

Awake Not Sleeping

Reimagining Fairy Tales
for a New Generation

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Produced by the UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia
with financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

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FOREWORD

Welcome, readers, to our *Awake Not Sleeping* collection.

Why do modern fairy-tale princesses and heroines behave in such stereotypical ways? In real life, strong women and girls rarely act the way they do. Yet the stories we read as kids have the power to shape our world view. Without knowing it, they can influence how we think women and men should behave. These stories can enchant us and even make us feel differently about ourselves.

You are about to read a decidedly different collection of tales from across Europe and Central Asia. They were inspired by *There Once was a Girl*, a series of fictional stories from Georgia showcasing the courageous deeds, determination, wisdom, dignity and fight for justice of 12 female heroines. In honor of our Georgian colleagues, the story “The Belted Sona” has been included from that series in this new collection.

After reading *There Once was a Girl*, I was awakened to the potential of reimagining fairy tales. To mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, I wanted every country in Europe and Central Asia to have their own reimagined fairy tales. And so,

the *Awake Not Sleeping: Reimagining Fairy Tales for a New Generation* initiative was born.

UN Women leads action across the region to advance gender equality for girls and women—and for boys and men—in their minds, homes and communities. We believe in the power of storytelling and hope that *Awake Not Sleeping* will stir imaginations and stimulate children, young people, families and communities to talk about and take action against gender inequality.

We hope that you too will awaken your own inner activist in the process.

So, it is with great excitement that I share with you our very first *Awake Not Sleeping* collection. It includes 28 reimagined stories from across Europe and Central Asia. We hope you'll enjoy these tales of love, loss and leadership from Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Czech Republic, England, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Kosovo,* Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Russia, Scotland, Serbia, Switzerland, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Wales.

So, get comfy and prepare to experience the centuries-old storytelling tradition harnessed to promote gender equality for women and girls. We look forward to your awakening.

Alia El-Yassir

UN Women Regional Director
Europe and Central Asia

* All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).



INTRODUCTION

*Literature has the power to take us out of ourselves and return us to ourselves
a changed self, to enlarge our thinking while educating our hearts.*

—C. S. Huck (1987)

The *Awake Not Sleeping* collection welcomes you, as a reader or an important adult in a child's life, to awaken your curiosity about gender equality and building respectful and equal relationships. This collection invites you to notice, consider and question how gender inequality and its many intersecting issues can be explored through fairy tales.

There is no safer way than a book to initially wrestle with challenging concepts. Stories can offer captivating 'sliding doors' that can help change how you see, think and talk about the world around you. As you step through each sliding door, we encourage you to seize the opportunity to explore new possibilities and reimagine what gender equality can look and feel like in your community.

We hope that as you read the collection, you will consider the following with curiosity:

- Who is telling the story and why?
- How do these stories relate to this time in history, including your own experiences and understandings in your family and community?
- What are you learning from this story that you didn't consider or recognize before?
- How do you feel, and what would you do differently if you were in the position of each of the characters?
- How do the characters use their personal power and the power in their relationships to model leadership and accountability for their actions and behaviours?
- What do the communities in these stories learn to value about gender equality and respectful relationships?

We invite you to let these *Awake Not Sleeping* stories spark new and robust conversations with your family, friends and community—conversations that bring gender equality closer to realization.

Enjoy reading!

**Angela Walsh, Kalina Maleska,
Donna Jo Napoli and Nadia Albert**
Editors for the *Awake Not Sleeping* Initiative

Wee Little Khavroshechka

by Daria Apakhonchich

Once upon a time, there lived a poor orphan girl named Khavroshechka, who everyone called Wee Little Khavroshechka. No loved ones had she, so she worked for a family to feed herself.

She was kind and merry, yet the family she worked for did not care for her at all. The Mistress and the Master of that house were cruel to Khavroshechka, made her do the work of three and grudged her the very bread she ate. The Mistress' daughters—One-Eye, Two-Eyes and Three-Eyes—paid no attention to the poor girl at all.

Every day, Wee Little Khavroshechka did the hardest work—fed the cattle, lugged sweet water from the river, tidied up and gardened—while the Mistress scolded and yelled at her. Hard it was for the girl to live like this. Her biggest joy was looking after the cows that grazed in the field near the river. There, in the peace and quiet, surrounded by the cows and meadow flowers, Khavroshechka listened to the bees buzzing and birds singing, spun yarn and sang her songs to the cows.



One day, Wee Little Khavroshechka dipped a blanket in the river to wash it. Oh, no! The water ripped it from her hands. And it was the Mistress' favourite!

Oh, how angry the Mistress got—how she scolded!

“Weave me a new blanket! Better than the lost one! You were smart enough to lose it in one day, so now you must be smart enough to weave it in one day!”

One day! Or the girl would be punished horribly.

Wee Little Khavroshechka went to the field and cried bitterly. Who could spin and weave a blanket in just one day?

Her favourite spotted cow approached and told her:

“Do not cry, Khavroshechka, I will help you!”

“Ah, my dear cow, you can speak!”

“Yes, but only to those who can listen. You healed my leg to save me from being slaughtered at the hands of the Mistress. You are kind. Climb into my ear and out of the other, and all your work will be done in the sound of a snap.”

