

## **Curtain Boy and Spring Boy: A Crow Adventure**

There's a young man and woman. Their camp is in a high mountain valley. They live there alone, and the young man and woman care for each other very much. Each day he goes out and offers prayer, and hunts the deer. Each day he brings back plenty of fresh meat and fine hides for his wife. Each day she gathers berries and roots, and makes the clothing and prepares the meals for the two of them. They've got a good camp, and they care for each other very much.

One day when the husband is out hunting, an old woman comes into camp. The old woman walks with a limp and a cane. She wears ragged clothes, and has a bad face. She's not pleasant to look at. The young woman offers her quest some drink and food. But the old woman refuses it. Again some food is offered, this time the best the young woman has. Still it is refused.

"I want to eat my meal on the belly of a pregnant woman!"

Being generous, the young woman lies down, pulls up her dress and serves the meal on her huge belly. She's heavy with child. After finishing off the fine meal, the old woman pulls out her knife! She takes the life of that mother, and then cuts open the young woman's belly and throws the babies away. One boy is thrown inside the tipi, behind the liner of the lodge. The other boy is tossed into the nearby spring. The old woman sets the body of the young woman up, up against the lodge. She pulls from the fire a re-hot coal, and burns a smile into the face of the young woman! And then she's gone. Her name is Red Woman.

The day passes. With the meat and hide of a deer, the husband walks the path back to camp. He sees his wife, sitting beside their lodge, mending something perhaps? He feels good inside, seeing a smile she has for him. But as he gets closer, he senses something wrong. She's usually up, running toward him. She must be tired. He gets closer. And then he sees!

"How could this be?"

The young man dresses his wife in her beaded buckskins, as if for a dance, and places her body, along with her best things, on a scaffolding, not far from the camp. The young man cuts his long braids, and the skin on his head. Tears and blood fall to the ground. He just sits there, day after day.

One day he hears something, something coming from inside the tipi.

"Feed me father, feed me, I'm hungry!"

He goes into the lodge, and looks around.

"Feed me!"

From behind the tipi liner, he pulls out a small boy, full grown.

"Feed me, father!"

And then the father hears something coming from outside.

"Feed me father, I'm hungry!"

From the waters of the nearby spring, the father pulls out a full grown boy.

"Feed me father, feed me!"

The father prepares a fine meal for those boys, and they tell him what had happened to their mother.

"An old woman came into camp, and she was not pleasant to look at. She insisted on eating off our mother's belly. When she finished, the old woman did this to us."

The young man's sorrow is soon replaced with his joy for his two sons, Curtain Boy and Spring Boy. Each day he teaches them the lessons of the land and of growing up, of prayer and of hunting. He cares for those boys very much.

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The boys are gathered around, and their father tells them about the hunt of the elk and deer, and to, "stay away from that ridge over there. There's a huge tree, a tree that looks dead. If you walk by it, it'll come crashing down on you, and you'll be dead. It's dangerous! Stay away boys."

The boys look themselves in the eyes, and say, "let's go," and are off.

The boys are running, chasing each other. They're running right for the ridge, and that tree. The huge tree sees them. They run carefree and faster toward the giant tree. The tree is ready. Just as those boys are about to run under it, just as the tree is about to come crashing down, they stop! And the tree comes crashing down. Just like that, the boys are on top of the tree, breaking off all its branches. That huge tree stays down for good now.

Curtain Boy and Spring Boy bring back to their father some of the tree's branches. They'll make a good fire to heat the rocks for a sweat bath.

And all their father can say is, "You boys are crazy boys!"

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The boys are gathered around, and their father is sharing with them how to setup a tipi and to, "stay away from that valley over there. Roaming about in it lives a great buffalo. It's so large that all it has to do is just inhale, and you'll be swallowed right up, just like that. It's dangerous! Stay away boys."

So the boys look themselves right in the eyes, and say, "Let's go," and are off.

