



The Story Bag

Korea

A long time ago, there was a boy who loved to listen to stories. His passion for stories had been instilled in him by his grandfather, who had been a great storyteller and who had seated his grandson on his knees, from a very early age, to tell him one story after another. In this way, the boy developed such a fondness for stories that every time he met someone new he asked her to tell him a story. The boy made a leather bag to keep all the stories he had been told in, so that when he was alone in his room, he could listen to them all over again.

The boy grew very greedy for stories, refusing to share them with anyone. His bag became so full that he could barely fit any new stories inside. He would have to push very hard to get them in and then tie the strap on the mouth of the bag really tight so that no story could escape or be lost.

Years passed and the boy grew into a handsome young man. One day, at a party in a nearby town, he met and fell in love with a slight young woman. After a short courtship the couple made their promises and the wedding preparations began.

Everyone in the household busied themselves to put everything in order before the couple arrived to take possession of their home and celebrate their wedding night. Even the young man's grandfather wanted to help with the preparations. He was walking around the kitchen, looking for something to do when, suddenly, he heard voices whispering behind the garden door.

When he looked behind the door, he found his grandson's bag of stories.

Leaning closer to hear better, he heard a voice saying:

'Listen everybody. Tomorrow, the man who is our jailer is getting married. For too many years, he has kept us here locked up and overcrowded, preventing us from doing our work in the world ... I do not even remember how I was first told,' the story lamented. Then, coming out of its reflections, it added. 'The torture to which he has subjected us has been inhumane, but the time has come for our revenge.'

'According to nuptial customs,' the voice of another story said, 'tomorrow, he will ride his horse to his fiancée's house. After receiving the bride from her mother and father, he will marry her and bring her here to their new home. I propose that we make this wedding an event that he will never forget ... but for different reasons' it added in a whisper. 'I will transform myself into a succulent blackberry on a bush by the roadside. I will draw him to me. But as a blackberry, I will cause him terrible cramps in his guts, which will have him visiting the toilet all day.'

Grandfather heard giggles of complicity, after which another voice was heard.

'I will become the crystal clear water of a fountain that is in the path that leads to the bride's house. I will attract him in such a way that he will not be able to resist; and, when he drinks me, I will become alcohol, so that he will arrive at the house of the bride completely drunk.'

More giggles were heard inside the bag.

'I have a better idea,' a fourth voice said. 'I will become a stone, and I will wait for him in the straw bag that is put out for the groom at the house of the bride so that he can dismount comfortably from his horse. When he comes down off of his stirrups and steps on me, he will twist his ankle, and will have to spend his wedding day limping like a lame old man.'

This time the laughter was louder.

‘We will give him the most unforgettable wedding night anyone could imagine,’ said another voice. ‘We’re going to turn into fleas and wait for the bride and groom in the bridal bed!’

A loud laugh emerged from the bag.

‘Shhh!’ a voice exclaimed. ‘Shut up, they can hear us!’

But it was already too late. Grandfather had heard everything. Deeply concerned, he returned home and went into his bedroom to think carefully about what he could do to spare his beloved grandson such a hard time on his wedding day.

The next morning, after the young man had already mounted his horse and was preparing to leave with the wedding procession, his grandfather suddenly appeared among his entourage of guests and friends. His grandfather snatched the reins of his horse.

‘Allow me, my dear grandson,’ he said grasping the reins tightly. ‘I will accompany you, like a prince on his betrothal.’

‘No need, Grandfather,’ replied the young man, somewhat embarrassed. ‘I am perfectly capable of riding a horse as you know very well.’

‘Not at all!’ replied the grandfather, already leading the noble animal off along the procession. ‘You will arrive at your bride’s home like a great gentleman!’

So they went out along the road.

As they walked along, the procession passed by a large bush and, although it was not the season for blackberries, the young man saw a plump one hanging within arm’s reach.

