

---

Version 3, told by Maria Johns

---

The Narrator

---

Maria Johns was born probably some time between 1860 and 1870. The first time she saw a white man was when she and her family challenged the coastal Chilkoot and crossed the Chikoot Pass to trade at Wilson's Store in Dyea. This was in the eighties, and Maria was a young woman.

Maria belonged to the *tuq'wedi* [ or *decitan* ] sib, and she traced her ancestry ultimately to the coastal Tlingit town of Angoon (McClellan n.d.b: Chapter 14). While her first language was the Tagish dialect of Athabascan, she also spoke a good deal of Tlingit, which became, in fact, the chief native language of Tagish. She had little command of English.

Although she seems to have led a rather rich, full life, she was in poor health and partly blind during most of her adult days. When I met her in 1948, she was totally blind and spent most of her days in bed, covered with a gopherskin robe.

Maria composed at least three songs

of her own, and she evidently told a great many stories to her children, judging by the repertoires of her two grown daughters.

Maria volunteered the bear story on the morning of July 16, 1948. I had visited her in her daughter Dora's house, and had been asking her if there were any ritual observances for bears.

Maria was obviously a good raconteur. She pantomimed frequently, changed her voice to indicate that different characters were speaking, and imitated the sounds of the dogs and bears. She hurried the tale a bit at the end, for she was worried that I might miss the train taking me from Carcross.

Dora Austin Wedge, the interpreter, had been to school, and she speaks excellent English. Dora's daughter, Annie, was the only other person present. She was much interested in the story, which she evidently had not heard before.

---

The Story

---

Once there was a little girl about as big as Annie [about ten years old]. And she used to go pick berries in the summer. Every summer she would go with her family, and they would pick berries and dry them. When she used to go with her women folk on the trail, they would see bear droppings on the trail. In the old days the girls had to be careful about bear droppings. They shouldn't walk over it. Men could walk over it, but young girls had to walk around it. But this girl always did jump over it and kick it. She would disobey her mother. All the time she would see it and kick it and step over it. She kept seeing it all around her. She did this from

childhood.

When she was quite big, they were going camping. They were going to dry fish. They went out picking berries. She was just a young girl. She went out and was picking with her mother and aunts and sisters. She saw some bear droppings. She said all kinds of words to it and kicked it and jumped over it.

When they were all coming home, they were all carrying their baskets of berries. The girl saw some nice berries and stopped to get them. The others went ahead. When she had picked the berries and was starting to get up, her berries all spilled out of her basket. She leaned down and was picking them off

the ground.

Soon she saw a young man. He was very good looking. She had never seen him before. He had red paint on his face. He stopped and talked to her. He said,

"Those berries you are picking are no good. They are all full of dirt. Let's go up a little ways and fill your basket up. There are some good berries growing up there. I'll walk home with you. You needn't be afraid!" [Here Dora, the interpreter, stopped to explain: "He was really a bear, only she didn't know it yet. This is a really old story from way back when there were only a few people. It's true." ]

After they had gotten the basket half full of berries the man said,

"There is another bunch of berries up there a little ways. We'll pick them too."

When they had picked them all, he said,

"It's time to eat. You must be hungry."

He made a fire. [Dora explained that it just looked like a fire; it was not a real one. I am uncertain whether she was translating what Maria actually said, or whether she added this comment herself.]

They cooked gopher, quite a lot of it, and they ate some. Then the man said,

"It's too late to go home now. We'll go home tomorrow. It's summer, and there's no need to fix a big camp."

So they stayed there. When they went to bed, he said,

"Don't lift your head in the morning and look at me, even if you wake up before I do."

So they went to bed.

Next morning they woke up. The man said to her,

"We might as well go. We'll just eat that cold gopher. We needn't make a

fire. Then we'll go pick some berries. Let's get a basket full."

All the time the girl kept talking about her mother and father. All the time she wanted to go home, and she kept talking about it.

He said, "Don't be afraid, I'm going home with you."

Then he slapped her right on top of her head, and he put a circle around the girl's head the way the sun goes [clockwise]. He did this so she would forget. Then she forgot. She didn't talk about her home any more.

Then they left again. He said,

"You're all right. I'll go home with you."

Then after this, she forgot all about going home. She just went around with him picking berries. Every time they camped, it seemed like a month to her, but it was really only a day. They started in May. They kept travelling and going.