The boys travel to that valley of the buffalo. Along the way, they cut down stout saplings, and tie them to their backs. Those boys are up to something! And there it is. It's a huge buffalo. The boys get closer, running here, then there. The buffalo opens his mouth, and just like that, inhales the boys right in!

Inside the great belly, and its big, the boys look around. There's a little light coming in through the great nose of the buffalo. The boys see some decomposed people over there, some half decomposed people over there, and some people sitting over there, visiting with each other, just recently inhaled in. The boys go over and pay them a visit.

"How about a pow wow? Let's have a pow wow. It may be our last!"

Curtain Boy yells out to the buffalo, "Can we put on a pow wow, right here inside your belly?"

Well, the buffalo thinks this over, and thinks that's a grand idea, after all, he's never had a pow wow in his belly before!

"Go ahead boys."

You remember those saplings the boys had cut, well they untie them and build a small dance arbor. You can't have a pow wow without a dance arbor! The boys look around and find part of the belly wall that makes a pretty good drum. Pretty soon everyone who can is up dancing. It's a good dance.

At the height of the dance, Spring Boy climbs to the top of the lodge, and pulls out his knife. He begins poking around, here and there. The buffalo feels a shape pain, but thinks it must be the indigestion of having a pow wow in his belly. But the pain continues.

"Stop that, what are you doing?" the buffalo shouts.

And there it is, what Spring Boy is looking for. It's beating away. With a tremendous jab, the knife pierces the heart of the buffalo. A flood a blood flows out, and everyone is washed out of the mouth of the buffalo--the decomposed people, the half decomposed people and the people just recently swallowed up. There the buffalo lies, wallowing and kicking on his side. Then he kicks his last kick. The boys go over, and cut off the buffalo's tongue, and drag it back to their camp. It's a huge tongue! A fine meal of buffalo tongue is prepared for their father.

And all he can say is, "You boys are crazy boys!"

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The boys are gathered around and their father shows them how to prepare arrows, and tells them to, "stay away from the old woman with the jug. She'll point her jug at whatever she wants to eat, and it'll be sucked right in. She'll then cook it up. She's dangerous! Stay away boys."

So the boys look themselves right in the eyes and say, "Let's go," and are off.

As the boys near the old woman's camp, Spring Boy picks up a large, round stone. Those boys are up to something! And there she is. She's standing by her lodge, with her jug in hand. She points it at Spring Boy, and as she does, instead of Spring Boy being sucked in, the large stone is sucked into the jug. It happens so fast that Spring Boy is knocked over, and over. Curtain Boy starts to laugh at the sight of his brother rolling over and over. Curtain Boy laughs so hard that the old woman begins to laugh too. Both are laughing so hard that they both fall down. When the old woman hits the ground, she lets go of her jug. And just like that, Curtain Boy picks up the jug, and points it at the old woman, and she's sucked right in, where she stays for good.

Curtain Boy and Spring Boy return to camp, and present their father with the jug, and all he can say is, "You boys are crazy boys!"

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The boys are gathered around, and their father tells them to, "stay away from the camp of the snakes. Their noses are so sharp that they can dive into the ground, travel like lightning, and come up wherever they please, and they don't even warn you before they strike. They're dangerous! Stay away boys."

So the boys look themselves right in the eyes, and say, "Let's go," and are off.

The boys travel to the camp of the snakes. Along the way, the boys stop and find two flat stones, and put them in their breechcloths. Those boys are up to something! Then they're off. The boys know they're at the snake's camp because all the lodges have snake designs painted on the tipi covers, and there are snakes everywhere, thick with snakes!

The boys go to the chief's lodge and ask, "Can we come in?"

"Alright boys, come on in. We don't have too many visitors!"

The boys go into the lodge and sit down. There're snakes everywhere, piled deep, even hanging from the tipi poles. Just then a few of the snakes go right into the ground, and try to get inside the boy's bottom. But when they come up through the ground, the snakes bang their heads against the flat stones. They can't get inside those boys!

