

A Raven Flies South

Short Story

Written by Gord Bruyere

Gord Bruyere is Anishnabe and originally from Couchiching First Nation in northwestern Ontario. He is a writer, teacher, program/curriculum developer, and researcher. He has published a book, poetry, and journal articles that focus on Aboriginal issues in education, child welfare, traditional Anishnabe family beliefs, and antiracism. He currently lives in Lakefield, Ontario.



Tips

tobacco: a traditional medicine that is offered as a gift to the earth or elder

kookum: grandma [in the Oji-Cree or Cree languages]; In this story, Raven calls his grandma "Kooks" which is short for *kookum*.

Before

As you get older, do you find you have more responsibility? What kinds of responsibilities do you have? How do you feel about these responsibilities?

During

As you read this story, think about questions that you would like to ask the author.

A raven flies south across the face of the full November moon. Colony Farm is still purple before dawn but the frost on the brown grasses and bare trees is already visible. Above them, the sky is shifting layers from the black horizon of the Coquitlam hills, through the mix of magentas where the moon lies, to the upper blue that assures the return of the sun. The raven circles back. Its dipped wing touches the mountains far away. Snow will soon find its way down to the valleys. A white sheen across the abandoned farmland sliced by a winter-shallow river promises that.

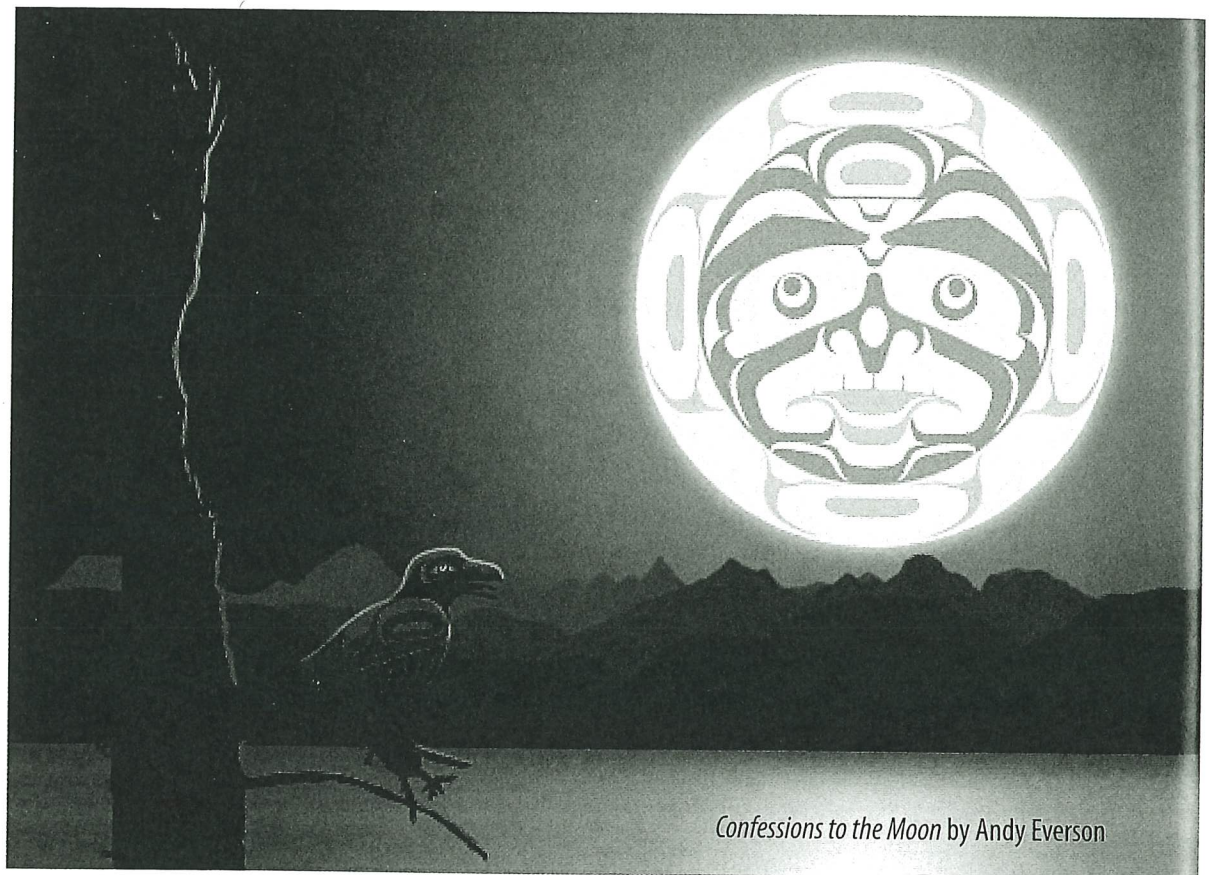
His name is Raven too. He is one of those children who wakes without being told. In fact, he is usually up before anyone else in the house. Like his namesake, the morning thrills him. It is special to be the only one awake. He cautiously pours cereal and milk in hopes it won't give him away, tiptoes to avoid the squeaky spots on the tiled floor, and slips outside. Raven, the boy, always feels a bit rushed

and tense, but only because he wants to hold onto the feeling that comes from being the only one around. It feels like the world belongs to him.

The birds are still hidden in the trees, except for that raven. Their sleepy voices are soft as if trying to protect his alone time. They will have other voices to feed, just like he will soon. He will have to go back inside soon. He sighs and pauses, then takes a deep breath and begins to walk. The frozen grasses down to the river look like dead spider legs, only white. Grandma says, "There are people like us who believe spider was the first woman." "Mom is the first woman to me," Raven smiles to himself, "and Kooks is next." Sometimes it's the other way around.

