

JAMEL

Mmm. I'm sure it will be delicious! -- All right: I will tell you a story.

SECOND NARRATOR

And so Jamel sat back and told his children a tale about...

JAMEL

My brother, Akilah, who -- as you know -- is very rich. But what you don't know is how he became rich. That is the story I will tell you. You see, many years ago Akilah lived in a small land that is far, far to the north -- one where it gets very cold in winter. The King and Queen of that land had a forest full of tall, tall trees but since the land was small and they had few subjects...

(LIGHTS rise on KING and QUEEN.)

KING

there is no one to cut them down. Winter is coming. We are almost out of wood, and we will need it to build fires to keep us warm,

QUEEN

and cook the food,

KING

and heat the water for our baths.

QUEEN

And we need it quickly!

KING

Before the cold sets in.

QUEEN

Wait -- there is Akilah. He's thin but he's strong, and a fine woodsman.

KING

Of course! I will send for him.

FIRST NARRATOR

(The MESSENGER, in stylized movement, travels from the palace to AKILAH's hut. MUSIC may be used.)

And so they sent a messenger to fetch Akilah, who lived in a small hut only a few miles away...

JAMEL

But your Uncle Akilah, as you know, is a man who likes his rest, and when the messenger arrived...

(AKILAH is discovered asleep and snoring.)

MESSENGER

Akilah. Akilah! Wake up. I have come from the King and Queen.

(AKILAH snores.)

They have asked me to fetch you.

(AKILAH snores.)

They have work for you, Akilah. Work that pays well.

(AKILAH snores.)

Akilah! Wake up!

(AKILAH wakes.)

AKILAH

Hm? Oh. I was sleeping.

MESSENGER

I know. But it's the middle of the day. Don't you have things to do?

AKILAH

I have sleep to do. And I was doing it.

MESSENGER

Come, Akilah. The palace is almost out of wood. You are needed to cut down one hundred of the tallest trees in the great forest, and chop them into firewood so there will be plenty for this winter.

AKILAH

Chop wood? I would. But I was sleeping.

MESSENGER

You must hurry. It's already November and the evenings are growing chilly.

AKILAH

Oh. I was sleeping.

MESSENGER

They say there will be snow soon, and ice can't be far behind. Your King and Queen need you.

AKILAH

My *bed* needs me. And *I* need my sleep.
(Rolls over)

MESSENGER

Akilah!

AKILAH

(Sighs)
Go on ahead. I'll be along directly.

MESSENGER

All right.

SECOND NARRATOR

And the messenger left.

JAMEL

But your Uncle Akilah, well...

AKILAH

(Snores, then wakes)
Hm? Oh.
(Rises and stretches)
Ah, that was good nap.
(Looks out the window)
But it's dark outside!
(Yawns)
And I'm hungry.

AKILAH (cont.)

(Looks in his "cupboard")
But I have nothing to eat. Except a little bread. I must find some food.
(Yawns)
Tomorrow. I am so sleepy! I will eat some of this and take a nap.
(Breaks off a piece and eats.)

FIRST NARRATOR

Akilah!

AKILAH

What is it?

FIRST NARRATOR

You need to stay awake.

AKILAH

Oh. -- I was having the strangest dream!

FIRST NARRATOR

Oh?

AKILAH

I dreamed a [man/woman] woke me and insisted I come to the King and Queen, to cut down trees for them.

FIRST NARRATOR

That's wasn't a dream.

AKILAH

It wasn't?

FIRST NARRATOR

No.

AKILAH

Oh. All right.

(Yawns)

But first I must take another little nap.

(Lies down)

SECOND NARRATOR

And he slept the entire night. In the morning, he rose and, carrying the rest of his bread, set off for the palace.

JAMEL

But, your Uncle Akilah?, he is a man who likes to take things very slooowllllyyy...

FIRST NARRATOR

(AKILAH mimes the actions.)

And so on the way, he stopped to look at the fields of harvested wheat

AKILAH

Ah, how lovely they are!

