

The Tail (Tale) of the Little Monkey

The little monkey was a foolish creature, but he was not stupid; and he knew that if he were to prosper on the earth, he had to see the diviners and make ebó. Sitting at the mat, he watched as the elder, wizened priest cast his cowries again and again, and he was excited when he said finally, “Maferéfún Elegguá!”* If you hope to prosper on the earth, and tell your tale to your great-grandchildren, you must make ebó to that orisha.”

“And what might that ebó be, wise man?” asked the monkey.

The diviner detailed the ebó to the monkey carefully, and the monkey, having faith, made his ebó quickly. Before he left, the diviner told him, “You must remember that in life, a good thing is often paid for with a bad.” The monkey scratched his head; he did not understand the proverb. Undaunted, he then set out to find his luck and fortune in the world.

As he traveled, he was lucky enough to find a banana tree filled with a rack of ripe fruit. He was hungry and pulled the fruit down so he could eat. Another group of monkeys came along, and when they saw the monkey eating by himself, they asked, “We are starving, and you

have the last bunch of bananas from this tree. Will you share with us?"

The monkey agreed, and he offered them some fruit. Quickly, all the monkeys grabbed what they could, and they fled high into the trees, laughing.

"You took all my bananas!" the little monkey screamed after them.

"That's life," they laughed. "One good thing is paid for with a bad thing." They swung out of sight before the little monkey could answer. Thankfully, he had eaten enough before they stole the fruit that his hunger was abated.

The little monkey continued his travels, and he met an ox tied outside a slaughterhouse. The ox was old, and he hung his head as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. "Ox!" cried the monkey. "Why are you so sad? Why are you tied up outside of a slaughterhouse when you should be tied to a plow, and tilling the fields?"

"I am here because I am old," said the ox. "All my life I have served my master, and I have pulled the plow through the fields from sunup to sundown. I never missed a day's work; even if I was sick, I pulled that plow because that's what my master wanted me to do. But now I am old, and because I am too old to pull the plow, I am here to be killed."

"Killed?" screamed the monkey. "That is not fair. You worked all your life and this is your reward?"

"Remember this if you remember nothing else: A good thing is paid with a bad. That's just how life is."

"Nonsense," said the monkey. "I will save you, and you can run free!" Quickly, the little monkey used his tiny hands to undo the knots in the rope. Soon, the ox was free. "We can run into the forest and hide!" he said, jumping up and down with excitement.

He turned his back to the ox and started to run when a sharp, piercing pain burned his tail; the ox had caught it in his mouth, and flipped the monkey high over his head. He landed on the ground with a hard thump. "Why did you do that?" the monkey cried.

"Because you were standing in my way," he said, barely looking over his shoulder. As he lumbered off to the forest, he yelled out again, "A

good thing is paid with a bad—that's just how life is. Remember that, if you remember nothing else."

The monkey sat there in disbelief, rubbing his throbbing tail. When the ox was out of sight, he stood up and walked into the forest himself.

A few hours later the monkey smelled blood and death in the forest, and in fear, he scaled the highest tree. He clung to its branches, shaking, while he looked at the brush below. It was then that he noticed the mutilated body of the ox, half-eaten and discarded like trash. "I gave him a good thing, his freedom," thought the monkey, "and he found a bad thing, his death." He looked a little farther ahead, and saw the bodies of the monkeys who stole his bananas; they lay broken and bloody on the forest floor. "A good think is repaid with a bad thing . . . again." For quite some time the monkey hung in the branches, pondering those words. When he was convinced the murderer was nowhere near, he jumped down from the tree and kept walking through the forest.

The monkey walked for hours when he heard a soft growl followed by a whimpering mew; he stopped and listened. The sound seemed to come from the earth itself. "Who is there?" he asked, and listened as he heard an animal crying.

"Help me," it called out weakly.

The monkey walked carefully, looking into the bushes and up at the trees. "Where are you?" he asked.

"Down here," said a weak voice. The monkey stopped and looked down. He almost fell into a huge, gaping hole, and there at the bottom was a leopard. "I fell in this trap," he said, "and I can't get out." The monkey saw that the hole was filled with sharp spikes, and by some miracle, the leopard had avoided them all in his fall.

"Don't worry, I'll save you!" promised the monkey.

There was a tree close to the hole, and its branches reached out in the air over it. The little monkey reached up and pulled on the branch, but no matter how hard he pulled, he was not able to reach the leopard with it. "I have an idea," said the giant cat. "If you hang from the end

of the branch with both hands, your weight will pull it deeper into this hole; and then, if you let your tail down, I can grab it with my mouth, and you can swing me out of the hole."

The monkey saw the wisdom of the leopard's plan, and carefully, he extended his tail into the hole. The leopard grabbed onto it with his mouth, his teeth grazing the skin. "Ouch!" cried the monkey; and quickly, he swung the tiger out of the hole and onto the ground. The leopard let go, and the monkey rubbed his bleeding tail.

The smell of blood was too much for the leopard, and with a hungry growl, he lunged for the monkey, both front paws extended to grab him with his claws. But he missed, and again the leopard fell into the hole.

"You tried to kill me!" the monkey cried, swinging higher into the branches while the leopard leapt and bit at his tail. His mouth closed on air, and he fell back into the trap, slicing his skin on a spike as it narrowly missed his torso.

"No," cried the leopard. "I was not trying to kill you. I was trying to hug you out of joy for saving me. But that was foolish, and I'm trapped again. Please . . . help me out! I won't hurt you, I promise."

The foolish monkey began to scale down the tree to help the giant cat once more when Elegguá himself emerged from the forest. "Monkey?" he asked. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to save the leopard. I pulled him out of that hole once, but he fell in again. He's not too bright!" taunted the little monkey.

"Neither are you, little one," said Elegguá, smiling. "For haven't you learned yet that good things are often paid for with bad? You made ebó to me, and that's why you've made it this far with your foolishness, but I'm telling you, monkey, that if you pull that leopard out again, I'm going to let him eat you."

Those words frightened the monkey and convinced him that he was being foolish. He jumped down from the tree and landed at Elegguá's feet, and together, the two of them walked off in the forest. The leopard roared in anger, but he was trapped, and in time died of thirst and starvation.

What happened to the monkey after that? He learned to let people suffer their own follies, and he spent his days swinging from tree to tree, far above the cares and concerns of the world. He lived long enough to have children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and he made sure to tell each generation his tale so none of them would suffer as he did.

And that is the tale (tail) of the little monkey.