Wee Little Khavroshechka was amazed, but she climbed into the cow's ear. What a miracle! She was smaller than she'd ever been, and the inside of the cow felt larger than she'd ever imagined. It was spacious, like in a chamber in this rich family's home. Dark, but not black like in a closet, instead sparkling like the middle of a meadow at night where stars shine and the air smells of herbs and dew. The more she explored, the more she came to realize that the cow was not of a cow's shape inside—inside, she was a woman!

When Wee Little Khavroshechka went out from the second ear, a ready blanket was lying in front of her—beautiful and smooth as if woven by magical hands.

“Thank you, dear Mother Cow. Did you know that you are like a human inside?”

The cow laughed:

“My dear Khavroshechka, did you know you are like a little calf inside?”

They both laughed, and Wee Little Khavroshechka rested among the cows in the field and enjoyed the sun, and the river, and the flowers.

In the evening, the girl drove the herd into the cow shed and brought the blanket to the Mistress. The Mistress’ eyes flashed wide. Instantly, she licked her lips.

“You’ve proved you can do it. Another blanket tomorrow, then.”

The cow helped Wee Little Khavroshechka the next day. When Khavroshechka handed the blanket to the Mistress, her eyes narrowed this time.

“I demand a blanket every single day!”

Soon, the Mistress demanded more—two blankets every day—and more—three, four blankets every day!

The cow helped Wee Little Khavroshechka each time, naturally. Every day, the girl climbed into one ear and out the other, and she found woolen goods in a pile, all in the amount of time it took to hear a snap.

But not every day was the same because the cow was different inside each time Wee Little Khavroshechka passed through her. Sometimes the cow was like a bird inside, sometimes like a little lamb.

Never in her life had Wee Little Khavroshechka had so many happy days as now and so much freedom as now. When all the spinning and weaving was done, the girl could listen, notice and think. Soon, she discovered that she could understand the inside shapes of people and animals without even going through their ears—it was enough for her to listen to them and to look at them.

The Mistress' inside shape was that of a big wallet, whereas the Master had the inside shape of a box and sometimes of an axe. What inside shape did their daughters have? One-Eye usually had the shape of a mirror—just like the mirror she gazed in every morning. Two-Eyes had the shape of a beaded necklace—just like the necklace she put on every morning. Three-Eyes had the shape of a doll—just like the doll she played with all day.

The Mistress sold all of Wee Little Khavroshechka's woolen work at the fair. One day, the Duke visited the fair and ran his hands over Wee Little Khavroshechka's work, picked it up and enveloped himself in the blanket.

"Who spun and wove this most delicate wool? Tell me, quickly! If this weaver is a young girl, I'll take her for my wife."

The Mistress grabbed the opportunity and immediately lied to the Duke, telling him it was her daughters who weaved so beautifully. So she sent her oldest daughter to watch how Wee Little Khavroshechka managed to produce such fine work.

One-Eye quietly followed Wee Little Khavroshechka and the herd out to the field, sat off to the side to remain unseen and waited. But Wee Little Khavroshechka noticed her and sang a song to lull One-Eye to sleep:

*What a warm and sunny day,
Sleep, a little eye, o-hey.
Little mirror, go to sleep,
Drop your ears and do not weep.*

As One-Eye fell asleep, Wee Little Khavroshechka went through the cow's ears, and all her work was finished in a snap.

One-Eye went home none the wiser. The next day, the Mistress sent her second daughter, Two-Eyes, to watch Wee Little Khavroshechka.



Two-Eyes also hid in the grass, but Khavroshechka knew she had been followed and sang another lullaby:

*River flows and knows no sorrow,
Sleep, one eye, and sleep, another.
Little necklace sleeps inside,
Little girl will sleep outside.*

Two-Eyes also fell asleep, and Wee Little Khavroshechka finished her work.

The next day, it was the third sister, Three-Eyes, who went to the field to watch Wee Little Khavroshechka. The girl sang a new lullaby:

*Sleep, one eye, and sleep another,
Sleep, the third one, don't you bother.
Sun is shining like a pearl,
Sleepy doll and sleepy girl.*

Three-Eyes fell asleep, and Wee Little Khavroshechka climbed into the cow's ear and noticed that the cow was like an apple tree, branches covered with juicy apples. Wee Little Khavroshechka climbed out of the second ear and asked the cow:

“Why are you an apple tree today?”

“Ah, soon I will become an apple tree. This is my fate, which I can predict: the third eye of the Mistress' daughter was not fully closed. She saw you pass through my ears. She will tell the Mistress, who will have me slaughtered. I am a cow, and every cow is predestined to such an end. But do not think that I will disappear! Bury my bones in the garden. An apple tree will grow from them, and it will help you as I have helped you. The Duke will come to your house, and I will help you marry him.”

Wee Little Khavroshechka cried:

“No, Mother Cow, that's not what I want! I do not need the Duke; I do not want to get married! I will not let them kill you!”

