

Fiction Excerpt: The Tongue-Cut Sparrow

Long, long ago in Japan, there lived an old man and his wife. The old man was good, kind, and hardworking, but his wife was cross, mean, and bad-tempered. They had no children, so the old man kept a tiny sparrow as a pet. Every day when he came home from working in the woods, he loved to pet the little bird, talk to her, and feed her food from his own plate. The sparrow's sweet singing brought happiness into the old man's life. But his wife did not like the sparrow. She complained that her husband paid too much attention to a silly bird.

One morning, when the old man went away to cut wood, his wife prepared to wash clothes. On this day, she had made some starch, which she set out in a wooden bowl. While her back was turned, the sparrow hopped down on the edge of the bowl and pecked at some of the starch. When the old woman saw the sparrow, she got so mad that she grabbed a pair of scissors and cut off the sparrow's tongue. "Go away, you greedy thing!" she shrieked, and the poor bird flew away to the woods.

When the old man returned home and heard what had happened, he felt very sad for his pet. The next morning, he went to the woods to look for the sparrow. Everywhere he went he cried, "Oh sparrow, little sparrow! Where are you, my friend?"

The woods grew thick and dark, and the old man began to worry that he might never see the sparrow again. With little hope, he called out, "Little sparrow, please come home!" And just then he heard the fluttering of the sparrow's wings. And, to his great surprise, he heard the sparrow speak.

"Old man," said the sparrow, "you have been very kind to me. Now I wish to show you kindness in return." She led the old man to a pretty, little house with a bamboo garden and a tiny waterfall. "Come in and meet my family," said the sparrow.

The old man bowed, removed his shoes, and entered the sparrow's house. Inside, many sparrows were singing sweet songs. They served the old man a delicious meal, with rice cakes, sweet candies, and plenty of hot tea. Then they did a wonderful dance that brought joy to his heart.

"This has been a magical day for me," said the old man, "and I thank you for your kindness. But I see that the sun is setting. Forgive me, but I must return home before my wife starts to worry."

"Before you go," said the sparrow, "please accept a gift." She placed two baskets before the old man. One was big and heavy, while the other was small and light. "Please choose one of these," said the sparrow, "and do not open the basket until you reach home."

The old man was not greedy, so he chose the small basket. With many thanks and goodbyes, he left the sparrow's house and returned home.

When the old man arrived at this home, he told his wife all that had happened. Then they opened the small basket. It spilled over with jewels, gold and silver coins, and other treasures.

The old man was delighted, but his wife cried, "You fool! Why didn't you take the big basket?" Then, without another word, she hurried into the woods to find the sparrow's home.

When she at last arrived at the sparrow's house, she called out, "Sparrow! Let me in!" Of course the polite sparrow invited her into the house, and served her some hot tea. She took one sip and then said, "Enough of this. I am ready to leave." The sparrow again brought out two baskets, one big and one small. "Please choose one," said the sparrow, "and do not open it until you return home." The old woman grabbed the big basket and ran out the door.

"Oof!" she cried, "this basket is so heavy!" She sat down to rest. She looked at the basket. "Why should I wait to get home?" she said. "One little peek won't hurt."

She opened the basket. Instead of gold and silver, it was filled with toads that leaped into her hair, snakes that slithered around her arms and legs, and wasps that stung her all over.

The old woman screamed and ran as fast as she could. When she reached home, she fell into the old man's arms. He took care of her, and when she got better, she said to him, "I was too greedy, and I am sorry that I hurt the sparrow."

From that day forward, the old woman helped the old man feed any birds that came to their house, and their home was always filled with sweet songs.