The First Tortilla

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A **legend** is an old story that tells about the great deeds of a hero. Now read about how a young girl becomes a hero in her village.

**Question of the Week**

How do changes in the weather affect us?
Jade opened her eyes and yawned. She knew she had slept late because the sun had already risen.

“Time to awaken, precious Jade,” her mother whispered. She was crushing dry chile pods in a metate.

“Time to greet the sun,” her father said. He was weaving a basket. Each day Jade’s parents went to the village market to sell their colorful baskets.

Jade jumped out of the hammock and greeted her parents. After breakfast she hurried outside to water the garden.

A huge volcano towered over Jade’s village. On the peak of the mountain lived the Mountain Spirit. When the Mountain Spirit spoke, the earth rumbled and smoke filled the sky. Sometimes burning lava poured down the mountainside. Jade said a prayer. “Mountain Spirit, send us rain. Our bean and squash plants are dying.”
She picked up a clay pot and walked to the lake. Jade greeted the other village girls who were also collecting water. The once beautiful lake was almost dry. She filled the pot and returned to the garden. As she worked a lovely blue hummingbird flew in front of her.

“You must go to the Mountain Spirit and ask for rain,” the hummingbird whispered. “And you must take a gift.”

Her father had told her the small birds brought messages from the Mountain Spirit. Jade knew she must listen.

“The path is very dangerous,” she said.

“I will guide you,” the hummingbird replied.

Jade ran back into the hut.

“What is it, my daughter?” her mother asked. Jade told her parents what had happened. Her mother smiled and said, “A blue hummingbird flew over your crib when you were born. It was a special sign.”

“Why don’t the rains come?” Jade asked her father.

“Years ago we had rain and good harvests, but the people forgot to thank the Mountain Spirit. We did not take gifts to the mountain. Now it is angry, and there is no rain.”
“I can take a gift of food,” Jade said.

Her father shook his head. “A girl cannot climb the mountain. You will fall from the cliffs like a bird without wings.”

“Our gardens are dying,” her mother said. “Soon we must leave our home in search of food. That will be the end of our way of life.”

Jade grew sad. She knew the people did not want to leave their village. They had lived at the foot of the volcano for many generations. This had been the home of their ancestors.

When her parents were gone to market, Jade walked in the garden, wondering what she could do to help her village.

The blue hummingbird appeared again. “The Mountain Spirit will listen to you,” the hummingbird whispered.

“Can I do it?” Jade asked.

Her father had said that she might fall from the cliff like a bird without wings. But if she didn’t go the entire village would suffer.

“Yes, I will go,” she decided.

She warmed a bowl of beans and squash and sprinkled chile powder on the food. “I hope this pleases the Mountain Spirit,” she said.

She gathered a rebozo around her shoulders and followed the hummingbird up the narrow path. Suddenly the mountain shook and boulders came crashing down.

“This way!” the hummingbird cried.
Jade jumped aside, and the boulders missed her.

Finally they arrived at the home of the Mountain Spirit, where butterflies danced among a rainbow of flowers. A waterfall cascaded into a clear, blue lake.

“Why have you come?” the Mountain Spirit asked. Thunder and smoke filled the sky.

“I came to ask for rain,” Jade replied. “Without rain our plants will die and we will starve.”

“Your people no longer honor me!” the Mountain Spirit said.

“I have not forgotten you,” Jade answered. “I brought you a gift.”

She uncovered the bowl of beans and squash. A pleasant aroma filled the air.

The Mountain Spirit was pleased. “You are a brave girl. I will send rain. And I will give you a gift. You may have the food the ants store in the cave.”

Jade looked at the ants scurrying on the ground. “The ants carry pebbles,” Jade said.

“Look closely,” the Mountain Spirit whispered. Jade fell on her knees.

“What are you carrying?” she asked the ants. “This is corn,” one ant replied.

“Taste it,” another ant said, offering a kernel. Jade chewed the corn. “Oh, what a sweet flavor!” she cried. “Where does it come from?”
“It grows here on Corn Mountain. We gather the grains and store them in a cave. Come with us.”

Jade followed the ants into the cavern. On the floor she found piles of corn.

“Corn is a gift from the Mountain Spirit,” the ant said. “Take all you want.”

Jade gathered the corn in her rebozo. She thanked the Mountain Spirit. She thanked the hummingbird for guiding her. And she thanked the ants for sharing their corn.

Then she carefully made her way down the mountain with her prize. Her parents had returned from the market. Jade entered her home and spilled the corn on the floor.

“What is this?” her father asked.

“Corn!” Jade cried. “The Mountain Spirit gave it to me. Here, taste it!”

Her father chewed a few dry kernels, and the corn softened with each bite. It was sweet and tasty. “Good,” said her father. “But hard to chew.”

“I will boil the corn in a clay pot,” said her mother. “It will make pozol.”

When the pozol was ready, Jade’s father tasted it.

“Wonderful!” he exclaimed. “We must thank the Mountain Spirit for this food.”
They scattered kernels of corn in their garden and said a prayer of thanks.

That afternoon clouds gathered on the mountain peak. Soon a gentle rain fell. Later in the season corn plants pushed through the earth.

The corn tassels blossomed. Soon tender ears of corn appeared on the stalks.

“Elotes,” Jade said as she picked the corn. That evening they ate corn, beans, and squash flavored with red chile.

When the corn was dry Jade placed some kernels in a *metate* and crushed them with a *mano*. She sprinkled water on the cornmeal.

The gruel was thick, like dough.

“Masa,” Jade said. She patted the masa back and forth in her palms until it was flat and round. Then she placed it on a hot stone near the fire.

While they were eating they smelled the masa cooking on the hot stone.

“What is that sweet aroma?” asked her father.

“The masa!” Jade cried.

There on the hot stone lay the freshly baked bread. She picked it up and offered it to her parents.

Her father ate a piece. “Hum, very good!”

“Delicious!” her mother exclaimed. “What shall we call this bread?”

Jade thought a while. “I’ll call it a *tortilla*.”

“I am proud of you,” her father said.
“We must share this with our neighbors,” her mother added.

In the following days Jade went from home to home, teaching the women how to make tortillas.

The corn plants grew. Corn tortillas became the favorite food of the people. Now the villagers did not have to leave their home.

During the harvest fiesta the people held a ceremony to thank the Mountain Spirit for giving them corn. They also thanked Jade, the girl who had baked the first tortilla.

**Corn Tortilla Recipe**

Tortillas are the bread of Mexico. They are used for classic Tex-Mex dishes like tacos and tostadas. Have an adult help you try this tasty recipe at home.

**Ingredients**

- 2 cups masa harina (a traditional corn flour)
- 1 tsp sea salt
- ¼ tsp baking soda
- 2 cups very warm water
- 1 tsp oil

In a large bowl, mix corn flour, salt, baking soda, warm water, and oil. Stir until dough stays together and does not break apart. Knead until dough forms a large ball. It should be soft and not sticky. Cover and let stand for two minutes. Pull off balls of dough, and roll each one into a flat, thin circle.

Have an adult heat a heavy iron pan. Have an adult cook the tortillas until both sides are golden brown. Eat with meat filling, shredded cheese, or plain.

Makes about 12 tortillas

**Glossary**

- **jade** a precious stone in ancient Mexico
- **rebozo** a shawl worn by Mexican women
- **pozol** or posole, a corn and meat stew
- **elote** *elotl*, an ancient Mexican word for ear of corn
- **metate** concave rock where corn is ground
- **mano** smooth rock with which to grind corn
- **masa** dough
- **tortilla** traditional Mexican bread