

About the Stories



TRACING THE LINEAGE of folktales is a tricky business. They travel so much that, in the end, we're usually left wondering just where, when, and how any given story first came to be told. In the following pages I tell a little about the stories that appear before each chapter of the book. I have tried to say something about their origin, when known, as well as how I first came to learn them.

The Beggar King (pages 1–10 and 213–16)

Originally from the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Gittin, this tale has appeared in many variations over the years. The legend of the magical stonecutting powers of the worm known as the Shamir seems to have grown out of the biblical restriction against using metal to build the holy arc of the covenant.

This tale echoes others known in Muslim countries, and the same Ashmodai may be from the Persian Aeshma-Daeva, the demon Aeshma. In *Jewish Folktales* selected and retold by Pinhas Sadeh, (Anchor Books, 1989), the author speculates that the tale of Solomon's wanderings may be a metaphoric recounting of King David's wanderings among the Philistines, during which time he pretended to be insane.

In the abbreviated version of the story that appears in this book, I have drawn upon several different texts and included some touches of my own. I first learned of the story from Howard Schwartz's groundbreaking work of Jewish folklore, *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales* (Harper and Row, 1983), which I recommend along with Sadeh's book to anyone who would like to read a fuller version of this story and other stories about Solomon and Ashmodai, king of the demons.

The Lost Horse (page 11)

Generally attributed to Lao Tzu, author of the *Tao Te Ching*, this tale expresses one of the core tenants of Taoism. The story seems to have been further shaped by the poet and prince Liu An, (179–122 B.C.E.) in his book *Huai Nan Tzu*.

I heard frequent references to this story during my travels in Hong Kong and China; when something went wrong people would say *sai weng shih ma*—the old man lost his horse.

I first heard the story from a psychic in the Mission District

of San Francisco, and was later given a written version by storyteller Ruth Stotter.

The Cricket Who Jumped to the Moon (page 29)

This original tale was inspired by memories of my father. I also drew upon a motif I found in a Burmese folktale, “The Musician of Tagaung,” which told of a boy whose father dreamed he would someday become the greatest harp player Burma had ever known. The boy tried and tried to play the harp, but had no talent for it, breaking the strings and ruining harp after harp. It was many years later, long after his death, that people found the broken harps, and began to invent stories of his musical abilities. So it was, over time, that he became known as a great harp player.

Optimism and Pessimism (page 49)

Though this story is quite well known, tracking down its origins was quite a challenge. I finally found what seems to be its earliest known written ancestor in a strange little book, buried deep within the stacks of the San Francisco Main Library. The book seems to be a story in itself; its title page was so intriguing that it seems worth reprinting here:

Waggish Tales of the Czechs
Originally entitled
Gesta Czechorum

Done into English out of the original 15th Century Czech manuscript of Rehor Frantisek, of Czaslau, sometime Almoner to the count of Zikmund, King over both Bohemia and Hungary, and Holy Roman Emperor, and later Master of the Wardrobe to the Magnata Bohdan Beverlik of Tynist by C. D. S. Feals, in an adaptation to the reading requirements of the American public by

Norman Lockridge

The Candide Press

1947

Therein lies a tale entitled “A Peasant Boy’s Faith,” in which three rich children attempt to play a dirty trick on a poor, but earnest, boy by leaving horse manure in his Christmas stocking. He responds by saying that he was given a horse by Santa.

I’ve known this story for many years, but cannot remember when I first heard it.

The Vow of Silence (page 61)

This appears to be a variant of a tale popular in Finland—also recorded in Norway and Ireland—known as “Too Much Talk,” about three men who retreat to a quiet glen at the far end of the world, taking a vow of silence. After seven years the first one speaks: “I heard a cow lowing.” The other two are angry but silent. Then, seven years later, the second says, “It was not a cow,

but a bull!” Seven years after that the third says, “I’m leaving this place. There’s too much talk!”

I first heard the story, while I was a student at Stanford, from Nick Burbules, the resident associate in my co-op.

The Search for Truth (page 81)

Since hearing this story from Lenny, I have tried to track down its origins without success. Though I have found written versions of it, the authors of those have also been unable to track down the source, which seems to be as elusive as truth itself. I attribute it to India merely because the story mentions the country; I would welcome information from anyone who knows more.

The Border Guard (page 97)

Like many of the shorter stories in this book, versions of this tale are often attributed to Sufi trickster Mullah Nasrudin. Sometimes, instead of a bicycle, he has a wheelbarrow full of sand.