Wee Little Khavroshechka turned to see how close to home Three-Eyes had gone. But Three-Eyes had not gone anywhere! She still sat alone, and tears dropped from her three eyes. She was not a doll but a little kid goat inside. Three-Eyes approached and said:

“Please forgive that I wanted to tell your secret to my mother! I will not tell her because I see that you two are best friends. I understand how difficult it is when your outside self is not what you are inside. I do not want to marry the Duke either. He does not know me and will only make me weave every day because he does not care whether his wife is a human or a cow—he only wants someone to work for him. With my three eyes, I see the inside of people too. The Duke is a bottomless pit inside, meant only for money. I will not tell my mother about you. But you must flee.”

“Thank you, dear Three-Eyes! I will never forget you!”

Wee Little Khavroshechka hugged the Mistress’ youngest daughter, then ran through the fields with the cow, through the forest—away, away, away from the village.

Meanwhile, the Mistress had come to the meadow to see why her youngest daughter was still not home. She chased after Wee Little Khavroshechka and the cow, shouting:

“Stop, thief! That’s my cow. Come back right now! Come get your punishment!”

But Wee Little Khavroshechka and the cow were already on the riverbank.

“Dear Mother Cow, let us ask the river to help us.”

Khavroshechka faced the river, she did not look so wee or little any more:

“Dear river, please, help us flee from the evil mistress!”

The river murmured and splashed. It turned to the girl with the cow and raised its head out of the water. Khavroshechka and the cow



entered one of the river's ears, the river splashed one more time and fell back. When the Mistress arrived at the river, all she saw was river foam. Since that day, no one in the entire country has ever seen Wee Little Khavroshechka and the spotted cow.

But far, far away, as far as rivers flow, as the clouds fly, as a heart can see, in the fairyland of apple trees, live the girl and the cow, and the bees buzz, and the birds sing.

The Child Without Golden Hair

by Kalina Maleska

My name is Nomi, and this is how I became a fairy. I grew up in the King's palace, where my mother was a cook.

I was ten years old when the future Queen arrived at the palace. The news of the royal marriage spread throughout the kingdom, but the people were surprised by the King's choice. It was said that his chosen bride was from a very poor family and that the King had chosen her because one evening, his servants heard her say that if the King married her, she would bear him a child with golden hair.

When the King's carriage entered the garden, its window was open, and I saw a woman with the loveliest face I had ever seen. I wished that she were my mother, so that I would be as beautiful as she was. I didn't think my real mother was beautiful, and I considered her responsible for my ugliness as well.

Then, I heard the future Queen say loudly:

"The castle is so beautiful, and with gold on it too! Is it real gold?"



At that moment, a large hand, with a big golden ring bearing the King's insignia, abruptly closed the window, so the beautiful face of the young woman and the large hand with the big ring disappeared from sight.

A few days later, there was a big wedding at the court, and my mother was busy day and night, cooking for hundreds of guests. I was free to run outside the walls of the keep, so my friends and I went to the small lake nearby. All of a sudden, a lady appeared from the lake. I was frightened, but my friends approached her and asked who she was.

"Prekrasnata Ilona," the lady said.

"Oh, the Wonderful Ilona. Are you a fairy?"

"Indeed I am," Ilona laughed.

There were a lot of stories in our kingdom about the dangerous fairies who attacked people, robbed them and sometimes even turned them into stone statues. They were able to escape prison cells by turning into snakes.

"Are fairies really dangerous?" I asked my mother a few days after the wedding.

She looked at me for a few seconds.

"Not to us," she finally said.

"To who then?"

"To those who are powerful, because fairies have even more power."

"How is that possible?"

"It's difficult to explain."

I hated that answer. I wanted her to explain everything, but she often thought I wouldn't understand. In that period, I frequently imagined myself being the beautiful golden-haired child of the Queen, who spoke to me as if I was the smartest person in the world. I imagined her being able to explain everything clearly and gently, and we'd always understand each other.

Many months went by, during which the Queen would occasionally come to the kitchen and talk to my mother. Her belly was growing bigger. One day, the Queen explained to my mother how a woman from her village predicted that she would give birth to a boy with golden hair.

At that moment, a guard entered the kitchen and pointed to the door. The Queen immediately got up and left the kitchen. Then I heard the terrifying voice of the King:

“Didn’t I tell you thousands of times not to go to the kitchen? You are a Queen now. You have no business talking to that ugly old cook!”

A few weeks later, voices woke me in the middle of the night, and my mother was not in the room. I got up and went inside the castle. The Queen was screaming. The baby must be coming, I thought, but just a few days ago my mother said it wouldn’t come for another few weeks. A little later, sure enough, I heard a baby cry. Then so many voices at once. The Queen’s screams became different, mixed with words I didn’t understand. Some of the guards said that the King, who had gone on a hunting expedition, should immediately be informed. People ran up and down the halls, and my mother came out of the Queen’s room, carrying in her hands a basket. I couldn’t see what was in the basket. She passed by me and did not even notice me. She took the basket to the river.

The King arrived three days later. He was surrounded by his guards, so I couldn’t see him, except for his angry eyes glowing red in the darkness.

“I don’t want that baby!” the King shouted. “Get rid of that baby! Give him to the cook,” he said to the guards.

When I was alone with my mother, she looked at me. “Should we call him Lan?”

