

How the Rainbow Was Made

A Creation Tale from the Ojibwe Nation

retold by

S. E. Schlosser

One day when the earth was new, Nanabozho looked out the window of his house beside the wide waterfall and realized that all of the flowers in his meadow were exactly the same off-white color. How boring! He decided to make a change, so he gathered up his paints and his paintbrushes and went out to the meadow.

Nanabozho sat down in the tall grass and arranged his red and orange and yellow and green and blue and violet paint pots next to him. Then he began to paint the flowers in his meadow in many different colors. He painted the violets dark blue and the tiger lilies orange with brown dots. He made the roses red and pink and purple. He painted the pansies in every color combination he could think of. Then he painted every single daffodil bright yellow. Nanabozho hummed happily to himself as he worked in the brilliant daylight provided by Brother Sun.

Overhead, two little bluebirds were playing games with each other. The first little bluebird would chase his friend across the meadow one way. Then they would turn around and the second bluebird would chase him back the other way. Zippity-zip went the first bluebird as he raced across the sky. Zappity-zing went the second bluebird as he chased him in the brilliant sunshine.

Occasionally, Nanabozho would shade his eyes and look up...up into the endless blue sky to watch the two little birds playing. Then he went back to work, painting yellow centers in the white daisies. Above him, the two birds decided to see how fast they could dive down to the green fields below them. The first bluebird sailed down and down, and then pulled himself up sharply just before he touched the ground. As he soared passed Nanabozho, his right wing dipped into the red paint pot. When the second bluebird dove toward the grass, his left wing grazed the orange paint pot.

Nanabozho scolded the two birds, but they kept up their game, diving down toward the grass where he sat painting and then flying back up into the sky. Soon their feet and feathers were covered with paint of all colors. Finally Nanabozho stood up and waved his arms to shoo the birds away.

Reluctantly, the bluebirds flew away from Nanabozho and his paint pots, looking for another game to play. They started chasing each other again, sailing this way and that over top of the giant waterfall that stood next to Nanabozho's house. Zippity-zip, the first bluebird flew through the misty spray of the waterfall. The first bluebird left a long red paint streak against the sky. Zappity-zing, the second bluebird chased his friend through the mist, leaving an orange paint streak. Then the birds turned to go back the other way. This time, the first bluebird left a yellow paint streak and the second left a pretty blue-violet paint streak. As they raced

back and forth, the colors grew more vivid. When Brother Sun shone on the colors, they sparkled radiantly through the mist of the waterfall.

Below them, Nanabozho looked up in delight when the brilliant colors spilled over his meadow. A gorgeous arch of red and orange and yellow and green and blue and violet shimmered in the sky above the waterfall. Nanabozho smiled at the funny little bluebirds and said: "You have made a rainbow!"

Nanabozho was so pleased that he left the rainbow permanently floating above his waterfall, its colors shimmering in the sunshine and the misting water. From that day to this, whenever Brother Sun shines his light on the rain or the mist, a beautiful rainbow forms. It is a reflection of the mighty rainbow that still stands over the waterfall at Nanabozho's house.

Rainbow Crow

(Lenni Lenape Tribe)

retold by

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It was so cold. Snow fell constantly, and ice formed over all the waters. The animals had never seen snow before. At first, it was a novelty, something to play in. But the cold increased tenfold, and they began to worry. The little animals were being buried in the snow drifts and the larger animals could hardly walk because the snow was so deep. Soon, all would perish if something were not done.

"We must send a messenger to Kijiamuh Ka'ong, the Creator Who Creates By Thinking What Will Be," said Wise Owl. "We must ask him to think the world warm again so that Spirit Snow will leave us in peace."

The animals were pleased with this plan. They began to debate among themselves, trying to decide who to send up to the Creator. Wise Owl could not see well during the daylight, so he could not go. Coyote was easily distracted and like playing tricks, so he could not be trusted. Turtle was steady and stable, but he crawled too slowly. Finally, Rainbow Crow, the most beautiful of all the birds with shimmering feathers of rainbow hues and an enchanting singing voice, was chosen to go to Kijiamuh Ka'ong.

It was an arduous journey, three days up and up into the heavens, passed the trees and clouds, beyond the sun and the moon, and even above all the stars. He was buffeted by winds and had no place to rest, but he carried bravely on until he reached Heaven. When Rainbow Crow reached the Holy Place, he called out to the Creator, but received no answer. The Creator was too busy thinking up what would be to notice even the most beautiful of birds. So Rainbow Crow began to sing his most beautiful song.

The Creator was drawn from his thoughts by the lovely sound, and came to see which bird was making it. He greeted Rainbow Crow kindly and asked what gift he could give the noble bird in exchange for his song.

Rainbow Crow asked the Creator to un-think the snow, so that the animals of Earth would not be buried and freeze to death. But the Creator told Rainbow Crow that the snow and the ice had spirits of their own and could not be destroyed.

"What shall we do then?" asked the Rainbow Crow. "We will all freeze or smother under the snow."

"You will not freeze," the Creator reassured him, "For I will think of Fire, something that will warm all creatures during the cold times."

The Creator stuck a stick into the blazing hot sun. The end blazed with a bright, glowing fire which burned brightly and gave off heat. "This is Fire," he told Rainbow Crow, handing him the cool end of the stick. "You must hurry to Earth as fast as you can fly before the stick burns up."

Rainbow Crow nodded his thanks to the Creator and flew as fast as he could go. It was a three-day trip to Heaven, and he was worried that the Fire would burn out before he reached the Earth. The stick was large and heavy, but the fire kept Rainbow Crow warm as he descended from Heaven down to the bright path of the stars. Then the Fire grew hot as it came closer to Rainbow Crow's feathers. As he flew passed the Sun, his tail caught on fire, turning the shimmering beautiful feathers black. By the time he flew passed the Moon, his whole body was black with soot from the hot Fire. When he plunged into the Sky and flew through the clouds, the smoke got into his throat, strangling his beautiful singing voice.

By the time Rainbow Crow landed among the freezing-cold animals of Earth, he was black as tar and could only Caw instead of sing. He delivered the fire to the animals, and they melted the snow and warmed themselves, rescuing the littlest animals from the snow drifts where they lay buried.

It was a time of rejoicing, for Tindeh - Fire - had come to Earth. But Rainbow Crow sat apart, saddened by his dull, ugly feathers and his rasping voice. Then he felt the touch of wind on his face. He looked up and saw the Creator Who Creates By Thinking What Will Be walking toward him.

"Do not be sad, Rainbow Crow," the Creator said. "All animals will honor you for the sacrifice you made for them. And when the people come, they will not hunt you, for I have made your flesh taste of smoke so that it is no good to eat and your black feathers and hoarse voice will prevent man from putting you into a cage to sing for him. You will be free."

Then the Creator pointed to Rainbow Crow's black feathers. Before his eyes, Rainbow Crow saw the dull feathers become shiny and inside each one, he could see all the colors of the rainbow. "This will remind everyone who sees you of the service you have been to your people," he said, "and the sacrifice you made that saved them all."

And so shall it ever be.