



Coyote and Mouse

A Tale from the Northwestern Band of Shoshone

Cultural Note

According to Shoshone tradition, Coyote tales should only be told during the winter.

The Shoshone people have many special songs for specific circumstances. For instance, the Harvest Song is sung as a prayer to invite a bounteous harvest. Before the gathering of choke cherries, a song is sung by the medicine people to ensure a full harvest. The Warm Dance is a ceremony performed in late December or early January to ask for deep snows to quench the thirst of the earth.

Vocabulary

cache

haunches

huddled

morsel

scurried

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One silent, winter night Itsappe, Coyote, and Po'naih, Mouse, huddled together in a little grass hut. The wind howled outside. Mouse shivered at the sound, but he was happy to be inside where it was warm. Coyote said to Mouse, "I am hungry, Little Brother. Let us sing the snow song. With lots of snow, it will be easy to hunt rabbits. The snow will help us see their tracks."

Mouse nodded. But he wasn't hungry. He had hidden a cache of grains and seeds, but Coyote didn't know. Coyote sang all night long. "Wuwuseewoo, Wuwuseewoo, appo wukootee, appo wukootee," he sang. Mouse burrowed into his warm, soft nest. He nibbled on a sunflower seed. He listened contentedly to Coyote. Mouse's eyes grew heavy as Coyote's voice lulled him to sleep. The singing brought snow during the night, too.



The next morning, Coyote looked outside. He ran back to Mouse and shook him awake. "Mouse, Mouse, wake up. Go outside and check to see how deep the snow is," he barked.

Mouse rubbed his eyes, still half-asleep. He had been so comfortable! But he nodded and yawned a big, tired yawn as he made his way to the front of the hut. BRRR! There was lots of snow everywhere, and was it ever cold! Mouse held his long tail up high to keep it from getting wet or cold from the snow. He jumped onto the snow once. He jumped twice. His tiny paws sank into the snow only as deep as a whisker—no more (after all, mice aren't very heavy). Brrrrr! He scurried back to Coyote and squeaked, "It's not deep at all, Coyote! It's only as deep as my thickest whisker!" And he plucked one from his face just to show Coyote. "Keep singing!" And he scurried back to his warm nest.

Coyote sat back on his haunches and began singing again. "Wuwuseewoo, Wuwuseewoo, appo wukootee, appo wukootee," he sang. Mouse burrowed into his warm, soft nest. He nibbled on a pine nut. His eyes grew heavy as Coyote's voice lulled him back to sleep.

After several hours, Coyote looked outside. Snow covered the ground as far as he could see. Coyote narrowed his eyes at Mouse. He shook his head once. Then he shook it twice. "No, this doesn't make sense," he said. "I think you must be telling me lies." He grabbed a stick and swatted at Mouse. Mouse awoke with a great SQUEAK! He dodged Coyote's blows and scurried into a hiding place. "I'll get you sooner or later, Mouse! I'm going out without you, and I'm going to hunt rabbits. You will get none, and you will STARVE!"





Coyote pulled his rabbit skin blanket tighter around himself and stomped out. But the snow was so deep, and Coyote so much heavier than Mouse. . . he sank into the snow clear up to his chin! "Mouse!" he shrieked. "You tricked me!"

Coyote had discovered the truth. Mouse trembled with fright, but stayed in his hiding place while Coyote dug himself out of the deep snow. Mouse nibbled anxiously on a pumpkin seed.

All day long, Coyote worked hard to dig himself out of the deep snow. He came back into the hut, teeth chattering and gasping for breath. He was so angry at Mouse. He snatched up a stick and ran around the hut, beating every place he thought Mouse might be hiding. Exhausted, he collapsed on the floor and groaned,

"What are we going to do now? There is just too much snow for us to track rabbits."

Do you think Mouse was going to answer that question? He knew Coyote was hungry AND angry, and would eat him up if he found him. He nibbled nervously on a kernel of colored corn, but he really wasn't very hungry. Mouse stayed hidden until Coyote wore himself out. When Coyote was fast asleep, Mouse scampered out of the hut.

Mouse traveled a long way. He was tired, cold and hungry, but he knew Coyote would be following after him soon. He headed to the mountains where he finally found the home of his uncle, Porcupine. Mouse found Porcupine sitting high up in a tall pine tree.



