

The Visiting Moon

Returns and reminders



Once there was a young chief. He had many very fine black and white cattle. He kept them in a beautiful green pasture near to his village.

Every morning he would go out to the green pasture and his cows would give him wonderful pure milk, warm, frothing, wonderful in its goodness and strength.

One morning, to his great surprise, the cows had no milk – there was no milk for him. The same thing happened the next morning. And again the next morning, and the next. He resolved that he would hide in a thicket close to the pasture, and watch what happened.

This he did. In the middle of the night the sky above him opened, and a rope came snaking down to the ground. Then climbing down the rope came many beautiful young women. Each carried a calabash, and each filled her calabash with milk from his cows, pure and very white, and full of goodness and strength. He watched in amazement. When they had filled their calabashes with milk, the young women went back to the rope and returned to the sky, and they let no drop of milk fall.

One young woman was slightly slower than the others. The young chief sprang forward, and ran across the green pasture. He caught hold of her. 'Please, please stay with me,' he pleaded. 'Be my wife, live with me for ever.'

'I will come down from heaven and live with you,' replied the young woman, 'on two conditions.'

'Yes,' said the young chief, 'what are the two conditions?'

'First, that I may bring with me a very special woven basket that I have.'

'Yes, of course. And what is the second condition?'

'The second condition is that you will not lift the lid of the basket and look inside, until I tell you that you may.'

'Very well,' said the young chief. The young woman lived with him as his wife for many years. The beautiful woven basket stood at the door of their hut and they passed it every day when they went in or out. The young chief never lifted the cover.

One day his wife was away from the village in the fields, and the young chief was feeling that day very lonely and depressed, very unsure of himself. He noticed the beautiful woven basket at the door of the hut. Why shouldn't I lift the cover and look inside, he wondered.

He knelt down and lifted the cover of the basket. He looked inside. The basket was empty. He replaced the cover.

Towards the end of the day his wife returned. She had been tending the cattle in the green pasture. 'What have you done today?' she asked.

'Nothing', he said, 'except...'

'Yes?'

'I opened your beautiful woven basket and looked inside.'

Her eyes filled with tears. 'And what did you see?'

'Nothing,' he replied, 'nothing. The basket was empty.'

The young woman knelt down and lifted the cover from the basket, and looked inside. Her eyes were brimming with tears.

'No,' she said, 'the basket was not, and is not, empty. I keep the treasures of the sky in here – the stars which sparkle, the sun which rises and warms and dances, and the moon, which in the dark is an ever returning promise of light. One day you would have seen them, if you had waited. But now I must go. I must return to my home in the sky.'

And she left him, taking her basket with her. He wept. He wept with sadness that he had lost her, and that he would never see her again. He wept also with gladness – gladness that he had known her. And gladness that another time would surely come when he might see the treasures of the sky – the stars which sparkle, the sun which rises and warms and dances, and the moon, which in the dark is an ever returning promise of light.

Source: Traditional Zulu story. This version is from *Inside Stories: wisdom and hope for changing worlds* by Angela Wood and Robin Richardson, Trentham Books, 1992

The picture at the start is by the London-based artist Simone Russell, 2020.

