

Nail Soup

One day a weary and hungry traveler was walking through the countryside when he met an old woman gathering wood and sticks for kindling. Night was approaching fast, and he needed a place to stay and something to eat. “Maybe she would help him if he asked nicely,” the traveler thought to himself.

So in his most friendly voice, the traveler greeted the old woman. “Hello and good evening to you,” he said warmly.

The woman was a little startled, but managed to reply, “Good evening to you. Where did you come from and what do you want?”

The traveler explained that he had come from far away and was on his way home. “I’m tired and hungry and need a comfortable place to stay the night. Would you be so kind as to help me?”

“Well,” said the woman gruffly. “That’s a bit much for a stranger to ask. You’d better keep moving along. The folks in this town are quite poor, and food is scarce. I’ve got nothing to give you, not even some scraps.”

The traveler was a clever man and decided to use his wit instead of getting angry.

“Well, then,” he said, “you must be starving, too. Maybe we can help each other. If you just bring me a big pot filled with water, I’d be happy to make soup for the both of us. I’ll even make enough soup for the whole town!”

“Now that’s impossible,” thought the woman to herself. But her curiosity got the best of her, and she decided to play along. She brought the traveler a big pot filled with water as requested. Then the traveler borrowed some kindling from the old woman and used it to build a fire. Next, he carefully set the pot on top of the fire. While the water was heating up, the traveler reached into his pocket and pulled out a rusty, bent nail. As the woman watched with wide-eyed amazement, the traveler washed off the nail and dropped it into the hot, bubbling water.

“I’ve been using this nail for many days,” commented the traveler, “and it’s never let me down. Even though it’s a little rusty now, I am confident that it will once again make a pot of delicious soup.”

The fire caught the attention of curious neighbors, and many gathered around. They were a little mystified when they saw the traveler stirring a pot of hot water with a rusty nail in it. Instead of asking the traveler questions, the neighbors whispered among themselves and waited to see what would happen next. After a while, the traveler tasted the soup and said to the crowd, “Well, it’s not bad, but it could use a little salt.”

Even though she was still skeptical of the traveler, the old woman agreed to fulfill his request. “That’s not a problem,” she said. “I will fetch some salt from my cupboard.”

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After the salt was added, the traveler tasted the soup again. Everyone watched and waited for his response. “Yes,” the traveler announced to the crowd, “the salt helped a lot, but the soup would taste even better with some onions added.”

This time one of the neighbors volunteered. “I’ll bring you some onions and include some pinto beans from my wonderful garden,” she said. “They will surely make the soup taste more flavorful.”

After the onions and pinto beans were added, the traveler tasted it again. “It’s definitely better,” he said, “but there’s still something missing. Maybe it needs some meat like sausage, chicken, or pork.”

“That’s not a problem,” said another neighbor. “I’ll bring you some of each.”

After a few minutes the neighbor showed up and dropped all the meat into the soup to cook. The soup smelled good, but the old woman noticed that it looked a little colorless. She was used to making healthy meals for her family and knew what to do.

“The soup would be much healthier and more tasty if we made it colorful,” she said. “We need to add a variety of vegetables. Who can bring some broccoli, tomatoes, cabbage, yellow squash, carrots, and potatoes?”

Many hands went up, and the neighbors ran home to gather their vegetables.

In the meantime, the old woman went home to gather different vegetables from her garden. She brought corn, sweet potatoes, green beans, and zucchini. When everyone returned, the vegetables were washed, cut into little pieces, and added to the pot. All the while the traveler was stirring, smiling, and tasting the soup.

In a short time the pot of soup was bubbling, and a most wonderful aroma filled the air. Once again the traveler tasted the soup, but this time he declared it done.

“It is now time for a feast!” the traveler announced loudly to the crowd, which had grown quite large. “And, as I promised, everyone here will be able to enjoy this delicious nail soup.”

“I brought some warm bread to have with the soup,” said a neighbor.

“I brought some cheese to garnish the soup,” said another.

“Here is some fresh milk that we can share, too,” said another.

And to everyone’s delight, the old woman brought the fresh apple pie she baked early that morning.

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All the food was set up as a serve-yourself buffet on a long wooden table, but the traveler made sure he was the one to dish up the soup. That night, a fine, healthy meal and friendly conversation were had by all.

(If you're wondering about the nail, well of course the traveler took it out before serving the soup. He carefully wiped it off and tucked it in his pocket to save for another time. After all, it was a valuable nail, and he might need it to make soup again.)