

Rat - Rat - Rat

Maria did not sleep that night. It was her fourth night without a good sleep. Now it was morning. She felt tired. The baby wanted food and her husband wanted his breakfast. Every night the rats had come to visit her house. There were the rats that lived in the roof and those came into her house from outside. She didn't like either kind of rat - the rats from outside or the rats that lived inside her house on the roof. What a noise they had made as they ran over the roof all night. She had been so worried in case the rats attacked her new baby. Maria knew that rats often bit people at night. She looked around the room. What a mess the rats had made. They had eaten some of the maize her husband had brought home. He would be angry and would shout at her. Maria looked around the kitchen. She could see where the rats had been. The bread on the stool had rat teeth marks on it. The horrible rats had drunk the water from her husband's cup on the table. She could see rat footmarks on the table. Maria began to cry. She did not know what to do. This was her husband's village. If she said her house had many rats, her husband's relatives would talk and say she was not a good wife. She wanted to be a good wife. But these rats were keeping her awake at night. She was getting tired. She didn't know what to do to keep the rats away.

She began to think about her own village where she had lived with her mother and father. There were hardly any rats at her father's house. Perhaps her family could help her. After breakfast Maria asked her husband if she go to see her mother for the night. When he said yes, she made some cooked food for her mother. She fed the baby and tied him on her back. Then she began the long walk to her village. By the time the sun was high in the sky Maria could see her home in the distance. She felt happy. Children came to meet her and talked and talked and looked at the baby. When she got to her family house her mother was waiting for her. They cried and embraced each other. Then Maria's mother took the baby and put it on the mat so it could sleep.

After they had eaten Maria told her mother about the rats, and how they ran all over the house and tables, the bed and ate the maize and drank the water from her husband's mug? She said she did not know what to do and began to cry. Her mother waited until Maria had stopped crying and then began talking quietly to her. My daughter, there will always be rats in our country. But we can help to keep them away from our houses. I will make you a nice drink. You look around this house and tell me why the rats don't often come here. Oh – Ma, said Maria - why do you make things difficult for me. Just tell me what to do – then I will do it and get rid of the rats. No – said her mother. Do as I say? Look – use your eyes.

Maria looked around the house where she had lived for so many years. It looked just the same as it had always looked. Why did her mother not just tell her how to get rid of the rats? She went outside and stood beneath the large tree she loved so much. It was just a few steps away from her father's house. She looked at the ground. It was dirt. All the grass had gone for about twenty long steps. She could see all around the house. It was bare, except for one flower growing near the front door. Her husband's house was different. There was long grass everywhere. It was all around their house and their village. She stood there wondering about the long grass and the short grass at her village. Just then her mother called her for a cup of cha.

It was sweet cha, with good goat milk and plenty of sugar. Mmm...but, before Maria could ask her mother about the short grass outside her house, her mother asked if her husband's house had long grass around the house. Oh, yes said Maria – all the houses do – I was standing outside by our tree and I was thinking how different our village is with the big open spaces around the houses. Ah – said her mother with a smile. Do you know why they are like that? Maria shook her head – I had never even thought about it until just now. It has always been like that. Her mother nodded her head. Daughter – one of the big reasons for the wide clean space round our house is to keep the rats away. Rats are like thieves. They don't like to be seen when they steal. Rats don't like running over open spaces. If you have a big clear

space around the house like we do, it will help to keep the rats away. It will help to keep snakes away too. A clear area of twenty long steps is a good distance to keep rats away.

Now – said mother – tell me daughter – what do thieves take from people’s houses? Maria laughed. Why – anything good that they see. And... said her mother – what would a hungry thief take? Food, replied Maria. Yes – said her mother. And rats are hungry and thirsty.

Oh, said Maria. Mother – you always tell me everything by making me give the answers to my own questions. If rats are going to look for food and water, then I must put it all away and make sure that it is covered up.

And said her mother. What about the rotten food – I wonder if a hungry rat would eat that? Maria laughed. Of course, she said, in my husbands’ village the rubbish is everywhere. Sometimes I have seen rats jumping over it and eating there. I think we should not have rubbish there? You have to have rubbish, said mother, but you can put it into the ground and cover it up. Dig it deep into the ground so that the rats can’t get it.

Just then the baby began to cry. It would soon be dark. The sun was getting redder. When the baby had been fed and had fallen asleep, Maria and her mother talked about other things. They said a prayer for their dead father and talked about her brother who had gone to Quelimane to look for work. He was still away and no one had heard from him for a long time. As the sun got redder, mother said to Maria– its time now to make sure rats don’t want to come to our house to steal our food and water.

Maria and her mother went around the house and put all the water into containers with strong lids. If these rat thieves can’t get a drink at our house, said mother, they won’t want to stay here. The food was put in a box covered with a tight lid and a heavy stone was put on top of it. No rat thief will open that box, said Maria with a smile. The two women cleaned the floor and collected the rubbish. Maria took it to the place where the village people buried the rubbish. She buried it deep in the ground. It was nearly dark. Because Maria had been away for a long time, the local villagers welcomed her back with songs. It was a happy evening. Later when Maria went to bed, she listened for rats. There were none. Tomorrow she would go home. She would talk with her husband and tell him what she learned about getting rid of the rats.

A friend showed me this photo of a girl bitten in the neck by a rat. She asked me to write an education program with a clear message.

