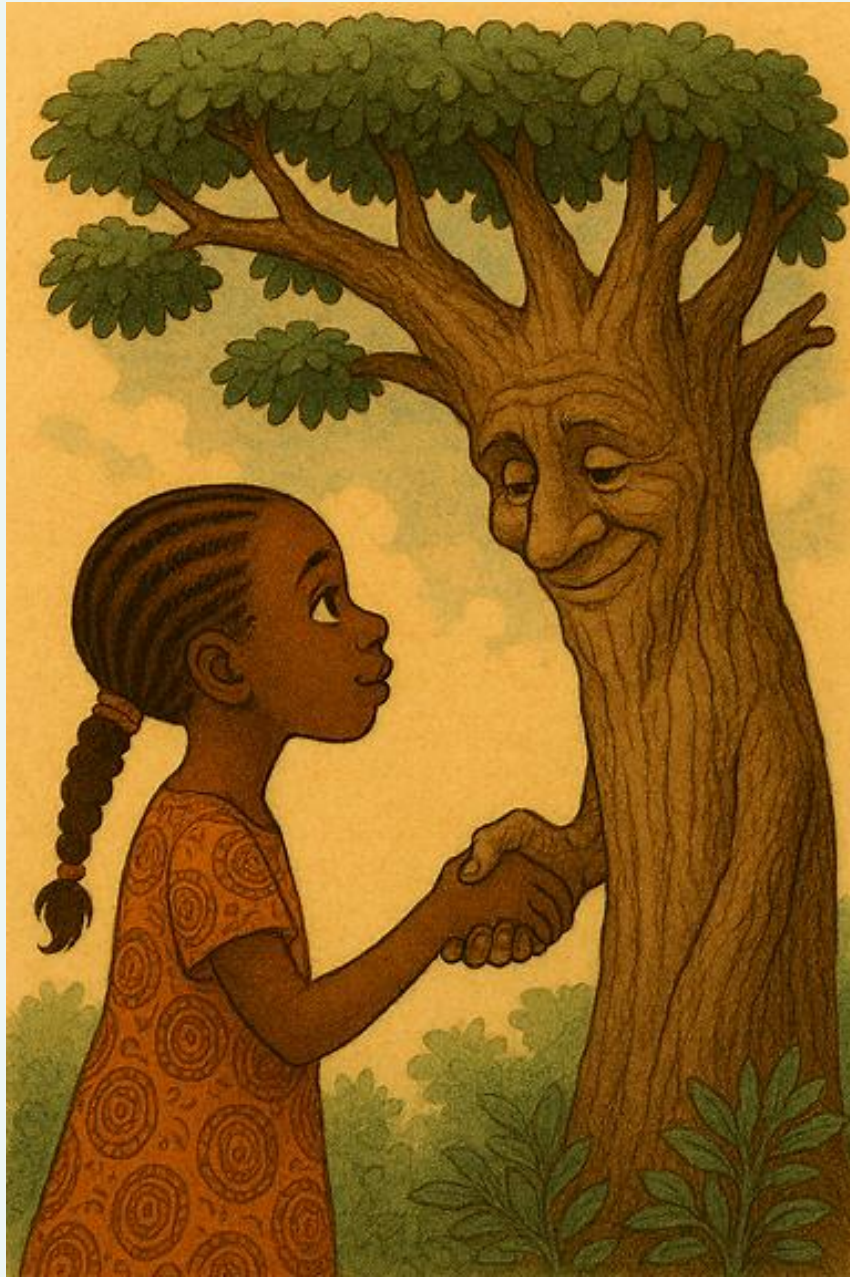


Kumba Without A Mother



Retold in English by Michael Fuller from French transcribed and taught by Lilyan Kesterlout, Univeriste de Dakar, Senegal

Kumba was 11 years old. Her sister was almost 10 and was also named Kumba. The older Kumba had a terrible nick name given to her by her stepmother. “Kumba without a mother”. Her mother had died around the time of Kumba without a mother’s birth, but Kumba without a mother could not remember exactly when. Her younger sister often was called “Kumba with a mother”.

Kumba without a mother was treated poorly by her stepmother and stepsister and was the only person who did the chores around home while her sister played with toys and tried to make herself beautiful, combing and braiding her hair all day long. Kumba with a mother treated her stepsister very poorly and loved to tease and boss her around. Kumba without a mother seldom had time to play.