I approached the bed, my heart was beating faster, and my face was covered in sweat. Lan had no hair at all. So, this cannot be the Queen’s baby.

I leaned closer, and one of his eyes seemed much smaller than the other, almost closed.

“I think he is blind in one eye,” my mother said softly.

I touched his hand, and he closed his fingers around my finger.

“He’s strong, though.”

“Isn’t he?”

We smiled at each other.

The next morning, the King’s heralds pronounced that the Queen had given birth to a sickly child instead of keeping her promise to give birth to a golden-haired boy. As punishment, she was bricked up all the way to her neck at the gates of the keep.

The King ordered that everyone who passed through the gate must spit on her. I ran to the gate, and there she was: bricked up, begging the guards to let her go.

“Someone took my golden-haired son and replaced him with that other child!” she cried.

Replaced? I saw my mother carry a basket to the river the night the baby was born.

I ran back to my room.

“Where is the Queen’s real child?” I shouted. “Did you have anything to do with it?”

“What are you talking about? Of course not. There are simply things you don’t understand.”

I was so angry. How could this happen to the Queen?

About a year later, while I was playing with Lan, teaching him how to make houses with pebbles, I saw my mother passing through the gates without spitting on the Queen. The guard said something to her, and they argued. Then she turned and quickly spat on the ground.



When I was passing through the gate a few days later, I also refused to spit on the Queen. I spat on the ground instead, so the guard grabbed me. Then I saw my mother standing nearby. She had a frightened look on her face. She came closer and told the guard I was still young and didn't know what I was doing. He released me.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Why do you do it?" I asked back.

"That's different. I'm an adult; I know the consequences of what I do."

"So do I."

One day, I passed near the gate and realized the Queen was no longer there. I was so excited that I immediately ran to the kitchen in the palace. My mother was there cooking.

"Was the Queen's child found?" I asked.

"What?"

"The Queen is not at the gate. Was she released? Did someone find her child?"

My mother stopped cooking and asked me to go outside with her.

"Nomi, the Queen died last night," she said.

"No, she isn't dead. Her golden-haired child must have been found."

"There is no golden-haired child, Nomi. Lan is her son."

"No, he isn't. The Queen said someone took her baby. I saw you take a basket down to the river on the night he was born."

"Stop! I took the sheets from her bed in a basket to wash them in the river."

"Then why did she say that her child was replaced?" I asked.

"She was frightened and hoped the King would let her go. But it didn't work."

“But that’s not fair! Someone should’ve stopped him.”

“Who? The King has great power.”

“But she was the Queen!”

My mother just shrugged.

The King didn’t deserve his power. I knew someone who had more power than him, so I headed to the lake. I asked Ilona if she could turn the King into a stone statue.

“Why would you want such a thing?”

“Statues don’t have power. Can you do that to him?”

“Oh, you want to take away his power?” Ilona smiled. “You don’t always have to do something to him directly. Don’t you know he can lose some of his power if others around him become more powerful?”

“Like you?”

“Sure. The more fairies there are, the less power he has.”

“Can I become a fairy?”

“It is possible for anyone to become a fairy if they are willing to.”

One day soon after that, Lan and I were following a small hedgehog and ended up in the King’s garden, although this was strictly forbidden. Lan’s curls glowed in the sunlight. When the King saw Lan, he said to one of his guards:

“Throw him out!”

I stood in front of the King. Suddenly, his large hand, his terrifying voice, his glowing red eyes became connected into a single body, and I could see all of him in front of me. I straightened up, and his hand with the golden ring no longer seemed so enormous; his voice was just loud, and his eyes were simply blue.

“I will not let you throw out my brother,” I said.



I saw my mother standing nearby. She nodded at me, and that was when I knew I had turned into a fairy.

As I soon found out, not all fairies want to turn people into stone statues, not all fairies can escape prison cells. But I can do a lot of other things, and I'm still alive and able to tell you my story.

Snow

by Altyn Kapalova

A strong wind blew. Little Aman walked against the wind. Even though the wind was big and strong, Aman persisted. Finally, exhausted, she sat down by the fence. She hid her face from the wind, but the cold wind still penetrated and pricked her frozen cheeks.

Aman raised her head and saw the face of the wind. It was transparent with gold and blue patterns.

“Hello. Are you the wind?”

“Yes. I am a wind.”

“But the winds in my city are San-Tash and Ulan—two heroes who fight with each other.”

“San-Tash and Ulan? Never heard of them.”

“Well, there is such a legend. Two heroes fought over a girl they both loved. Neither one could win. In the end, they turned into winds and scattered. But now and then, they meet here, to battle again.”

“And you believed this tale?! Ha-ha-ha! One of these winds is me!”



Shami. And the second wind is my friend, Boroni. We don't fight. This is our game!"

"When you play, you chase the clouds away. I want clouds. I want snow. I love snow!"

"But we have to play. Boroni and me. We fly! We soar!"

"If you relaxed sometimes, the clouds could gather and make snow."

"We never learned to manage our emotions like people do."

"So, there will never be snow in this city?"

"Probably not."

"That's sad... for me, at least."

"Is that why you cry when you walk home from school?"

