

~~"And the mule driver who was killed, I permitted it to happen because he never remembered me until this day. I took his life to keep him from sinning again."~~

Mexico

28. Rice from Ashes

People tell the story of a girl who lost her mother. They say her father turned around and married a woman who had two daughters of her own. The cruel stepmother made her husband's daughter the house servant, and right from the start the two stepsisters would have nothing to do with her. She had only a little lamb to keep her company, and one day her stepmother came into the kitchen and said, "Butcher the lamb!"

The girl started to cry. Then the stepmother held out a plate of rice and said, "If you don't kill the lamb, you'll have to separate this rice from ashes." She spilled all the rice onto the hearth and went off to take her midday nap.

The girl was wondering how she could ever separate the rice, when a dove appeared. "Why do you cry, child?" "Because my stepmother says I have to separate this rice before she gets up from her nap."

"Lie down and sleep," said the dove. "I'll take care of it." As the girl lay down, a flock of doves arrived, and in no time the clean rice was heaped on the plate just as before. When the stepmother got up from her nap she hardly knew what to think. The next day she poured sand into a dish of lentils.

"If you don't kill the lamb," she said, "you'll have to separate these lentils. Do it before I wake up." The girl began to cry. But a flock of birds arrived and picked out the lentils while the stepmother napped.

The day after that, the stepmother threw sugar onto the hearth

and ordered the girl to kill the lamb or pick the sugar clean. She went off to her nap. Hearing the girl's cries, a large ant appeared and told the poor child not to worry. This was the ant queen, who commanded many workers. Immediately the ants came crawling over the hearth, and when the stepmother got up from her nap the sugar was heaped in the dish.

Another day passed, and the stepmother came into the kitchen and said, "Kill the lamb, or you'll have to spin these two bags of wool into thread. Do it before I finish my nap." The girl began to weep. The lamb said to her, "Don't cry. I'll do it for you." As the girl watched, the lamb dragged the wool from the bags and stretched it out until it was all in a beautiful thread.

When the stepmother saw that the wool had been spun, she was furious. But when she examined the lamb, she found one wisp stuck to its little anus. Since every wisp had not been spun, she ordered her stepdaughter to kill the lamb and cook it for supper that very night.

The girl wept uncontrollably. But the lamb told her she should not be sad. "Calm down! Take me out and butcher me, and in my bowels you will find a little cup. This you must remove and keep always."

So she led the lamb to the riverbank, slit its throat, and quartered the carcass. When she found the cup, she set it aside.

Just then a little old man came by and asked for a drink. She dipped some water with the cup and gave it to him. Then she returned to the house and laid the cup in the bottom of the trunk where she kept her belongings.

The girl went often to the cemetery to visit her mother's grave. A little tree grew there, and in the tree there was a bird with a beautiful song. The girl would sit beneath the tree weeping, telling her troubles to her dead mother. As she told them, one by one, the bird's singing would take them away.

At home now, without the lamb, she had no one to be her friend. Out of meanness, just to remind her of her loss, her stepsisters had their mother buy them each a lamb of their own. The stepsisters' lambs grew quickly, and when not a leaf or a blade of grass was left in sight, the mother told her daughters that these lambs, too, would have to be butchered.

First the older daughter went out to kill her lamb. It made her cry to do so, but the lamb told her she must not be sad. She must look for a little cup inside the lamb's belly and take it for her own. She must also remember to be kindhearted and help those in need.

She butchered the lamb, and sure enough, there was the cup. At that moment a little old man came by and asked for water. The stepsister answered, "I don't give water to filthy old men."

This little man was God.

The following day the younger of the two stepsisters went out to kill her lamb, and the lamb gave her the same advice. She, too, found a cup in the lamb's bowels and met the same little old man asking for water. She answered him contemptuously, "If you want water, bend down and drink from the river." The old man got down on his hands and knees and drank.

Now, in the town there was a king whose queen had died and who had a son. On her deathbed the queen had told the prince he would someday marry a woman who would bring him a cup of gold, because this was the fate predicted by the prince's fairy godmother when he was born. The prince had now grown up, and the king proclaimed that any young woman with a cup of gold was to present herself at the palace.

When the stepmother heard this news, she drew up her skirts and ran as fast as she could to the center of town. She told the king that the girl with the golden cup was her own daughter. The next day the prince mounted a swift steed and set out to claim his bride. Arriving at the stepmother's house, he asked for the girl with the cup.

