

Mehazelo - Cinderella of Soqotra

by Vladimir Agafonov

Once upon a time there was a girl. Her parents died when she was very small so she went to stay with an old man and his wife who would look after her. The old man was a fisherman, but his catch of fish was small - just enough for them not to die from hunger. His wife was very angry, aggressive and very noisy. The girl lived with them but was worried because the old man and his wife didn't love her and that is why she was named Mehazelo, the unloved, by the neighbours.

Some time past and Mehazelo grew up. She became tall and well-shaped but she had no silver bracelets and no clothes embroidered with silver. She always had to work very hard but the girl remained good and friendly in spite of this.

One day the old man and Mehazelo went to the sea to fish. The old man checked his wire basket but there was only one fish with a thorny spine growing from its back. The fish was very little, with only a large prickly spine and too small to eat! The fisherman put the fish into Mehazelo's basket and put his wire basket once more into the sea hoping to catch more fish if not today, but tomorrow.

Suddenly the fish with the spine spoke to Mehazelo with a human voice:

- Let me go, Mehazelo! Let me into the sea! Maybe I will save you one day.
- I cannot! - Mehazelo said. - I am living with the old man and his wife. They rarely talk to me and treat me badly and we have had nothing to eat today at all. I can't put you back into the sea. You must not ask me to do that!
- Leave me! If it is bad for you I will help you, - the fish said.
- Well, but how you will help me? - Mehazelo asked. - Now, if you put me back I will swim to the stormy sea. But if the storm is bad for you come to this stone, stand in front of the sea and sing three times:

My fish,
I'm your friend!
Come here,
I feel bad!

And I will come and save you. But before you return me to the sea I will prick you with my spine. You must tell the old man that the fish got out of the basket, pricked you with its spine and jumped into the sea.

Mehazelo had pity on the fish so she opened her basket and let the fish go to the sea. Then the old man came back. He saw blood on Mehazelo's finger and asked her:

- What is wrong with you?
- The fish get out of the basket, pricked me with its spine and swam away! - Mehazelo said.
- You stupid girl! - the old man cried. - You will go without any food today!

One day the young Sultan of the island arranged a feast. The old man and his wife also were invited to this feast.

- You cannot go! - they said to Mehazelo. - This will be your feast,
- the old woman said. - I will spill one sack of wheat, one sack of maize, one sack of oats and one sack of rice and all the grain will be mixed up. You must sort the grains and separate the grains into its own sack before sunrise. If you do not succeed your life will be over!

The old man and his wife went to the feast and Mehazelo stayed behind crying. She could not possibly do all this before sunrise and she didn't know what to do. Suddenly she remembered what the fish had said so she ran to the seashore, stood upon the stone and sang:

My fish,
I'm your friend!
Come here,
I feel bad!

Before she had sung it three times the fish was there, it jumped out of the sea onto the shore and turned into a maiden . The maiden-fish gathered lots of birds and ordered which must gather wheat, which must gather maize, which must gather oats, and which must gather rice, and that the task must be completed before sunrise!

The birds went to work and the maiden-fish gave Mehazelo a beautiful red dress embroidered with silver and five beautiful silver bracelets for each hand and two big silver bracelets for her legs.

- Pick up your dress and let us go quickly to the feast! - the maiden-fish said.
- Oh, no! I can't! - Mahazelo said. - They will know me.
- Don't worry about anything! - the maiden-fish said.

And they went to the feast. On the road they passed along a deep stream. Mehazelo washed her face with clean water and her long hair fell into the stream. While she washed her legs one of her big silver bracelets fell from her leg. But the stream was very deep and she was unable to reach the bracelet.

Mehazelo and the maiden-fish came to the feast, danced and played there and before sunrise returned home. The maiden-fish once more became a fish with a spine and went back into the sea. Mehazelo put on her old dress and went began to work. When the old man and his wife came back they found all the grain had been sorted into their sacks.

The same morning the Sultan's slaves took his camels to a camel drinking pool. The slaves saw that there was something shining at the bottom of the stream. One of the slaves who knew how to dive plunged into the stream and picked up the big silver bracelet from the very bottom.

Another slave saw a piece of very long hair in the water. He picked it up, wound it on his finger and made a little ball! The slaves went to the Sultan and told him what had happened and what they had found. The young Sultan had a problem, he could not find a bride.

- Go, find me the lady of this excellent bracelet and of this beautiful hair! - he said. - She must be tall and well-shaped as my bride must be!

The Sultan's servants went from house to house, from village to village. They tried the bracelet on every girl in the villages but it was always too large! They also let down all of the village girl's hair but their hair was always too short. The people didn't understand this so they were so frightened! Finally the Sultan's men came to the fisherman's house.

- Well, - they said. - Who is here in your house?
- My old noisy wife, no one more, - the old man said.
- Have you told the truth? - asked the Sultan's men.
- Well, - he said, - I also have a girl here but hardly you want her.
- We have an order! - the servants said, - Let her come here!

When they tried the silver bracelet onto her it fitted! When they asked her to untie her hair they saw that it was her hair! So the Sultan's men hurried back to their lord with the happy news.

That very day the Sultan sent an expensive present to the old fisherman and soon there was a great wedding.

(c) Collected and literary retold in English by Vladimir Agafonov, 2004

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