"That. And something worse. Much worse. I miss Mum. She died. I miss living with her in our old town. My mother loved snow, just like me. There was a lot of snow in that town."

"I thought maybe you got hurt all the time, like maybe you fell all the time."

"I don't cry when I fall, even though it hurts. But I have to cry when I think of my mum. Missing her hurts my head and my legs and my heart. I want to hug her. But I can't. I can't ever again."

"I have never had a mum. But I swirl your tears up inside me, and I think I know what you mean. You're so small, but you pushed against me—a huge, powerful wind. You don't give up against me. So why give up on hugging your mother?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think maybe Boroni and I need to have a little chat. We love to play rough and tumble, but we can learn how to be gentle too. Go home now, Aman. And watch the skies."

Aman got up, wiped her tears and went home. It seemed to her that the wind was not blowing so hard.

In the morning, Aman ran out into the street and saw that everything around was white.

“Daughter, look what snow! There has never been such snow in our city. Apparently, San-Tash and Ulan made up,” Aman’s Papa smiled.

Aman packed her bag and ran to school. The wind blew on her back and urged her on. At school, children played with snowballs. Even the teachers played. Today, who needed lessons?

When Aman grew up, she moved to another city, where there was a lot of snow and rain. She loved snow and rain. Every time the wind blew, she whispered, “I love this snowy city, and I love you.”

The Frog Girl

by Ivanka Ferenčić Martinčić

Once upon a time, there lived a man and a woman who desperately wanted to have a child. But by twist of fate or lack of luck, they could not. One day the woman said, “If only I could give birth to a child, even if it was a little frog!”

At that moment, a fairy laughed, and wild dreams came true all around. And so, it came to be that the woman gave birth to a girl that was a little frog. With green skin and wide frog legs. She was kind and brave, curious and quick-witted. Her parents danced around the room when she sang beautifully. They loved her for being their daughter.

As time passed, the Frog Girl was still a little frog, and her parents were getting older and older. A Worry came to settle in their minds and could be seen in the corner of their eyes. They worried because good parents always worry about their child. How will the world treat their little frog girl?

“She is so different and little, and the world is so big,” the Worry whispered.

“It will turn out okay, somehow,” the old father said.

“Yes, it will turn out okay, somehow,” the old mother agreed.

Every day, mother and father would work in their fields and around the house, and Frog Girl would follow. But one day the mother got ill, so the father worked alone.

“I wonder how your father is doing. I should go and help,” said mother.

“No, mother, you have to rest to get better. I will go. I can carry some food to father and keep him company. And maybe even help a little.”

“But how will you carry the food to the field? You’re just a little frog,” said mother.

“Don’t worry. I am little but not powerless. Put the food in a basket and tie it to my back, and I will carry it to father.”

It wasn’t easy. She was little but not powerless, so she made it to the field and brought food for her father. There he ate his food and then continued working, and the Frog Girl asked him to lift her up and put her in the tree. In the tree branches, she sat and sang. She sang so beautifully that it made the work easier for her father. So, each day she came and sang.

One day, the youngest son of the King walked by. When he heard the Frog Girl’s song, he came to the old father.

“Good day, old sir. I’m sorry for interrupting your work, but I would love to sit here in your field for a bit. I hear an amazing song, and my heart won’t let me leave without enjoying every moment of it.”

The old man looked at his Frog Girl looking at the young Prince and allowed him to stay.

“Oh, how wonderful would it be to meet the person singing so beautifully. How wise and meaningful is her song. Sir, would you by any chance know if I could meet her?”

“I don’t know, Prince. But what if she is strange or comes from a distant land where everyone is upside down?” asked the father.

“Oh, well if that was the case, then I would seem upside down to her as well,” laughed the Prince.

For days to come, the young Prince would come to the field and listen to the song, and he and the old man would share stories. Frog Girl wondered why he was leading his horse instead of riding it. That evening, she asked her father, “Why didn’t the Prince ride his horse? Can you ask him?” So the next day he asked the Prince, while the Frog Girl listened from the tree branch. The Prince said, “My horse has an injured leg. But I couldn’t leave him behind in the barn all day. He’s always by my side.” For days to come, every evening, the Frog Girl would tell her father questions to ask the Prince the next day, and little by little she learned that the young Prince was a good and compassionate man.

One day, the Prince came and sat under the tree but was very quiet. The old father asked him what was bothering him.

“My father the King gave us, his sons, a task to find brides worthy of the kingdom. When we present them to the King, he will choose the best one and decide which one of us will rule the kingdom. And I didn’t find anybody. I don’t care about the crown. I have never much cared for ruling others, but I don’t want to insult my father when I don’t bring anybody. Oh, if only the wonderful singing girl would want to come with me,” the Prince sighed.

“But my Prince,” said the old father, “what if she comes from a distant land where everyone is green? What would your father say?”

“That doesn’t matter to me. Even my father would have to admit how special this girl is with the truths in her songs.”



At that moment, the Frog Girl jumped down from the tree in front of the Prince and smiled at him with her big green smile. And the Prince smiled back. He had, in fact, already seen her up there, hidden in the tree branches but didn't want to scare her until she was ready to come out.