The chief of the snakes comes forward. His name is Snake Face.

"What are you boys doing here? We never have visitors!"

"We've come to tell you some stories!"

"No one has ever done that before. That sounds good. Go ahead boys."

So all the snakes in the camp gather around, and curl up.

The boys tell the snakes, "Be sure to say, 'yes,' if you're still with the story.

And the boys start in.

"It's fall, and the leaves are yellow and are falling from the trees. All day long a cool wind beats on our lodges, and soon it brings a heavy rain. All we can do is stay in our warm, dry lodges. The sound of the rain hitting against the lodge covers puts us all fast asleep."

Most of those snakes say, "Yes."

We're out hunting deer. It's winter and very cold. The tracks are clear, but the snow is deep. Each step is more difficult than the last. It's a long day. We finally get the deer, and butcher it. But with all the meat loaded on our backs, the journey back to camp is even more tiring. It's exhausting! We finally make it back to camp. With thick, soft buffalo robes over our shoulders, we warm ourselves around the fire, cook up the fresh meat, and relax. After a fine meal, we fall fast asleep."

Only some of those snakes say, "Yes."

"The spring thaw is on, and thick mud and deep water is everywhere. It's time to move camp. It's a dirty job, taking down the lodges, and packing up everything. When we finally get going, we travel all day long, and all the next day, and the next. The streams and rivers are swollen with fast,

icy-cold waters, and are very difficult to cross. We're exhausted by the long journey. It's so nice to finally set-up camp, gather around a hot fire and dry out, and with thick, soft buffalo robes on, fall fast asleep."

Only a few of those snakes say, "Yes."

"It's a hot summer, and we move our camp into the mountains, among the tall, cool pines. The wind blows strong through those trees, and hearing the rustling in the pines, we fall fast asleep."

And all those snakes are asleep as well! None of them say, "Yes."

So the boys, very quietly, take their knives, and one by one, cut off the heads of the snakes. It takes them quite awhile to get the job done. There're a lot of snakes! Just as they're about to finish the job, the last snake, the chief snake, Snake Face, wakes up, and dives into the ground. He's gone, just like that. But when he comes up, he comes up in Spring Boy's foot. Gotta get the snake out, so Curtain Boy cuts into the foot of his brother to get the snake out, but it's gone, gone into the leg. So Curtain Boy cuts into the leg, but finds the snake gone into the belly of Spring Boy. So the belly is cut open, but the snake has gone into the chest. So Curtain Boy cuts open the chest, but finds the snake gone, gone into the head. So Curtain Boy cuts off the head of his brother, and sets it over a fire to boil the snake out. And sure enough, the snake comes out! Curtain Boy holds tight to that snake, and is just about to cut off its head, when Snake Face asks for its life.

"I'll..., I'll take that gourd off that bush and put it on my tail. I'll not strike again without first giving a warning. I'll rattle before I strike! Let me go!"

But just to make sure the snake can't sneak up on you, Curtain Boy take out that flat stone from his breechcloths, and scrapes the head of the snake against the stone. The head of Snake Face is as flat as the stone. And that's the way the snake have been since then.

But poor Spring Boy is in a bad way! So Curtain Boy builds a sweat bath and heats up the rocks. With all the parts of his brother gathered up, and with red-hot rocks and plenty of water, a good sweat bath is taken, and prayer is offered. When the door flap is finally raised, out of the steam runs Curtain Boy, followed by Spring Boy!

The boys return to their camp, and present their father with some of the heads of those snakes, and all he can say is, "You boys are crazy boys!"

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The boys are gathered around, and their father tells them to, "stay away from that coulee there. When you try to jump over it, it'll spread wide and you'll fall in. Then that coulee will close up fast, and you'll be buried. It's dangerous! Stay away."

So those boys look themselves right in the eyes and say, "Let's go," and are off.

