"The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" is a traditional Iroquois narrative that I have adapted. I include it here because E. Pauline Johnson, also Iroquois, retains certain of its narrative features and character traits in her story. This account tells of a Sacred Woman who overcomes her enemy (whom she married at her father's behest) and through an act of great courage, power, and self-assertion turns his perfidy into a new planet, Earth, with its sun and moon. The story shows the importance of the rules of obedience, respect, focus, and discipline through which one gains metaphysical power sufficient to create planetary systems. It also forms part of the creation story of the Iroquois.

Once upon a time, long ago so far, a young woman was told by her dead father to go and marry a stranger. Being a strange woman, she did as he said, not taking her mother's counsel in the matter as she should have done. She journeyed to the place where the dead father had directed her to go, and there found the man she was to marry.

Now this man was a renowned magician, a sorcerer. He heard her proposal that they marry skeptically. He said to himself, "This woman is but a girl. It would be more fitting for her to ask to be my servant rather than my wife." But he only listened silently to her, then he said, "It is well. If you can meet my tests, we will see if I will make you my wife."

He took her into his lodge and said, "Now you must grind corn." She took the corn and boiled it slightly, using wood she
brought her for the fire. When the kernels were softened, she began to grind them on the grinding stone. And though there were mounds and mounds of stuff to be ground, still she was done with the task in a very short time. Seeing this, the sorcerer was amazed, but he kept silent. Instead he ordered her to remove all her clothing. When she was naked, he told her to cook the corn in the huge pot that hung over the fire. This she did, though the hot corn popped and scattered scalding, clinging mush all over her. But she did not flinch, enduring the burns with calm.

When the mush was done, the woman told the sorcerer it was ready. “Good,” he said. “Now you will feed my servants.” He noted that her body was covered with cornmush. Opening the door, he called in several huge beasts who ran to the woman and began to lick the mush from her body with their razor sharp tongues, leaving deep gashes where their tongues sliced her flesh. Still she did not recoil but endured the torment, not letting her face lose its look of calm composure.

Seeing this, the sorcerer let the beasts back out, then said she and he would be married, and so they were. After four nights that they spent sleeping opposite each other with the soles of their feet touching, he sent her back to her village with gifts of meat for the people. He commanded her to divide the meat evenly among all the people, and further to see to it that every lodge had its roof removed that night, as he was going to send a white corn rain among them. She did as she was told, and after the village had received its gifts, the meat and the white corn rain, she returned to her husband’s lodge.

Outside his lodge there grew a tree that was always filled with blossoms so bright they gave light to his whole land. The woman loved the tree, loved to sit under it and converse with the spirits and her dead father, whom she held dear in her heart. She so loved the light tree that once, when everyone was sleeping, she lay down under it and opened her legs and her body to it. A blossom fell on her vagina then, touching her with sweetness and a certain joy. And soon after she knew she was pregnant.

About that time her husband became weak and ill. His medicine people could not heal him, but told him that his sickness was caused by his wife. He was certain they were right, for he had never met anyone so powerful as she. He feared that her power was greater than his own, for hadn’t she been able to withstand his most difficult tests? “What should I do?” he asked his advisors. (They did not advise him to divorce her, because that kind of separation was unknown to them.) They did not advise him to kill her, because death was unknown among them. The only death that had occurred was that of the woman’s father, and they did not understand what had happened to him.

After deliberating on the matter for four days, the advisors told the sorcerer that he should uproot the tree of light. Then, lying beside it, he should call his wife to come and sit with him. He should by some ruse get her to fall over the edge of the hole the uprooted tree would leave, and she would fall into the void. When she had fallen, they said, he was to replace the tree and then he would recover his health and his power.

That afternoon he went outside his lodge and pulled up the tree. He peered over the edge of the hole it left, and he could see another world below. He called his wife to come and see it. When she came, he said, “Can you see the edge of the hole. You can see another world below.” She knelt beside the hole and leaning over the edge, looked down. She saw darkness, and a long way below, she saw blue, a shining blue that seemed filled with promise and delight. She looked at her husband and smiled, eyes dancing with pleasure. “It looks like a beautiful place there,” she said. “Who would have thought that the tree of light would be growing over such a place!”

“Yes,” her husband agreed. “It surely seems beautiful there.” He regarded her for a moment carefully, then said, “I wonder what it is like there. Maybe somebody could go down there and find out.”

Astonished, the woman looked at her husband. “But how would someone do that?”

“Jump,” The husband said.

“Jump?” she asked, looking down through the opening, trying to calculate the distance. “But it is very far.”

“Someone of your courage could do it,” he said. “You could jump. Become the wind or a petal from this tree.” He indicated the tree lying fallen next to them. “A petal could fall gently, on the wind it would be carried. You could be a petal in the wind. You could be a butterfly, a downgliding bright bird.”
She gazed for a long time at the shining blue below her. "I could jump like that. I could float downward. I could fall into the shining blue world below us."

"Yes," he said. "You could."

For another long moment she knelt gazing downward, then taking a deep breath she stood, and flexing her knees and raising her arms high over her head she leaned into the opening and dove through.

For some time the sorcerer watched her body as it fell downward through the dark, toward the blue. "She jumped," he finally said to the council as they made their way slowly toward him. "She's gone."

And they raised the tree and placed it back firmly in its place, covering the opening to the other world with its roots.
SPIDER WOMAN'S GRANDDAUGHTERS

Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women

Edited and with an Introduction by

PAULA GUNN ALLEN

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