The King of the Fishes

Hanging Libraries
Reading is the key to learning
A fisherwoman lived by the side of the sea. She was not rich but she was happy. Her house was small but it was clean. The roof was made of iron sheets but it did not leak.

She was strong and well. She had a garden where she grew vegetables and trees which gave her fruit. She was a good fisherwoman. She took her boat out to sea every day. She caught many fish so she was never hungry.

She had a new husband. He was handsome but lazy. He went to the town sometimes to trade but he never made much money. He always wanted new things. He wanted new clothes. He wanted a gold watch. He wanted a car.

‘We have no money for such things,’ she said.

‘You’re making me unhappy,’ said her husband. He scowled.

She went down to the sea to fish. She fished all day. Nothing!

‘I’ll try one more time,’ she said.

This time her net was heavy. She pulled it in. There at the bottom was a big fish with shining gold scales.
‘I’ll take this fish to the market,’ said the fisherwoman. ‘I’ll sell it. Then perhaps my husband can have some new clothes. Perhaps he’ll be happy.’

Then a wonderful thing happened. The fish began to speak. ‘Fisherwoman,’ it called. ‘Don’t take me to the market. I am the King of all the Fishes. I can give your husband the clothes he wants. I can do many things for you. If you want something come here and call, “King of Fishes I need your help.” I will come. But remember, do not ask for too much. If you do that, everything you have will be taken away. So now throw me back into the sea and go home. Your husband has what he wants.’

The fisherwoman ran home. She called to her husband. He came out. He was wearing a shining new gold suit. He had a gold watch on his wrist.

‘How did I get these things?’ he asked.

‘The King of Fishes sent them,’ said the fisherwoman. She told him her story.

‘But you must ask for more,’ said her husband. ‘How can I wear these clothes and this watch in this dirty little house? I want a big house with electricity and air conditioning, and a bar and a swimming pool. Go back now and ask for these things.’

‘Not today,’ said the fisherwoman, ‘maybe tomorrow.’

‘You’re making me unhappy,’ said her husband. He scowled and glared.

Next day the fisherwoman went down to the sea. She called out, ‘King of Fishes, my husband is unhappy. Help me.’
The golden fish rose up. ‘What does he want?’ asked the king.

He wants a great big modern luxury house,’ said the fisherwoman.

‘Go home, he has one,’ said the fish.

The fisherwoman ran home. Her husband came out of a big white house. He was angry.

‘You’re a fool,’ he said. ‘You asked for this big house but who is going to clean it? Who is going to cook? I want servants and cooks and gardeners. I want a new black limousine with two drivers, one for the day and one for the night. They need uniforms and hats. Go back and ask for them.’

‘Not today,’ said the fisherwoman, ‘maybe tomorrow.’

‘You’re making me unhappy,’ said her husband. He scowled and glared and sulked.

Next day the fisherwoman went down to the sea. She called, ‘King of Fishes, my husband is unhappy. Help me.’

The golden fish rose up. ‘What does he want this time?’ asked the king.

‘He wants servants and a big car,’ said the fisherwoman.

‘Go home, he has them,’ said the fish, ‘but he must be careful. He must not ask for too much.’
The fisherwoman ran home. At the gate there was a watchman polishing a big black limousine. ‘Who are you?’ he asked.

At the door there was a servant. ‘Wipe your feet,’ she said.

The fisherwoman went upstairs. Her husband was eating strange food at the table. It was meat in bread. ‘Eat this,’ he said. ‘They’re called burgers. They’re new and they’re much better than fish.’

The fisherwoman tried to pick one up. ‘No,’ said her husband. ‘That’s not the way to do it. Use this gold knife and fork. Smart people don’t use their fingers.’

‘But I like eating fish with my fingers,’ said the fisherwoman.

‘That’s because you’re poor,’ said her husband. ‘Nobody knows you. I want to be rich and famous. I want everyone to know me. I want everyone to envy me. I want to be on TV. Go back to your fish and tell him that!’

‘Not today,’ said the fisherwoman, ‘maybe tomorrow.’

‘You’re making me unhappy,’ said her husband. He scowled and glared and sulked and brooded.
Next day the fisherwoman went down to the sea. She called out, ‘King of Fishes, my husband is unhappy. Help me.’

The golden fish rose up. ‘What does he want now?’ asked the king.

‘He wants to be rich and famous. He wants to be on TV.’

‘Go home, he has what he’s asked for,’ said the king, ‘but now he must be very careful. He must not ask for too much.’

The fisherwoman ran home. This time the house was even bigger. There were many cars round it. There were TV cameras. The TV people were talking to her husband.

‘I can’t talk to you,’ he said to the fisherwoman. ‘I’m too busy.’

She went inside. Later a servant brought her a note. It said, ‘I’m not happy. Being rich and famous isn’t enough. Go back to the King of Fishes and tell him I must rule the whole world. Go now or I’ll shout and roar and be very angry.’

Next day the fisherwoman went back down to the sea. She called out, ‘King of Fishes, my husband is shouting and roaring. Help me.’

The golden fish rose up. He was very big and very angry. ‘And now what does he want?’ asked the king.

‘He wants to rule the world,’ said the fisherwoman. ‘Perhaps that will make him happy.’
‘Now he is asking too much’, said the fish. ‘But I will make you happy. Go home and come back tomorrow with your fishing net.’

The fisherwoman ran home. There was no big house, no big black limousine, no servants. Her husband was sitting outside their old house in his old jeans and t-shirt with his head in his hands.

‘What happened to me?’ he asked. ‘I had a gold suit and everything and I was not happy! I wanted more, I wanted to rule the world!’

‘You must have been dreaming,’ said the fisherwoman.

The next morning the fisherwoman went back down to the sea and threw in her net. It came back full of fine fish. She threw it in again and again. Each time it came back full.

‘I’ll take all these fish to the market,’ said the fisherwoman to her husband, ‘and I’ll sell them. Perhaps you can have a new suit, but not a gold one.’

‘That would make me really happy,’ he said, ‘but from now on I’ll help you with your work.’ And he smiled at her.
5 Questions
1. How did the fisherwoman’s husband show that he was not happy?

2. What did the King of the Fishes warn the fisherwoman’s husband about?

3. The King of the Fishes gave the fisherwoman’s husband fame, a big house, clothes and servants. Which one did he get first, which second, which third and which last?

4. Who was happy in the end?

5. What do you think the story teaches us?

Something to do
Make the story into a play and act it out with your friends. (This could be done with puppets. Draw the characters. Cut them out and fix them onto a stick.)

Think of something that has made you happy. Write about it in a letter. Imagine you are writing about it to your friend in another place.
These books have been developed from an idea by Hugh Hawes and Sam Muwonge and used since 2007 in schools in and around Kampala. The books have been revised since 2014 and new titles created.

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Third stage

Story re-telling by Hugh Hawes and Christine Scotchmer. Pictures by Ruth Herbert.