The boys are playing, running here, and there. They see the coulee, and the coulee sees them. Spring Boy runs fast toward the coulee, and is just about to jump over it, but stops short. The coulee spreads wide, and then closes up, without getting its catch. Curtain Boy takes a run at the

coulee. He's just about to jump it, when he stops short. The coulee spreads wide, and then closes up fast. Those boys keep on running at the coulee, but stopping short. And the coulee keeps on spreading and closing up, but without getting its catch. After awhile, the coulee spreads and closes pretty slowly. And then, it can't move anymore. The boys jump over that coulee, and drink from its water. It won't catch anybody now.

Curtain Boy and Spring Boy return to camp, and give their father some water from that coulee, and all he can say is, "You boys are crazy boys!"

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The boys are gathered around, and their father tells them to, "stay away from the old woman with the digging stick. She's very clever. She walks with a limp, and a cane that is her digging stick. Whenever she gets hungry, and she's hungry all the time, she'll touch that stick to whatever she wants, and she'll eat it up. She's dangerous! Stay away boys."

So those boys look each other in the eyes and say, "Lets go," and are off.

The boys travel to the old woman's camp and wonder how they'll overcome her. She's very clever. Then the boy's get an idea! Just before they get to the old woman's camp, Curtain Boy turns into a butterfly, and Spring Boy turns into a bee. They fly right into her camp, and find the old woman asleep, with her digging stick close at hand. The butterfly lands on the stick. Then the bee charges the old woman and plants his stinger in her nose! She's up, just like that, chasing the bee. As she runs about after the bee, the butterfly turns back into Curtain Boy, and he's got the digging stick. He just touches the old woman with the digging stick and she's down. The boys tear down her lodge, pile it on top of the old woman, and set it afire. Its a big fire.

And then from the fire some of the wood jumps out and a laugh of the old woman is heard. The boys throw the wood back into the fire. Then a voice is heard.

"You can't overcome me!"

And some of the wood jumps out from the fire. The boys keep throwing the wood back into the fire, and the old woman keeps throwing it out. But the boys keep it up, and after awhile, the lodge, and the old woman are burnt up. All that remains is a pile of ashes. Then a wind comes up and blows the ashes to the four directions. You know, the old woman with her digging stick is still out there. We call her mosquito!

Curtain Boy and Spring Boy return back to camp, and give the old woman's digging stick to their father. It is the cane of Red Woman! All their father can say is, "You boys are crazy boys!"

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One day the father goes out hunting and the boys say, "Our mother has slept too long! It's time to get her up."

So the boys gather up four things she had used--a bone awl, a flesher, a jug and a grinding stone, and go to their mother's scaffolding.

Curtain Boy throws the bone awl high into the air, and says, "This awl is going to land on you; its time to get up!"

As it comes down, the mother's eyes open, just a little, and then close! The awl lands on her.

Curtain Boy tosses the flesher high into the air, and says, "This flesher is going to land on you; its time to get up!"

As it comes down, the mother moves her head, just a little, and then the flesher lands on her.

Spring Boy now steps forward and throws the jug high into the sky, and says, "This jug is going to land on you; its time to get up!"

As the jug comes down, the mother sits up, but then is down, as the jug lands on her.

Then Spring Boy throws, with all his strength, the heavy grinding stone high into the sky, and says, "Mother, this stone is going to land on you; its time to get up; you've slept too long!"

As that stone comes down, the mother opens her eyes and sees that stone coming down, and jumps off her scaffolding!

On their way back to camp, the boys walk on either side of their mother. But back in camp, the boys hid their mother! Those boys are up to something.

After a long day of hunting, the father returns to camp. Fresh meat is prepared, and its a fine meal. The father places a buffalo robe over his shoulders, and lies back to rest.

Then the boys start in. Spring Boy says, "Father, call in our mother!"

