oh, my son, you're just a baby, people will only laugh at you."

Still, the small boy wanted the people to know that he could bring caribou, never mind if the people laughed at him. So the old man went out and spoke to the people.

"Just a few days ago this child was born and now he wants to work with his medicine to bring caribou." The people agreed. "He's just a small baby but make a big fire at the end of the camp and I will bring him there as he says and he will walk around this fire." The people were willing to do as they were asked. The old father brought his son to this fire place and took him out from under his fur coat. The small boy had a coat, pants and hat made for him out of one marten skin.

The small boy was put down on his feet by the fireplace and started walking around the fire singing a medicine song. As he reached into the snow, a caribou head appeared and then disappeared again.

He told the hunters, "This morning when you go out hunting, you will all see and kill lots of caribou. There will be one special fat cow and whoever kills this fat cow will give me the fat of the caribou. If I receive it, there will be lots of caribou and there will be no starvation ever."

The men went hunting and their families moved after them. When the women and children got to where the men were, the men had killed a lot of caribou and everybody was happy. The small boy asked his father to carry him around to see all the caribou that were killed.

It happened that the little boy's greedy uncle had killed the fat cow. The boy told his father, "This is the caribou that I want the fat from," so the old father left him there by the caribou and went to cut his caribou.

The old greedy uncle started saying mean things to the child while he was cutting up this fat caribou, saying, "You say you have medicine. You're no medicine person. Who do you try and make people believe you are?"

After cutting the fat caribou up, he cached it and didn't give the child any fat. Just then the old father came back and picked his son up and carried him away. The small child started to cry. Other hunters offered caribou fat to the boy but he only wanted that special caribou fat. While his father packed him and pulling the front part of the caribou home, the boy cried all the way home. He went on crying late into the night when all at once the greedy old uncle spoke out. "Send him to the moon. Why he is keeping everyone awake with his crying?"

The boy asked his father what was said and the old father answered, "Oh, it's just that silly old man, pay no attention to him."

The little boy said, "I heard. I heard it and I will." The little boy told his parents that he would be leaving and left a message with them. He asked his mother if she had a white tanned skin and she had one. The boy told his parents to keep one shoulder blade of caribou inside of this skin and just cut pieces of meat off to eat, every morning it would be whole again.

"Tomorrow morning all the caribou which were killed will all vanish again and there will be no meat and no caribou," he also told his parents. "You people will only live so long but I will be on the moon as long as there's a moon and stars in the sky. And when it is a good winter with plenty of meat, always remember my song and be happy, dance, and make a feast, be thankful for the meat. I will always be watching down on everyone."

He took a little bag of caribou blood and a small dog with him and disappeared.

Early the next morning, the hunters went back to where the caribou were killed to haul them in. When they got there, there was no sign of anything, not even a speck of blood. There was no meat and the people were starving to death. Only the old parents of the small boy lived by keeping the meat their son told them to save until they came to a place where there were a lot of caribou. They lived until they passed away of old age.

Johnny Semple

Johnny was born about 1888 to Peter and Annie Simple at Vittrekwa Creek (Vittrekwa Teetshik) on the Peel River upstream from Fort McPherson in the Northwest Territories. At this time Gwich'in families moved seasonally to different places and lived in skin houses. Skins were sewn together, hair on both sides, to shape a house for living in the winter with a fire in the middle and smoke coming out of the top of the house. It was common for legends and stories to be told nightly.

About this time, Archdeacon McDonald was teaching the bible to people which he translated into Gwich'in with the assistance of his Gwich'in wife, Julia Kutuq, and provided services and taught school in the skin houses. Johnny, who was in "Loucheux" school was able to read his bible and hymn book in Gwich'in.

Johnny started trapping at the age of 10 with his parents and other families in the canyon of the Blackstone River. After his parents died, Johnny stayed in Dawson, and worked and travelled all over this area. Johnny recalled Dawson City as a very noisy town around 1910. There was no television or automobiles, but there were phonographs, pianos, and violins. Johnny, not married yet, worked at various jobs and remained observant of the many changes happening throughout the north.

Johnny became a guide, a trapper, as well as a pilot on the river boats. He went on trips by dog team to Mayo, Dawson

and other mining places with Reverend Toddy. Sometimes he was a lay reader for him during church services. He and his young nephew, Peter Henry, met the Barz brothers on their travels in the Bonnetplume River area. One time, he agreed to make a trip and was supplied with horses, packs and everything he needed. He and his horses boarded a steamboat that was to let him ashore a hundred miles away. He met Bishop Stringer on the same steamboat who informed him his travel would bring him through rough country. In the winter months Johnny went trapping and caribou hunting around Van Choo (Hungry Lake) and beaver hunting around Edrii Njik (Hart River) with John Martin in the fall.

In 1918 Johnny married Alice, daughter of Caroline and Charlie Ts'ee gei (Ts'ee gei means 'young porcupine'). Together they had five children. They stayed in Mayo before moving to Dawson City, and then to the Blackstone River area. They eventually settled in Aklavik where he became a lay minister for the Anglican Church.

Between 1900 and 1960, Johnny travelled to many growing towns and places on the land in the Yukon, Alaska, and Northwest Territories including along the Yukon River, the Snake River, Bell River, and to hot springs in the Yukon to treat his rheumatism. He travelled by dog team, steamboat, horseback, and by snowshoes.

REFERENCES

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