

# Hiro's Festival (Children's Story)

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Hiro's father was village headman. He was the best farmer—his radishes and cabbages were enormous, his paddy produced unequalled yields of rice. Little Hiro would follow his father through the fields as he worked, stopping only to admire a dragonfly perched on a stalk or to watch a bird pecking bugs from a leaf. Every third evening the men of the village would come to the house to practice for the spring festival. His father played the flute, while his elder brother tapped the drum. Hiro would sit, fascinated, against the wall across from the *irori* fire, keeping time with his foot. When he grew a little bigger, he tried to copy the steps of the dance—two steps forward, one step back, two steps left, two steps right, turn and begin again. His father was pleased—one night he let Hiro dance at the end of the line—after that he would dance with the men until they left at midnight. But Hiro grew older—he had to go to the village school and spent his days learning to read instead of following his father in the fields. In the

evenings he did schoolwork. When the men came to practice, the dancing felt like lessons and he no longer enjoyed it. He stretched out his schoolwork so he would not have to join the dancing. When his father noticed this he took Hiro aside to explain the tradition of the festival, which celebrated the victory of the local lord over invading pirates, and told Hiro that he and his elder brother, Toyo, must lead the festival when he became too old. Hiro was sad to have disappointed his father, but he still longed for his lost freedom. At last his father dismissed him—Hiro bowed and turned away to go to his quilt in the corner, passing the golden carp his mother kept in a Kingyo-bachi bowl on a table by the window. He looked into its bulging eyes and heard a soft voice say, “Hiro, why are you so unhappy?” He whispered, afraid someone would laugh at him for speaking to a fish, “I would like to be free of the dancing and have time to myself again.”

“What would you do with the time?”

“Play in the fields after school, like that mouse running by the wall.”

“Would you like to change places with the mouse?”

“Yes.” Suddenly the room around him grew larger. He looked down and instead of his feet in *tabi* socks, he saw tiny feet covered with gray fur. Something was moving toward him—it was the family cat. Frightened, he ran into a little hole in the wall, but over his shoulder saw the cat’s face staring in. He ran deeper into the dark space between the inner and outer walls until he could no longer see the cat. Other mice were near him, but they were not playing. He asked the nearest what it was doing. It said, “Searching for food as we always do. What kind of mouse are you not to know that?” Then it sniffed and turned away. Hiro huddled in the darkness until he saw light through chinks in the wall, then managed to make his way outside. It was chilly and he was very hungry. He found some seeds to nibble, but he didn’t feel like playing. Toward sunset he got back inside the house through a chink in the wall. Then the drum began to beat. He

imagined the men lining up to practice—his feet began to twitch. He peeked out to watch and found himself out on the floor moving into place at the back of the line. He began to dance, and as he danced he grew until he was back to boy size again. His father looked at him and nodded. Afterwards, his mother served snacks of rice balls and toasted dried fish. Hiro thought he had never tasted anything so good. On the way to his quilt, he caught the eye of the fish. It seemed to say, “Did you enjoy yourself?” Hiro sadly shook his head.

Next day was a school holiday, and Hiro worked diligently to make up the lessons he had missed. He passed the fish in its bowl, and heard its soft voice say, “Being a mouse didn’t make you happy, what will you do now?” Embarrassed, he whispered, “Mice are too small to play. A cat might have a better time.”

“Would you like to change places with the cat?”

“Yes.”

Again the walls of the room rose around him. Now his feet were covered with orange and white fur. He had whiskers on his face and a long tail like the mouse, but it stood up proudly, while the mouse’s tail had followed meekly behind him. Food and water bowls stood in the corner of the kitchen, but he found that he would have to earn his food. His mother called to him, “Puss, puss, puss—there is a mouse in my kitchen!” He raced after it, but it ran into the same hole in the wall he had used. His mother said, “Move faster or the mice will eat our food.” Then she cried, “Another mouse! Don’t let it get away!” He ran and managed to slap the mouse with his paw, but it rolled over and vanished into another hole. Mice were everywhere—after he had chased them all, he was panting. He took a sip of water and a bite from his food bowl, then went back to hunting. It had grown late—his elder brother was getting the drum down from the wall—the dance practice would be starting. As his brother tapped to see if the drum was in tune. Hiro’s feet began to twitch at the familiar rhythm. He

stood on his hind legs and took the first steps of the dance. His brother stared as the dancing cat grew into his younger brother.

“Hiro, is that really you?”

“Who else would I be?”

“I thought I saw the cat dancing there.”

“Perhaps you were dozing and dreamed the cat.”

Puzzled, his brother went back to tuning the drum. Hiro was hungry, but the family had already eaten. He would have to wait for the snacks after practice. As the men came in, he sadly took his place at the back of the line. He did his best, but his mind was full of thoughts of food. After the practice, he passed by the fishbowl.

“Are you still not happy, Hiro?”

Hiro whispered, “I didn’t know animals worked so hard, I only wanted a little time to play in the fields.”

“Would you like to be an animal which does not depend on people?”

“What kind of animal?”

“Would you like to be a fox?”

“Foxes are beautiful but I don’t know much about them.”

He had forgotten to whisper and suddenly heard his father’s voice behind him.

“Who are you speaking to, Hiro?”

Hiro was ashamed to tell his father that he had been talking to a fish. His father asked the fish, “What is this talk of foxes? Are you really the fish who lives with us?”

The fish shook itself and became a cloud that began to rise out of its bowl. As Hiro stared, the cloud turned into a lady in a silk robe. Hiro’s father said, “You look like a beautiful lady, but your shadow on the wall has a fox’s tail.”

“Yes, I am a fox spirit who has been living with your family as a fish.

I have become fond of your family and mean no harm, but I have a favor to ask. My fellow foxes and I are very interested in your festival. Would you let us join the procession? We foxes can wear beautiful robes and carry lanterns, and we are fine dancers.”

Hiro’s father considered, then replied, “I have no objection. If the other village men agree, perhaps you could join us this year.”

The lady smiled, “Very well, I await your decision.”

The other men thought it would add to the size and beauty of the procession, and arranged to have the foxes join them at the next practice.

After hearing that, the fox spirit flowed back into her fish shape, and Hiro’s father said, “What have you been doing in secret with this fox spirit, my son?”

“Oh father, I am sorry. I wanted time to play, and she made me a mouse, then a cat, but I didn’t know they had to work so hard to live. Please forgive me, and I will be happy to be just your son, Hiro.”

His father said, “Good, you understand that it is wrong to keep secrets from your family. But your mistakes have led to our festival being enhanced.”

After that night Hiro worked very hard at his dance steps, and at festival time he danced proudly at the end of the line of men, dressed in his festival costume. Behind him came the line of foxes carrying lanterns and beating drums in the same rhythm. All the people watching pointed and clapped. Then they began to cheer, because behind the foxes came the family cat, dancing on its hind legs and shaking a string of bells, followed by a line of tiny mice, dancing in perfect time to the drums. Everyone agreed, it was the best festival they had ever had.

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## Discussion Questions

1. What is the moral of the story?
2. What is the right thing to do, or say, when you don't want responsibly?  
Is responsibility simply a part of life?
3. Is it fair that Hiro's parents gave him the responsibility of dancing without asking him if he wanted the responsibility?
4. Is Hiro selfish for not wanting the responsibility of dancing? Is it selfish to tell your parents the responsibilities you don't want to have? It is fair for your parents to force you to do those things anyway? If so, why?
5. If you could be magically transformed into any animal, what animal would it be, and why?

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