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How Spider Got a Thin Waist *A West African Folktale*

MANY dry seasons ago, before the oldest man in our village can remember, before the rain and the dry and the rain and the dry that any one of us can talk about to his children, Spider was a very big person. He did not look as he looks today, with his fat head and his fat body and his thin waist in between. Of course, he had two eyes and eight legs and he lived in a web. But none of him was thin. He was big and round, and his waistline was very fat indeed. Today, he is very different, as all of you know, and this is how it came to pass.

One day Spider was walking through the forest. It was early morning and he noticed an unusually pleasant smell. He wrinkled his nose and sniffed the wind. It was food! Goodness! He had almost forgotten. Today was the festival of the harvest. Every village in the big forest was preparing a feast. The women were cooking yams and cassava, and chicken with peanut-flavored sauce. There would be fish and peppers and rice boiling in the great pots over the fires.

Spider's heart jumped for joy. His mouth watered. His eyes sparkled and he smiled brightly. Already he could taste the food on his tongue.

Now, of course, Spider had not done any of the work to deserve such a feast, and no one had invited him to come and eat. Spider had not planted yam or potato. He had not planted rice, nor gone to sea in a long

boat to catch fish. For Spider did not like to work at all. All day he played in the sun or slept, and since it is not the custom to refuse food to anyone who comes to one's door, he could eat very well by simply visiting all his friends. In fact, he ate more than they did.

Now Spider was right in the middle of the forest. Not far away there were two villages. Spider stood just in the middle, and the two were exactly the same distance away. Today each village would have a great feast.

"How lucky for me!" thought Spider.

But then he was puzzled. Since there were two dinners, he did not know which one he wanted to go to. That is, he did not know which would have the most to eat. So Spider sat under a breadfruit tree and thought and thought and thought. At last he had an idea! He could go to them both! Of course. Spider was so pleased with his good idea that he did a little dance right there and then.

But how could he know when the food was ready? He sat under the breadfruit tree again and thought and thought and thought. And then he had another idea. He did another little dance just because he was so brilliant. And then he did two things.

First, he called his eldest son, Kuma. He took a long rope and tied one end around his waist. The other end he gave to his son.

"Take this rope to the village on the east," he said to Kuma. "When the food is ready, give the rope a hard pull, and I will know it is time for me to come and eat."

And so Kuma went to the east village and took the end of the rope with him.

Then Spider called his youngest son, Kwaku. He took another long rope and tied it around his waist, just below the first one.

"Kwaku, take this rope to the village on the west," he said, "and when the food is all cooked, pull very hard on it. Then I will come and have my fill."

So Kwaku went to the west village, carrying the end of the rope with him.

My friends, can you imagine what happened? I don't think so, so I will tell you. The people in the east village and the people in the west village had their dinners at *exactly the same time*. So, of course, Kuma and Kwaku pulled on both of the ropes at the same time. Kuma pulled to the east and Kwaku pulled to the west. The ropes got tighter and tighter. Poor, greedy Spider was caught in the middle. He could go neither east nor west, nor left nor right.

Kuma and Kwaku could not understand why their father did not come, and they pulled harder all the time. And something was happening to Spider. The ropes squeezed tighter and tighter and his waist got thinner and thinner. Kuma and Kwaku waited until all the food was eaten. Then they came to look for their father. When they found him, he looked very different. His waistline was thinner than a needle! Spider never grew fat again. He stayed the same until today. He has a big head and a big body, and a tiny little waist in between.