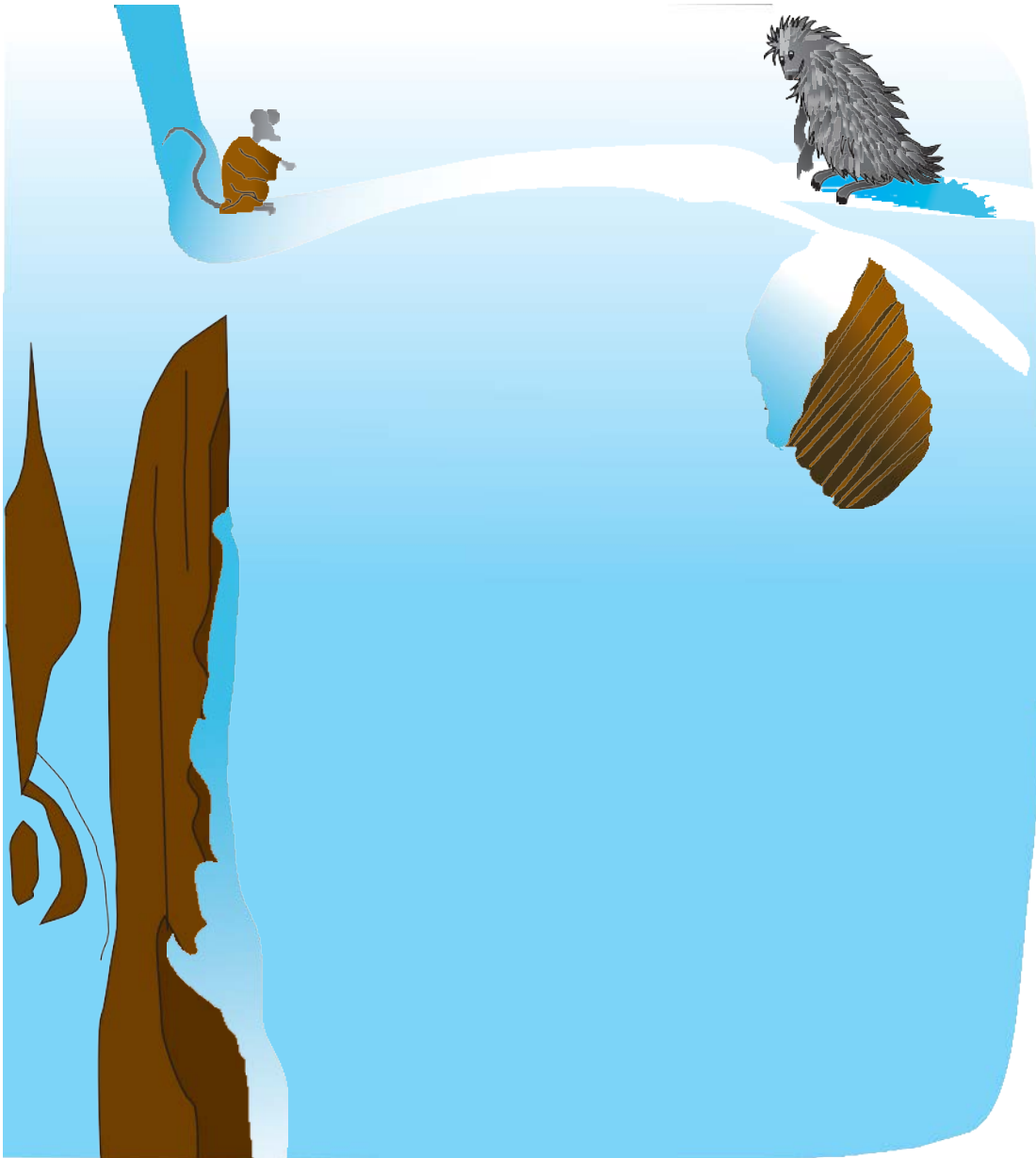
Porcupine was surprised to see his little nephew.

Mouse was shivering with cold, and he looked hungry. "What are you doing so far from your home?" Porcupine asked.

With chattering teeth, Mouse answered, "I've been running away from Coyote."

"Well, climb up and get warm." He wrapped Mouse in a warm blanket. "You can stay here as long as you need. Come, I'll show you my home." He walked him over to the left side of the tree where he had hung a side of ribs from a mountain goat. "This is my food. Here, eat." Mouse's eyes grew wide at the sight. The ribs were large and full of flavorful meat. The branch sagged from the heavy weight of the ribs. He ate hungrily as he looked up every now and then to thank Porcupine.





After Mouse had eaten his fill, Porcupine showed him the other half of the ribs that hung way up high on the right side of the tree. "This," he explained, "is what I use to...well, it's what I use to relieve myself. It's my potty." The branch sagged from the heavy weight of what was in those ribs. Porcupine added, "It's quite full, too. I'll need to empty it soon."



Meanwhile, Coyote, with brush strapped to his feet to keep him from sinking into the snow, followed Mouse's tracks straight to Porcupine's tree. He sniffed

around the tree. He smelled the sweet, fatty smell of the mountain sheep ribs. He danced and yelped around the tree and called up to Porcupine, "Oh, please, Brother!

I have traveled so far and I am so hungry. Can't you share just a morsel of food with this weary traveler?" He knelt in the snow and held up his paws, begging. "Don't let me die from hunger!"

Porcupine called down and asked, "Why are you hungry? Can't you chase anything for food?"

Coyote answered, "Believe me, I've tried! I chased Mouse, but he got away from me." Mouse's mouth dropped open and his eyebrows went straight up when he heard that!

Coyote danced with anticipation at the bottom of the tree and begged once again, "Please, share some of your food with me!"

Porcupine tapped his forehead. He whispered to Mouse, "I'm going to play a trick on Coyote." He pointed to the ribs on the right side of the tree. "All right, Coyote, you can have this stuff. Stand right under it. I'll drop it down to you, and you catch it." Mouse winked at Porcupine and muffled a giggle with both paws.

Porcupine called down, "Coyote? Are you ready? Now then, stretch your arms up."

Coyote looked up into the tree and stretched his arms up, just like Porcupine had told him to. His mouth watered just thinking about how sweet the meat would taste. Oh, how he would gobble it up!





Porcupine pushed the ribs loose from the branch. With one sudden jolt, they crashed through the pine boughs and landed right on top of Coyote.

Poor Coyote! He moaned and wailed as he staggered away, still hungry...still cold...and now covered with...well...you know.

Glossary

itsappe - coyote

'po'naih - mouse

takkapi - snow

Wuwuseewoo, Wuwuseewoo, appo wukootee, appo wukootee - words to the snow song

yehne-ttsi - porcupine

Reading Suggestions

- With your parents' permission, build a hut in your front room or bedroom with blankets. Take a flashlight into your hut and read this book again, along with some of your other favorite books.
- What are some of your favorite songs? Discuss your musical traditions with your family.
- In traditional stories like this, animals often take on human-like qualities. They speak to one another as if they are all part of the same family, and lessons are taught using humor, personification, and exaggeration. Think of some well-known fables or traditional stories and compare and contrast them with this story.

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