

How do you turn a man into a chair using magic? You might think you use a magic wand or say some words, but no, you... kiss him? Find out more in today's story!

[intro]

Hello my Lovely Learners, and welcome to Easy Stories in English, the podcast that will take your English from OK to Good, and from Good to Great. I am Ariel Goodbody, your host for this show. Today's pre-intermediate-level story is called *Three Balls of Wool*. As always, the transcript and PDF are available at EasyStoriesInEnglish.com, and you can find the link in the description.

This story was originally collected by A. M. Jalili, and I found it in the book *Storyworld*.

OK, I'll just explain some words in today's story.

Rot, R O T, means for food to go bad. If food rots, you should not eat it, because you will get sick. Rotten food should be thrown away. However, fermentation is really just letting something rot a bit, but doing it in a way where it's safe to eat. In Iceland, for example, they eat fermented shark, shark meat that has rotten in the ground for several months.

A **fig**, F I G, is a soft, dry fruit. Figs are purple on the outside and red on the inside, and they have many small seeds. You can grow figs pretty much everywhere now, and they taste very good. There is a certain type of insect, a wasp, that lives inside figs. Figs are often eaten on their own or used in cooking desserts.

A **witch**, W I T C H, is an evil woman, a very bad woman, who does magic. Witches go [cackle]. They have black cats as pets, they wear big black hats and they fly on broomsticks. In *Harry Potter*, Hermione is a very successful witch. The musical *Wicked*, which has just been made into a film, is about witches.

A **wart**, W A R T, is a lump, a raised area of skin, that grows on your face or your hands. Warts are usually harmless but ugly. In fairy tales, witches often have warts on their nose.

If you cut yourself very badly, you will have a **scar** afterwards, S C A R. Scars are marks that are left after a wound heals. For example, I had surgery on my shoulder a few years ago and now I have a scar there.

Scratch, S C R A T C H, is when you do this: [makes scratching sound]. Basically, you move your nails against something. You might scratch yourself because you are itchy. If a mosquito bites you, then you will probably scratch the place where it bit you. Or maybe you don't like someone and so you scratch them. Cats like to scratch things a lot.

An **itch**, I T C H is an uncomfortable feeling on your skin. You can scratch an itch, although scratching an itch often makes you itch more. Woollen clothes can make you feel itchy.

A **dot** is a small round mark. That's why we say 'dot com', because you type a full stop, which looks like a dot. You might also have a dress with coloured dots on it, for example.

When your **curiosity gets the better of you**, there's something you want to do, and you know you shouldn't do it, but you're simply too curious. For example, maybe a mother tells her daughter not to look in the bottom drawer of her dresser. The girl really wants to know what's inside, but she knows she shouldn't do it... Finally, her curiosity gets the better of her and she checks, and finds her Christmas presents there. Oops!

When you **gaze** at something, G A Z E, you look at it very carefully for a long time, either because you're curious, interested, amazed by it, or love it. For example, lovers often gaze lovingly into each other's eyes. Or, if you're bored, you might gaze out the window.

When you look in the mirror and see yourself, that is your **reflection**. Nowadays, we have mirrors everywhere, so we see our reflections often, but in the past, you had to find a river or a piece of glass to see your reflection.

OK, so listen and enjoy!

Three Balls of Wool

Once upon a time, there was a poor woman who lived with her husband. They had just one daughter, a beautiful baby girl called Leila, but at the same time as Leila was born, her father lost his job, and so the mother spent her days going around the neighbourhood looking for food.

One day, the woman could not find food anywhere, and with no other option, she went into a rich man's garden. She was surprised, however, to find that it was very poorly looked after: everywhere plants were dying, and the ground was covered with rotten figs.

Well, she thought to herself, *I am sure he will not mind me stealing a few rotten figs.*

But as soon as she touched one of the rotten figs, there was a loud BANG! And a horrible old witch appeared before her. The witch had three warts on her nose and five scars on her chin.

'A fig thief!' cried the witch. 'You must pay for your crimes!'

'But it is only a rotten fig!' said the woman. 'Surely it is worth nothing?'