SECOND NARRATOR

And at the cows and goats in the pastures

(SOUND: Moos and whinnies.)

AKILAH

Ah, how hungry I am!

FIRST NARRATOR

and even to exchange pleasantries with a bird that sat on a fencepost.

AKILAH

Ah, friend Grackle: How is it you are still here when most of the others have flown South?

GRACKLE

Personally

(“Chirps”)

I am fond of the cold.

AKILAH

Oh?

GRACKLE

With a chill in the air I can spread my wings. Flapping them keeps me warm.

(Demonstrates)

Of course, in the heat, flapping them keeps me cool. Ah, we grackles lead a pleasant life. We can fly to the tops of the tallest trees and look out across the earth. There are forests and mountains everywhere, green fields and blue waters that go on and on forever. And, you know, I am a very modern bird: I have learned a hundred languages. That is how I am able to talk with you. I have friends of *every* species, because I can talk with anyone or anything. And when I chirp, I have learned to make the sound of an entire band!

AKILAH

You have?

GRACKLE

Listen!

(She/he “chirps.” MUSIC up: an upbeat song suitable for dancing, perhaps featuring marimbas, drums and flutes. She/he dances to it.)

You see! But -- it is more fun to dance with friends.

(She/he “calls.” The following words should be vocalizations rather than clearly spoken English.)

Come and visit me, my friend. Share this lovely autumn day. We'll dance and play and laugh together. Hurry, lest time slip away!

AKILAH

What did you say?

GRACKLE

An invitation. Here: Touch my wing; you will understand the language.

(AKILAH does. A MOLE appears.)

MOLE

My friend! I'm delighted to hear from you. Come; let us dance.

AKILAH

A mole!

GRACKLE

Oh, indeed. And as talented a dancer as ever dug beneath the earth. I'll chirp. Watch!

(GRACKLE chirps. MUSIC up. MOLE dances.)

MOLE

Grackle, dance *with* me!

GRACKLE

It will be my pleasure. Come, Akilah: Join us.

AKILAH

Of course. I am known far and wide for my dancing.

(THEY dance. AKILAH dances clumsily.)

MOLE

(Vocalizations rather than
clearly spoken English)

That was such fun! Thank you!

AKILAH

What?!

GRACKLE

You must touch my wing!

(GRACKLE extends it and indicates.)

AKILAH

Ah.

(He touches the GRACKLE's wing.)

MOLE

(Spoken English)

Now I must be off. There are carrots and onions to gather for the coming winter. Stay well. I will see you again soon.

(MOLE bows; GRACKLE and AKILAH return the bow. MOLE exits.)

GRACKLE

Ah, that was a delight. And now, I am hungry again!

(Removes a clawful of grain from a pouch.)

AKILAH

I have only a little bread left, and *I* am hungry too.

GRACKLE

Oh, there's plenty of food in the fields, left from the harvest. Corn, and wheat, and even some barley.

AKILAH

A feast!

GRACKLE

Help yourself. I must be off: The nestlings are waiting for their dinners!

(THEY gather. GRACKLE "chirps" and, dancing, exits.)

AKILAH

I can make soup; that will fill me up and keep me warm.

SECOND NARRATOR

Of course, all the walking and dancing had made Akilah very tired.

(AKILAH yawns.)

FIRST NARRATOR

So he found a cave, and...

(AKILAH snores.)

SECOND NARRATOR

But, by the end of the first day?

FIRST NARRATOR

He had traveled only one mile!

SECOND NARRATOR

And on the second day, he woke up to find the ---

(AKILAH snores.)

(Clears throat)

And on the second day, he woke up to find the day was bright ---

(AKILAH snores.)

Akilah. Akilah! Wake up.

AKILAH

I am sleeping!

SECOND NARRATOR

But you still have a way to go before you reach the palace. You have trees to cut.

AKILAH

I have sleep to get!