The worst chore was the one hour walk to the well to gather two large buckets of water and bring them back home – another hour walk. Kumba without a mother had to take that trip two times every day – once before breakfast and once before dinner. She had to travel that distance by herself through the bush where there could be wild animals, or ... worse.



One day before dinner as the sun was setting, Kumba without a mother got ready to start her hour walk with two large buckets to get water from the well. Just as she was leaving the yard, her stepmother yelled to her, “Hurry! You must make couscous with meat as soon as you get back!”

She heard her stepsister softly laughing as she was combing and braiding her hair underneath the baobab tree in the yard.

Her stepmother’s order caught Kumba without a mother by surprise, as she knew there wasn’t any meat at home and she didn’t even think there was enough charcoal to build a fire. She put the buckets over her shoulders and took off toward the well.

She hadn’t gotten very far into the bush, and right there in the middle of the path was a HUGE lion; a male lion with black mane looking puzzled at this little girl walking down the path. Kumba without a mother was very frightened; this was the closest she had ever been to a live lion.

Remembering what her grandmother taught her, when she got to the lion, she paused. Kumba extended her hand in greeting to the lion and said, “Malekum-salaam, Lion! Nge-def?” Which of course translates to “Peace to you Lion, how are you today?”

This too surprised the lion; he expected the little girl to scream and run off. He wasn’t hungry and didn’t like eating good little girls.

The big lion shook his head side to side and let his mane make it look even grander than it was ... and he said, “Salaam-malekum Kumba! Jamm-rek, bu-soba-yhalla! Kumba, nge-def?”
Replying, “Peace back to you Kumba. I have peace today thanks be to Allah, how are you?”

At first Kumba was shocked that the lion could speak Wolof, but then again, she was in the bush so why not?

Kumba replied to the Lion, “Jamm- rek, bu-soba-yhalla! Lion. You are not going to eat me, are you?” The lion chuckled and his mane bounced up and down making the laugh all the better. He asked Kumba, “what are you doing out in the bush as the sun goes down all by yourself?”

Kumba explained that her stepmother told her to go get water and come back and make couscous with meat for dinner. She went on saying that there wasn’t any meat in the house, and she didn’t really know what she was going to do.

The lion thought for a minute, and an idea sprouted in his big yellow eyes. “Kumba, I just ate lunch a short way down the path. A very good tasting antelope, and there is just enough left for you.” The lion led the way and the two found the left-over antelope meat – a small stake really, and he said to Kumba, “here is my gift to you. Take this meat and I am sure you will have enough for your couscous.”

Kumba took the meat, but was curious, so she asked the lion, “why are you giving me your meat and not chasing me or eating me?” “Ah”, the lion said, “you are such a good and brave girl. You did not scream; you did not run. You just said “Salaam-malekum Lion” like you would anybody.

Finally, the lion said, “Demmal ag Jamm, Kumba” – Go in peace!

Kumba stuck the meat in the inside pocket of her skirt and headed down the path.



A bit later down the path, Kumba had another surprise. There was a huge baobab tree right in the middle of the path; and it wasn’t there in the morning!

She got closer to the baobab, and she could see it moving very slowly from one side to the path to the other. She wasn’t as scared of the baobab as she was of the lion, but trees don’t move and that bothered her. She was in the bush though, so why couldn’t trees move very very slowly?

When she was at the tree, she extended her hand in greeting to the baobab and said, “Malekum-salaam, Baobab! Nge-def?” The tree shook its upper branches, and dust fell on

Kumba, and the tree said, “Salaam-malekum Kumba! Jamm-rek, bu-soba-yhalla! Kumba, nge-def?”

Kumba was less surprised as if a lion could speak Wolof, then surely a tree could too!

She answered the tree respectfully, and of course the tree wanted to know what a good, brave little girl was doing in the bush nearing sundown when all the dangerous animals come out to hunt.

Kumba explained that her stepmother told her to go get water and come back and make couscous with meat for dinner. She went on saying that there wasn’t any meat in the house, and no charcoal either. She didn’t really know what she was going to do.

Like the lion, the tree thought for a moment and reached up with one branch and broke off a small lower twig from itself. “Kumba, take this twig and when you get home, I think it will build your fire”. Kumba thanked the tree and asked it if there was any help she could offer it in exchange.