He sighs again and turns back down the hill. It is already brighter. The sun now touches the mountains and turns the peaks pink. The moon has bedtime soon. The frost is turning into mist following the river and swimming across the valley like a water snake or a salmon in the shallows.

He picks his way down to the river. He likes to leave no trail if he can. He hops and big-steps from a bunch of grass to a rock to a patch of bare ground. He has to do it fast so it is harder to do. Sometimes he pretends he is being chased by spies. The frost has already moistened on these spots and hides his trail. Today is even better because



Confessions to the Moon by Andy Everson

he can step onto frozen puddles and hear the crunch and crash. It leaves a print and the proof of muddy water, but he likes the sound. He must remember to clean his boots off before he goes back inside.

His path leads to the edge of the slow-moving river. It is sleepy too and that makes him feel more awake than the river, at least for a little while. That makes him feel strong. He balls his fists in front of his belly and tenses his muscles. He knows his arms are skinny and he is being crazy, and he laughs. He remembers why he is here.

Grandma said, "You have to approach these times like a warrior with serious intent." He had nodded at the time but didn't really understand. He doesn't like fighting and the only tent he had was the saggy orange pup tent rotting in the backyard. That doesn't make any sense. He knows the word *serious* though. He stands there and remembers what she had told him: "Our people used to begin every day like this and it's what made us strong." Not like these days. He wants to be strong and his arms aren't very big at all, not like those wrestlers his uncles watch, so he thinks it's a good idea to do what the old lady said.

"We put an offering in the water and pray, and we don't pray like Christians either," she said.

His Mom was a Christian and what's wrong with that, he wonders. Maybe that had something to do with why she was sad all the time. Oh yeah, Grandma. Our people don't ask for things and we are never afraid when we pray. All we do is be thankful. "Put tobacco in the water, my boy," the old woman said, "and with all your heart say thank you. If you do it right, the tobacco will warm in your hand and the water will lap at your feet." He didn't believe her about that at first, but she is right. He isn't sure if using cereal is as good as tobacco but he didn't want to steal any of Mom's cigarettes. He takes the handful of cereal out of his pocket, extends his arm out over the water and closes his eyes. Sometimes it is hard to make the feeling come. Sometimes the feeling in his stomach is too strong. Not today. Today it is easy and, with closed eyes, and with skinny arm held out, he slowly sprinkles crushed Cheerios into the Coquitlam River.

Raven, the boy, looks around. Ooh, it's like I'm inside that snake or salmon made of this mist, he thinks. "You are a salmon too because you are a twin," his grandma had told him. His brother was gone now. Mom said Jesus took him home. "No, my little man," Kooks said. He calls his grandma Kooks when he talks to her because she likes that. "Jesus didn't have that power," she said. "He was a good man and you could learn from how he lived. But we have always known that Creator makes everything including death." A third sigh.

Jesus was a fisherman. Kooks made Mom laugh when she said that was the only thing Dad and Jesus had in common. The men who fish would be up early like him.

"A good man gets up before the sun," Kooks said. Raven doesn't know what time Dad gets up. The river wanders away to go find out for him.

It's time to go back inside. He will line up the cereal boxes, place a bowl and spoon on each side of the table so those brats won't fight, take out the milk again, and go wake everyone up. He has to get the school clothes out and get lunches. He has to find the key on a shoelace that Dolly was twirling around last night and remember to put it around his neck to keep safe. He can't get mad at them because it will only get everyone upset. He has to be kind and grown up. There is a lot to remember and Raven starts to get that feeling in his stomach again.

"Only until Mom gets better," Kooks said. The sun is up now. The moon is asleep. Now where did that raven go?

One last sigh and he turns to open the door.

What Inspired Me to Write This Selection

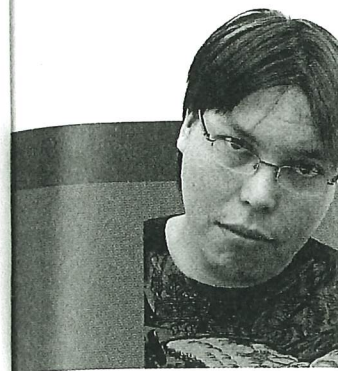
"I woke before dawn and witnessed what I wrote as the first line of the story. I caught the story through my window and held it long enough to write it down pretty much as it appears in this anthology. Or it caught me. Either way, I'm grateful to share it and so is Raven."

After

- 1. Understanding Form and Style** How does the author use imagery to convey Raven's love for his surroundings?
- 2. Reading for Meaning** What evidence can you find in the story about the emotional state of Raven's mother? How does this affect Raven?
- 3. Reading for Meaning** Why do you think Raven performs the ceremony by the river?
- 4. Critical Literacy** Why do you think the mother's voice is not heard in this story?
- 5. Student Voice** Are there any similarities between you and the character in the story? Explain.
- 6. Metacognition** What strategies did you use to help you understand the story?

Beyond

Reading for Meaning Draw the outline of a head. Inside the head, draw any symbols, words, or images that are in Raven's mind in this story. Explain your drawing orally or in writing.



Before

Reflect on the title and the themes, issues, and characters you believe will be present in this selection.

During

As you read the personal account, note the key challenges that the author faced in the journey from childhood to adulthood. Use a graphic organizer to record these challenges.

Challenges

