

Ayashe and the Red Crow

Every day Ayashe followed the soft pine needle path to the place where Mother River met the jagged rocks and here, she would collect water. The journey was long and tiring but she never complained about her sore feet or her aching arms for she longed to be in the forest and lingered there as long as she could. The earthy green scent of the trees and the tiny woodland flowers brought peace to her heart. Their gentle growing and fading reminded her that the Creator gave all living things their own special time, with a new beginning and finally an end.

Ayashe's birth mother would chide her saying, 'You will never get a husband if you spend so much time in the forest. You are nearly a woman now with a woman's work to do. Soon you must make your own way in the world.' Ayashe did not listen though, for she was happy to be far away from the tribe with their folded arms and their hardened stares. There was no love for her among the people. The other girls were cruel and teased her for her stubby nose and straw-like hair, calling her 'as ugly as an eel.' The young men made fun of her blushing, clumsy ways and laughed as she ran off to hide her tears. The forest animals were Ayashe's only friends – the wily masked one who showed her how to steal with his dark little hands and the tiny restless striped one who taught her how to hide nuts away for the winter. Most of all, she treasured her friendship with the beautiful red crow and looked forward each day to meeting him down by the shores of Mother River.

The red crow would wait near a rushing waterfall where Mother River tumbled down the rocks and spread her silver fingers into many streams. The crow could not speak her native tongue of course, but would caw softly as he listened to Ayashe's sing-song voice telling tales of the beautiful world around them. She told the crow about the wood sprites and tree spirits who lived deep in the forest and of the mischievous water imps who hid their faces among the reeds on the riverbanks. She spoke about the animals that lived upstream roving deep into the forest where humans rarely trod. The bird would listen carefully with his head tilted to one side, watching her with a yellow eye.

'You are so lovely,' she told the red crow one spring day. 'You are as gorgeous as I am plain. I'm so glad you are my friend.' When Ayashe filled her pitcher and reluctantly turned back towards the village, the red crow rose into the air

and tipped his wings, flying high up over the waterfall so that she could see the light shimmering on his gorgeous ruby feathers.

‘How wonderful he is’ she sighed to herself, ‘If he had paws instead of wings, he could be my constant companion.’ Later that week when Ayashe arrived at their meeting place, the red crow was waiting as usual. He had brought her a gift, a bright copper bangle, which he dropped at her feet with a solemn bow. She picked it up and slipped it on her wrist.

‘I thank you red crow, for this is surely a sign that we are best friends. If you had hooves instead of feathers, I could ride you to the western shores and I would never go back to the village again.’ Ayashe bent down to stroke the crow’s glistening back and he did not flinch at her touch.

When Ayashe next saw the red crow, he had brought her another offering. It was a piece of the purest purple amethyst that sparkled under the rainbow torrent’s spray, reflecting the light into a myriad of patterns. She put the amethyst into a little buckskin bag she kept in her pocket for safe keeping.

‘I thank you red crow, for this is a sign that we are kindred spirits. Your devotion has made me the richest girl in the land.’ A week later, the red crow returned again to Ayashe, this time with a tiny glinting object that flashed warmly in the sun as he placed it gently on her outstretched hand with his beak. Ayashe stared in wonder. It was a ring depicting two tiny birds intertwined, wrought of the finest gold. Ayashe put the ring on her marriage finger and bent down to kiss the crow on his crimson head. He did not shy away.

‘How thoughtful you are,’ she told him. If you had legs instead of talons, I should love you forever with all my heart.’ Mother River had been watching Ayashe and the red crow and she did not like what she saw. From her long years of watching all nature’s creatures, Mother River knew that no good ever came from a courtship such as this. One morning she spoke to Ayashe.

‘Red crow is not a man. The wolf does not live with the hare. The owl does not live with the mouse. You say you would love him if he was a man, but you cannot have your heart’s desire. Give him up and let him be free.’ But Ayashe would not

listen for she loved the red crow more than her own kind. Instead, she pined for what she could not have, until she grew thin and plainer still.

The summer came and brought with it a crackling, humming heat and soon, there followed a desperate drought. Ayashe had not seen the red crow for several days and her heart ached with worry that he might be ill. Mother River's water dwindled from a raging torrent to a trickle and the animals and birds began to leave the forest rather than die of thirst. Mother River spoke again to Ayashe.

