

"A Wife Demands the Death of her Mother-in-Law"

A Folktale from South Sudan

Once, a young man and a young woman loved each other for many seasons. One day, the man said, "It is time we marry." The woman agreed but set a hard condition:

"Unless you kill your mother, I will not be your wife."

The young man took up his spear and went to his mother's home. Before he entered, he looked through the window. He saw his mother eating. His baby brother defecated; the mother cleaned the child and went on eating. Soon the baby coughed and vomited; again the mother wiped him clean and still she ate, not even washing her hands, thinking only of the child.

The young man's heart burned. He stepped inside and asked, "Mother, is this how you cared for me and for all my brothers and sisters?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"Truly, this is how you cared for me?"

"Yes, my son."

He lowered his spear. "Mother, I came to kill you. My beloved demanded it before she would marry me. But I have seen how you care for your children. I cannot raise my hand against you."

That very night he moved his mother and his younger siblings to another village and built them a new home. Later he returned, paid a full dowry, and married the young woman. To her he said, "I have done as you required." She asked no more.

In the seventh month of her first pregnancy, the husband said, "We will build two new houses. You will carry the grass and poles, and you will keep the housework."

"I cannot do it alone," she protested. "I am heavy with child. Let one of my sisters help."

"You told me to kill the one who would have helped you," he replied. "Now work with your own strength."

The wife labored and finished the houses. In the second pregnancy, the same. In the third and in the fourth, the same—each time she complained, “Whenever I am pregnant, you make me rebuild the houses!” And each time he answered, “You asked me to kill my mother, who could have helped you. Now you must do the work alone.”

One day the husband asked, “Do you love your mother?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Then why did you ask me to kill mine? She would have helped you, but you chose that I should live without her.”

The woman fell silent.

At last the man brought back his mother and his younger siblings. When the wife saw her mother-in-law from afar, she ran to meet her and embraced her.

The next morning the wife brewed beer, and the couple called the in-laws and the whole community. When the people were gathered, the husband stood and spoke:

“My people, I must tell the truth. Years ago, before our marriage, my wife demanded that I kill my mother. I pretended to obey, but I only hid my mother away. Each time my wife was pregnant, I made her build our houses, so she would feel what it is to be without a mother’s hands.”

The elders murmured and nodded. They slaughtered three cows: one to honor the mother’s return, one to bind the family together again, and one to bury the false death that had been spoken.

From that day the family lived in peace. The wife served the whole household with care and even bathed her mother-in-law at times. And the people said, “A house without a mother is heavy to carry.”