Amazed, the father says, "Stop that foolish talk. An old woman had come into camp, and she wasn't pleasant to look at. She insisted on eating off your mother's belly. When she finished, the old woman took the life of your mother, and threw you boys away!"

Spring Boy again says, "Call in our mother!"

"Stop that foolish talk!"

The Curtain Boy starts in and says, "Father, call in your wife!"

"Stop that foolish talk!"

"Call in you wife!"

So the father gives in to those boys.

"Come on in wife."

And from the lodge the wife comes out! All he can do is watch her. He can't sleep, but just watches her for four days!

Those boys are crazy boys!

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The boys are gathered around, and their father tells them to, "always stay together. There're animals out there that'll try to get you. They're dangerous! Stay together boys."

So the boys say, "Let's go," and are off on their separate ways.

Spring Boy is alone, sitting on a ridge. Long Arm looks through the sky hole, and sees Spring

Boy, alone. Just like that, Long Arm grabs Spring Boy, and brings him into the sky. He's gone!

The days pass, and Spring Boy doesn't return to camp, and his parents worry about him. They look everywhere, but turn up empty handed.

"He's gone, for good!"

"Nothing can hurt my brother!" and Curtain Boy looks around.

He picks up Spring Boy's tracks, and follows them to a ridge. There's where Spring Boy had been, but he's gone. Curtain Boy sits right where his brother had been, and sees a hole in the sky.

"That's it!"

Curtain Boy draws one of his arrows, points it toward the sky hole, and lets it fly, and he's gone too. A second arrow is shot, then a third. When the fourth arrow is shot, Curtain Boy is through the hole, into the sky.

Curtain Boy changes into a poor boy, an orphan, and travels around. He comes to a camp. All the lodges are black! It's the camp of the raven people.

An old woman asks, "Where are you from?"

"I've no relatives, and I've come a long way."

"I've no children. I'll adopt you."

The old woman takes Curtain Boy in, and feeds and cares for him.

That night Curtain Boy asks, "Grandmother, have you seen a boy come past here?"

"In the land below, there're two boys, and they're no good. Those boys have overcome the family of Long Arm--the woman with a jug, the great buffalo, the dead tree, the snakes, the coulee, and Red Woman. Long Arm look one of those boys to his camp, and in four days, is going to eat that boy!"

The next day, Curtain Boy travels to another camp. The lodges belong to the crane people.

An old woman asks, "Where have you come from?"

"I'm traveling about, and I've no owner."

"I've no children. I'll adopt you."

So the old woman takes care of Curtain Boy, and feeds him.

It's night and Curtain Boy asks, "Grandmother, have you seen a boy come by here?"

"There're two boys in the other world. They're no good. Long Arm has taken one of those boys, and in three days, will eat him!"

The next day Curtain Boy travels on, and comes to another camp. The lodges are white, and it's the camp of the white-hawk people.

An old woman asks, "Where did you come from?"

"No one owns me, and I've come a long way."

"I've no child. I'll adopt you."

The old woman takes Curtain Boy in, and feeds him.



That night Curtain Boy asks, "Grandmother, have you seen a boy come by here?"

"In the other land, there're two boys, and they're no good. Long Arm has taken one of them, and in two days, he'll eat him!"

The next day Curtain Boy travels to another camp. All the lodges are white and black, and belong to the black-eagle people.

An old woman asks, "Where have you come from?"

"I've no family, and I've traveled a long way."

"I've no child. I'll adopt you as my son."

The old woman takes care of Curtain Boy, and feeds him.

That night Curtain Boy asks, "Grandmother, have you seen a boy come along here?"

"In the land below, two boys have overcome the relatives of Long Arm. They're no good. Long Arm has taken one of those boys. Tomorrow he'll eat that boy, right here in his camp!"

"Grandmother, will you take me to that feast?"

At the feast, everyone is dancing. Long Arm is there, and his arm is wrapped around Spring Boy, holding him tight. There's also the medicine of Long Arm, a round stone that lies close by. Curtain Boy takes an arrow, aims it at the stone, and lets it fly. The stone crumbles to sand!

