Elder's story

The boy who went to the moon

As told to Louise Profeit-LeBlanc by Mary Vittrekwa

Many years ago, when the people depended totally
on the land, the Gwich'in people remember this
story. It's the story about the boy who went to the
moon.

There was a couple who had only one child. He
was only a few months old and was fussing, so his
mother took him out of their tent to show him the
moon on a warm spring night. The little boy
became very happy, he smiled and pointed to the
moon and said the word for moon in his mother's
language. He settled right down after this. His par­
ents realised then that he must be special and in fact
his father said "I think he comes from the moon
people. He has a moon spirit. We must be good to
him all his life."

Time passed until the year that the people were
suffering from famine. That was the year that the
caribou had taken another trail in their migration.
The snow and cold weather had come too quick and
the people hadn't got enough to last them the win­
ter. They didn't know how they were going to get
through the winter and the whole village was wor­
ried. Some even cried because they knew that there
was going to be great suffering.

This boy was about 14 years old now. Although
he was this age, he was still as small as a young
child. He never grew. He was a midget. His mother
took pity on him and sewed him little marten skin
pants to keep his legs warm and when they moved
across the country she would carry him on her back,
as walking over the tundra was very difficult. His
parents treated him very well.

"Mom, I know how to make caribou come to this
place. I will make medicine for the people and bring
caribou back from their trail." His mother was very
surprised when her son told her what he could do to
help the people.

The little guy went out of the skin-tent and
pulled at a little clump of willows in the snow. It
turned into a small calf caribou right before his par­
ents' eyes! They killed that little caribou.

"Now take some of that meat and attach it to the
fringes on my jacket. I'm going to make a song and
dance for that bull caribou, to change his mind."

His mother did as her son instructed and attached
strips of the caribou meat to the fringes of his jack­
et. The young boy went outside the tent again. This
time he plucked some willows and peeled the bark
of them. He was going to use these for dancing
sticks.

"Now before I make my medicine to bring that
chief caribou back, go tell all the people what I am
going to do. Tell them that the only thing I want
for my work is the stomach fat around the caribou's
stomach. That's all I want. Now go and tell them
quick, while I make a song for them."

His mother went to tell the people. Meanwhile
the boy came outside of the tent and with those
dancing sticks in each hand, proceeded to sing a
special caribou song, a song which even the oldest of
the Elders no longer remembers the words to. He
danced, clacking the sticks together to make the
same sound that caribou horns make when they are
in a large herd moving across the land. Pretty soon,
on top of the nearest rise, the young man saw the
silhouette of a bull caribou. The chief for the cari­
bou people. He knew that there were thousands
more behind him.

The people ran around frantically, herding the
caribou into the caribou corrals, spearing and shoot­
ing them with arrows. They were in a state of fren­
zy. Many caribou were taken that day, and the
young boy waited patiently in his tent with his
mother. Nobody came.
“What's the matter with my people? How can they forget their promise so quickly? His mother insisted that he wait a little longer. They are busy with the meat, my son. Be patient, they won't forget you.”

The boy waited until nightfall. He became very upset. He cried. He cried over this condition of the people. “I want to go back to my people. Back to the moon, for these people here have no more respect. They forget promises. I don't want to live among such people anymore.”

His parents begged the boy not to leave them. In fact, that night when they went to bed, they put the child between them so he could not leave. In spite of their attempts, however, in the morning, he was not there. They awakened to discover only his little marten skin pants hanging from the smokehole in the middle of their tent. Their son had returned to the moon.

Now, to this day, if you look closely at the moon, you will see a young boy holding something in his hand, something that looks like lace fat from around a caribou's stomach. And this boy is still controlling the caribou. On the first full moon in the fall and the first full moon in the spring, the caribou begin their migration as they have done since the beginning of time.

So Rod! You figure the tranquilizer is wearing off yet?”