

The Star Brides

In the days of the people who are gone two beautiful young sisters were overtaken by night in the woods.

Knowing they could not hope to return to their village before daylight, they made themselves beds of pine boughs and lay down under the open sky, huddling together for warmth.

As they waited for the coming of sleep, they talked, as young girls will, of the young men they might one day marry.

The sky was cloudless and the stars were very bright. Sleep was slow in coming and the sisters were a little afraid. To comfort one another, they pretended the stars were the eyes of lovers, looking down at them protectively.

"I will choose that one to be my husband," said the elder sister, pointing at the sky. "His eyes are as bright as those of a hawk."

"And I will choose that one," said the younger sister, gesturing drowsily, "his eyes are as bright as those of an eagle."

The sisters laughed, fell silent and drifted off to sleep.

Then it was morning. Even before opening her eyes, the elder sister stretched her beautiful arms and legs.

"Be careful!" cried a voice, "you will spill my warpaint!"

Suddenly, the sisters were fully awake. They sat up quickly, their eyes wide with wonderment.

Here were two handsome young warriors. One, with eyes like those of a hawk, leaned on his spear. The other, with eyes like those of an eagle, knelt on the ground to mix his red warpaint.

Perhaps it was in that first instant of awakening that the sisters fell in love. Perhaps it took many days. Perhaps they only imagined that they were in love. In any event, it was not long before they were married: the elder sister to the warrior with the eyes of a hawk; the younger to the warrior with the eyes of an eagle.

For a time, they were happy. While their husbands hunted in the Woods, the sisters cared for their wigwams.

But soon the sisters grew sulky because, near the wigwams, there was a large, flat stone which their husbands had strictly forbidden them to touch or move.

If their interest had not been aroused by their husbands' prohibition, the sisters might never have thought of touching the

stone. As it was, they could not rest until their curiosity was satisfied.

So one day when the men were hunting for bear, the sisters pried up the stone and peered under it.

What they saw made them start back and cry out with fear. For the stone was like a trapdoor in the roof of the world.

Far, far below they saw the village of their childhood, surrounded by the forest in which they had fallen asleep.

“Our husbands are not men!” cried the elder sister.

“They are wizards!” cried the younger.

“They are star creatures!”

“And they have taken us to their home above the sky!”

The sisters embraced one another and wept and when their husbands returned home they would not leave off weeping.

“Did you not choose us to be your husbands?” the hawk-eyed man demanded.

“Did you not summon us when you lay in the forest?” demanded the eagle-eyed man.

“That was only a game,” wept the elder sister.

“All girls play such games,” wept the younger.

“Then you wish to return to your world?” asked the hawk-eyed man.

“Yes. Oh, yes. Please,” the sisters agreed.

“Then you are free to go,” said the man with the eyes of an eagle.

“But you must follow our instructions.”

That night the sisters were told they must sleep together, and they were to cover their faces.

“In the morning you must not be in haste to uncover your faces,” the star men warned. “Wait until you hear a chickadee sing; and even then you must not open your eyes. Wait still longer until you hear the red squirrel sing; and still you must wait. Keep your faces covered and your eyes closed until you hear the striped squirrel sing, then open your eyes and uncover your faces and you will be safe.”

The sisters slept little that night and awoke early the following morning. They lay awake for a long time with their faces covered before they heard the singing of the chickadee.

The younger sister wanted to get up at once to see if they had in truth been returned to earth, but the elder sister restrained her.

“We must wait until the singing of the striped squirrel,” she reminded. “Be patient. We will soon be back in our own village.”

But when the red squirrel sang, the younger sister could control herself no longer. She uncovered her face and opened her eyes. And the moment she opened her eyes she found herself falling through the night — falling faster and faster toward the stony floor of the world.

There was not even time for her to cry out, so her sister did not know she had disappeared until she heard the singing of the striped squirrel, uncovered her face, opened her eyes and found herself in the part of the forest where their adventures had begun.

However, as she looked up at the sky from which she had lately come, the elder sister saw a star falling through the gray of the early morning and knew that star was in fact her younger sister who had uncovered her eyes too soon and was doomed to fall forever toward the earth.

And to this very day when the people see a falling star they say it is the younger sister, still tumbling through the night.

There are even those who say that the morning star is the hole in the sky through which the eagle-eyed warrior observes the eternal descent of his bride.

Here is another nursery rhyme chock-a-block with possibilities for story making.

There are men in the village of Erith
Whom nobody seeth or heareth
And there looms on the marge
Of the river, a barge
That nobody roweth or steereth

I am indebted to Louise Cullen, a program consultant with the former North York Board of Education who wrote the haunting tune that follows. Sing the piece in unison, then try the piece as a two-part round. Work with the sounds of dripping oars and add movements. Perhaps the children could build imaginary barges and row in time to the round. Quite a bit of layering could be tried here.

I have heard wonderful interpretations of the text. Students have pictured the storytellers as sirens haunting the river, weeping women and children awaiting the return of warriors from battle, scolding