And so, the two of them headed for the King's castle. The Prince was leading the horse by the reigns, and the Frog Girl was perched on the saddle.

"Do you really think your father the King won't mind you bringing me, a frog girl?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter. I am just happy you wanted to come. It was so nice to spend time with you and your father on your land, but I want you to see my home as well," said the Prince.

Now that she didn't have to wait for the evening to tell her questions to her father, the two of them talked and talked and were almost late for the big festivity the King had planned.

In the city a crowd gathered, murmuring with anticipation, and the King called his sons to present their chosen ones.

First came the oldest son. He brought forward a princess from a distant realm who was known throughout the land for her beauty. When the Prince introduced her to the King, she gave the King a rare and beautiful flower that smelled as though the fairies had grown it themselves.

Then came the second son, who brought forward a princess from a neighbouring kingdom. She was known throughout the land for her wisdom. When the Prince introduced her to the King, she gave the King a rare medicinal herb that could heal any ache or pain.

"I forgot we have to bring a flower for the King!" the youngest Prince whispered to the Frog Girl.

“Don’t worry, I have one,” she said and proudly hopped off the horse’s back and in front of the King. All the gathered people stared in shock, and the King frowned.

“Your majesty, I am not known throughout the land for my song, since I only ever sang it to my old father and mother, but to them, it is their favourite song,” said the Frog Girl and started to sing. As she sang, even the birds fell quiet to listen. When she was finished, she hopped over to the King and placed a single blade of wheat from her father’s field at his feet.

The King fell quiet in disbelief for a moment.

“My sons have not failed me. Their chosen ones are truly special. But you, Frog Girl, you are the only one who understands that there is no life without bread. You shall be the Queen and rule by my son’s side.”

All the gathered crowd started to yell. Some because they didn’t want a frog to be their Queen, and others because the Frog Girl was exactly who they wanted to be their Queen. And even the wisest of kings can’t please everybody.

“But father, this can’t be!” The two older sons were angry. “A frog can’t be the Queen!”

“Yes, I agree. That is why I will search the kingdom to find a fairy creature that will turn her into a real girl,” said the King.

The Frog Girl and the young Prince looked at each other in tacit understanding. The Frog Girl didn’t really want to change, and the young Prince didn’t really want to be King. So as the festivities began, they whispered to each other.

“I like your city, but I love my parent’s fields and singing in my tree.”

“I love my city, but I don’t want to be King.”



So that evening, they said goodbye to the King and went back to that field and that old house and spent their lives with the old father and old mother. They lived a humble but happy life.

And somewhere, a fairy laughed, and wild dreams came true all around.

The Spinning Girl

by *Bergrún Íris Sævarsdóttir*

Night has arrived... I think. It's hard to be certain since the room has no windows, but the birds are quiet now, which tells me the world is sleeping—that everyone is sleeping, except for me.

A small lantern lights up the spinning wheel in front of me. Keeping my tired eyes open becomes harder to do, but there's not a lot to see in here. Just the red spinning wheel and the wool. Mountains and mountains of wool that I am to spin into a thread that will fill spindles of yarn. Fairy tales tell stories of evil stepmothers, but what about stepfathers? What about this cruel man that keeps me here captive, ordering me to spin night and day?

The mountains of wool fill up this tiny windowless room. Getting through them will take a long time—I work slowly, for my mind spins faster than the spindle. Before one skein is done, my attention has long flown. My spinning mind is busy creating a fairy-tale land of white horses, flame-breathing dragons and a castle with a tall tower from which I see free birds flying above the vast green woods ahead.



Had I my own window, my eyes could rest on something real and I wouldn't have to make up this imaginary view. My mind draws the tower and from it a winding staircase, leading down to the wide open castle doors. A white horse neighs softly, bound by the door. I imagine myself untying the horse and climbing onto his soft back. The evil dragon lays sleeping across the drawbridge and keeps sleeping as I jump the horse over its scaled tail.

I follow my mind out across the drawbridge, down a paved path leading to the woods. On my way, I can see seven little goats, three little pigs and a puzzled wolf who can't seem to make up his mind on whom to follow. It's not easy, being a fairy-tale villain.

"Keep working," he shouts from the doorway behind me.

His raw voice yanks me from the enchanted forest and back into this dark room filled with wool and work. After he slams the door, I turn my eyes to the floor. There, I see a plate with one piece of buttered bread with cheese, which tells me it's a dry end, but I don't mind. I'm so hungry I could eat the wool that fills every corner.

In one corner of my room lies my mother's old black spinning wheel, covered in spiderwebs and dust. The spindle is broken and the treadle is stuck, but it lasted as long as she lived. Once for my birthday, he brought me a gift. I remember my surprise, how my eyes widened so much that I teared up. I hadn't been expecting a present, with my mother being sick, but he had on a big grin. This had to be the most wonderful present any ten-year-old girl had ever received. When I saw the new spinning wheel he had given me for my birthday, painted red, I couldn't hide my disappointment. My eyes closed as I waited for him to leave. That same night, my mother drew her last breath, and her broken old spinning wheel was left to collect dust in a dark corner.

“Stop being lazy,” I can hear him yelling through the closed door.

