

The Origin of the Narwhal

A Treasury Of Eskimo Tales

North American

Easy
7 min read

A long, long time ago a widow lived with her young son and daughter in a small hut. They had a hard time to get enough to eat. But the boy was anxious to do all he could, and while he was still quite small he made a bow and arrows of walrus tusks which he found under the snow. With these weapons he shot birds for their food.

He had no snow goggles and one day when the sun shone bright and he was hunting, he became utterly blind. He had a hard time finding his way back to the hut and when he got there without any game, his mother was so disappointed that instead of pitying him for his blindness she became angry with him.

From that time she ill-treated him, never giving him enough to eat. He was a growing boy and needed a great deal of food, and she thought he wanted more than his share, so she gave him less, and would not allow her daughter to give him anything. So the boy lived on, half starving, and was very unhappy.

One day a polar bear came to the hut and thrust his head right through the window. They were all much frightened, and the mother gave the boy his bow and arrows and told him to kill the animal.

“But I cannot see the window and I shall miss the bear. Then it will be furious and will eat us,” he said.

“Quick, brother! I will level the bow,” said his sister.

So he shot and killed the bear, and the mother and sister went out and skinned it and buried the meat in the snow.

“Don’t you dare to tell your brother that he killed the bear,” said the mother. “We must make this meat last all winter.”

When they went back into the hut she said to her son, “You missed the bear. He ran away as soon as he saw you take your bow and arrow. We have been following him a long way into the woods.”

The sister did not dare to tell her brother. She and her mother lived on the meat for a long time while the boy was nearly starving. But sometimes when the mother was away, the girl gave him meat, for she loved her brother dearly and used to weep because she knew he was hungry.

One day a loon flew over the hut, and, seeing the poor blind boy at the door, resolved to restore his eyesight. The bird perched on the roof and kept calling, “Quee moo! Quee moo!” which sounded to the lad like “Come here! Come here!”

He went out and followed the bird to the water. There the loon took the boy on its back and dived with him to the bottom. The loon is a great diver and can stay for a long time under water, but it knew the boy could not. So it came to the surface soon and asked, “Can you see anything?”

“No, I cannot see anything as yet,” answered the boy.

They dove again and remained a longer time. Again when they came up the loon asked, “Can you see now?”

“I can see a dim shimmer,” replied the boy.

“Take a long, long breath and hold it while we go down,” said the loon. “When you can hold it no more, let it come out very gradually. As soon as the bubbles of air begin to rise I will know that you must come to the surface and will bring you.”

The third time they remained a long while under water, and when they rose to the surface the boy could see as well as ever. He thanked the loon very heartily, and it said to him:

“Go to your home now; but promise me never again to shoot a bird.”

He gladly promised, and then ran away to his hut. There he found the skin of the bear he had shot hanging up to dry. He was so angry that he tore it down and, entering the hut, demanded of his mother, "Where did you get the bearskin that is hanging outside the house?"

His mother perceived that he had recovered his sight and that he suspected the truth about the bear. She was frightened at his anger and sought to pacify him.

"Come here," she said, "and I will give you the best I have. But I have no one to support me and am very poor. Come here and eat this. It is very good."

The boy did not go near. Again he asked, "Where did you get the bearskin that I saw hanging outside the door?"

She was afraid to tell him the truth, so she said, "A boat came here with many men in it and they gave me the skin."

The boy did not believe her story. He was sure that it was the skin of the bear he had shot. But he said nothing more. His mother was anxious to make peace with him, and offered him food and clothing, which he refused to take.

He went to the other Inuit who lived in the same village and made a spear and a harpoon of the same pattern as they used. Then he watched them throw the harpoons, and in a short time he became an expert hunter and could catch many white whales.

But he could not forget his anger at his mother. He said to his sister, "I will not come home while our mother lives in the house. She abused me while I was blind and helpless, and she mistreated you for pitying me. We will not kill her, but we will get rid of her and then live together. Will you do what I have planned?"

She agreed. Then he went to hunt white whales. As he had no kayak he stood on shore, winding the end of the harpoon string around his body, and taking a firm footing so he could hold the whale until it quieted down and died. Sometimes his sister went along to help him hold the line.

One day his mother went to the beach, and he tied the string around her body and told her to take a firm footing. She was a trifle nervous for she had never done the thing before, and she said, "Harpoon a small dolphin, else I may not be able to hold it, if it is large enough to make a strong pull."

After a short time a young animal came up to breathe, and she cried, "Kill that one. I can hold it."

"No, that one is too large," he said.

Again a small dolphin came near, and the mother shouted, "Spear that." But he said, "No, it is too large and strong."

At last a huge animal arose quite near, and immediately he threw his harpoon, taking care to wound but not to kill it, and at the same time pushing his mother into the water.

"That is because you abused me," he cried, as the white whale dragged her into the sea.

Whenever she came to the surface to breathe she cried "Louk! Louk!" and gradually she became transformed into a narwhal.

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