Finally she recognized a place. It looked like a place that she and her family used to dry meat. Then he stopped there at the timberline and slapped her. And he made a circle sunwise [on her head], and then another on the ground where she was sitting. He said,

"Wait here. I am going hunting gophers. We have no meat. Wait 'till I come back. [Dora explained: "It was a grizzly bear." ] Then he came back with the gophers. They kept travelling. Late in the evening they made camp and cooked.

Next morning they got up again. At last she knew. They were travelling again, and it was getting near fall. It was getting late. And she came to her senses and knew it. It was cold. He said,

"It's time to make camp. We must make a home." He started making a home. He was digging a den. She knew he was a bear then.

## The Girl Who Married the Bear

He got quite a way digging the den, then he said,

"Go get some balsam boughs and brush." Then she went and got some. She broke the branches from as high as she could. She brought the bundle. He said,

"That brush is no good. You left a mark, and the people will see it and know we were here. We can't use that. We can't stay here."

So they left. They went up to the head of a valley. She knew her brothers used to go there to hunt and to eat bear. In the spring they took the dogs there, and they hunted bears in April. They would send the dogs into the bear den long ago, and then the bear would come out. That's where her brothers used to go. She knew it.

He said, "We'll make camp." He dug a den and sent her out again.

"Get some brush that is just lying on the ground—not from up high. No one will see where you get it, and it will be covered with snow."

She got it from the ground and brought it to him, but she bent the branches up high too. So she let them hang down so her brothers would know. And she rubbed sand all over herself—all over her body and limbs. And then she rubbed the trees all around, so that the dogs would find where she had left her scent. Then she went to the den with her bundle of brush. She brought it.

Just when the man was digging, he looked like a bear. This was the *only* time. The rest of the time he seemed like a human being. The girl didn't know how else to stay alive, so she stayed with him as long as he was good to her.

"This is better," he said, when she brought back the brush. Then he brushed up and fixed the place. After he fixed the den, they left. [Dora explained: "The grizzly bear is the last bear to

go into his den. They go around in the snow."]

They went hunting gophers for winter. She never saw him do it. She always sat around when he was hunting gophers. He dug them up like a grizzly bear, and he didn't want her to see it. He never showed her where he kept the gophers.

Nearly every day they hunted gophers and picked berries. It was quite late in the year. He was just like a human to her.

[ Each time that Maria wanted to indicate that the bear looked like a human she passed her hand from one side of her face to the other.]

It was October. It was really late in the fall. He said,

"Well, I guess we'll go home now. We have enough food and berries. We'll go down."

So they went home. Really they went into the den. They stayed there and slept. They woke up once a month and got up to eat. They kept doing it and going back to bed. Every month, it seemed like another morning, just like another day. They never really went outside. It just seemed like it.

Soon the girl found that she was carrying a baby. She had two little babies—one was a girl, and one was a boy. She had them in February in the den. This is when bears have their cubs. She had hers then.

The bear used to sing in the night. When she woke up, she would hear him. [Maria sang a short song.] The bear became like a doctor [shaman] when he started living with the woman. It just came upon him like a doctor. [Maria then repeated the song and said that this was what should be sung to the skull of a slain bear.]

He sang the song twice. She heard it the first time. The second time the bear made a sound,

"Wuf! Wuf!" And she woke up.

"You're my wife, and I am going to leave soon. It looks like your brothers are going to come up here soon, before the snow is gone. I want you to know that I am going to do something bad. I am going to fight back!"

"Don't do it!" she said. "They are my brothers. If you really love me, you'll love them too. Don't kill them. Let them kill you! If you really love me, don't fight! You have treated me good. Why did you live with me, if you are going to kill them?"

"Well, all right," he said, "I won't fight, but I want you to know what will happen!"

His canines looked like swords to her.

"These are what I fight with," he said. They looked like knives to her. She kept pleading.

"Don't do anything. I'll still have my children if they kill you!" She knew he was a bear then. She really knew.

They went to sleep. She woke again. He was singing again.

"It's true," he said. "They are coming close. If they do kill me, I want them to give you my skull—my head, and my tail. Tell them to give them to you. Wherever they kill me, build a big fire, and burn my head and tail and sing this song while the head is burning. Sing it until they are all burnt up!" [Maria sang the song again.]

So they ate and went to bed, and another month went by. They didn't sleep the whole month. He kept waking up.

"It's coming close," he said. "I can't sleep well. It's getting to be bare ground. Look out and see if the snow is melted in front of the den."

She looked, and there was mud and sand. She grabbed some and made it into a ball and rubbed it all over herself. It was full of her scent. She rolled it

down the hill. Then the dogs could smell it. She came in and said,

"There is bare ground all over in some places."