Dry wool scratches my finger as I twist it to a fine thread as the spindle turns round and round. I reach for a new bundle from the heap of wool next to me, but it seems tangled. My hand pulls and yanks, but nothing is moving. I reach in and rummage around, but then all of a sudden, I can feel something tough, like warm leather. From deep within the heap appear two yellow eyes.

I swallow my screams before they escape. There before me are bright yellow eyes and above them coarse lashes, like straw from a witch’s broom. The large eyes blink quickly, and then the heap of wool starts moving. From the gray wool emerges a large female troll with a crooked back. Even if I want to call for help, I know that what awaits me on the other side of the door is much worse than whoever is staring back at me from the wool heap. I take a deep breath and try my best to hide the fear in my voice.

“Hello,” I say, as gently as possible.

“What do you want?” the troll says with a raspy voice.

She clears her throat by coughing up a large slimy hairball. Perhaps it’s wool and not hair. Once again, my imagination gets away from me, spinning so fast it’s impossible to stop it. Before I know it, I’ve spun a story about a grey sheep who swallows a cat and coughs it back up in the middle of the field.

“Are you listening, girl?” the troll thunders.

“My ears work fine, so lower your voice,” I say, surprising myself with my bravery.

“Why did you wake me?” she asks while rubbing her eyes. “Do you need help?”

“Why were you hiding in my room?” I ask her right back. “And what do you mean by help?”

“It’s a very simple question,” she says and stretches. “It won’t be free, but it seems there’s work to be done here. Were I to spin your wool for you, I would need something in return. Something very valuable. Your first child perhaps?”

I can’t remember when I last laughed, but I’m finding it hard to hold back.

“You can’t be serious,” I say, laughing. “What makes you think I even want to have children? I’m only sixteen years old, locked in this room, a captive slave with no real future ahead of me.”

My intense speech seems to confuse the troll. She walks around angrily, trampling on the wool.

“Then how will you ever repay me? I must get something precious.”

“Just to be clear, you’ll never take my child, if I even decide to become a mother. But what about my first story?”

“Story!” she exclaims in disbelief. “Who are you to think you can tell stories?”

“I’ll do you one better. Tell me about your life while you spin, and later I will write a whole book, all about you.”

She seems hesitant but accepts the wool and takes a seat. Her intense eyes stare at me, as if she’s trying to see right into the centre of my soul.

“Well then, I’ll spin the thread and you’ll spin the story. Where should I start?”

“Just start at the beginning,” I say, smiling.

“My name is Gilitrutt,” she says as she threads the spinning wheel.

The troll’s heavy foot pounces on the treadle with a fast beat, spinning the wheel round and round. As she spins, Gilitrutt tells me her life’s story leading to this very day. I try to get comfortable and lean up against my mother’s broken spinning wheel, and the flywheel falls out from under it.

While Gilitrutt spins and talks, I hold the wheel in front of me, playing with it in my restless hands.

Gilitrutt's yellow eyes turn dreamy as she tells me of the mossy hills of her childhood. She talks of bathing in waterfalls and the kisses of trolls under the dancing northern lights.

I listen intently while my hands pull apart my mother's spinning wheel, screws and sticks falling to the floor. The troll reaches for more wool and talks about endless summer nights when she must hide in deep caves to avoid turning to stone.

The birds have woken and sing merrily on the other side of the brick wall. I tell Gilitrutt to hide, just in time because now the door opens up.

"Work harder!" he says, not even looking in the room.

Had he looked, he would have seen that mountains of wool have been replaced by balls of yarn.

"Now, where was I?" asks Gilitrutt, stepping out from the shadows.

I look down to see that my hands have built the most curious thing while I listened to Gilitrutt talk.

"Could you hand me my spinning wheel?" I ask the troll.

She moves the red spinning wheel towards me. I try to keep up with myself, but my mind spins a new idea faster than I can grasp it.

"And the wooden chair as well?"

Gilitrutt seems confused as she hands me the chair.

With a few simple changes, screws and bolts, I attach the two wheels underneath the chair. My hands reach out towards the troll. She lifts me up on the chair and places my paralyzed feet so I can sit comfortably. I thrust my hands down to spin the wheels.

"Well look at that!" Gilitrutt exclaims, smiling. "You clever girl! It seems you've built a sort of chair on wheels. A wheelchair!"

“I’m moving!” I shout happily and push myself around the room.

Giltrutt puts down the last skein of wool and heads towards the door. She lays her heavy hand on the doorknob.

“I did my part. Now it’s your turn,” she says, challenging me with her piercing eyes.

I’m scared. So scared that my voice dries up in my throat. Muted, I can’t stop the troll as she tightens her grip on the doorknob.

“Get out of here and write my book. I’ll deal with the man,” she orders and opens the door.

I roll out the door. Out into the soft morning sun, the clean air, out towards my freedom and future. I may be heading towards the unknown, but it’s hardly worse than what I’m leaving behind in the dark room.

I no longer spin wool. I spin stories of heroes and villains, baby goats and hungry wolves, but first I write the story of Giltrutt and the Spinning Girl.

Jack and the Beanstalk

by Siobhan Tebbs

“We’ll have to sell the car,” said Mum, with tired eyes. “Or there won’t be enough money to put dinner on the table.”

