Once upon a time in Iraq, “there lived a fisherman whose wife had drowned, leaving him with only a small daughter named Maha.” Despite promises to his child that he would not marry again, he did in fact take a second wife. “At first, all went well, but as time passed, the woman saw how much the fisherman loved his daughter” and how clever and capable she was. Her own girl was clumsy and dull. Soon, Maha found herself forced to do more and more of the housework. Her stepmother gave her “only a few dried dates” to eat. Now it happened one day that Maha was carrying a basket of catfish home to her stepmother. That’s when she heard a voice, right under her nose! It said, “Luckless child! Have pity on another unfortunate! Spare my life!” Well, the girl was startled but she put the basket down and looked inside. There underneath the other fish was tiny red one. It had wiggled its way to the top. Quickly, Maha ran back to the river with the fish cupped in her hand, and let it slip into the water. “Allah says a kindness never goes unrewarded. Call for me anytime and ask what you will.”

Well, when the girl got home, her father asked where the little red fish was. She had no choice but to confess that she had set it free. Out into the night, back to the river, her stepmother sent her, with orders to bring back that fish. When she got to the riverbank she cried out, “Little fish, please help me! I don’t know what to do.” The fish appeared and gave her a coin. She ran back home and gave this money to her stepmother. In this way, she avoided a beating. But her stepmother still did not love her. The years passed and both Maha and her stepsister grew to become maidens. While Maha’s hands grew rough and red from work, her heart grew sweeter by the day. And while her stepsister’s hands were soft and smooth, her face became marked by her ugly nature.

Now it happened one day that the “daughter of the master merchant was to be married...This was a time of great excitement among the unmarried girls, for it was at the women’s celebration that they were seen by the mothers of young men. Whom would they choose to be brides for their sons?” But Maha
was not allowed to go. Her stepsister, scented and dressed in silk, and her stepmother left her all alone. That’s when she went back to the river and called for her friend, the little red fish. “What do you wish, my child?” asked the fish. “I wish to join the other girls at the bride’s henna. I long to sing and laugh and see all the fine clothes and jewelry.’ ‘You shall go,’ replied the fish...” and will sit on the cushions in the middle of the hall near the bride herself...just be sure to leave before your stepmother does.’ On the grass of the river bank there appeared a silken gown, a pearl comb, and a pair of golden sandals. “Soon, Maha was bathed and dressed in finery. At the henna, no one recognized the lovely stranger, although her stepsister did think she looked an awful lot like Maha...only, clean and with fine clothes! It made her laugh. Oh! How lovely was the bride, and what a time Maha had that evening. But suddenly, her stepmother and sister stood up to leave! She had to get out the door first. Running out the door and down the path as fast as she could, she made it to the bridge...and that’s where one of her golden sandals skittered off her foot, over the bridge, and—splash—into the water. But she could not stop.

By the time her stepmother got home, Maha was dressed in rags and sleeping the porch. A few days later, the brother of the bride was riding along the riverbank. He stopped to let his horse have a drink, but the horse whinnied and pulled back. That’s when Tariq, for that was his name, bent over to look at the water. And that’s when he found a little sandal, as gold as the sun. At home that evening, Tariq showed his mother what he had found, and told her of his wish to find, and marry, the girl it fit. “His mother was pleased. ’Don’t worry my son. I will find her.’ she said, and she went looking the next day, on the rich side of town. Surely, one who wore golden slippers must be a fine girl. Maybe, just maybe, she was the mysterious stranger from her daughter’s henna. But it fit none of the upper class girls.

On the second day she searched the other side of town. It fit none of the lower class girls either. On the third day, she went to the huts where the fisherfolk lived. When Maha’s stepmother saw the lady coming, she pushed the girl into the bread oven and blocked the entry with a big rock. Unfortunately, this did not help her own daughter’s foot to fit the shoe. Just then, “the rooster flew to the top of the oven and began crowing with all his might. ’Ki-ki-ki-ko, Ki-ki-ki-ko, The one you seek is down below!’ So they had
to open the door, and when Tariq’s mother saw Maha, and the “beauty and kindness in the girl’s eyes, she knew she had found a worthy bride for her son. “She gave stepmother a small sack of gold and told her to get Maha ready for her wedding, in two days. Well, this the stepmother did, with an extra touch of her own. The night before the wedding, she rubbed rotten fish oil through Maha’s hair while she slept. Now she could hardly wait to see what would happen when the part came during the wedding ceremony for the groom to lift her veil. What a stink there would be! But when Tariq lifted Maha’s veil, the scent of fresh roses wafted over the crowd, and Maha’s hair was so lovely that Tariq could hardly keep his hands off it.

Now, it happened that Tariq’s brother also sought a bride. This young man presented the stepmother with a second sack of gold, and told her to prepare her own daughter to wed him. This she did, rubbing her own girl’s head thoroughly with rotten fish oil. But as the wedding ceremony began, everyone’s noses began to twitch. What a stink! Where was it coming from? And when the groom lifted the veil, everyone could see that the bride’s head was covered in angry, red, blisters! The wedding was called off and the stepmother and daughter laughed out of the door. But Maha and Tariq “were blessed with seven children and lived their days in great joy and good fortune.”