SECOND NARRATOR

If you don't cut the trees, you may soon find yourself sleeping in the palace dungeon.

AKILAH

At least no one there will disturb me! But

(Yawns)

all right.

SECOND NARRATOR

All right: On the second day, which was bright and sunny and without a cloud in the sky, Akilah woke

(AKILAH glares. SECOND
NARRATOR glares back.)

and -- at last -- he began to walk toward the palace.

FIRST NARRATOR

But, on the way, an old woman stopped him...

SECOND NARRATOR

She was a very unusual old woman, and...

OLD CONCH

Traveler! Where are you going?

AKILAH

Who asks?

OLD CONCH

I do!

AKILAH

And who are you?

OLD CONCH

(Cackles)

I am called Old Conch, and that is my land

(Points in one direction)

And that is my land

(Points in another direction)

And *that* is my land

(Points in a third direction)

That is my land.

(Points in the fourth direction)

And *this*

(Points to where AKILAH is standing)

is my land as well.

AKILAH

Old Conch! You are as wealthy as a king!

OLD CONCH

(Cackles)

Oh, I don't own the land, but it is my land nonetheless.

AKILAH

How can that be?

OLD CONCH

Everyone who crosses it pays me tribute. One gold coin. That is the price. If they do not...

(Cackles)

AKILAH

I don't understand, but I am just a simple man on his way to see the King and Queen.

OLD CONCH

Oh. So you are going to the palace?

AKILAH

I am. To cut one hundred of the tallest trees in the forest, chop them into firewood and bring them to the palace.

OLD CONCH

But how will you bring them back?

AKILAH

With a horse and cart, of course.

OLD CONCH

There is no road between the forest and the palace for a horse and cart to travel. Only hills covered with mud.

AKILAH

I didn't know that!

OLD CONCH

You will have to fill a wheelbarrow again and again, and deliver a few logs each time.

AKILAH

A few logs at a time? It will take me the entire winter to bring the chopped wood from one hundred tall trees from the forest to the palace!

OLD CONCH

It will not -- if I help you.

AKILAH

You? You are an old woman. You can neither carry wood nor push a wheelbarrow-full.

OLD CONCH

(Cackles)

But -- I know a way...

AKILAH

Tell me!

OLD CONCH

Oh, no: It's magic, and only I can do it.

(Unimpressed)
Magic! Hah!

AKILAH

You don't believe in magic?!

OLD CONCH

I believe in it when I see it.

AKILAH

Then I will *let* you see it!

OLD CONCH

Summer rain and winter snow:
Darkness come and bright sky go.
Crackle thunder; lightning form.
I command it: Let it storm.

(As she finishes her chant, it grows dark. There are the SOUNDS of wind and thunder, and lightning flashes. OLD CONCH stands and cackles, but AKILAH clings to whatever he can find to avoid being blown away.)

Help. Stop! *Stop!*

AKILAH

Do you believe now, or would you like the wind to blow you to the palace?

OLD CONCH

I believe! I believe!

AKILAH

Then:

OLD CONCH

Stop storm stop. You must go!
No more thunder. Wind: Don't blow.
Lightning vanish. Darkness end.
Let a bright sky come again.

(The storm ends and the stage brightens.)

You see?

AKILAH

I see! -- And your spells: They are most interesting. Where did you learn them?

OLD CONCH

(Cackles)

My mother taught them to me, and many other spells.

AKILAH

I have heard spells before, but none like those.

OLD CONCH

There are none like them. They are all special songs whose words have perfect patterns.

AKILAH

Ahh!

(To himself)

I must pay careful attention. Knowing spells might come in handy.

OLD CONCH

Now: Since you are passing through my land, you must pay me my tribute: one gold coin.

AKILAH

But I have only this bread and a few grains of wheat and corn and barley.

OLD CONCH

Bah! I should plant you in the field as a scarecrow. You are certainly skinny enough to be one.

AKILAH

No, please don't.

OLD CONCH

Why not!