Kumba asked the tree, “why did you give me a part of your limb to build my fire?” “Ah”, the tree said, “you are such a good and brave girl. You did not scream; you did not run. You just said “Salaam-malekum Baobab” like you would anybody else.

The tree bowed its upper branches toward Kumba and said, “Demmal ag Jamm, Kumba” – Go in peace!

Kumba placed the twig next to the meat in her pocket and set off down the path.



After a short distance there was the scariest thing in the world standing in the middle of the path – a witch! The witch was covered in branches and feathers and other forest treasures and Kumba could not tell if it was a man, a woman or something completely different.

Kumba was afraid this time more than others. But Kumba got near the witch and reached out her hand in greeting to the witch and said, Malekum-salaam, grandmother or grandfather! Nge-def?”

The witch looked at Kumba squinted their eyes, and said, “Salaam-malekum Kumba! Jamm-rek, bu-soba-yhalla! Kumba, nge-def?” Kumba thought a witch who spoke Wolof was normal, unlike a lion or a tree.

Kumba once again explained to the witch, just like the lion and the tree, that she needed to go get water and come back home to make couscous with meat. The witch was silent holding still and Kumba saw small birds fly in and out of the witch’s headdress.

Finally, the witch said, Kumba you are a good and brave little girl; and I have a gift to give you, but you must listen very, very carefully. “Between here and the water the terrible wild animals are still resting waiting for their night hunt. You will not be able to walk through them without being eaten. I have a trick to help you. Take these three eggs and hold them gently so you don’t break them and don’t lose them! You see they are all different sizes small to largest?” Kumba took the eggs and nodded agreement to the witch.

The witch continued, “here is the careful part so listen. First, walk to the thicket and before you go inside, break off a thorn the size of your thumb. When you have that thorn break the smallest egg. Then you go into the thicket and crawl near the animal so you can poke it with your thorn – it will run off thinking a witch is after it. BUT! If you poke too hard the animal will come back angry and eat you.”

“When you have all the animals away, and you are on the other side of the thicket, break the second egg – NOT the biggest one! Go get your water and then when your buckets are full, break the third egg.”

The witch paused and looked at Kumba and asked, “understand?” Kumba nodded and thanked the witch. In turn, the old witch said, “Demmal ag Jamm, Kumba” – Go in peace!



Kumba slowly walked to the very beginning of the thicket. She found a good thorn bush and broke off a small thorn, just the size of her thumb. As she broke the thorn, she thanked the bush for sharing its thorn with her.

Kumba took the smallest egg and threw to the ground smashing it in the dust. She felt a weird tingling and then looked at her hand ... she was invisible! The animals in the thicket wouldn’t see her, though they could hear her if she wasn’t careful.

At the first wild animal, she couldn’t really tell which it was but it as big as she was and snoring. Kumba crept closely and poked the animal with the thorn. The animal howled and took off running sure that the witch or something worse as after it. Kumba crept to the next animal and did the same with that thumb-sized thorn, and that animal took off running out of the thicket. Kumba kept on and after 6 or 8 animals, she lost track how many, Kumba came to the end of the thicket just as the sun was setting.

She quickly broke the second egg just the same way in the dust. As she did, her hand became visible again and she hurried to the well to fill her buckets. With the bucket full, she broke the largest third egg in the dust by the well. Within a minute, a huge eagle swooped down from the sky and gently picked up Kumba and took off into the air.

The eagle took Kumba back to her house and dropped her in the yard. Her stepmother came running when she heard the noise, but she didn't see the eagle. She only saw Kumba standing in the yard with a great big smile. This made stepmother very angry!

Kumba heard her stepmother asking, "where's the couscous with meat? It's getting late, you best get busy!" ... the stepmother didn't think Kumba could make couscous with meat and was looking forward to punishing the little girl.

Kumba gathered up the needed kitchen tools, the huge mortar and pestle made of wood and the big metal pot. She looked and looked for couscous but all she could find was 1 grain of millet hiding under the mat on the floor. Kumba put the millet in the mortar, lifted the pestle with all her might and brought it down with a huge BOOM! Like a drum in the forest.