He asked her why she had made the marks. "Why? Why? Why? They'll find us easy!"

After they had slept for half a month, they woke, and he was singing again.

"This is the last one," he said. "You'll not hear me again. Any time the dogs are coming to the door. They are close. Well, I'll fight back. I am going to do something bad!"

His wife said, "You know they are my brothers! Don't do it! Who will look after my children if you kill them? You must think of the kids. My brothers will help me. If my brothers hunt you, let them be!"

Then they went to bed for just a little while.

"I can't sleep good, but we'll try," he said. They went to bed, just for a little while.

Next morning he said, "Well, it's close! It's close! Wake up!"

Just when they were getting up, they heard a noise. [Maria stirred about and knocked on the furniture.]

"The dogs are barking. Well," he said, "I'll leave. Where are my knives? I want them!"

He took them down. She saw him putting in his teeth. He was a big bear. She pleaded with him.

"Please don't fight. If you wanted me, why did you go this far? Just think of the kids. Don't hurt my brothers!"

When he went, he shook hands and said,

"You are not going to see me again!"

He went out and growled. He slapped something back into the den. It was a pet dog, a little bear dog [i.e., a Tahltan bear dog. See McClellan n.d. b: Chapter

4], and also a pair of gloves. (The gloves do not quite jibe with what follows.)

When he threw the dog in, she grabbed it and shoved it back in the brush under the nest. [Maria acted out how she had done this, pretending to hide something under her own gopher-skin robe.] She put the dog there to hide it. She sat on it and kept it there so it couldn't get out. She wanted to keep it for a reason.

For a long time there was no noise. She went out of the den. She heard her brothers below. They had already killed the bear. She felt bad, and she sat down. She found an arrow and one side of a glove. She picked it up, and all of the arrows. Finally she fitted the little dog with a string around his back. She tied the arrows and the glove into a bundle. She put them all on the little dog, and he ran to his masters.

The boys were down there dressing the bear. They knew the dog. They noticed the bundle and took it off.

"It's funny," they said. "No one in a bear den would tie this on!" They talked about it. They decided to send the youngest brother up to the den. In those days a younger brother could talk to his sister, but an older brother couldn't.

The older brothers said to the youngest brother, "We lost our sister a year ago in May. Something could have happened. A bear might have taken her away. You are the youngest brother. Don't be afraid. There is nothing up there but her. You go and see if she is there. Find out!"

He went. She was sitting there crying. The boy came up. She was sitting and crying. She cried when she saw him. She said,

"You boys killed your brother-in-law! I went with him last May. You killed him, but tell the others to save me the skull and the tail. Leave it there for

me. When you get home, tell mother to sew a dress for me so I can go home. Sew a dress for the girl, and pants and a shirt for the boy. And moccasins. And tell her to come and see me."

He left and got down there and told his brothers,

"This is my sister [up there]. She wants the head and tail."

They did this, and they went home. They told their mother. She got busy and sewed. She had a dress and moccasins and clothes for the children. The next day she went up there. She came to the place. They dressed the little kids. Then they went down to where the bear was killed. The boys had left a big fire. She burned the head and tail. Then she sang until all was ashes.

Then they went home, but she didn't go right home. She said,

"Get the boys to build a house. I can't come right in (to the main camp). It will be quite a while. The boys can build a camp right away."

She stayed there a long while. Towards fall she came and stayed with her mother. All winter. The kids grew.

Next spring the boys [her brothers] wanted her to act like a bear. They wanted to play with her. They had killed a female bear that had cubs, one male and one female. They wanted their sister to put on the hide and to act like a bear. They fixed little arrows. They pestered her to play with them, and they wanted her two little children to play too. She didn't want it.

She told her mother, "I can't do it! Once I do it, I will turn into a bear. I'm half there already. Hair is already showing on my arms and legs. It is quite long."

If she had stayed there with her bear husband another summer, she would have turned into a bear. "If I put on bearhide, I'll turn into one!," she said.

They kept telling her to play. Then

## Appendix: The Story and the Narrators

the boys sneaked up. They threw the hides over her and the little ones. Then she walked off on four legs, and she shook herself just like a bear. It just happened. She was a grizzly bear. She couldn't do a thing. She had to fight against the arrows. She killed them all off, even her mother. But she didn't kill her youngest brother, not him. She couldn't help it. Tears were running down her face.

Then she went on her own. She had her two little cubs with her.

That's why they claim that long ago a bear is partly human. That is why you never eat grizzly bear meat. Now people eat black bear meat, but they still don't eat grizzly meat, because grizzlies are half human.