'So you think my food is worth nothing, do you?' said the witch, scratching her chin angrily. 'You should learn some respect. You will give me the thing that is most valuable to you, or I'll turn *you* into a fig.'

'I have nothing!' said the woman. 'Only a baby girl – but I will not give her to you!'

The witch laughed and scratched her nose. 'Oh, you will. Give her to me now and it will be much easier.'

But the woman could not, and she ran away as fast as she could. To her surprise, the witch did not follow her.

That night, she slept very deeply, and in the morning she could not tell if the witch had only been a dream. She had certainly been very hungry, and hunger made for strange dreams...

Ten years passed, and things got better for the family. The husband got a job working for the king, and he often sent expensive gifts home from his travels. They moved to live in a beautiful village, and Leila grew up to be brave and happy.

But one day, while Leila was playing in the grass, she saw a very strange butterfly. On one of the butterfly's wings were three dots, and on the other wing were five lines. Leila had never seen a butterfly with dots and lines on its wings, and her curiosity got the better of her. She reached out to touch it.

BANG!

There she was again, that horrible witch, with three warts on her nose and five scars on her chin!

'I've finally got you, child!' said the witch, and she grabbed Leila's arm tightly and pulled her away. Leila cried and tried to escape, but the witch was too strong.

The witch took her to a huge castle, and once they were inside, the witch kissed the front door, and it disappeared.

'You will work for me, girl,' said the witch. 'And when you are old enough, you will give me your body, so that I can be young and beautiful again!'

Leila burst into tears.

'What, don't you have anything to say for yourself?' said the witch.

But the girl was too scared to speak. In just a moment, her entire world had changed.

'Pah, all that beauty is wasted on a stupid girl like you!'

And so began seven years of sadness for Leila. Every day, she worked under the eye of the witch. As the witch scratched her warty nose, Leila washed the dirty floors. As the witch scratched her scarred chin, Leila baked fresh bread. As the witch complained about her itches – and the witch *a/ways* complained about her itches – Leila dusted the house.

Despite what the witch said, Leila was a clever girl, and she quickly began to watch the old woman's magic. As the years passed, she saw many tricks, but when she tried, they mostly didn't work. One thing she could do, however, was turn a chair into a table and a table into a chair. All she had to do was kiss them. But this wasn't particularly useful, so eventually Leila gave up trying to learn magic.

The worst thing was that the witch insisted Leila call her 'mother', and in return, the witch called her 'my daughter'. With each passing day, the witch grew more interested in Leila's beauty. She brushed her head and said how pretty she was, and Leila began to worry that soon the day would come where the witch would take her body. What would happen then? She tried not to think about it.

To Leila's surprise, one day the witch woke her up early in the morning and said she was leaving.

'I'm tired of this itching,' she said. 'I've looked it up in a book, and to stop the itching on my nose and chin, I need the nose hairs of a beautiful girl and the chin hairs of a beautiful boy. So I'm off to go find those.'

Apparently, she trusted Leila enough to stay at home by herself.

'But there are three things you must not do, my daughter,' said the witch. 'One, you must not open the cupboard under the stairs. Two, you must not look at the mirror in my bedroom. And three, you must not gaze out the window.'

'Yes, Mother!' said Leila, hiding her smile.

The witch grunted, scratched her warts and scars one last time, and jumped out of the window. They were two floors up, but the witch's dress blew out like an umbrella and carried her slowly to the ground.

Leila went about her work for the day. She tried to think of how to escape – when next would she get an opportunity like this? But the only way out was to jump through the window, and Leila didn't know the magic to fly down like the witch. She tried kissing the wall where the front door had been, but all she got was a cold, dirty tongue. Maybe it was too much to hope to escape...

She was so focussed on escaping that she half-forgot about the witch's warning, and when she came near the cupboard under the stairs, she grew curious.

'Leila,' she said to herself. 'Curiosity is what got you here.'

But that was seven years ago, and if she did nothing, she would be here forever. Besides, the witch had never told her to not go somewhere before... So finally, Leila's curiosity got the better of her. She opened the door, and inside found an old stick and three balls of wool: one blue, one green and one red.