‘Stop for a moment, Grandfather!’ said the groom. ‘I want to eat that blackberry. It seems to call out to me from that bush.’

‘Forget about it!’ replied the old man quickly. ‘Where we are going you will be able to taste delicacies much more delicious than that humble berry of the forest.’

As soon as they passed the blackberry bush, the groom’s desire to eat the berry faded.

When they entered the path that led to the bride's house, the bubbling water of a fountain caught the groom's attention.

'Grandfather, stop for a moment, please,' he said quickly. 'I want to drink some water. I do not know why, but I am now terrible thirsty.'

'That water will not quench your thirst,' said Grandfather, quickening the horse's pace. 'It is salt water, and in any case soon you will be able to taste the delicious drinks of the nuptial banquet. Surely you can wait a bit.'

After ten seconds had passed, the young man was no longer thirsty.

Finally, they entered through the portico of the bride's house and went to meet the parents of his fiancée where they were waiting for him, with a straw cushion on the floor. As the smiling groom dismounted and was about to put his foot on the cushion, the old man pulled the horse's bridle. The sudden movement caused the young man miss the cushion and he fell to the ground.

As he lay on the ground, the groom wished that the earth would swallow him, but his grandfather knew that this fall was but a minor evil compared to what could have been a nightmare of a day.

Finally, the young man got up and, not wanting to make a scene in front of his future in-laws, he smiled again and continued with the wedding customs.

The bridegroom took the bride with the blessing of her parents, and both of them were married to the joy of the two families and the many friends who had come to celebrate with them ... meanwhile his grandfather was already preparing for his final challenge.

After the wedding and the celebration, the newlyweds were taken to their new home so they could finally enjoy each other's company. They thought they were alone there, but the groom's grandfather was hiding on the verandah outside their bedroom door.

When the couple entered the room, ready to get into bed, grandfather suddenly appeared, much to the surprise of his grandson.

‘Get out of here immediately!’ said the old man. ‘There’s no time to explain. Just take your wife and go back to the living room. I’ll call you when the danger has passed.’

Grandfather was left alone with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of stories all of whom were turned into fleas and all of whom desired revenge. But, grandfather had been a storyteller all his life, so it did not take him long to enter into a peaceful dialogue with them.

After they had conversed for a while the stories admitted that they had lost their minds after so many years of being confined and isolated. But they argued that what his grandson had done to them went against their nature. They told him that stories were born to be told, to be shared from person to person, from generation to generation, and that they desired more than anything to travel to the ends of the earth. The greed of his grandson had led to a torture that could not be understood by a human being. Only another story could know the immense suffering they had felt.

Grandfather had never lost an opportunity to tell the stories he knew. He recognised some of these stories from his own childhood, some he remembered sharing with his grandson. He could see now how much these stories had suffered in the bag.

After talking to Grandfather, the stories felt a bit better. Grandfather left them and went to explain to his grandson what had happened.

‘What a fool I have been!’ exclaimed the sincerely repentant grandson. ‘How could I have done this to them, to these friends who gave me so many moments of joy and illusion, who helped me to live?’

Immediately, the young man went into the kitchen, took the story bag and untied the strong knot that he had tied it with. The remaining stories were finally free of their prison, free to find some lips, some hands and some eyes that could give them life again, that could share them again in front the hearth fires and bonfires, at kitchen tables and in nurseries.

The young man promised that he would never again lock his stories away in his bag, that he would always leave the leather cord loose so that they could come and go as they pleased. He promised his

grandfather that, from that day forward, he too would be a teller of stories. He too would give gifts as stories not only to his wife and future children, but to the entire community, and to anyone whome he met and who was willing to listen to a story. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2019).

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Comments

The versions of this story that I have been able to find are quite similar to each other, but they all contain elements that I would describe as cruel or, at least, violent. That is why this adaptation has been changed, in order to remove those hard details and to provide the story with a more innocent and carefree tone.

Sources

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