'The animals are thirsty. The water comes too slowly from upstream but I know not why. The forest will wither without water. Ayashe, if you love us, you must help before we all perish.'

'Yes, Mother River, I will help for the forest is my home and its creatures are my kin.'

'Take care my daughter, and do not put your trust in strangers.' With that Mother River flowed into the east and spoke no more. Soon after Ayashe saw the red crow again by the waterfall and her heart rejoiced. She told him what Mother River had asked of her.

'I feel this burden most keenly, my love. What shall I do?' The red crow said nothing but nestled his head on her shoulder in consolation, his soft feathers brushing her face. Instead of returning to the village that afternoon, Ayashe walked upstream with the red crow flying overhead. They travelled many miles over rocky ground and on the first night, exhausted, Ayashe slept on Mother River's shores only to awake at the first rosy blush of day. A neat mound of river mud had been left by her feet and overhead the red crow cawed aloud.

'What does this mean, red crow?' she asked, but he could say nothing. She walked all day up craggy hills on dusty tracks and by nightfall, fell into a restless slumber beside the river once more. When she woke in the glowing light of dawn, she found that a wad of thick brown fur had been placed in her hand, but still she could not understand what the red crow was trying to tell her.

'What have you seen from up high my love? Show me if you can.' But the red crow just shook his scarlet feathers and spread his wings in flight. They travelled on

tirelessly together and Ayashe spent a third night sleeping fitfully beside the silvery river's shore. When the new day arrived Ayashe found some gnawed sticks of cedar on the ground and suddenly she understood.

'Aah. Now I see!' Ayashe set off upstream again and did not stop once although her lungs were bursting and her legs were burning with pain. Finally, she reached the highest point where the water once flowed freely. As a fourth night fell, she settled down behind some reeds and waited while the crow roosted on the branches above her head. The stars were twinkling red and white in the balmy summer sky when the first large tawny creature appeared and shook the moisture from its fur. A second arrived, then several more. They waddled along the bank, their paddle tails dragging behind them making strange scratching noises on the bone-dry ground.

'Flat tails!' Ayashe saw the creatures stop at a huge mound of mud, which she guessed must be their lodge. The sound of their squeaking little kits came from inside, hungry for their supper. Even in the gloom, Ayashe could see that most of the trees around her had been felled and a huge dam had been built across the water from bank to bank. She knew better than to try to reason with the flat tails, to persuade them to stop building their dam, for their stubbornness was legendary even among humankind. Instead, she waited for daylight and hoped that with it would come some inspiration. But when the golden dawn arrived Ayashe still could not think of a plan. The red crow had landed beside her and bowed his head in greeting.

Ayashe spoke gently to him. 'Good day red crow. How will I free Mother River's water so it flows once more? Do you have any clever ideas?' The bird could not answer of course so they paused awhile in silence. All at once Ayashe heard a rustling sound coming from the water reeds beside her. In the half light a tiny wood sprite appeared. He had a moss green face and long pale ears and was no more than a few inches high. When he spoke, his voice was thin and sharp as needles.

'I can help you with your quest. I'll tell you how to help Mother River, but what will you give me in return?' Ayashe thought for a moment and then reluctantly slid the copper bangle from her wrist, handing it to the wood sprite. She was very sad to part with it, but the sprite was highly delighted, squealing and spinning the bangle around his waist in glee.

Eventually he said, 'You need to set a fire next to the flat tails' lodge. The smoke will make them run away and then you can break the dam.'

'But I have no fire.'

'Well, that's not my fault,' said the sprite snappily. 'I didn't say I *had* some fire, only that you needed it.' With that the sprite disappeared into the water reeds and Ayashe felt angry and foolish. She had been tricked into giving away one of the crow's special gifts and began to give chase when a small cloaked figure, all in chestnut brown appeared before her. It was a tree spirit.

'I overheard your conversation with that greedy wood sprite. You need fire. I can give you fire. What can you give me?' Ayashe felt the lump of amethyst in its buckskin bag and she knew she must part with it. She took the bag from her pocket and held it out to the tree spirit. In a flash, the spirit had snatched it from her hand and began examining the contents. Finally, he spoke.

'Your fire is in that tree over there.' The spirit pointed with a cloaked arm at some orange flames licking the upper boughs of a tall fir tree. Ayashe was dismayed.

