

"Four Precious Things"
Hui People, China

Sailimai's father-in-law, Ali, was hired to do repair work in the palace for the emperor. One day, when Ali had been working til midday, the hard work made his head swim. This gave him a pain in his back and caused his hands to shake. As a result, he accidentally knocked over one of the emperor's precious vases. It broke into pieces.

When the emperor heard of this he opened his eyes so wide that it seemed as though sparks would fly from them. He drew his sword and was about to kill Ali.

Panic-stricken, Ali implored, "Forgive me, your Majesty! I will pay for it! I will pay for it!"

"Ah! This poor old man talks big! How will you pay for it?", the emperor asked the man scornfully. Receiving no reply, the emperor continued, "All right, Ali. I will not ask you to pay for my precious vase with money. I only ask these four things of you: first, 'What is blacker than the bottom of a pan?'; second, 'What is clearer than a mirror?'; third, 'What is stronger than steel?'; and fourth, 'What is as large as the sea?' You must answer these four questions in ten days, or I will chop off your head."

Even though Ali had avoided death at that moment, he felt sick as he went home. All day long he was depressed and unable to eat. That night he could not sleep.

Sailimai saw all of this. She asked, "Father, what is the trouble? Do not depress yourself like this."

The deadline set by the emperor was drawing nearer. Ali wanted to speak about it, but he thought it useless to tell his daughter-in-law. So he only gave forth long sighs.

But Sailimai did not give up. She tried to persuade him with all the words she could muster: "Just tell me. Maybe we can find a way."

Ali could not refuse her repeated questioning. With tears in his eyes, he told her the entire story.

Whereupon Sailimai said, "Father, do not worry! I have the four answers. When the emperor comes tomorrow, I shall present them to him myself."

Ali thought that Sailimai was just trying to comfort him, and said, "Do not be a fool, Sailimai. The emperor will never be satisfied with your answers!"

Sailimai replied, "Father, I have the four answers ready -- and the emperor would agree. Even if you might not believe me now, you could see tomorrow."

The next day was the deadline for having the four answers. The emperor wondered why Ali did not appear. He went to punish the criminal himself, accompanied by a troop of soldiers.

Ali and Sailimai were waiting at home. When the emperor entered he asked ferociously, "Ali, have you got the four answers? The time has come!"

Ali said meekly, "Your Majesty, the four answers are ready. If you would, please ask the questions again, one by one. My daughter-in-law would give the answers on my behalf."

The emperor said, "My first question is, 'What is blacker than the bottom of a pan?'"

Sailimai replied, "A heart with a bottomless amount of cruelty, is blacker than the bottom of a pan."

The emperor was shocked. He glared at the young woman. He wondered if she might be referring to him. After a few moments, the emperor continued:

"The second question is, 'What is clearer than a mirror?' "

Sailimai replied, "Knowledge used wisely, is clearer than a mirror."

Again the emperor was shocked. He wondered if she might be referring to her own clever answers. But he proceeded to ask the third question: "What is stronger than steel?"

"The unity of people who love each other, is stronger than steel", Sailimai answered.

The emperor thought she might be referring to the bond between Sailimai and her father-in-law. For a moment, the emperor regretted that it seemed that he was not also a part of this unified strength. But he collected himself and asked the fourth and final question: "What is as large as the sea?"

Sailimai looked down, and quietly and simply said, "A virtuous woman's heart, is as large as the sea."

"I suppose she is referring to herself," the emperor thought. But he blushed scarlet with shame that he had threatened to kill this woman's father-in-law for accidentally breaking a vase.

For a long time the emperor remained still and silent. Finally he stood up and said to Ali and Sailimai, "You have given correct answers. The debt for the broken vase is paid." The emperor then slightly nodded his head to Ali and Sailimai, and walked out of their house. His men followed him silently.

Since that time, this story about wise Sailimai has spread far and wide.