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### The Old Man and the Storks

There once was an old man who lived in a village beside a river. On the chimneys of the houses were storks' nests with storks living in them. Only the nest on the old man's house was empty because his storks had flown away and had not come back.

He was a lonely old man with no wife or children, and he spent his days fishing the river and tending his garden. One day at the river he came across a stork with a broken wing. She looked very sad and weak.

"A poacher has shot her," the old man thought. "A fox will catch her."

The old man dropped his rod and pail and returned to his house. There he fetched a blanket and hurried back to the injured bird. With great care, all the while speaking soothing words, he managed to catch her and bring her back home.

In his little house was a room where he stored tools, so here the stork could be safe and could heal. He filled a barrel with fresh water and brought fish from the river for her to eat. She was so hungry he had to go to the river twice that day.

The villagers saw him. They laughed and asked, "What are you going to do with all those fish?" The old man just smiled and went on his way.

At first the stork was frightened of the old man, but he always talked softly to her. He called her *Malena*, "Little One." He told her that she would soon be better.

But noticing how her injured wing hung down, not moving, he was not so sure. He got his blanket again and caught her and inspected the wing. There was buckshot still in her flesh, so he carefully removed each piece. She fluttered in his grasp every time he removed a pellet. Soon he had all of them out. He washed her wing and let her go.

"Are you angry with me, Malena?" he asked, laughing. "But now you'll be better, you'll see."  
Her two black eyes, like polished glistening stones,

looked at him. Then she turned her back and busied herself preening her feathers, fixing the mess the old man had made. Soon Malena was better. She was able to move her wing, and she ate lots of fish. But she could not fly.

"I don't think you will ever be able to fly again, Malena," the old man said sadly. He knew she would not be able to follow the other storks on their journey to their winter home in South Africa.

Malena looked up at the old nest on the chimney of the old man's house.

"How will you even be able to get up to that old nest," the old man asked.

Then he had an idea. In his barn he found some planks of wood. He hoisted them across his shoulders and brought them out into the yard. With hammer and nails, hammering all morning, he built a gangway for Malena to walk up to her nest.

And that was exactly what she did. She fixed her nest up with little branches. The old man helped her. Up and down, up and down, she walked with branches in her narrow bill until she had made a beautiful nest. From there she could see the old man in his yard and she could see the whole country, the corn fields and vineyards, and the villagers working.

One day, not too long after, when the spring leaves were still bright green, a male stork flew in. He was tall, taller than Malena, with a shock of white feathers on his chest like a cravat, and the same bright black eyes like polished stones. He was a very handsome gentleman. For days he and Malena talked to each other, their heads close together as though they were sharing a secret. Then they moved around the nest and along the top of the roof, their bills clacking loudly like the castanets of Spanish dancers. The male stork clacked even louder than Malena.

"Who do you have there, Malena?" the old man asked from the yard below. "I think I will call him *Klepetaan*," he said, "Chatterer," because he likes to talk. Now you will not be alone, now you have *Klepetaan*."

He was happy for Malena, but he was a little sad for himself. "Well, now I have two storks, and they will keep me

occupied."

Soon there were four eggs in the nest, and then not long after four little storks. *Klepetaan* was very busy flying to the river to bring food back for his family. The old man also went to the river each day with his rod and pail, and he brought back fish to put in the barrel. "If *Klepetaan* has a slow day at the river, there will always be fish here," he thought. Each day, Malena descended her ladder from the roof and went to the barrel to eat. Sometimes if the old man saw her he came out and petted her on the head, which she let him do now.

Then it was summer. The little storks had grown, and *Klepetaan* began to teach them to fly. He taught them to sail from the nest down to the yard, and how to ride the wind currents. They had to become expert gliders if they were to make it all the way to South Africa in the fall. One baby stork was weaker than the rest, but *Klepetaan* showed it patiently how to spread its wings and glide from the roof. Finally, the little one understood.

The summer went on. *Klepetaan* showed the young storks how to fish in the shallows of the river. They watched him stand quietly not moving then dart his bill into the water to pluck out a fish. Soon all of the storks, even the smallest one, were able to hunt for themselves.

The summer went by. One day the young birds, with a final look at their parents, Malena and *Klepetaan*, sailed from the nest to live on their own. It was one of those last warm, windless summer days before the first rains begins to fall on the warm earth.

It was becoming fall. The leaves were turning colour. The old man gathered his grapes to make wine. The villagers laughed at him and said, "What now when all the birds are flying south, what will your Malena do?"

The old man knew what he would do. He would take care of Malena through the cold winter months until *Klepetaan* returned next spring. That is what he would do.

The day was approaching when *Klepetaan* would leave. For three days before flying south he turned his back on Malena and would not look at her. On the morning of the

fourth day he leapt from the nest, made one slow turn above the house and above the nest where Malena stood, looking down at her one last time, then he caught a wind current arcing to the east and disappeared into the blue distance. The last they saw of him was the sun shining on his white wings.

Malena and the old man were sad. She sat all day in her nest and he walked glumly around his yard looking for something to do. Then he decided, after two days, to drive her in his car to the river, to bring her back to life, and to breathe some life into his own heart.

She sat in the passenger seat with her head out the window. The villagers laughed when they saw a stork driving in the car. "Have you ever seen such a thing? A stork in a car! Where are they going?" the villagers wondered.

