

"The Fish Brother"

A Tamil Folktale

There were seven brothers and one sister. The youngest brother was a fish in the river. The sister used to take food to her brothers every day. On the way to the six older brothers, she would give the youngest brother, the fish, a ball of rice; and he would carry her across the river as she stood on his back.

One day the sister did not have enough rice to feed the fish-brother, so she made a ball of dirt, stuck a few remaining rice grains on its surface, and gave him that. When the fish tasted the dirt-ball, it thought, "How could my sister give me this to eat? Is this the thanks I get for carrying her across the river every day?" Enraged, he cut her foot with his sharp fin.

She told the rest of her family that the fish had cut her, and they killed the fish. They buried him beside the river. A rosebush with many flowers grew over his grave.

Life went on for the family. Soon it was time for the sister's marriage. All the preparations had been done, except: there were no flowers anywhere in the town! Nowhere! They looked everywhere, but found nothing. Then one of the brothers said, "There is one beautiful rosebush I know of. It grows beside the river, right over where we buried the fish who cut our sister".

The older brother went first to the rosebush, and sang,
Flowers, flowers, flowers,
We need flowers for sister's wedding.
Flowers for her wedding garland.

But the rosebush sang back,
Don't pluck me,
Don't touch me!
I was given a ball of dirt to eat,
And I was punished unfairly.

The second oldest brother went singing,
Flowers, flowers, flowers,
We need flowers for sister's wedding.
Flowers for her wedding garland.

But again the rosebush sang back,
Don't pluck me,
Don't touch me!
I was given a ball of dirt to eat,
And I was punished unfairly.

Again and again, the brothers went to pick the flowers, and the bush refused.

Finally, the mother and father came and, despite the rosebush's protests, they were able to pluck flowers from the bush.

They took the flowers home, and the flowers were woven into a marriage garland. It's said that a garland put on a good person will shine brightly and that a garland put on a bad person will fade and wilt. That's what happened here. When they garlanded the bride, the flowers faded and wilted. The flowers looked terrible. At this point, her parents said to their daughter, "Go to your brother and ask for forgiveness. Then come back."

The sister went to the spot where her brother had been buried, and said, "What I did was wrong. I didn't have enough food that day. That's why I gave you that dirt-ball covered with rice. Please forgive me, and send me back with your blessings." When he heard this, the fish-brother blessed her, and wished her a happy married life.

This time when the garland was put around the sister's neck, it shone brightly. The sister and her groom were married, and all were happy.

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