

Lion's Three Whiskers

Transcription of Peter's telling of "The Lion's Whiskers", a traditional folktale from Ethiopia Peter learned from Eshu Bumpus.

Once there was a woman who was having some troubles with her son, so she went to the house of the wise old man and knocked on the door.

"Oh, wonderful, a visitor. When I was young I used to get visitors all the time, but now I hardly ever get visitors. How wonderful of you to come, please do come in; would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you, I've come for help."

"Certainly, I will do anything I can to help you; tell me what I can do."

"It's my son. When he was young we played together all the time; we ate and played and slept at the same time, we did everything together and I always knew what he was doing and feeling. And now he's a teenager, and he leaves the house on his own, and when I comes back I say "Where have you been, what have you been doing?" and he answers, "Oh, nowhere, really, nothing important." And I feel like I don't know him anymore and I wonder if you can help me."

"Oh, teenagers, they can be very difficult. I am sorry, I don't know what I could do for you."

"But I thought you were the wise old man, I thought you knew magic, isn't there some magic you can use?"

"Oh, yes, I used to do magic all the time when I was young, but I don't remember much of it any more."

"Can't you remember just one magic potion for teenagers?"

"Well, no, a magic potion for teenagers? Well, yes, yes, actually, I did know one once."

"Well what was it? Can you try to remember, can you make it for me?"

"Oh, it was so long ago...let's see...we need a bowl, and we need some water from the river, and we need some of this stuff and, hmmm, it needs one more ingredient....oh! it needs a whisker from the lion, it needs three lion's whiskers. I am so sorry, I haven't had a lion's whisker for years."

"That's all you need, is three lion's whiskers? I'll go get them."

"No, no, that would be too dangerous, don't go..."

But it was too late. The woman left the Old Man's house and ran to the butcher's and got herself a big piece of meat. Then she went through the forest, through the jungle, to the plain. She saw the lion's cave on the other side of the plain. She walked halfway across the plain, laid the piece of meat down on the ground, walked back to the edge of the forest, stopped, turned, and waited.

After a while she saw the lion appear at the mouth of his cave. The lion looked at the woman and she looked back at the lion and did not move. The lion started walking across the field towards the woman with just the tip of his tail twitching, looking at her the whole time. When he got to the meat the lion lowered his head down, picked up the meat, and carried it back to his cave.

Every day after that the woman would go to the field, lay a piece of meat down, walk back and stand and watch as the lion came out of his cave, looked at the woman, walked across the field, picked up the meat, and took it back into his cave. But every day the woman left the meat a little closer to the cave and every day she stood a little closer to the meat.

One day, a few weeks later, the woman got some meat from the butcher, walked across the field, all the way across the field right up to the lion's cave, laid the meat right there at the mouth of the cave, and stood right next to the cave. The lion came out of the cave, and looked at the woman. She did not move, but started singing:
Ishay Oluah, kolay gazheo, Ishay Oluah, Kolay goshayo

The lion laid down and started eating the meat. As the lion ate the meat the woman kept singing. With one hand she stroked the lion's mane, and with the other hand she took hold of one of the lion's whiskers and pulled:

"ROOOAAAR" The lion stood up and took a step towards the woman. She did not move, but went back to her singing.

As the lion ate the woman kept stroking him and pulled two more whiskers out.

"I have the whiskers, I have the whiskers," she whispered to herself as she backed away from the lion, all the way to the edge of the field, and then ran through the forest, back to the village, and knocked on the Wise Old Man's door, knock, knock, knock!

"Oh, wonderful, a visitor. When I was young I used to get visitors all the time, but now I hardly ever get visitors. How wonderful of you to come, please do come in; would you like some coffee?"

"No, no, look, I've got the whiskers, I've got the three whiskers!"

"Whiskers, what whiskers?" asked the Old Man.

“You know, you know, I came weeks ago and told you about the troubles I was having with my teenage son and asked you for a potion for teenagers, and you started making one, but you needed three lion’s whiskers and didn’t have them, so I went and got them, it took me weeks but I have them, here they are!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, my memory isn’t what it used to be. There’s no potion for teenagers, how did you ever do that? How did you get the whiskers?”

“Well, it was very difficult; I had to get meat. I had to go back every day. I had to be very persistent, I had to be very patient, I had to be very gentle.”

The Old Man smiled at the woman, and she said to the Old Man. “Well, I guess I’ll go back to my son, now.” And she did; she went back to her son.