I had heard this story long before Lenny told it to me, from my friend Charlie Lenz, an Austrian who lives in Switzerland near the Austrian border, where he teaches karaté.

The Appointment (page 107)

Known in many variations throughout Middle Eastern folklore, this tale became the namesake for John O’Hara’s 1934 novel,

Appointment in Samarra. O'Hara heard the stories from William Somerset Maugham who also wrote a well-known literary version of the tale, with the story told from Death's perspective.

I knew the story before Lenny told it to me, having first heard it in 1989 from Dr. August Zemo, headmaster of the Riverside School in Thalwil, Switzerland, where I served briefly as a storyteller-in-residence.

The Wisdom of Chelm (page 127)

These are but a few of the many tales about the mythical Jewish town of fools. There is, in fact, an actual city of Chelm in modern-day Poland, forty miles to the east of Lublin. Though the city once had a sizable Jewish population, no one knows just how it came to be associated with foolishness.

Many of the tales told of Chelm are told of other villages of fools as well, including Gotham in England, Mols in Denmark, Schildburg in Germany, and Kampen in Holland. After hearing my mother refer to the Chelm stories, I was formally introduced to them by Mrs. Bertha Molatsky, my second-grade religious-school teacher and the librarian at the Temple City Library. Seeing I was bored stiff, she sent me to read *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories* by Isaac Bashevis Singer, for which I am forever grateful.

Buried Treasures (page 137)

This is my version of a Jewish story, often attributed to Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav. A very similar story is told in England as “The Peddler of Swaffham,” in which a poor peddler lives in a house with a cherry tree in front, and dreams of a bridge in London. He travels there, finding nothing, but learns of a guard’s dream, which sends him back to find that the treasure he sought was buried under his very own tree.

All these stories express one of the great themes in folklore: returning home to find what you had not seen before. I first learned of the story from my father.

The Strawberry (page 156)

Attributed to the Buddha, this is a classic Zen tale—very short, with an ending that may sound unresolved to a Western mind. Like Zen koans, these stories are meant to open up the listener’s heart and mind.

I first learned of this story from the book *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*, compiled by Paul Reps (Anchor Books, 1989).

Hershel’s Last Laugh (page 171)

A literary cousin to Mullah Nasrudin, Hershel of Ostropol was an actual person, though many of the stories are undoubtedly

apocryphal. An early stand-up comedian, he served as the official court jester to Rabbi Baruch of Medzibozh, the grandson of the great storyteller, Rabbi Israel, the Baal Shem Tov. According to legend, Rabbi Baruch lacked the wisdom of his grandfather and appointed Hershel to distract from his many mistakes. This, itself, turned out to be a mistake, as Hershel spent the rest of his life making Rabbi Baruch the butt of his jokes.

As with the Chelm stories, I first learned of Hershel from my mother's references.

The Happy Man's Shirt (page 180)

This story, which was originally told about Alexander the Great in the Greek literary work *Pseudo Callisthenes*, was popular in medieval times. Many variations exist around the world, including a Jewish version from Afghanistan and a Danish version, which became the basis for Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Shoes of Happiness."

The version in this book is adapted from several tales, including one, collected in Italy in 1912, from a housewife by the name of Orsola Minon, which appears in Italo Calvino's book, *Italian Folktales* (Pantheon, 1981). I learned of the background of the story from *Wisdom Tales From Around the World* by Heather Forest (August House, 1996).

The Fox in the Garden (page 193)

Many variations of this tale are known, including one of Aesop's Fables and a tale collected by the Brothers Grimm, in which a wolf overeats in a smokehouse and cannot escape through the same hole he had entered. Other versions have been found in Hawaii, Italy, and throughout Africa.

The double bind in this story, where the fox must first fast to enter, then fast again to leave the garden, seems to be a peculiarly Jewish twist. I first heard the tale at my father's funeral, from Rabbi Frank Ackerman, esq.

The Secret of Happiness (page 206)

Arguably the most famous trickster in the world, Nasrudin is known in the folklore of the Middle East, North Africa, India, and China. He goes by many names, including Hodja, Hoca, Khaji, Jocha, or simply Mullah, which is Persian for teacher. Though his stories are often secular, they are most treasured by Sufis, the mystical sect of Islam.

Although many countries claim to be his home, he is generally believed to have been born in Turkey, sometime around the year 1208. Legend has it that he is buried there, in a grave that has a heavily locked gate, but with no fence around it.

I first heard "The Secret of Happiness" from Elisheva Hart, a puppeteer and storyteller in San Francisco.