

Story 1929 (1995 Tape 1)

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Flea's Efforts to Save His Friend

Once there was and once there was not,¹ time within time,²
when the sieve was in the straw,³ when the flea was a barber and the

¹Formulaic opening for many Turkish folktales, this is known as a tekerleme. A full tekerleme may run to several lines, though most narrators nowadays use only one or two parts of a tekerleme. The tekerleme is a nonsense jingle filled with paradoxes and other comic incongruities. It is meant both to amuse and to alert the audience to the fact that a tale is to follow. Some of the humor is lost in translation because it is difficult to reproduce in English the rhyme scheme.

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

Story 1929

camel a porter, when I was rocking my mother's cradle and sending my father off to school each day—well, back at that time there lived in a certain country Flea and Louse, who were good friends.

One day these two friends decided to take a journey together. They walked and walked. They walked over hills and across plains. They walked six months and a winter, but when they looked back, they discovered that the distance they had gone was no more than the length of half a grain of wheat.⁴

One day when they were walking along together, they came to a mud puddle. Spry Flea easily jumped over the puddle, but when slow Louse tried to do the same thing, it fell into the puddle. Wishing to rescue his friend, Flea ran to Pig and said, "Alas, my friend has fallen into a mud puddle where he may drown. Give me one of your bristles so that I can use it to reach out to him and pull him out of the puddle."

Pig said to Flea, "Go to Apple Tree and ask it for an apple for me. When you bring me the apple, I shall give you the bristle that you want."

onto a sheet of canvas, but the grain-laden straw remains in the sieve. The final threshing of these bits of straw is done by the fingers of the threshers.

⁴A favorite narrative formulaic device used in Turkish tales to indicate extended travel.

Story 1929

Flea then ran to Apple Tree and said, "Alas, my friend Louse has fallen into a mud puddle and may drown if I cannot rescue him. If you will give me an apple for Pig, then he will give me a bristle with which I can reach out into the puddle to pull Louse to safety."

Apple Tree said to Flea, "Go to Crow and ask him to stop perching on my branches. If he will stop his perching, I shall give you an apple."

Flea went to Crow and said to him, "Alas, Crow, dearest Crow, please stop perching on the branches of Apple Tree. If you will do that, Apple Tree will give me an apple for Pig, who will then give me a bristle with which I can reach Louse and rescue him from a mud puddle."

Crow answered, "Go to Grain Dealer and get me some barley, and then I shall promise not to perch on the branches of Apple Tree."

Going to the seller of grain, Flea said, "Dear Grain Dealer, please give me some barley for Crow, for that will make him stop perching on the branches of Apple Tree. In exchange for that, Apple Tree will provide me with an apple for Pig, who will then give me one of his bristles with which I can reach to Louse and pull him from the mud puddle before he drowns."

Story 1929

Grain Dealer responded, "If you will go to Mouse and make him agree to stop gnawing on the walls of my storage bins, I shall pay you for your trouble with some barley."

Going next to Mouse, Flea said, "Dear Mouse, dear Mouse, please stop gnawing on the walls of the storage bins of Grain Dealer. If you will agree to stop, then Grain Dealer will pay me with barley for Crow, who, in turn, will promise to stop perching on the branches of Apple Tree. In exchange for that promise, Apple Tree will provide me with an apple for Pig, who will then give me one of his bristles with which I can reach out to Louse and pull him from the mud puddle before he drowns."

To that request Mouse answered, "Go back to Grain Dealer and tell him that I shall stop gnawing on the walls of his grain bins if he will force Cat to stop trying to catch me."

When Cat was given that order by his owner, Grain Dealer, Cat said, "I will catch Mouse and devour him, and after that I shall go and bask in the sunshine."

All the efforts of Flea had been wasted and, as a result, he was unable to rescue his friend Louse from the mud puddle.