

Turkey and the Big Reed

(adapted by Brooke Bailey from Navaho Folk Tales by Franc Johnson newcomb, University of New Mexico Press, 1967.)

Once upon a time, there was a happy village on top of a hill full of people. First Man and First Woman were the ones in charge. Turkey lived with them and they kept him as a pet. He had a little pen, and First Woman gave him lots of wonderful food so that he would never be tempted to run away- seeds, nuts, pumpkins, corn and milk. Sometimes he would go hunting for fat juicy bugs as a treat. So he grew very fat and his little wings could no longer lift him up to fly, but he was very happy.

One day Turkey was wandering around the edge of the hill, outside the village, with his friend First Boy. Before long they began to hear a strange sound. “Sssss Hiss. SSSSS HISSSS”. It sounded like an angry goose, but there was no goose around. “Sssss hissss.” It sounded like Sage Hen protecting her chicks, but there was no hen around. “Ssssss hissss.” It sounded like Snake, when you get too close to his den. But there was no snake around. “SSSSS HISSSSSS!”

Suddenly they noticed that in the distance the earth was covered with long, wiggling lines of white water. “That looks just like foam on the sea..” said Turkey. And then they realized that was exactly what it was- foam on water, black, angry water, that was covering the land!

“Where can all that water be coming from?” gasped Turkey. “There’s not a cloud in the sky!”

“It’s coming from below the ground, from the world underneath,” said First Boy. “The ocean always wants to make war on the land. Run! We have to tell the village!” And First Boy sprinted away, fast as the wind, and he made it to the village first. He told everybody what was happening, and they could see the angry water themselves.

They went to First Woman to find out what to do, for she was the leader of everybody. “There is a tall mountain near here, in the west,” she said. “We have to go there. We have to go to the very top where the water cannot reach us. But first, everyone should take something useful! We don’t know if we can ever come back, and we may need to start all over again in a new place.”

Everyone went to their homes to gather the useful things First Woman had told them to bring along. During this time poor Turkey, huffing and puffing, finally made it back to the village and ran around trying to tell everybody his version of the story. But they already knew from First Boy and no one was interested in listening to him. His face was red, his feathers were all draggled and he was so out of breath he couldn’t say anything but “Obble, obble, obble!”

But still, he wanted to help. He looked around for something he could take to the mountain. In First Woman’s store room he saw long skeins of cotton, weavings, spinning tools and grindstones, but he didn’t much care about them. Then he saw them- twenty sealed stone jars, all filled with seeds. He knew right away what he would save.

He began to take a bit from each jar. White corn, blue corn, yellow corn, red corn and rainbow corn. Beans: black beans, pinto beans, white beans, red beans. Seeds: sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, squash seeds, melon seeds, gourd seeds, onion seeds. Tiny seeds: tobacco, mustard, sage, mint, and peppergrass. Each of these corns, beans and seeds he tucked under his soft feathers, so that each feather was carrying a seed.

While Turkey was busy gathering all the seeds, everybody else left and were already at the mountain. There they camped out for a few days, but the waters were rising, rising, rising. The people never thought the waters could have reached the top of this high mountain but soon water would be over their heads. First Woman knew that they would soon have to leave this world. She looked around and saw all the people arriving with all of their possessions and baskets. "That's good," she thought to herself. "Surely we have all brought just enough so that we will have everything we need to survive in our new world."

Everyone watched the waters rising and they asked First Woman, "Whatever are we going to do now?" Then one old man spoke up. "I have brought with me a bamboo seed," he said. "It is magic. Let's plant it." And so they did, and they sat up all night singing and chanting to the seed and it began to grow. It grew, and grew, and grew into a huge, hollow bamboo reed, big enough for all the people to get inside of it. So they cut a little door in the stem and that is what they did. They built ladders and platforms inside so every family could have its own room. Everyone started settling in, to be safe from the water. They were just about to shut the door.

Meanwhile, back in the village, Turkey had finally finished collecting all of the corn, beans and seeds. When he came out of the storeroom, the village was deserted. Everybody was gone and almost to the mountain but Turkey. "Oh no," he squawked, "I will never get there in time, I cannot run fast enough!"

"We will help you," said the winds, and they helped to push Turkey long towards the mountain, so that he was very fast.

Back in the reed, right before they slammed the door shut, First Woman remembered something. "But where is Turkey?" said First Woman suddenly. She peered far and saw a little hobbling shape running up the mountain towards them. "That's him all right!" she cried. "Turkey is always the last to arrive."

"Run, Turkey, RUN!" everyone cried. Because the raging waves were pulling at Turkey's tail feathers, trying to suck him in! Just in time, First Woman seized him and pulled him through the door with all her might. Wind slammed the door behind them, and all were safe.

First Woman looked around and was so happy to see all of her people safe and sound. She called each of them by name, so that each person could show everybody the precious thing they had brought along to help them in the new world.

Black Bear showed them acorns, ground nuts and berries he had saved. Spider Woman showed a long ball of silken thread with which to weave beautiful things. Owl brought herbs for medicine

and Packrat brought fruit, and so on and so on. It seemed like everyone had thought of something that would help them in their new world.

Now First Woman looked at Turkey to see what his contribution would be. But she saw no bag with him, no jar, no basket. It looked like he had not brought one thing, and she was angry with him.

“So,” she said. “You thought you would just amble on in here last of all, worrying us all sick, and not bring one thing to help in the new world? You are fat and lazy and let everyone else do all the work for you. I’m very disappointed in you. Did you really bring nothing at all?”

Turkey was so upset and so red in the face that he couldn’t even speak. So he answered her by stretching out his wings and flapping them up and down, up and down. Corn kernels showered out! White corn, red corn, blue corn, yellow corn and rainbow corn! Then he fanned out his tail feathers and beans fell out- black beans, white beans, pinto beans and red beans. They clattered all over the floor and rolled around like marbles. Then he shook the feathers on his back and his legs and big seeds rained out- sunflower seeds, squash seeds, pumpkin seeds, and melon seeds. Lastly he stretched his head and ruffled the fine, soft feathers of his neck and breast and all the tiny seeds fell went in every direction- mustard, sage, mint, barley, millet and rice. Those were the very last of the seeds, and Turkey folded up all his feathers and sadly walked away.

Absolute silence.

Everybody wondered how they possibly could have forgotten to pack the corn, the beans, and the seeds. For without these things, there would be no crops, no farming, no fields, and no harvests in the new world. That meant there would have been nothing to eat during the long cold months of winter, and everyone would have starved. So you see, Turkey’s gift was the most important of all.

Finally First Woman spoke. “I am sorry,” she said softly, “that I called you fat and lazy, Turkey. That was not fair. Turkey has brought us the very best things of all. From now on Turkey will be an honored member of our community and we will use his feathers in all of our ceremonies.”

And then, she marked all his feathers with the patterns and colors of the seeds he had collected, and that is why Turkey is so beautiful.

After that, the people climbed up the inside of the reed, walked through an opening in the sky, and entered the new world.

**Why did a flood come in the first place? I’ll give you a hint: it was all tricky coyote’s fault. But that is another tale and shall be told another time.*

Snip, snap, snout

My tale is all told out.