

The broken mirror, the black cat and lots of good luck

Nikos was an ordinary man. One thing that he did not believe in was superstition. But when so many things that are meant to cause bad luck started bringing him good luck, he began to wonder ...

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. a superstition
2. to believe in something
3. rational
4. a taverna
5. to make a bet
6. a lottery draw
7. to spill something
8. a ladder

Definition

- a. to think that something is true
- b. describing somebody who prefers facts, logic and clear-thinking
- c. to guess who will be the winner of a game; you win money if you are correct but lose money if you are wrong
- d. a belief that doing particular things will bring you good or bad luck
- e. a game in which numbers are chosen; if somebody has a ticket with those numbers, they win money
- f. a small restaurant or café in Greece
- g. a portable set of steps
- h. to let something fall out of its container by mistake

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Nikos was an ordinary man. Nothing particularly good ever happened to him; nothing particularly bad ever happened to him. He went through life accepting the mixture of good things and bad things that happen to everyone. He never looked for any explanation or reason about why things happened just the way they did.

One thing, however, that Nikos absolutely did not believe in was superstition. He had no time for superstition, no time at all. Nikos thought himself to be a very rational man, a man who did not believe that his good luck or bad luck was in any way changed by black cats, walking under ladders, spilling salt or opening umbrellas inside the house.

Nikos spent much of his time in the small taverna near where he lived. In the taverna he sat drinking coffee and talking to his friends. Sometimes his friends played dice or cards. Sometimes they played for money. Some of them made bets on horse races or football matches. But Nikos never did. He didn't know much about sport, so he didn't think he could

predict the winners. And he absolutely didn't believe in chance or luck or superstition, like a lot of his friends did.

One morning Nikos woke up and walked into the bathroom. He started to shave, as he did every morning, but as he was shaving he noticed that the mirror on the bathroom wall wasn't quite straight. He tried to move it to one side to make it straighter, but as soon as he touched it, the mirror fell off the wall and hit the floor with a huge crash. It broke into a thousand pieces. Nikos knew that some people thought this was unlucky. 'Seven years' bad luck,' they said, when a mirror broke. But Nikos wasn't superstitious. Nikos wasn't superstitious at all. He didn't care. He thought superstition was nonsense. He picked up the pieces of the mirror, put them in the bin and finished shaving without a mirror.

After that he went into the kitchen to make himself a sandwich to take to work for his lunch. He cut two pieces of bread and put some cheese on them. Then he thought he needed some salt. When he picked up the salt jar, it fell from his hand and broke on the floor. Salt was everywhere. Some people, he knew, thought that this was also supposed to bring bad luck. But Nikos didn't care. He didn't believe in superstitions.

He left the house and went to work. On his way to work he saw a black cat running away from him. He didn't care. He wasn't superstitious. Some builders were working on a house on his street. There was a ladder across the pavement. Nikos thought about walking around the ladder, but he didn't care; he wasn't superstitious and didn't believe in superstitions, so he walked right underneath the ladder.

Even though Nikos wasn't superstitious, he thought that something bad was certain to happen to him today. He had broken a mirror, spilled some salt, walked under a ladder and seen a black cat running away from him. He told everybody at work what had happened. 'Something bad will happen to you today!' they all said. But nothing bad happened to him.

That evening, as usual, he went to the taverna. He told all his friends in the taverna that he had broken a mirror, spilled the salt, seen a black cat running away from him and then walked under a ladder. All his friends in the taverna moved away from him. 'Something bad will happen to him,' they all said, 'and we don't want to be near him when it happens!'

But nothing bad happened to Nikos all evening. He sat there as normal, and everything was normal. Nikos was waiting for something bad to happen to him. But it didn't.

'Nikos, come and play cards with us!' joked one of his friends. 'I'm sure to win!' Nikos didn't usually play cards, but tonight he decided to. His friend put a large amount of money on the table. His friend thought Nikos was going to lose. Nikos thought he was going to lose.

But it didn't happen like that.

Nikos won. Then he played another game, and he won that one too. Then somebody asked him to play a game of dice, and Nikos won that as well. He won quite a lot of money. 'Go on then, Nikos,' his friends shouted, 'use all the money you have won to buy some lottery tickets!' Nikos spent all the money he had won on lottery tickets. The draw for the lottery was the next day.

