

Two women

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Once there were two women who were married to the same man. One of them had children, but the other was barren. Now the children of the one woman were wasting away with hunger. The man was called to appear before the *ghuseri*, the village council, where all the men had gathered. His children were there, picking the lice off their bodies. So the council asked the man, "What are your children eating?" And he answered them, "My children eat lice." Can you even believe that? His children were eating the lice as their food! Now all the men at the *ghuseri* were present. So the man was asked, "And is your hunger satisfied with lice?"

"No," was his answer.

"So what in the world did you do to get yourself in this situation?"

"Nothing," he sulked. "I wasn't feeling too well, but it's nothing".

You hear that? There wasn't anything sicker about him than there usually is among men! So the men persisted, "Is that really what you're giving your kids to eat? Lice? Is that food?" The man himself was living with the barren woman. Since she didn't have any children to cook for, the little bit of greens that she could gather all went into feeding the man. So the man got up from the *ghuseri*. He gave his wife a skinny goat, one with hardly any fur. So off she went. She went far, far away to look for food. She was travelling back to the place she'd come from. I don't know the name of the place, but it was a long way off.

Before she arrived, she met two young men, *batana*. They had met up because the road was so long, and there were no trees along the way to block the view. So the *batana* had come up to her and asked her, "Where are you going?" She answered, "I've been given this goat kid to sell so that I can find food for my children." The *batana* told her, "Give it to us." Now as they were talking they arrived at the village gateway to their home. The *batana* were the deceased from her clan; her own two older brothers who had died! They told her, "We're going in here, but you need to listen to what I say. Follow me. But if I say anything to you, don't answer a word. Don't say anything." So they went and went.

When they arrived there, the woman saw her mother. How the mother cried and cried, "*Hii, hii, hii!* My sons, why have you brought my daughter so-and-so to join us? Oh, I don't even have a stool for her to sit on!" That's when the young man answered, "No, mother, I haven't brought her to stay. Listen to how we met one another on the road. She had been cast off, looking for food for her children." Then the mother took her daughter and returned her to the dividing wall. The woman's two children were there too, and one of them said, "Mother, why is there a strange smell here?" The mother answered, "This one has one kind of smell and that one has another kind of smell". But the children persisted in asking, "Why is there a strange smell here?"

The woman took out her gourd. She took it and cleaned it, and then she cooked for her children with a small cooking pot. For two nights she was there. On the third night the *batana*, her older brothers, brought her back. She had been given one *sonjo* bean, one millet seed, one pigeon pea. That is, of each kind of food she'd been given one seed. So when she came back home, she came

back with her older brothers, and into every leather storage bag in the house she placed one seed. If it was a cowpea, she put it here. A single millet seed, she put it there. Sorghum, a single seed there. A mung bean here, millet there, a lablab bean over there. When they were done putting the seeds into different storage bags, they took the small lamb, slaughtered it, and stretched out its skin. "I'm going now," said her brother. "You have forgotten me. You have forgotten me..."

The next morning the woman woke up and found her house completely filled up with food. All the storage bags were overflowing. The children had been eating lice as their food, but now it would be different. So the woman, as she was cooking, decided to serve up a platter for her husband, the man who had given her a goat kid to sell. She went over to bring the man some food. Can you believe that? She took the food over to her co-wife's house and placed the steaming dish in front of him. And what did he do? He ate it and finished the whole thing.

The next day she did the same; she cooked for her husband, put it in a dish, and brought it to him. By the third evening, the man decided to see for himself. The woman was still in the fields, but had left her two children sleeping in the doorway as guards. The woman had wanted to prevent him from entering, but he jumped over them and entered the house. Wherever he groped in the dark house, he found bags and bags filled with food. The whole house was full whenever he reached out to grab something. That's the hour he decided to act.

He went to the barren woman's house. She too was still in the fields. He went in, and began to pull up all the supporting beams and pillars. He drove out all the goat kids that had been inside, and the house collapsed. That's when the barren woman came home. In her anguish she was writhing on the ground. She wailed, though none heard her, "In the end, what was I supposed to have done?" After a while, she called the child of her co-wife, "Come here. Can you bring me some coals to light my fire anew?"

When the man heard what the child was supposed to do, he told her, "Go tell that woman, "Is it my fault that you aren't having any children?" Tell her to bring herself over here, or just send her 'piece' on over.. When the poor barren woman heard this, she cried out, "Yee!"

Now this is how the story has been told to me: She made a fire, and then put a burning brand inside herself between her legs. The next day the husband found her. Do you hear what I'm saying? This is exactly how the man found her. She had killed herself by stabbing a burning branch into her womb.