'How can I reach the fire? It is too high for me to catch it.'

'You didn't say you needed wings as well,' the spirit sounded surprised. You should have been more specific.' With that he laughed wildly and clambered up a birch tree until the forest canopy hid him from Ayashe's view.

'That tree spirit knows I have no wings' she cried bitterly, 'how can he be so unkind? But then suddenly she had a wonderful idea.

She called out, 'Red crow! Where are you?' For a few moments there was silence and then she heard a rush of wings as the crow swooped low over her head. 'Please red crow, can you catch the fire in the top of that tree? she begged. 'If you bring the fire, the smoke will drive the flat tails away and the water will be free.' Within a few seconds, the red crow had plucked a twig from the ground and soared upwards towards the fire. Just as he reached the summit, a strong gust of wind caught the flame and the tree groaned and cracked. Sparks flew everywhere and soon all of the trees around were ablaze. As Ayashe watched, the crow disappeared into the smoke and flames.

'My love!' She wailed in anguish. 'I'm sorry I sent you into the fire. Don't leave me all alone.' Just at her moment of deepest despair, she caught sight of the crow again, flying lower and lower and then he dropped the burning twig which set the flat tails' lodge alight. Soon the creatures were running in all directions and Ayashe took her chance to wade into the sluggish water to shift the fallen trees. Quickly she discovered that the logs were too big and heavy to move.

'I cannot give up my quest now' Ayashe cried aloud, 'Mother River needs her water to flow again and she has put her trust in me.' Just then, a wispy white water imp appeared, swimming in little circles and bobbing around playfully.

'I hear from that wily tree spirit that you need to clear the dam. I can help you, but what can you give me in return?' With great sadness Ayashe removed the golden ring from her marriage finger and gave it to the water imp.

'I am still the richest girl in the land for I have the love of the red crow,' thought Ayashe as she watched the imp tucking the ring into a little blue sack on its back. In an instant, the imp was waving its hands over the water in widening circles until a thousand little whirlpools appeared. The dam loosened and burst and then hundreds of logs were carried down the river with the powerful surge of water that had been released. Ayashe was swept along with the torrent, bumping and splashing, all the way down the hill until eventually she was back at the waterfall where she first met the red crow. She dragged herself onto the river bank gasping and bruised. The crow alighted beside her and now Ayashe could see he looked quite different. His feathers were no longer a beautiful crimson colour, but had been singed completely black from the fire in the trees.

'My beautiful bird! What have I done?' The bird rested his head in her lap as if to comfort her. They sat for a long while consoling each other and then Mother River again spoke to Ayashe.

'You have both saved the forest and its animals. Crow – I cannot restore your crimson feathers as the fire has stolen their colour to keep for its own. From now on you will always be black as the night but I will give you some rainbow mist to brighten your wings on a summer's day. I shall also make sure that you will be known from

this day as the wisest and cleverest bird in the land.’ The crow bowed his head solemnly in gratitude for this rare honour.

‘Ayashe, you have been a faithful friend to the forest and did my bidding without question. In return I will grant you one wish. What do you desire?’

Ayashe did not hesitate. ‘I would like to spend my life with the crow.’

Mother River warned. ‘I have told you that crow is not a man. To ask him to be forever earthbound would be the greatest cruelty you could inflict.’

Ayashe pleaded. ‘Is there no other way? I will die of a broken heart if we cannot be together as one.’

Mother River thought for a while and then said ‘There is something I can do, but once it is done, it cannot be undone.’

‘Then do it please, Mother River, for I love the crow with all my heart.’

‘As you wish,’ said Mother River, ‘but you must stand beneath the waterfall for my magic to work.’ Ayashe climbed over the slippery rocks and stood in the mist of the torrent’s flow. To begin with she felt nothing and then slowly there grew a strange tingling in her hands and toes. Her fingers started to turn black and formed into elegant feathers, and instead of arms she now had a pair of beautiful iridescent wings. From her toes sprung sharp talons that gripped the ground and her lips had formed into a sharp, hard beak. Above her, the crow was waiting, hovering in the warm summer breeze. She flapped her new wings and leapt aloft, soaring high in blue cloudless sky to follow her beloved. From high up she spied the village, tiny and remote so far below and felt certain that she would never go back there ever again.

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