The next day after work Nikos went to the taverna again. Everybody was watching the draw for the lottery on TV. The first number came out, for the third prize. It was Nikos' number. Then

the second number, for the second prize. It was another of Nikos' tickets. Then the first prize. It was Nikos' number as well. He won all three of the big lottery prizes.

It was incredible. It seemed that all the things that people thought caused bad luck actually brought him good luck.

The next day Nikos bought a book about superstitions from all over the world. When he had read the book he decided to do everything that would bring him bad luck. He left empty bottles on the table. He asked his wife to cut his hair for him. He accepted a box of knives as a gift. He slept with his feet pointing towards the door. He sat on the corners of tables. He put a candle in front of the mirror. He always left his hat on the bed. He always left his wallet on the bed. He bought things in numbers of six or thirteen. He crossed people on the stairs. He got on a boat and whistled. And with everything he did, he got luckier and luckier. He won the lottery again. He won the games of dice in the taverna every evening. The things got crazier and crazier. He bought a black cat as a pet. He broke a few more mirrors, on purpose. He didn't look people in the eye when they raised their glasses to him. He put loaves of bread upside down on the table. He spilled salt. He spilled olive oil. He spilled wine.

The more superstitious things he did, the luckier he became. He went into the taverna and started to tell all his friends what he thought.

'You see!' he told them. 'I was right all along! Superstition is nonsense! The more things I do to break ridiculous superstitions, the more lucky I am!'

'But Nikos,' replied one of his friends, 'don't you see that you are actually as superstitious as we are? You are so careful to break superstitions, and this brings you luck. But you are only lucky when you do these things. Your disbelief is actually a kind of belief!'

Nikos thought hard about what his friend said. He had to admit that it was true. He was so careful to break all the superstitions he could, that in some way he was actually observing those superstitions.

The next day, he stopped spilling salt, chasing away black cats, walking under ladders, putting up umbrellas in the house and breaking mirrors. He also stopped winning money on the lottery. He started to lose at games of cards or dice.

He was a normal man again. Sometimes he was lucky, sometimes he wasn't. He didn't not believe in superstitions any more, but he didn't believe in them either.

'Nikos,' said his friend to him, 'it was your belief in yourself that made you lucky. It was your self-confidence that helped you, not superstitions.'

Nikos listened to his friend and thought that he was right. But however rational he still believed himself to be, he always wondered what would have happened if he hadn't broken that mirror ...

Chris Rose

Tasks

Task 1

Circle the correct ending for the sentences.

1. At the beginning of the story, Nikos thought he was ...
 - a. superstitious.
 - b. rational.
 - c. lucky.
2. Nikos often went to ...
 - a. horse races and football matches.
 - b. lottery draws.
 - c. the taverna near his house.
3. Some of Nikos' friends thought that breaking a mirror ...
 - a. brings you bad luck.
 - b. brings you good luck.
 - c. is a meaningless superstition.
4. Nikos walked under the ladder because ...
 - a. there was no other way around it.
 - b. he was sure it wouldn't bring any bad luck.
 - c. he hoped it would bring him good luck.
5. Nikos' friends invited him to play cards because ...
 - a. they knew he was good at it.
 - b. they expected him to lose.
 - c. they wanted to cheer him up.
6. Nikos won some money in the taverna and then used it to buy ...
 - a. lottery tickets.
 - b. a book about superstitions.
 - c. a gift for his friends.
7. Nikos believed that he had got rich because ...
 - a. he was naturally a lucky person.
 - b. he always made rational decisions.
 - c. he had broken so many superstitions.
8. After talking to a friend, Nikos realised that ...
 - a. superstitions were the cause of all his luck.
 - b. it was his self-confidence that had brought him great results.
 - c. his friends mattered more to him than the superstitions.

Task 2

Complete the bad luck superstitions with words from the box.

black cat

glass

mirror

umbrella

salt

ladder

1. Breaking a
2. Spilling
3. A crossing the path in front of you
4. Walking under a
5. Not looking someone in the eye when they raise a to you
6. Putting up an inside the house

Discussion

What kinds of superstitions are common where you live?

Answers

Preparation task

1. d
2. a
3. b
4. f
5. c
6. e
7. h
8. g

Task 1

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. b
5. b
6. a
7. c
8. b

Task 2

1. mirror
2. salt
3. black cat
4. ladder
5. glass
6. umbrella