Both sisters stepped forward and began to shove each other. To settle the matter, the mother pointed to the older girl, "Go with the prince!"

The prince put her behind him on his horse and started off for the palace. But as they were passing the cemetery, the little bird that lived in the tree sang out,

*Swift young lord,
turn back, turn back.
Your companion-to-be
is awaiting you yet.*

The bird kept repeating its song until the prince turned around to the girl and asked her to show him the cup. She placed it in his hands and he saw that it was iron. Returning to the house, he said to the stepmother, "This is not my bride."

The younger of the two sisters now came to the door with her cup in her hand. It was all gold. The prince put her on the back of his horse and set off. But when they got to the cemetery, the bird sang out from the tree,

*Swift young lord,
turn back, turn back.
Your companion-to-be
is awaiting you yet.*

The prince asked for the cup, and when the girl handed it to him he saw once again that what had been gold was now iron. He rushed back to the house and asked the girl's mother if she had another daughter. The woman said no.

The prince insisted, "She has to be somewhere!" With the mother denying it, he ran into the house and started pulling everything apart. When he got to the kitchen, there was the orphan girl. He asked her, "Do you have the golden cup?" She had no idea why he asked but said simply, "Yes."

The prince told her to sit behind him on his horse, while the stepmother tried desperately to explain that this was only a kitchen girl. The prince replied, "It doesn't matter," for all he needed was to find the young woman who owned the cup.

As they passed the cemetery the little bird ruffled its feathers contentedly and sang,

*You've found your companion,
O swift young lord, keep on!*

To make sure there was no mistake, the prince looked over his shoulder and asked to see the cup once more. There it was, shining so brightly it blurred his vision.

When they reached the palace, the king was taken aback to see his son riding up with a barefoot girl in rags. But he saw the golden cup and knew she was the one who had been so long awaited.

The wedding took place at once, and when the kitchen girl changed into finery she was everything a princess should be. In time she had many children and became a great queen, known for her works of charity. She aided orphans especially.

Argentina | Aída Agüero de Agüero

⇒ 29. Juan María and Juana María ⇐

There were two women who lived together, and they were good friends. One of them had a son named Juan María. The other had a daughter named Juana María. The children grew up loving each other as brother and sister, but at a certain age they wanted to get married, and the two mothers put a stop to it.

So Juan María and Juana María ran away from home and took blood out of their own veins and wrote a contract with it. They swore in writing they would never marry anyone but each other. After a while they got to a strange city where there was no one to protect them, and they were arrested for vagrancy. Before they knew what was happening, they'd been thrown into prison in separate cells. Not even their prison guards were the same. Juana María had a woman as her guard. Juan María had a man.

Every day the prisoners were taken out into the street for exercise, and one time Juan María was noticed by the governor's daughter on her way to Mass. She fell in love with him at first sight and said to her father, "Let this man go free. I'm going to marry him." The governor granted his daughter's wish, and Juan María was taken to a hotel room, where they cleaned him up and put him into a fresh suit of clothes.

Juana María heard all about it. With the help of her prison guard she had a white shroud made for herself. Then she ordered a dagger, a lantern, and a long heavy chain. The night of the wedding dance was held at the governor's palace. As soon as it was dark Juana María came out of the prison in her white shroud, wrapped in her chain, with the dagger tucked in her belt. When people saw her coming through the streets, carrying the lantern and rattling the chain, they fled in terror. They could hear her crying out:

*This is the road of my desire,
If any who stops me has two thousand lives,
Two thousand times he'll expire.*

She was still wailing when she got to the governor's mansion. The dance was in full swing. Juan María came to open the door, and when he saw who it was, he took her into the bridal chamber without a word. She said, "You know why I've come. To honor our vow." Then he threw himself across the bed, and she drove the dagger into his heart.

Back out on the streets, she started wailing again:

*This is the road of my desire,
If any who stops me has two thousand lives,
Two thousand times he'll expire.*

When she got to the prison, she allowed herself to be locked up again as peacefully as if nothing had happened.

Then somebody discovered the dead bridegroom, and the place was in an uproar. The dance turned into a wake. The next morning they put Juan María into a casket and carried him to church, to be buried the following day. That night Juana María came out of the prison again in her white shroud. The entire city was still in shock. She went through the streets, wailing and rattling her chain. When she got to the church, she opened Juan María's coffin and stabbed him once more for good measure.

Then just as she stepped out of the church a pack of devils snatched her and dragged her off. As they passed the prison gates, Juana María