'Is that all?' said Leila, disappointed. 'Well, I better get back to work.'

When the witch returned that evening, she stood beneath the window and sang.

'Leila, Leila, daughter of mine

Let your hair down so I can climb!

Great, thought Leila, *another job for me to do*.

But the girl let her hair out of the window and let the witch climb up.

'Did you find the nose and chin hairs?' said Leila.

'No!' said the witch, scratching her warts. 'I thought I'd found a beautiful boy, but it was a *girl* with chin hair. And then I did find a beautiful girl, but when I tried to take her nose hair, the little monster was so scared that it all fell out. Can you believe it? Her nose hair fell out!'

Probably because you smell so bad, thought Leila.

'Useless!' said the witch. 'So I will be going out tomorrow as well.'

'What a pity!' said Leila.

'I know, my daughter, I know.'

The next day, Leila managed to go all afternoon without her curiosity getting the better of her. But when she was cleaning outside the witch's room, the door fell open a bit, and she saw the mirror inside. Well, she could just take a quick look, couldn't she?

She was very careful stepping in front of the mirror, but to her disappointment, all she saw in it was her own **reflection**.

'What a shame,' she said.

'Ah, but it is not a shame!' said Leila in the mirror.

Leila jumped. 'Oh, don't hurt me! I'm sorry!'

'No, don't be!' said her reflection. 'It's been so long since I had somebody to talk to.'

'I admit, I'm surprised,' said Leila. 'After the wool, I thought it would be something normal.'

'Oh, the colourful balls of wool in the cupboard?' said her reflection.

'Yes, those ones. Let me guess, she uses them to knit her smelly old socks?'

The reflection looked around, as if she was checking to make sure no-one was listening. 'Well, I'm not supposed to tell you this, but... Let's just say that those aren't any ordinary balls of wool. They have powerful magic. If you ever find yourself running from someone – and I can't imagine *who* that might be! – you'll find them quite useful.'

Just then, the witch's singing came from outside the castle.

'Leila, Leila, daughter of mine

Let your hair down so I can climb!'

'It's the witch!' said Leila, and she ran away to go let the witch up.

'Still no luck!' said the witch, once she'd climbed through the window. 'I found the perfect boy, but when I pulled his chin hairs out, I found out he was quite ugly. The beard was hiding the ugliness. So that won't work.' The witch scratched her nose. 'And then I found a beautiful girl, but she was so beautiful that she didn't grow nose hair at all. Huh, she must get the worst colds!' The witch scratched her chin. 'I don't suppose anything interesting has happened here while I was gone?'

'Oh, not at all, Mother!' said Leila, a little too quickly.

'Good girl,' she said, and touched Leila's hair.

The next day, Leila didn't wait for her curiosity to get the better of her – she went straight to the window and gazed out of it. Of course, all she saw was the sky and the forest below her. Then, a minute or so later, a young man called up to her.

'Oh, pretty girl there at the window!'

'I'm busy gazing, thank you very much!' cried Leila.

'Oh, that's a shame!' said the young man. 'I was hoping to talk to you. You're not just pretty, you're beautiful!'

So Leila stopped gazing and looked down, and she saw a well-dressed handsome young man. She supposed she should be happy to have a visitor, but if she hadn't found a way to escape this place in seven years, what use would this well-dressed man be?

What Leila didn't know, however, was that this man was the prince of a nearby country.

'What do you want to talk about?' said Leila, embarrassed. She had only spoken to the witch for the last seven years, and she wasn't very good at holding a conversation.

'It is a strange house you live in,' said the prince. 'Where are the doors? It would be much nicer if we could sit down together and talk over a cup of tea.'

'We-ell,' said Leila. 'I could let down my hair...'

And without thinking, she did so, and the prince climbed up. But just then she heard another voice – it was the witch singing to her!

'Leila, Leila, daughter of mine

Let your hair down so I can climb!

'Quick!' she said to the prince. 'Hide! Wait, no, she'll find you. Um... Ah, I know!'

She hit the prince on the arm.

'Ow! What was that for?'

'No, that won't do it.'

So she hit him on the nose.

'Hey, that hurt!'

