

Txamsem and Salmon Woman



TXAMSEM AND SALMON WOMAN

Txamsem was in a solitary mood. As sometimes happens after a disturbing experience, he wanted to be alone for a while. On a recent quest for seafood, he had tried to trick a giant crab into his cooking pot but the trick had failed. The crab's crusher claws had grabbed Txamsem and dragged him under the sea. Although Txamsem was often putting himself in danger by playing risky tricks, this time he had been deeply frightened, for Crab had almost succeeded in drowning him. Txamsem needed to keep to himself for a while and think about this terrible event.

Txamsem travelled down the river to a quiet and secluded spot. In a small clearing surrounded by tall cedars and giant spruce he built a small house. Though it took him many weeks, he burned out the middle of a cedar log, shaped and formed the wood until he had made a canoe. A sliver of beach ran the length of the clearing and made a good launch site. He then searched the forest for a straight, strong alder sapling and made a sturdy and serviceable spear. These were the things that Txamsem needed to survive.

One fine morning, with the sun just peeking over the crest of the trees, Txamsem ventured out with his spear and canoe in search of breakfast. The hungry Txamsem looked down into the blue river which reflected the cloudless sky and saw something shining and wriggling beneath the surface. "A fine salmon would make a good meal to start the day," Txamsem said to himself and he



raised his spear. However, the fish darted under the canoe and over to the other side.

Before Txamsem could locate his target again, the sky darkened and his canoe was suddenly enveloped by a cool mist. In fact, he lost all sense of direction as the fog thickened and his canoe was carried by the current of the grey river. He feared his canoe would be swept far down river and into the dark ocean. A chill of fear ran down his spine as he remembered the cold salt water and how he had almost drowned.

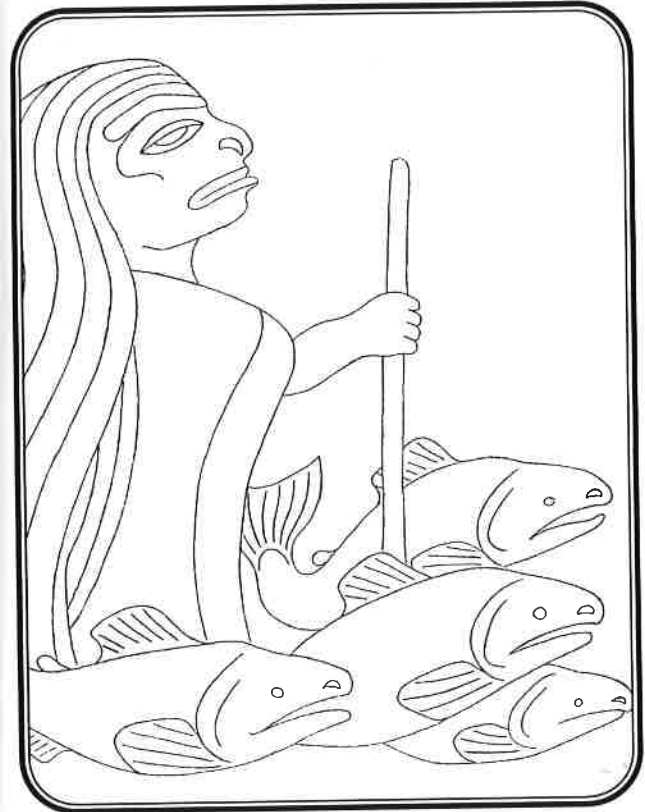
Txamsem sat for quite some time pondering his fate, when at last the sun's rays filtered through the haze. Before him, sitting in the bow of his canoe was a beautiful young woman. She sat in a halo of light and the air around her seemed iridescent with silvers, greens and blues. Not quite believing what was before his eyes, Txamsem tentatively smiled at the beautiful woman and was rewarded with a smile in return.

He immediately had a thought and blurted it out. "I want to marry you."

The woman replied, "I will go with you Giant. But take care! I am the Salmon and you must not do me any harm."

Txamsem agreed quickly to her warning and said, "I will remember, Salmon Woman and I promise never to harm you. But I will call you Bright Cloud Woman because I found you shining through the fog. Let us go to the house that I have built."

They went to the small house in the clearing by the beach and they began to live as husband and wife.

