

The Legend of Queneesh

In written form as told by Mary Clifton (written down by Barb Frank)

Adapted for storytelling with the felt storyboard

There are many wonderful legends that belong to the K'ómoks people. The K'ómoks are the people who have given their name to this part of Vancouver Island, where they have lived for thousands of years.

One of these stories is the Legend of Queneesh. **qʷənəs** (kwun-ees) is the K'ómoks word for whale, and the name of the huge white glacier which looks down majestically over the Comox Valley.

Let's travel back in time, thousands of years, to when giant evergreen trees grew right down to the shore of the Puntledge River (**PLACE TREES AT SHORELINE**). The K'ómoks people lived along the shoreline in big houses made from cedar planks with totem poles presiding over the doorways. Canoes lined the riverbank (**PLACE TWO CANOES ALONG SHORELINE**), weirs were set to catch salmon, and there were smokehouses for preserving salmon and clams.

The K'ómoks people numbered in the thousands (**BEGIN PLACING PEOPLE ON THE LAND**) and spoke their own language. In this world, when people went to sleep at night, the only sounds they could hear were the sounds of nature. And other than the moon and the stars, the only light came from fires in the big houses.

On just such a night, an old man, *Qwoi kwa lak*, had a dream. In this dream, a voice came to him and told him that he must go to his chief and warn him of a coming disaster. When *Qwoi kwa lak* woke up, he remembered what had happened to him during the night: the power of the voice that spoke to him, the clear direct advice as to what must be done made him realize that he must act!

Qwoi kwa lak went to the lodge of the Chief of the K'ómoks people, *Gye gya janook*, and requested an audience. The old man told the chief about his strange and compelling dream. The voice in his dream told him that he must repeat to his chief what the dream said.

The voice warned that soon rain will begin to fall, and it will not stop for a long, long time. Day after day, and night after night, it will rain. This constant rain will result in tremendous flooding such as the people have never seen before! The voice warned that in order for the K'ómoks people to save themselves, they must work hard to prepare for this time. If they are willing to do as the voice advises, the people will remain safe in their own land.

Gye gya janook, Chief of the K'ómoks, thought about what the old man had told him. This was a grave prediction with serious consequences if it was ignored. Finally, because First Nations people have such respect for the advice of their elders, the Chief decided he must act on this revelation.

Gye gya janook called all the people together (**POINT TO ALL OF THE PEOPLE**) and told them about *Qwoi kwa lak's* dream. He told them that their present plans must be put aside. He assigned one group of people to build more canoes (**MOVE 1-2 PEOPLE TO CANOES**), others to harvest much cedar bark (**MOVE 1 PERSON TO TREES**), and still others to pound and prepare the cedar bark for weaving (**GROUP 2 PEOPLE TOGETHER**). *Qwoi kwa lak* was to oversee the weaving of a huge cedar bark rope which must be many kilometers in length.

Other people got busy preparing food that could be kept for long periods of time. Fish must be smoked, clams and cockles had to be dried, seaweed preserved, deer hunted, and the meat cured and readied.

Everyone had a job to do, and everyone began to carry out the tasks that they were given.

Capes and hats made from woven cedar bark could easily shed rain and were a must! (**POINT TO CEDAR CAPES ON THE PEOPLE**) Young boys, taught carefully by the older men, made bailers. Many were needed! Even the children had to give up their games to help.

People also had to decide which objects would have priority in the space available and what must be left behind. Ceremonial dress and rattles are treasures that must be kept safe.

Finally, because the people had been diligent, because they listened, because they worked hard, because they had been cooperative, and because from the youngest to the oldest, each one had done their best, the K'ómoks were finally prepared. And just in time, for the rain began to fall. **(PLACE GREY CLOUDS IN THE SKY)**

A group of the strongest and wisest young men were sent to make the trek to the top of the glacier that rose above the valley. **(CONNECT A CEDAR ROPE FROM THE VILLAGE TO THE GLACIER)** They were to use their judgement as to the ideal location for the cedar rope to be attached. Choosing the right place was crucial, because the very future of their families and loved ones depended on the correct choice.

It rained, and it rained, day after day, and night after night. Before long the river began to flood and the people had to get into their canoes **(PLACE OTHER 2 CANOES IN WATER, AND PLACE 2 PEOPLE IN EACH CANOE)** and attach the canoes to the great cedar rope. Soon the water rose up over the totem poles and the people had to watch as many of their wonderful possessions, such as bent wood cedar boxes, floated by. There was just not enough room in the canoes for all these things.

The trees in the valley, and then even on the mountain side, became covered as the water rose higher and higher. **SHOW THE CANOES RISING OVER THE TREES.** But the rain continued to pour down and the people became more and more afraid. The canoes required constant bailing and the children were very afraid and unhappy as they could no longer run on the green grass or play on the beaches. The world became one of water and sky, a very dismal sky. **REMOVE ALL OF THE VILLAGE PIECES.** Daylight and darkness came in each their turn, but the rain continued relentlessly.

Each person asked the other what will happen when the flood waters rise to where our young men have tied the rope. A great fear spread among the canoes. Eventually, the day came when the glacier was almost covered over and only the topmost part could be seen.

Gye gya janook, the chief, and *Ha ha geelth*, his medicine man, and every person in each canoe prayed. As they prayed, something they had never dreamed possible had happened.

The glacier, their glacier, that they had seen and watched from a distance for years, seemed to suddenly take on a life of its own. It began to float **LIFT OFF THE GLACIER AND MAKE IT BREECH LIKE A WHALE**. Then it broke through the surface of the flood waters in the same way a giant grey whale breeches. The water ran off the glacier and foamed around their canoes, causing a huge commotion.

At first, the people were in awe of this strange happening. And then slowly, as they began to understand what had happened, the K'ómoks people began to cry out and cheer: "The glacier is a huge white whale!" Then they began to chant, "**qʷənes** (kwun-ees), **qʷənes**, **qʷənes**!" as before their eyes, the glacier had indeed become a huge white whale. (**PLACE WHALE DESIGN ON GLACIER**)

Soon, to add to their joy, the rain began to stop. (**REMOVE GREY CLOUDS**) After weeks of constant rain, this seemed an added miracle. The people cheered again and for the first time, they slept well and comfortable in their canoes.

In the morning, the sun shone brightly. (**PLACE SUN IN SKY**) The air was fresh and sweet. Steam rose from clothing and belongings, and things began to dry. Great excitement ran from one canoe to another. People were laughing, talking, and calling back and forth. The time of sitting silently and fearfully wondering were over.

Plans began for a giant celebration when they were all safely back on the site of their own village. They knew there would be much work to do but they also knew they would be safe in their own land, K'ómoks. The air was filled with the sound of laughter, and words of praise and thankfulness.

The rain had stopped at the perfect time. Queneesh had floated almost free of the mountain, but not quite. Now as the water began to recede, Queneesh began to settle back into his former position where the people see and admire him to this very day, overlooking the whole Comox Valley.

(REMOVE CANOES AND PEOPLE. PLACE VILLAGE PIECES BACK ON THE BOARD.)

So honoured is Queneesh, that he is symbolized in paint on the front of one of the remaining bighouses of the K'ómoks. **PLACE WHITE BIGHOUSE IN VILLAGE.** Those who are truly K'ómoks are still heard to whisper to him, "*Kwee la whee gai, q^wənes, thank you, thank you!*"