'Leila!' called the witch from below. 'Where are you, my daughter?!'

'Oh!' said Leila, annoyed. 'Fine, let me try this.'

She kissed the prince, and the magic worked: the prince turned into a chair! Then Leila let down her hair and pulled up the witch.

'I've got my hair!' said the witch proudly, holding up a small bag. 'You wouldn't believe how long this girl's nose hairs were, and what a fine beard I took from that man. Soon, there'll be no more itches for me! Hmm, where did this chair come from?'

'I found it when I was cleaning, Mother. Isn't it pretty?'

'It looks nice and strong,' said the witch, 'which is perfect, because I need a good rest after catching that boy.'

She sat down on the chair, and the chair let out a little 'oof!', but luckily the witch didn't hear.

'You didn't gaze out the window or anything while I was away?' said the witch.

'No, no, Mother!' said Leila.

'Good.' The witch smiled cruelly. 'I think I might be wanting that body of yours soon, my daughter...'

That night, Leila stayed awake. She waited until she heard the witch's **snoring**. Then she got up and went to the chair, which she kissed to back into the prince.

'She sat on me!' cried the prince.

'Shh!' said Leila, holding a finger to his lips. 'We must be quiet and quick.'

Leila ran downstairs, opened the cupboard and took the three balls of wool in her pocket. Then she came back up and let her hair down out of the window.

'Go on, climb down,' she said.

'But you'll be trapped up here.'

'I'll jump!' said Leila. 'I know magic to protect me.'

Of course, she was lying. She had no idea how she would slow herself down, but she was tired of living with that horrible witch. One more day and the old woman might take her body.

So the prince climbed down Leila's hair, and when he was safely on the ground, Leila closed her eyes.

Think. What did the witch always do before jumping out of the window? That was it!

Leila scratched her nose three times and scratched her chin five times, and when she jumped out of the window, her dress blew out like an umbrella and slowed her down. She landed in the prince's arms, and they ran away into the night.

When the witch woke up, she knew something was wrong.

'Leila! Leila!' she called. 'Where are you, my daughter?'

The witch looked through the house, and then saw that the chair in Leila's room was gone. It didn't take her long to realise what had happened. The girl had run away, and she'd had help!

'That girl has been gazing! After everything I've done for her!'

The witch immediately went and filled her shoe with water. She waved a hand over the water, and in the reflection she saw Leila and the prince, running across the desert.

'Aha!'

She went to the cupboard under the stairs and grabbed her magic walking stick, which let her walk twice as fast as normal people. She was in such a rush that she didn't notice the three balls of wool were gone. Then she kissed the wall, the door to the castle appeared, and she ran out to catch Leila and the prince.

The sun was starting to rise, and Leila and the prince were running right through the middle of the desert. They were just starting to think they were safe when they heard a horrible sound from behind them.

'Leila!' screamed the witch. 'You broke your promise!'

Leila turned around and saw a faraway dot that was quickly getting closer.

'Oh no!' cried the prince. 'What will we do?'

But Leila remembered what her reflection had told her. *If you ever find yourself running from someone, you'll find the wool quite useful...*

So she pulled the green ball of wool from her pocket and threw it behind them.

Suddenly a huge forest appeared, full of thick trees.

'We're free!' cried Leila.

But she spoke too soon. The witch laughed, and pulled on her teeth. Her teeth grew longer and longer, and she ate through the trees like they were grass!

'Damn!' said the prince. 'Try another one.'

So Leila pulled out the blue ball of wool. She threw it behind them, and a wide sea appeared, full of dangerous sea monsters.

'Surely that is enough to stop her?' said the prince.

But the witch laughed again. This time, she pulled on her lips, and her mouth grew as wide as a whale's. She bent down to the water and drank it up like a cup of milk!

'Try the last ball!' said the prince. 'Quickly!'

So Leila threw the red ball of wool. A huge mountain of fire grew from the ground.

'You can't stop me, Daughter!' cried the witch. 'My magic made that wool, and my magic will end it! I can turn into smoke myself!'

The witch pulled on her ears, but nothing happened.

'Er, I said, I can turn into smoke myself!'