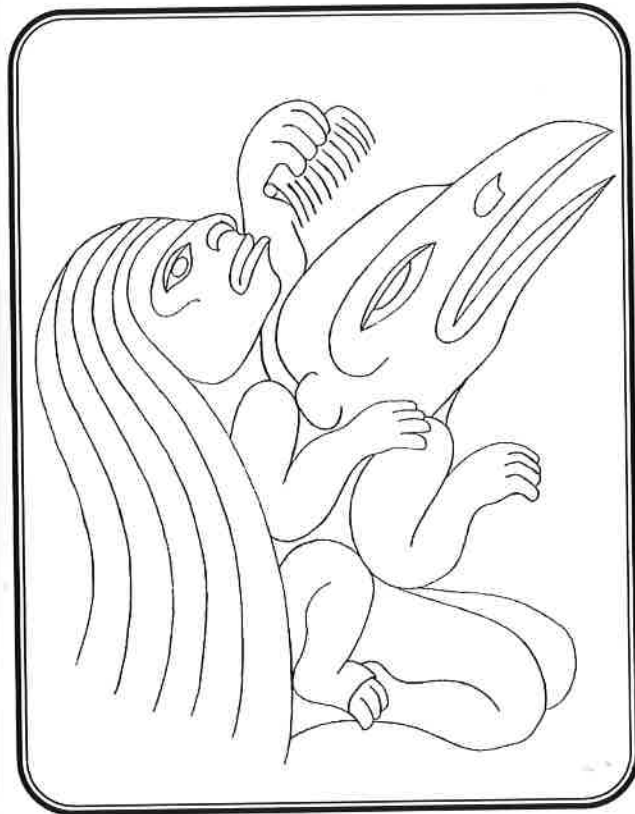


Txamsem, who had been living as a hermit, had not cared about his appearance. He had not combed his hair and it was wild and tangled. He had not cared for his skin and it was scaly, rough and dry. Bright Cloud Woman did not want to hurt Txamsem's feelings but she wanted to make him a more attractive and appealing husband.

She took her fish-bone comb and gently combed his hair until it was smooth and straight. As she combed, its colour became a glorious auburn hue. She soothed his skin with oils and gave him a fragrant bath in wild rose petals. With all this attention, Txamsem began to feel cared for and loved, and as the days passed he adored his wife more and more.

Txamsem's days were filled with happiness as he joyfully learned many things about his loving and caring new wife. She taught him many useful survival skills and these Txamsem eagerly and quickly learned. There was much knowledge and many skills that Bright Cloud Woman shared with her loving and caring new husband. But there was something he did not know or learn.

Very early on the first morning that they were together, Bright Cloud Woman had risen quietly and went down to the river. As she stepped into the chilly water, she wriggled her toes. Suddenly the river was alive with thousands of spring salmon sparkling in the early morning sunlight. Txamsem's new wife hurried back to waken her husband so he might see the miracle. Txamsem was amazed and laughed loud at this good fortune.



That day and each day thereafter, Txamsem went down to the river and speared many spring salmon. He took them to his wife who cleaned them with a sharp mussel knife.

Bright Cloud Woman instructed Txamsem and said, "Go and find some slender poles and make a drying rack." This he willingly did and soon there was a sturdy lattice of poles sitting across from the house in the little clearing by the river. Next, they found pieces of dry alder wood and built a fire under the racks. In this way, they dried and smoked the salmon, for these would be the beginning of their winter supply. It was not too early to start this activity, for salmon that have been cured well keep for a long time. A storage house was built in a shady space between the drying racks and the little house. Txamsem and Bright Cloud Woman worked hard together and soon the storage shed was full.

One bright summer morning, Bright Cloud Woman again went down to the river. This time she waded in up to her knees before she wiggled her toes. In an instant the river was full of shiny sockeye salmon. The sockeye were as plentiful as pebbles on a beach. As before, she rushed back to waken her sleeping husband and share in his delight when he saw the teeming mass of fish in the river.

Txamsem built a second storage house and again the couple set to work. Their days were filled with the routine of spearing, cleaning, smoking and preserving. Txamsem was proud of his industrious and loving wife and he was proud of himself. With the aid of his wife, he was now making an honest

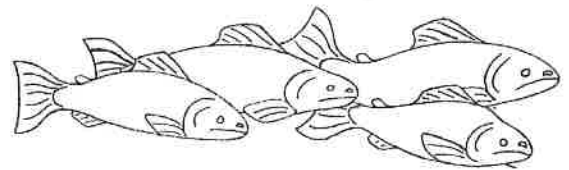
living and not depending on someone else's hard work. Too much of his time had been spent in thinking of ways to trick others out of their food so that he could eat. Despite the hard work, there was a great sense of contentment in his life which he had never experienced before. Life was indeed very good.