That one grain of millet exploded into a full portion of couscous for her family. Kumba then took the twig from the baobab and set it afire; it blazed into a fire that would burn all night. She put oil in the pot and took out the lion's antelope stake, and the pot was full of meat sauce for the couscous. Kumba had made a perfect dinner of couscous with meat.



When Kumba without a mother brought the dinner to the family, the stepmother was amazed and dazzled. She knew that somehow Kumba without a mother had found great magic on the path to the well, and stepmother was sure that her daughter Kumba with a mother would get even more magic if she went to the well the next night.



The next evening before dinner, stepmother told Kumba with a mother to go to the well to get water and come back to make couscous with meat.

Kumba with a mother had never gone to the well by herself in the twilight and was very afraid. But she remembered the magic her stepsister found and thought that since she (Kumba with a mother) was better than her terrible stepsister, Kumba with a mother would receive even better magic.

Kumba with a mother headed down the path and after a way met that very same lion again. Kumba with a mother screamed and yelled like her pants were on fire. But she couldn't move, she couldn't run she was so afraid.

The lion's ears hurt. That little girl made such terrible noise! The lion just walked off the trail and disappeared in the bush. After a few minutes, Kumba with a mother settled down and started again down the path.



After a short distance, Kumba with a mother ran into the Baobab tree; literally ran right into the tree standing in the middle of the path. She was so afraid of the bush that she wasn't looking out for where she was going, she was looking at her feet. When she ran into the tree, she was mad at the Baobab and kicked it with all her strength.

The Baobab just shrugged its upper branches but Kumba with a mother did not notice. Baobab did not move so Kumba with a mother stepped around the tree and headed down the path.



Before too much time, Kumba saw the witch. The witch had this large headdress with birds and spiders in it and long gnarly fingers. Kumba was more afraid of the witch than the lion; Kumba with a mother stood there staring at the witch unable to scream or say anything she was so afraid. All she could do was pee in her own skirt she was so scared.

The witch just laughed and laughed but after a bit, started feeling sorry for Kumba with a mother. The witch told Kumba with a mother, "you are scared little one, and you didn't even greet me when we met on the path. Yet I feel sorry for you, and I will give you a trick and help to safely get to the well and then home."

Kumba with a mother didn't trust the witch, but she nodded her head anyway. The witch leaned down and whispered to Kumba, "here is the trick so listen very carefully. First, walk to the thicket and before you go inside, break off a thorn the size of your thumb. When you have that thorn break the smallest egg. Then you go into the thicket and crawl near the animal so you can poke it with your thorn – it will run off thinking a witch is after it. BUT! If you poke too hard the animal will come back angry and eat you."

“When you have all the animals away, and you are on the other side of the thicket, break the second egg – NOT the biggest one! Go get your water and then when your buckets are full, break the third egg.”

As soon as the witch finished the instructions, it disappeared.



Kumba with a mother didn't remember what the witch told her. She tried to remember but all that came back was first egg and then a thorn in the animals and then break the last eggs. Kumba with a mother went to the thicket, and she found a good thumb-sized thorn. She broke off the thorn from the bush but didn't acknowledge or thank the bush.

With that thorn in hand, Kumba with a mother smashed the first egg on the path. She noticed her hands were invisible and she figured out how to scare the animals. Kumba with a mother was a little bit mean ... she went to the first animal and poked the animal as hard as she could even drawing a small drop of blood. The animal of course ran off out of the thicket hurting and very, very mad. Kumba did the same thing with all the remaining animals. All were bleeding and very, very mad.

As Kumba with a mother reached the end of the thicket, she broke both eggs just as all the animals were coming upon her to hurt her! They scratched her head to toe and were ready to eat her when the eagle swooped down and picked up Kumba with a mother.

When Kumba with a mother reached home, she did not have water. But she thought she had captured the magic and could make couscous with meat regardless. She found a kernel of millet and put it in the mortar, but Kumba with a mother had never done chores and she couldn't even lift the pestle up to smash the millet.

She didn't have any meat for the couscous, and she didn't have any wood or charcoal to start the fire. All Kumba with a mother had were big ugly animal scratches from head to toe.



Kumba without a mother had made new friends with the lion, the baobab and the witch and spent many a morning and afternoon walking the path to the well with friends who looked out for her and always treated her with respect. Even the animals living in the thicket watched for Kumba and made sure nobody ever got in her way.