

Stories from the Cultural Awareness Team

Fisijra

by Alhanouf Al-Kuthairi

Once upon a time, there was a fisherman who lived a quiet life in a small house by the sea. Indeed, he loved the sea so much that he went fishing from sunrise to sunset. He had a wife and only one daughter, her name was Hamda.

One day, her mother passed away and suddenly Hamda became isolated because her father was gone fishing all day, every day. As she mourned the tragic loss of her dear mother, month after month passed by and Hamda became very thin. Feeling extremely lonely, bored and depressed, Hamda thought to herself: “Why don’t I encourage my father to remarry? Maybe I could have a mother and a sister or brother who would understand me and end my suffering.” That night after her father returned home with a plentiful catch of fish, Hamda went to her father and said: “Hey, Dad, have you thought about getting married again? If you do, perhaps the new wife would love me, take care of me, and help me in house duties. I am terribly alone, and I am going crazy from boredom.” With a dash of shock and a sparkle in his eye reflecting his sadness, he replied: «I’m afraid a new wife will not love you as much as you think she will, and what’s worse, she may not treat you well. Blind to her father’s wisdom, Hamda quickly snapped back with glee: “Then I will choose your wife!” After his long mourning period ended, her father married and 10 months later Hamda had a new sister in-law, named Sarah. Sadly, as Sarah grew up, her stepmother treated Hamda badly. In fact, the stepmother often did not feed her and dressed her in old, ragged clothes to make her look plain. On top of that, she forced her do all the house duties while her daughter Sarah enjoyed extravagant clothes and an easy life.

One day, the fisherman returned home with his daily catch of fish. As part of her daily routine, Hamda took the fish and began to clean them in front of the sea. Among them, there was a big golden fish that stood out from the others. Suddenly, the fish spoke: “Set me free and I’ll remove your sadness.” Hamda was amazed by the voice, and looked around to find where it was coming from. Then, to her great surprise, she saw the mouth of the golden fish open. Shockingly, it repeated the request. In a low and earnest voice, Hamda pleaded: «My stepmother will be upset, so I’m afraid that I can’t just let you go.» At that very moment, the golden fish turned it’s head. In a similarly hushed voice, it tried to reassure Hamda: «Don’t worry about your stepmother. I’ll take care of you when she becomes upset.» Feeling confident and hopeful by the magical voice of the golden fish, Hamda returned it to the sea. The moment his head and tail touched the water, the golden fish sprang up and said to Hamda: “If you want anything, simply shout ‘Fisijra’ near the sea, and I will be with you straightway.” When Hamda went back home, her stepmother grabbed her by the neck and yelled: “You scammer! Did you eat the golden fish? Did you? Did you? Did you? It had the most meat out of all of them.” Then she pushed Hamda across the floor into an unpainted concrete wall. When she recovered from the shock, in a low and nervous voice, Hamda lied: “It wasn’t my fault. That fish slipped away into the sea while I was cleaning the others. I did not eat it. Please don’t hurt me. I didn’t eat it!» In her continued fit of anger, the stepmother screamed: “You fool! Get out of my house or I’ll beat you and tie you to the kitchen table with nothing to eat. In fact, now that I think about it: I’m not going to give you lunch or dinner today.

Go away before I change my mind and regret my kindness to your insults and lies!” Hamda was, again, disheartened and scared. Crying loudly she ran to the sea: «Fisijra! Fisijra! I am hungry, do you have any food?» As the vibration of her voice splashed across the crashing waves, in the blink of an eye, Fisijra appeared with an amazing banquet and Hamda enjoyed the tasty dinner by the sea while chatting with Fisijra. It was usual for the stepmother to punish Hamda by hitting her nothing to eat, and now Hamda felt enormously lucky to have Fisijra’s friendship and support.

One day, the Sheikh’s son decided to get married, and he asked his mother to choose a suitable bride. His mother held a party in the Al-Mirqab neighbourhood. Among the party attendees were the fisherman’s wife and daughter, Sarah. Before going to the party, the stepmother screamed at Hamda, telling her that she would not take Hamda with them because she was motherless. Then she continued: “Clean the house and stable by the time we return from the party, or I’ll punish you like never before!” After Hamda finished cleaning, she forced her weary body to the sea and began crying. As her teardrops fell and the waves washed them out to sea, Fisijra suddenly appeared without Hamda calling for her: “My dear child, why are you crying?” Fisijra queried. When Hamda finished telling the story, Fisijra took on a stern look and with a splash of his tail dressed Hamda up in a very pretty way, giving her golden shoes and an elegant dress garnished with coral beads. Then, with another splash of his tale, Hamda suddenly appeared at the party. Attendees were shocked by her beauty and asked about her clothes and golden shoes. On her way home from the party, Hamda’s golden shoe got stuck in the mud. As she tried to take it out, she unwittingly made struggling noises that caught the attention of a group of men standing nearby, and the Sheikh was among them. As soon as Hamda saw these men starting to move toward her, Hamda quickly ran away with fear, leaving her shoe in the mud. Even though the Sheikh only briefly caught sight of Hamda, he quickly shouted to his guards, “Find this girl!” All through that night the guards tried to find Hamda but couldn’t. Then the Sheikh told his mother that he would not marry any other woman but the owner of the lost shoe. When Hamda returned home, she told her stepmother what had happened. With one sharp, spiteful breath, the stepmother and cackled: «Hehehe...Then who cleaned the house and stable?» Later, the Sheikh’s mother went to each and every house around the village looking for the stunning beauty who wore the golden shoe. As the Sheikh’s mother made her way to the fisherman’s house, the stepmother heard news of her approach and hid Hamda in the stable. After entering the house, the Sheikh’s mother put the golden shoe onto the fat foot of the Hamda’s stepsister, Sarah, who shouted: “Ouch! Take it off. It’s too tight!” The Sheikh’s mother grieved: “This is the last house in the village. I don’t understand why the golden shoe doesn’t fit any of the girls. How could I have failed my son?” With deep regret and sadness, the Sheikh’s mother slowly left the humble fisherman’s house. Pausing for a moment at the gate, she was startled to hear a rooster, apparently begging for her attention: “Kokoko! Hamda is in the stable. Kokoko!” She shook her head in complete shock at hearing a rooster speak. Then, glancing back at the stepmother with a knowing look, the Sheikh’s mother headed directly to the stable and tried the shoe on Hamda. The Sheikh’s mother smiled and looked with kindness at Hamda’s gentle demeanor. Hamda’s head was bent to face the ground for some time, not knowing how to explain the situation. When Hamda eventually raised her head from the golden shoe and her eyes met those of the Sheikh’s mother, her future mother-in-law gleamed: “Well of course it fits perfectly.” After some time together with the Sheikh’s mother, Hamda eventually married the Sheikh and lived happily ever after.