In the fall when the blueberries ripened, Bright Cloud Woman waded into the river once more. She went in up to her waist and she wiggled her toes.

This time the river overflowed with silver coho. They were as plentiful as the blueberries on the bushes.

Txamsem built a third storage house and it was filled with bundles of good dried salmon, until there was room for no more. The little clearing by the river had a prosperous and busy look and indeed Txamsem was now a wealthy man. He had more food than he and Bright Cloud Woman needed. This meant that he could gain other items by bartering.

Now that the fish were ready for winter, Txamsem found that he was unoccupied much of the time, and with so much idleness, he became bored and restless. One morning he left his house at a very early hour and did not return home until late in the



evening. Bright Cloud Woman had a meal prepared for him on his return but did not ask him where he had been. This happened again the next day and the next. Each day Bright Cloud Woman had a meal ready when Txamsem returned. Though she was very curious she did not ask what he had been doing.

However, on the fourth day, Txamsem returned in a rage. He stomped into the little house and turned on his wife and yelled, "What have you been up to woman? You can't keep your secret from me."

Bright Cloud Woman was frightened and replied, "I don't understand you, my dear husband."

"I know you have been planning with someone to hurt me behind my back," he snarled. "I have been gambling every day for four days. At first I was winning, but now I am losing steadily. I know you are the reason why."

Distressed and saddened, Txamsem's beautiful wife appealed, "How could I be planning with someone to harm you? No one has ever visited us here in this deserted place, nor has anyone been here the last four days."

That night Txamsem went to bed still angered by his poor luck. The day he had first met Bright Cloud Woman and the promise he had made then were forgotten and he ignored his sad wife as she cried through the darkness. Until now, Txamsem had been kind and appreciative, joyful and happy, busy and hard-working. Bright Cloud Woman could not understand the sudden change in his character and knew there was a darkness within



him that she had never before seen. His false accusations still rang in her ears as dawn streaked the sky.

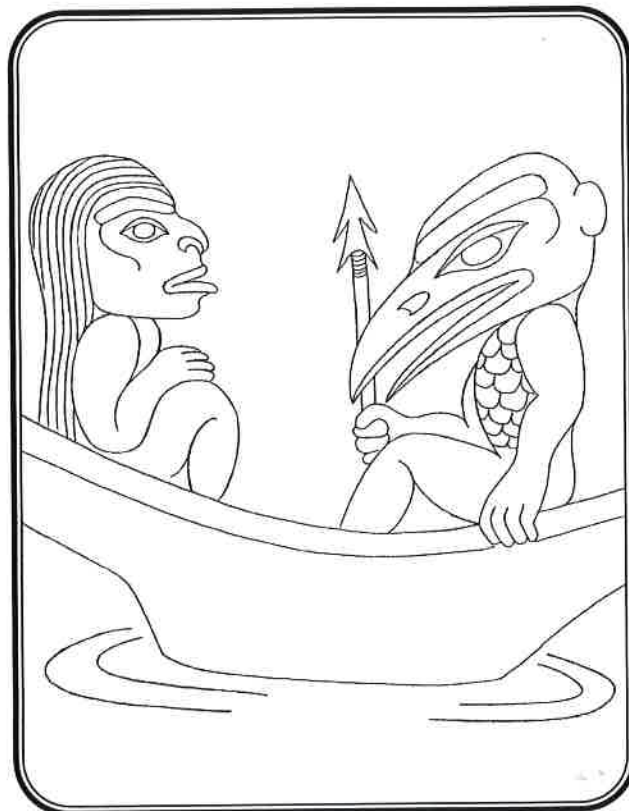
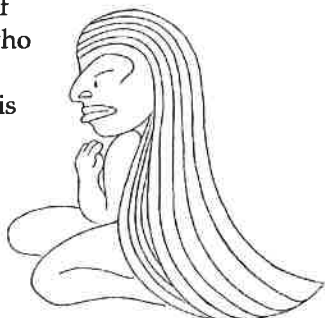
Txamsem woke and dressed. He said, "I am going for a walk."

