

## Fire Woman and Sky Man

There once was a woman who lived in the woods with her community. As she came of age, it was time for her to learn to make fire. She took to it eagerly and very well. Soon, she became known as Fire Woman, because she was so good at starting fires. Fire Woman was proud of her gift and happily accepted the appreciation others showed her for her abilities. However, she felt it took a lot of work to keep the fires burning. Fire Woman had an axe she used to chop branches and make logs. This was the part she liked the least about making fires. The wood was heavy to carry and the splinters hurt her hands. She complained to the sky and asked for help.

However, instead of the help she wanted, soon her fires went out even earlier than before. The wood became scarcer and she had to venture out farther and farther afield to find it, since the community forbade cutting down or damaging living trees. One day, she ventured out near sundown with her axe, deep into the forest. There was no wood to be found anywhere on the forest floor. Fire Woman went deeper into the woods, farther than she'd ever gone before. Soon, she became lost. She felt very cold. The sun went down. It was dark and Fire Woman was afraid.

Just up ahead was a clearing. Fire Woman thought to herself, "What a good spot to make a fire." However, there were only living trees around her. She decided to cut off just a few branches from them. Surely the trees could spare them and would understand. Fire Woman swung her axe at a tree with a nice inviting branch. The axe, however, came apart in her hands.

Overcome with despair, Fire Woman sank to her knees on the ground and cried.

Then, just up ahead, she saw an old man with a walking staff. The staff was made of gnarled old wood, highly polished. He stopped in front of her and leaned on it, nodding his head. Fire Woman wiped her tears and stood up. "Grandfather, please hear me," she said. "My name is Fire Woman and I'm lost and cold. Can you help me?"

The old man spoke: "My name is Sky Man. You are here because you misused your gift. Instead of thanking the trees for giving you warmth and helping you cook your food, you complained and wanted me to help you make your life easier. That's why the wood in your fire refused to burn for long, and the branches on the ground hid from you so you had to walk farther to find them. Now your axe is broken because you threatened a living tree. This is forbidden."

Fire Woman hung her head in shame. "Please forgive me, Sky Man. What can I do now?"

Sky Man shifted his weight on his staff. The staff grew and thickened and sprouted branches of dry wood in different sizes. He broke them off and gave them to her. "You've walked far enough now. Take these and make your fire. Let it burn all night and be careful not to let it go out. Guard it against the wind and rain, which will come

later. If your fire still burns by morning, you can go home and tell your people what you learned. If not, you will wander these woods for seven years.” After speaking these words, Sky Man became Crow, and flew up toward the stars.

Fire Woman knelt down to make the fire. Soon, however, the wind began to blow, harder and harder. Fire Woman looked around and quickly started to gather rocks to make a palisade to guard the flames. The rocks were embedded deep in the ground and were hard to pull out. The fire was almost out, with only one branch burning. Fire Woman closed her eyes and said: “Thank you, rock, for sheltering my flame.” As if by magic, the rocks came out of the ground with ease. The fire was saved.

Then, the rain started to fall. Fire Woman looked all around, but could not find anything to protect the fire. Soon, only a tiny twig remained. Though she was shivering with cold, Fire Woman removed her deerskin dress and put it over the fire like a tarp, leaving an opening at an angle against the rain so the flames could still burn. The fire gathered strength again. She stayed close to it and felt warmer.

Dawn broke. Fire Woman saw the fire was still lit. She breathed a great sigh of relief and thanked Sky Man, the trees, and the animals for all their help. Then, she went back to her community and told them what she learned. From that day on, her fires burned long and well.