She pulled her ears again, but the magic still did not work.

'What's happening?!' she cried.

Suddenly, Leila understood. 'The itching. Her true power was in the itching. She stopped the itches, and...'

But before she could finish her sentence, the witch started to cough, and because of her big lips, her coughs sounded like explosions across the desert. The smoke from the fire was

making her cough, and before she realised what was happening, the mountain of fire had surrounded her.

'Oh, Leila!' the witch cried. 'All I really wanted was a daughter!'

But it was too late. The fire had its teeth in the old woman, and it would not stop until she was burnt black.

'Don't watch,' said the prince, and turned Leila away.

When the fire died, they looked back, and all that was left was a single fig in the sand. There were some strange spots and lines on it, a bit like three warts and five scars.

Leila buried the fig deep in the sand and smiled. Finally, she was safe, and she had a brave prince by her side. They travelled on to the prince's home country, and there a huge celebration took place.

'You didn't tell me you were a prince!' cried Leila over the loud music.

'There wasn't a good moment,' he said. 'Can I offer you a fig?'

'No thanks,' she said, turning away from the food. 'I don't think I'll eat another fig for my entire life.'

'Well, can I turn you into a chair?'

'Huh?' said Leila.

'Like this.'

And the prince kissed her. She didn't turn into a chair, but it felt like magic just the same.

THE END

Phew! I hope you enjoyed today's story. I certainly enjoyed writing it. You know me, I love a fairy tale with a witch who laughs like a witch, you know? I love all that stuff. I love some magic balls of wool. Oh yeah, I just love what I do.

What I don't love is the cold weather. Oh my goodness, I don't know about where you are, but right now in the UK, it is freezing. And I mean literally freezing. It's been below zero degrees Celsius for quite a few days now. It's got to like minus five in the night. I wake up and there's frost on my window, and frost covering everything outside, and pretty much the only warm place to go is the Underground, the Tube, because the Tube is always hot, basically.

So I hope you're having a warmer January than I am. I recently heard the phrase 'January is the Monday of months'. 'January is the Monday of months'. Because Monday is the worst day of the week because you have to go back to work and January is like that but for the whole year and I know I'm not the only one who had the experience of going home for the holidays, feeling really rested and relaxed and then coming back to work and BAM! It's like it hits you in the face. It's like, ah, you thought you were rested. You thought you were relaxed, but bam, here's some work.

Okay, well, actually, so far my January has been pretty good, I can't lie. I'm really enjoying teaching my new students. The other day, I took one of my classes on a trip to a bookshop so we could all buy books to help us learn. So they're reading books in English to help them learn English, and I'm going to be reading a book in Spanish to help improve my Spanish.

Actually, I've been doing a lot of language learning recently. I've been listening to lots of podcasts to learn Chinese, watching lots of Chinese learning YouTube videos, and yeah, just having a good time.

Partly, I just like to remind myself what it's like to be a language learner. When you're a teacher, it's easy to forget how it feels for the students, but also, I just love learning

languages. And winter is really that time for me to stay inside, to read books, to study, to stay warm, ideally.

You may be wondering how am I settling in to my new place, because if you remember well, I moved at the end of November last year. I think I'm settling in pretty well, but again, at this time of year, I'm not exactly going outside that much, although I have been to visit the forest near where I live, which is gorgeous. It's really beautiful. And the other day, I walked all the way to this big lake where there were loads of birds. There were swans, ducks, and moorhens.

I can't really describe moorhens. It's a particular kind of bird that you get on lakes in this country. They're very cute, they're kind of small and black and they have very long legs, but usually you don't see their legs because they're under the water. Wow, I just said I probably can't describe moorhens and then I tried to describe them anyway.

As always, if you go to the transcript on [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com](https://www.EasyStoriesInEnglish.com) there'll be some pictures to help you understand what I'm talking about. Anyway, I hope you've had a fantastic January so far. I hope you're smashing all your New Year's resolutions. Remember, you can join my email newsletter and stay up to date with Easy Stories in English at [EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Email](https://www.EasyStoriesInEnglish.com/Email). I would love to see you there.

Thanks for listening and see you soon.