Bright Cloud Woman took out her fish bone comb and quietly combed his hair as she did every morning. However, Txamsem was anxious to leave and he stood up suddenly. The backbone of the fish caught in a snarl of his hair. He yanked it out and threw it in the corner of the house.

"You're just like that no-good lying Bright Cloud Woman," he spat at the comb. "I'd be better off without the both of you."

At this torment, Bright Cloud Woman hung her head and cried. Then without speaking she arose and walked to the river. She dipped her bare feet in the water, turned around and whistled. Sadly she said, "Come my tribe, let us go back." All the dried salmon rose from the storage houses and became live fish once more. They flew through the air and dove into the river, swimming this time to the ocean.

The realization of what he had done and who he had insulted struck Txamsem like a blow. His beautiful hair became scorched and ugly as he remembered his promise to Salmon Woman when she first sat in the bow of his



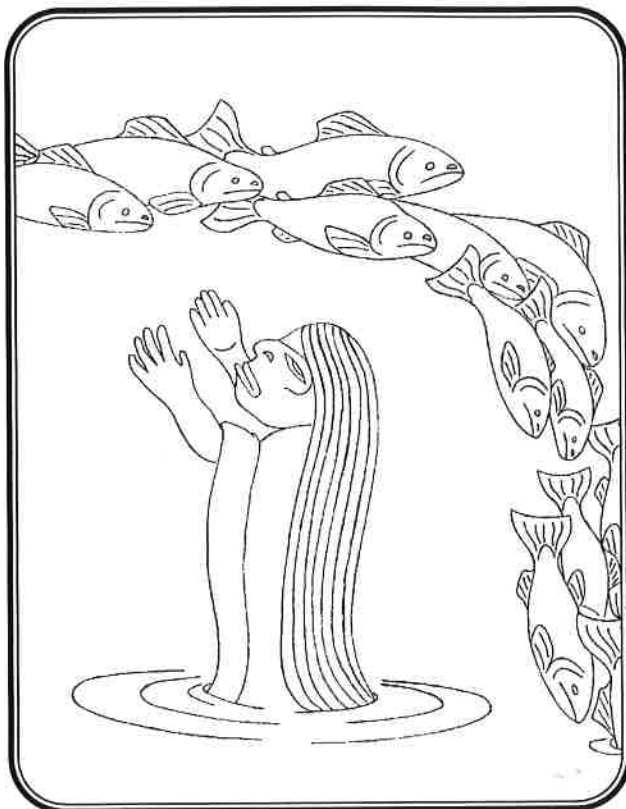
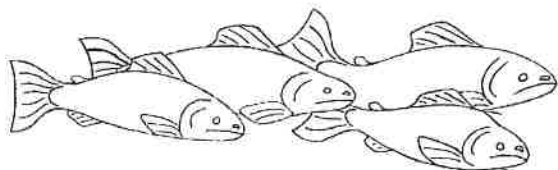
canoe. How easily he had called her Bright Cloud Woman and forgotten who she really was.

Txamsem ran after his beautiful wife. "Please don't leave me! I am sorry for what I have done. I need you, my beloved one." He desperately tried to put his arms around Bright Cloud Woman but she was like a wraith of smoke and vanished into the morning mist.

There Txamsem was, all alone. He was poor and he was wretched. His hair was scorched and he was uglier than he had ever been. He had no food and he was hungry. He had no one to comfort him. Bright Cloud Woman was gone and all the goodness and brightness that had come with her were lost. Txamsem sat on the beach and cried for all the things that had been his.

Salmon Woman was now gone from the human world. But in her wisdom, and sense of fairness, she decided that all people should not suffer because of Txamsem's wrongdoing.

Although the salmon do not stay year long in the rivers, but come with the seasons, Salmon Woman sends her children every year on their yearly upstream journey.



About the Author . . .

Marilyn Earl has experience as a classroom teacher with grades one to four. In addition, she has first hand experience in Australian classrooms as an Exchange Teacher.

Born in Saskatchewan, she moved to the Bella Coola Valley in British Columbia. At the time, there were no roads, so her family moved their possessions by pack horse. Growing up in isolation and splendour has provided Marilyn with a lifelong desire to be near the mountains and the forest.

Marilyn is actively involved in sports, especially, running, tennis, and skiing. Her hobbies include tole painting, creating stained glass and reading.



Currently she is teaching at Uplands Elementary School. Marilyn lives with her husband and spends valuable time with her five step grandchildren in Terrace, British Columbia.

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