"Long Arm, let my brother go!"

"What sweet thing is this that comes to our feast? I'll eat you as well!"

"You've no power," and Curtain Boy pulls out his knife.

Where the knife passes, the arms of Long Arm fall. Four cuts, and Long Arm is finished.

All the birds are gathered around and Curtain Boy says, "You're all birds, and not people. Fly as birds to the land below, fly in all directions, and forget about Long Arm. He's no good!"

Curtain Boy and Spring Boy let their arrows fly, and return through the hole in the sky, to their own camp. That hole closes up, never to open again.

The father and mother care for those boys very much, and the boys, well, those boys are, "crazy boys!"

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The story of the hero-twins, Curtain Boy and Spring Boy, is a traditional buffalo-day story. I first became acquainted with the story during the late 1970s when several episodes from the lengthy cycle were told to me by Haywood Big Day. The occasion was an afternoon just prior to the Sun Dance ceremony. It is also recorded by Robert Lowie, who offers slightly varied versions from three of his informants (1918:74-98). It's a living story, part of the continuing oral literature of the Crow people.

In the exploits of Curtain Boy and Spring Boy, something of the adventure, hope and joy found in the lives of the Crow people is expressed. The story offers several glimpses into the Crow character.

I have retained much of the story's "rough edge" as first presented to me, and conveyed in the three versions recorded by Lowie. Certainly sections of the story are explicitly harsh, at times brutal--treachery and murder are to be found. But such moments are always balanced with expressions of warmth and tenderness--love shared by a husband and wife as well as the love between sons and parents. The story's emotional ride, its joys and sorrows, is as dynamic and volatile as life is experienced by the Crow. Life is to be experienced in all its many splendors, with the pleasant alongside the not so pleasant.

Relying on nothing more than their skill and intelligence, the hero-twins match wits and cunning against adversaries of all forms. Each contest offers a formidable opponent, seemingly invincible. But each contest is won by the twins; "coup" is taken. Not only do the exploits of the twins offer wondrous adventures, but in the outcome of each endeavor, hope is offered. Despite overwhelming hardship and potential loss; good triumphs over evil. A landscape inundated with monsters is transformed and made safe. A hostile environment and an uncertain future are to be faced without trepidation. Monsters, in all forms and hidden in all sorts of places, are to be faced and can be overcome.

Though they may at times approach an adversary with reckless abandonment, the twins always project a sense of joy and play in their endeavors. Counting coup is, after all, not war, but a game of adventure. Humor is to be found even in the most difficult of circumstances.

We see several traditional Crow and Plains Indian values expressed in the *Curtain Boy and Spring Boy* story. The importance of family and kinship is reiterated throughout the story. Even one's adversaries share in kinship, as members of Long Arm's family. In the shared bonds of kinship, strength against adversity is found. But alone, without family, as an orphan, danger awaits. Cementing these bonds, and all forms of relationships, is reciprocity--what is given is received. Good and evil done are returned in kind. This balance is also expressed in the symbolism of the number four. As the seasons of the yearly circle and as the directions of the earthly circle number four, no endeavor can be completed without a sequence of four segments.

In the slaying of the monsters and the transforming of the landscape, explanations for the world's character are offered. Snakes rattle before striking and mosquitoes (instead of an old woman) and birds fly about because of the triumphs of *Curtain Boy and Spring Boy*. The dangers that once were are no longer, and the land is safe to travel.

Among the world view theme embedded in the *Curtain Boy and Spring Boy* story are:

1. orphan quest motif--culture heroes (twins), by themselves and alone, overcoming challenges and bringing about wholeness (family re-established and monsters destroyed)
2. trickster motif--using deception and cunning to accomplish their desired goals
3. origin motif--rattle snakes, mosquitoes and birds are explained and brought forth