

How the Woman and Rat Came to Stay in the Same House

A Folktale from South Sudan

Once upon a time, the rat lived in the bush, far from people, with no dealings in human life. In those days there was a terrible problem with childbirth. Whenever a woman became pregnant, at the end of nine months her stomach was cut open; the child lived, but the mother died. This went on for a long, long time, and many women were lost.

One day Rat came to the village and said, "Why are all the women being killed at the end of their pregnancies? When this woman's time comes, call me. Do not cut her."



When her labor pains grew strong, the people gathered the knives as usual. Rat said, "No—be patient. She will deliver."

After some time, the woman delivered her child and, to her astonishment, lived. She asked, "Was it this Rat who saved me and allowed me to deliver?" The people said it was. She cried, "Let Rat tell me what he wants; I will give it in return for his kindness."

The village met. One said, "Give Rat a cow with her calf," but Rat said, "No, thank you." Another said, "Give him a girl," but Rat said, "No, thank you." Others said, "Give him the newborn child," and Rat again said, "No, thank you."

Rat spoke: "I refuse because I am small and cannot care for such gifts. I ask only this: Mothers, wherever you live, let me live with you. Whatever you eat, let me share a little with you." The woman said, "If that is your request, I accept—for you have saved us." The others agreed.

From that day, Rat moved into the houses of women. That is why the rat now stays indoors, looking over every utensil, nibbling buckets and food and clothes—and yet the woman does not kill him, for there is a promise between them. And so, even now, the children say: "The rat looks over my property, and I overlook the rat's property."