AKILAH

I ... would not make a good scarecrow. I like birds far too much. They are my friends. If I could, I would like to *be* a bird.

OLD CONCH

You already have the beak. Hmm.

AKILAH

Hmm?

OLD CONCH

Hmm! What should I do with you.

AKILAH

You should ... come with me! To the palace. The King and Queen, they will pay me handsomely for cutting down the trees and chopping the wood. Then I will pay your tribute *and*, if you help me, I will also give you one-tenth of what they pay me.

OLD CONCH

Hmmmm.

AKILAH

Hmmmm?

OLD CONCH

Hmmmm! Go with you to the palace?

AKILAH

Of course! Come. It's getting late and the palace is still more than a mile away. We should leave now, don't you think?

OLD CONCH

Hmmmmm.

AKILAH

Hmmmmm?

OLD CONCH

Hmmmmm! You will give me - half of what the King and Queen pay you.

AKILAH

Half?

OLD CONCH

Half.

AKILAH

But it is I, Akilah, who will do the work of cutting the trees and chopping them into logs. You will do nothing except magic. That is easy work, while my back will ache and my arms will tire.

OLD CONCH

Magic is not "work" at all. Magic is magic!

AKILAH

Whether by work or by magic, *what* you do will be only one-third of the task.

OLD CONCH

Without my one-third, you will be paid nothing.

AKILAH

(Sighs)

I suppose you are right.

OLD CONCH

Of course I am right! I do not care if your back aches. One half: That is the penalty for failing to pay me my tribute now!

AKILAH

All right.

(With a glimmer in his eye)

I will pay you -- for the work that you do.

OLD CONCH

Hmmmmmmm.

AKILAH

Hmmmmmmm?

OLD CONCH

Hmmmmmmm! Let us go.

(LIGHTS change.)

JAMEL

And so Akilah and Old Conch went together toward the palace.

SEE TROUBLE

It's too bad he couldn't see trouble ahead, like I can.

CUSHION

Perhaps there was no trouble.

STONE THROWER

Uncle Akilah *always* has trouble, Cushion.

GAME SKINNER

Because he always travels the wrong road.

ROAD BUILDER

I'd build one for him, Game Skinner.

RIVER DRINKER

If you did, I'd swallow all the rivers he would have to cross.

DALIA

Come, children, let your papa finish the story.

CHILDREN (VARIOUSLY)

Yes, Papa. Tell us what happened. Was he frightened of Old Conch? Did he ever get to the palace?

JAMEL

Well...

(LIGHTS change.)

FIRST NARRATOR

As dusk fell it began to grow cold

SECOND NARRATOR

and, by the time they reached the palace Akilah was shivering.

AKILAH

Brrrr! I'm too cold even to sleep!

FIRST NARRATOR

He knocked at the door, and ...

PAGE

Yes?

AKILAH

(Shivering throughout)

I am Akilah. The King and Queen have sent for me to cut down one hundred trees.

PAGE

They have been waiting for you! But who is this?

(OLD CONCH cackles)

AKILAH

Uhm, this is my - assistant.

(OLD CONCH cackles)

PAGE

Well come in. And hurry, before everyone catches a cold.

JAMEL

The Page, [she/he] led them to the where the King and Queen sat -- waiting and shivering.

PAGE

Your Majesties, this is Akilah the woodcutter, and his assistant.

KING

It's about time!

QUEEN

Yes! We have built only a small fire; there is barely enough wood to last the week.

KING

I have heard you are the best woodcutter in the land.

AKILAH

That is true. I am small and thin but when I wield an axe I am a giant!

QUEEN

We are glad to hear it, for this is a task that requires the best woodcutter.

JAMEL

Now, your Uncle Akilah, he is a bold man, and he sometimes says things that are - a little larger than the truth...

AKILAH

There is no one in the land who can cut trees faster or better, or chop them into logs more efficiently. It will take me no time at all!

KING

Even one hundred trees?

AKILAH

One hundred trees!
(Laughs)