

Long ago, as it still is today, it was the custom for a boy who reached a certain age to go into the forest and wait for a dream. He would build a small lodge and go without food for many days in the hope he would be visited by some animal or spirit of the forest that would take pity on him and give guidance and power. There was a boy named Opichi who reached that age. Opichi's father was very respected in the village and he was determined that his son would be given a dream of such power that no one else could compare with him.

So eager was the father for his son to get the power that he insisted the boy go on his dream fast before the last snow left the ground, even though most boys would wait until the time when the ground was warm and the leaves returned to the trees. "My son is strong," said the father. "He will go now. He will gain greater strength from the cold." Opichi was a boy who always wished to please his parents and so he did as his father said. They went together into the forest and the father selected a spot on top of a small hill. There Opichi made a small lean-to of saplings, covering it with hemlock boughs. He sat beneath it on the bare ground with a thin piece of deerskin wrapped about his shoulders. "I will return each day at dawn," the father said. "You will tell me then what you have seen."

That night the north wind, the icy breath of the Great Bear, blew cold. Opichi's mother was concerned, but the father did not worry. "My son is strong," he said. "This cold wind will make his vision a better one." When the morning came, he went to the lean-to and shook the poles. "My son," he said, "tell me what you have seen." Opichi crawled out and looked up at his father. "Father," the boy said, "a deer came to the lodge and spoke to me." "That is good," said the father. "But you must continue to fast. Surely a greater vision will come to you." "I will continue to watch and wait," Opichi said. Opichi's father left his son and went back to his lodge. That night light snow fell. "I'm worried about our son," said Opichi's mother.

"Do not worry," said the father. "The snow will only make whatever dream comes to him more powerful." When morning came, the father went into the forest again, climbed the hill and shook the poles, calling his son out. "Father," Opichi said as he emerged, shaking from the cold, "last night a beaver came to me. It taught me a song." "That is good," said the father. "You are doing well. You will gain even more power if you stay longer." "I will watch and wait," said the boy. So it went for four more days. Each morning his father asked Opichi what he had seen. Each time the boy told of his experiences from the night before. Now hawk and wolf, bear and eagle had visited the boy. Each day Opichi looked thinner and weaker, but he agreed to stay and wait for an ever-greater vision to please his father.

At last, on the morning of the seventh day, Opichi's mother spoke to her husband. "Our son has waited long enough in the forest. I will go with you this morning and we will bring him home." Opichi's mother and father went together into the forest. The gentle breath of the Fawn, the warm south wind of spring, had blown during the night and all the snow had melted away. As they climbed the hill, they heard a birdsong coming from above them. It was a song they had never heard before. It sounded almost like the name of their son. Opi chi chi. Opi chi chi. When they reached the lodge, Opichi's father shook the poles. "My son," he said, "it is time to end your fast. It is time to come home." There was no answer. Opichi's mother and father bent down to look into the small lean-to of hemlock boughs and saplings.

As they did so, a bird came flying out. It was gray and black with a red chest. Opi chi chi. Opi chi chi. So it sang as it perched on a branch above them. Then it spoke. "My parents," said the bird, "you see me as I am now. The one who was your son is gone. You sent him out too early and asked him to wait for power too long. Now I will return each spring when the gentle breath of the Fawn comes to our land. My song will let people know it is the time for a boy to go on his dream fast. But your words must help to remind his parents not to make their son stay out too long." Then, singing that song which was the name of their son, the robin flew off into the forest.