By the blue-green river, as the friendly breezes blew over the land, Malena and the old man felt better.

But the old man could not help but think about Klepetan flying south. It was a long, dangerous journey of 14,000 kilometres. First Klepetan flew to the east where he would see ancient monasteries on big plains; then he flew south across the Greek islands that would look to him like chains of white stones on the dark blue sea; then he flew across the narrow mountainous land of Lebanon, and finally he reached Africa, the Africa of big rivers and vast windswept deserts and massive jungles. Finally, he would come to the havens of South Africa. There, there would be other birds, it was true, but he would be by himself.

It was the passage over Lebanon that was the most dangerous, the old man thought, because this flyway for migratory birds was a favourite waiting place for poachers who liked to shoot the birds down for food or just for fun. Two million birds were shot each and every year.

And when Klepetan needed to rest, which he did every 600 kilometres, when he found rivers or lakes for water and food, there would be jackals and wild dogs waiting for him. When there were no lakes or rivers, Klepetan would have to go without food or water. There was also drought in some parts of Africa, and the nights could be very cold.

The old man was worried, but he tried not to think

about it.

Back home, he kept the wood stove burning all winter in the room where Malena lived. Snow fell on the village and ice formed on the edges of the river. But the old man still went to the river every day to fish. He sat on his pail huddled and shivering in his woolen coat. The fish were fewer and fewer, and the river more and more frozen. For a while, he bought fish with the little money he had.

A few of the villagers still laughed at the old man. "An old man living with a stork. Have you ever heard of such a thing? Now he will have to decide, will he feed himself or the stork?"

But others had softer hearts. They said, "The old man is doing a good thing. We will help him."

And they put their money together and had fish brought in pails. Maria, an old lady who worked at the market, and who lived all by herself, was the first to bring him a pail of fish. "Here, Joseph," she said, "for your lady stork." The old man smiled and Malena clapped her bill when she saw all the fish in the barrel.

Then finally the snow melted and the ice broke apart on the river.

It was spring.

Klepetan would soon be back, the old man thought. But in his heart he was afraid. He returned to the river to fish as he had last year. Malena walked around the yard or climbed to her nest on the roof. She brought new branches to repair the damage from the winter. She took great care to make the nest big and beautiful. Then she sat in the nest looking around at the country, and she waited.

She waited and waited and waited.

Still no Klepetan came.

The villagers who had laughed at the old man now saw him walking back and forth to the river with his head down, sad. "He is a good man," they said. "He was just trying to help storks. Maybe his male stork will still come back. But it better be soon."

But Klepetan did not come. Other storks flew in to the village in the middle of March. That was when Klepetan had

arrived a year ago. They repaired their nests and stood proudly in their finished work. Only Malena was alone.

More time went by.

The old man was giving up hope. He was sure Klepetan had come to a bad end. He was sure he had been shot down by a poacher. Or a wild dog had caught him while he rested, so exhausted from his travels.

Life goes on. Life must go on, the old man thought.

"You must find another mate, Malena," he told her. She looked at him with her dark eyes like polished stones.

Another male stork started to court her every day, standing on the roof, trying to get into the nest with her. She warded him off with her one good wing, but he kept returning. Day after day he kept returning.

It was the beginning of April then. The villagers said, "Klepetan is not coming." And for the first time they were sad.

The old man saw a report on TV from Lebanon showing a poacher holding a dead stork. It was a big stork with a big ruffle of feathers on his chest like a cravat. The poacher said proudly to the camera, "Now I will have him stuffed, sell him and feed my poor family." The crowd of men around him began to cheer.

The old man wept when he saw the image of the dead stork. "It looked like Klepetan," he thought sadly. "Is it really him?" he wondered.

When he was at his lowest, one morning, he looked up into the sky and saw, in the blue distance, something coming towards the village. The villagers saw it too, and they gathered to watch it approach. Nearer and nearer it came, something gliding on the warm spring wind.

It was a bird.

It was a white bird with long legs and black feathers underneath its wings.

It was a stork!

"Klepetan!" the old man yelled.

Everyone watched the stork approach the house and descend onto the roof, his big wings spread wide.

The other male stork was waiting for him.

"They are going to fight," the villagers shouted.

"Klepetan will drive him off!"

And that is exactly what he did. With his big wings and long bill, Klepetan leaped into the air and buffeted the other stork until he gave up and flew off.

Klepetan and Malena were together again. They danced around the nest, round and round, their heads close together as though they were sharing a secret. They clapped their bills, clap, clap, clap, clap, like the castanets of Spanish dancers.

"It looks like Klepetan," the villagers said, "but is it really him?"

"Watch now," the old man answered.

Klepetan was happy to see his Malena, but he was also hungry after his long journey. He jumped off the roof and sailed into the yard. There was blood on his wings. On his long thin legs he strode to the back room where the barrel of fish was. He stuck his long bill into the water and caught a fish.

"You see," the old man laughed, "of all the male storks in the world, only Klepetan knows where my barrel of fish is!"

The villagers cheered. That night they had a big banquet in the street to celebrate the return of Klepetan.

Some of the villagers came to the old man with a demijohn of wine.

They said, "Joseph, will you have a glass of wine with us?"

"Yes," the old man said.

Then Maria, the market lady, brought a meat pie to the old man and asked him, smiling, "Joseph, will you share this food with me?"

The old man smiled back.

"Yes," he said, "Yes!"