

Story 1906 (Dictated)

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of Bursa Province

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The Son of the Fisherman

Once there was and once there wasn't,¹ time within time,²
when the sieve was in the straw,³ there was a fisherman and his wife

¹This is a tekerleme, a formulaic narrative device used to introduce many a Turkish tale. It is a rhymed nonsense jingle that charms and amuses listeners, sharpens their wits, and prepares them for the fact that a tale is about to begin. Much of the nonsense is based on absurdity and paradox. Frequently a tekerleme will be longer than this one. Occasionally it may become a tour de force that runs for a page or more.

²"Time within Time" refers to the chronology of events in an interior world. A person may dream or fantasize at great length during only a few seconds of ordinary time. One may even seem to spend many years in that other world within; one may take a job, marry, have children, and see them grow to maturity. In Turkish this is called Zaman Zaman İçinde. It is elsewhere sometimes referred to as "Frozen Time" or "Moments of Eternity."

³The humor here derives from the fact that the sieve is never in the straw; the straw is in the sieve. It refers to the threshing of grain on farms too small or too remote to have available modern threshing machines. On a dried-clay threshing floor, stalks of grain are thrown. They are chopped up into small pieces by a döven, a wooden rectangle from the bottom of which protrude scores of sharp pieces of flint. When the chopped-up mass is winnowed, the chaff blows downwind, but there fall directly to the floor kernels of grain and small bits of the stem to which grain is still attached. Both the kernels and the small pieces of straw to which some kernels are still attached are then thrown into a sieve (about 30 inches in diameter). The kernels fall through onto a sheet of canvas, but the grain-laden straw remains in the sieve.

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who lived in a small village. The wife became pregnant, but before the child, a boy, was born, the fisherman grew ill and died.

This boy never saw his father, and he did not know what kind of work his father had done. When he was old enough to go to school, however, the other children would say to him, "Come, fisherman's son," or "Go, fisherman's son."

One day when he went home from school, this boy said to his mother, "Why do my classmates call me son of the fisherman?"

She answered, "Apparently they like the sound of that expression."

A few days later, however, he went into the attic of their home, where he found a complete set of fishing equipment. He realized then that his father had been a fisherman and that that was why his friends called him son of the fisherman. Going to his mother again, he asked, "Why didn't you tell me that my father was a fisherman?"

She said, "Before he died, your father compelled me to promise that I would not tell you that."

One day soon after that he said, "Mother, tomorrow I shall go fishing." While he was sleeping that night he had a dream in which an old man with a long beard appeared before him. That old man said, "Son, you will go fishing tomorrow, and you will work all day for

The final threshing of these bits of straw is done by the fingers of the threshers.

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nothing. Then when early evening arrives, you will catch just one fish. On your way home you will meet some Jewish people⁴ who will bid against each other in an effort to buy that fish. Do not sell the fish until the price offered for it becomes very high.” After having said this, the old man disappeared.

On the following day the boy took the fishing equipment and went to a large stream. There he cast his fishing line into the water, but he continued to do that all day long without any results. Then as the sun was setting, he at last caught just one fish. As he was heading for home, he was stopped by some Jewish people who wished to buy his fish. This was just what the old man had said would happen. When the bidding reached the unusually high price of ten liras, he sold the fish and took the money home to his mother. When he entered the door of the house, his mother asked, “Did you catch any fish today?”

“Yes, near the end of the day I finally caught one fish,” said the boy. “But then I met some Jewish people who offered me ten liras for that fish, and so I sold it. That was the source of the money I just gave you.”

That night he again saw in a dream the same old man with the long beard. That old man gave him the same message that he had

⁴There is no suggestion anywhere in the tale about why these people should be Jewish. They have no ethnic attributes, and there are no pejorative remarks made about them.

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provided the day before. On the following day he caught just one fish, but this time the bidding for it among the Jewish people reached twenty liras. Again he took the money home to his mother and explained to her how he had gotten it.

On the third night the old man with the long beard appeared again, but this time he gave the boy different instructions. He said, "Son, you have now gone fishing for two days, and at the end of each day you sold for a very high price the fish that you had caught. Tomorrow you will catch a much larger fish, but do not sell it. Take along with you a large metal container. Fill it with water and place the large fish that you will catch in that box. In that way you will reach home with a living fish." Having said this, the old man disappeared.

During the third day of fishing the boy caught nothing until the sun had begun to set. Then he caught a large and beautiful fish with red scales. He placed it in the metal container filled partly with water and set out for home. Once again he met the same Jewish people, and again they wanted to buy his fish, but this time he refused to sell it to them. When he arrived home, he dug a broad, shallow hole in the garden and filled it with water. Then he took the fish from the metal container and placed it in that pool. He did not know, however, that that beautiful fish was really a fairy girl.

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On the following day the boy went fishing again. While he was away, his mother decided to visit one of her neighbors. While they were both away, the fish came out of the pool and changed into a beautiful fairy girl. She cleaned the house and cooked some delicious food. Then she returned to the pool and became a fish again.

When the boy returned and saw how clean the house was, he was surprised. When he tasted some of the food that had been cooked, he was even more surprised. He asked his mother, "Did you do all of this cleaning and cooking?"

"No, I did not."

Every day after that, the house was cleaned and food was cooked by someone while the son of the fisherman and his mother were away. The boy kept wondering and wondering who it was who did this work for them. One day he remained at home and hid himself in the house. After awhile the fish came from the pool, turned into a girl, and began to work in the house. When the son of the fisherman saw how beautiful she was, he grabbed her and would not let her return to the pool. After a few years she and the son of the fisherman were married.

One day the son of the padishah passed by, and he was surprised to see such a very beautiful young woman at the home of the son of the fisherman. He wondered, "How could such a poor man

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persuade such a beautiful girl to marry him?" He called the son of the fisherman to the palace and gave him this order: "Even though it is the middle of winter, you are to bring me tomorrow a bunch of fresh grapes."⁵

The son of the fisherman, very upset, went home and told his wife the seemingly impossible task assigned to him by the prince. She said to him, "Do not worry about this. Go to the place on the bank of the stream where you were standing when you caught me. You will find a woman seated on the opposite bank. Give her my greetings and ask her to bring you a bunch of grapes from her garden."

The son of the fisherman followed the instructions of his wife. Going to the place on the bank of the stream where he had caught his wife in her fish form, he said to the woman on the opposite bank,

⁵From here onward the child narrator does not understand this popular story. In all other variants the ruler or his son persecutes the hero repeatedly in an effort to secure for himself the hero's wife. The hero is given tasks so dangerous to accomplish that he will almost certainly be killed attempting to complete them. Should he fail to complete each task assigned, he will be executed for his failure. In this tale there is one "mission impossible" given to him, and there is no threat of death connected with it. The hero's supernatural wife always makes it possible for him to complete safely his tasks, and here the hero's wife uses her supernatural connection to secure fresh grapes in winter. When that fruit is delivered to the son of the padishah, that prince enjoys eating them and gives no further thought to the hero's beautiful wife.

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“Aunt Fatma, I have brought you greetings from your daughter. Will you give me a bunch of grapes from your garden?”

The woman said nothing, but she immediately dived into the water. A few minutes later she reappeared. Again, she said nothing, but she handed the son of the fisherman a large bunch of fresh grapes.

As he walked toward the palace, he occasionally pulled a grape from the bunch and ate it. Each time that he did this, however, the grape taken was replaced by four or five new grapes.

When the son of the fisherman reached the palace, he presented the bunch of grapes to the son of the padishah. Very pleased, the prince sat down and began eating the delicious grapes.