“But it’s only broken down. Can’t we fix it?” asked Jack, already feeling a rumble in his stomach owing to a rather paltry lunch. “What’s a taxi driver without her taxi?”

“People are hardly taking taxis round here any more, anyway,” said Mum. “It’s all about the bicycles these days.”

“Well, school’s finished for summer. I could get a job? I hate seeing you this worried, Mum.”

“You’re so thoughtful, Jack. The thing is, you’re sixteen, so you’d be on minimum wage. We need more money than that to feed us both! I’m planning to get another job myself—maybe start a bicycle workshop. But right now, we need money fast.”

“Then selling the car it is,” said Jack, and he took out his phone.

* * *

As soon as he'd posted the photo of their old maroon Toyota, Jack received a mysterious message on the app.

"Hello, my friend," it said. "I would like to offer you these magic beans in exchange for your car. I haven't posted the ad yet—you're lucky!"

Jack laughed.

"Nice try!" he replied. But then the seller shared a photo of some shiny dark green beans that did indeed look quite magical.

"Listen," wrote the seller. "If you plant them tonight, by morning they'll have grown right up to the sky!" Jack thought about it for a moment. A sky-high beanstalk could make him an Instagram sensation, never mind minimum wage!

"Let's do it," he said, and the next day they met in town to make the exchange.

* * *

When Jack got home, Mum came up to him in the hallway, eyes wide with excitement.

"What did you get for the old Toyota, Jack? A few hundred pounds? A thousand? Not two thousand, surely?"

"I got these," he said, lifting up the bag of beans. "The strange lady said they were magic."

Mum's face sagged as she scratched her forehead. Her face dropped into her hands. Jack followed her into the living room, where she fell to her knees and began to shake her head slowly.

"Oh, Jackie boy," she said. "You're a good listener, but you shouldn't have listened this time. You've been swindled. I should have sold the car myself. I'm afraid there are only cornflakes left for dinner tonight."

Lying in bed, Jack felt a hole in his stomach—not just from hunger but from seeing Mum look so sad. He blamed himself for being bad at selling things, just as he seemed to be bad at almost everything else. He sat up, scooped a handful of the beans from his bedside table and tossed them out of the window into the garden.

“Take that!” he said, as though it were all the beans’ fault.

* * *

When Jack woke up the next day, his room was filled with streaks of sunlight. There were long winding shadows all over the bedspread and the walls—shadows that had never been there before. He leapt out of bed to look out of the window and saw something astonishing. A green stalk, thick as a tree trunk, had grown up out of the garden. Curling around it was a winding vine with big green leaves flapping in the wind.

The beanstalk was so tall that he couldn’t see the top. It was very close to his window. He forgot all about Instagram and instead jumped out in his pyjamas, wrapped himself around the stalk and started to climb. He climbed and climbed until he passed through the clouds. There, he saw a long paved road and stepped off the beanstalk to follow it.

He walked for a long time and eventually saw a huge house up ahead of him with a blue wooden door. A little scared, but hungry enough to be reckless, he knocked on it with all his might. It opened, and a huge woman with a face like mashed potato stood there, towering above him.

* * *

“H-hello,” said Jack. “I’m so sorry to bother you. It’s just that I’m hungry. Do you have any food you could give me?”

“I see. I’m Ophelia,” boomed the giant woman. “What’s your name, boy?”

“Jack.”



“Well, Jack. I’m an ogre, and so is my husband. He likes to eat Englishmen for breakfast—especially young ones like you. He’ll be downstairs soon. Are you sure you want to come in?”

Jack thought for a moment. Any danger was better than the gnawing in his stomach.

“Yes.”

So in he went, and Ophelia gave Jack some bread and butter. While eating, he noticed a perky hen hopping around the kitchen. At one point, it stopped in a nest in the corner, squawked and laid what seemed to be a golden egg. Jack almost choked on a piece of crust.

“So, does your husband cook the Englishmen or what?” he asked when he had swallowed the mouthful, trembling.

“I bake them into pies for him,” said Ophelia, looking down at the floor with a rather red face.

“Do you like living with him?” asked Jack. But there was no time to talk further: a loud stomping could be heard on the stairs.

* * *

“Quick!” said Ophelia, as low as an ogre could whisper. “Get into the oven! He won’t see you there.”

From the oven, Jack heard the booming voice of the husband approaching. Through the glass, he saw a giant figure with another mashed potato face appear in the kitchen.

*Fee-fi-fo-fum,
I smell the blood of an Englishman.
Be he alive or be he dead,
I’ll grind his bones to make my bread.*

“Oh, you must be mistaken,” said Ophelia, smiling at her husband. “I’ve made you a fry-up for breakfast. Enjoy it, my love!”

The husband gave a loud *hmmmp!* He didn't kiss his wife good morning, like Dad used to do to Mum, or seem grateful to her for cooking him up such a hearty treat. When he'd finished his breakfast, he left the kitchen again, and soon a loud snoring could be heard.

"Now! Get out while he's asleep!" whispered Ophelia.

Jack climbed out of the oven and dashed towards the door. But then he remembered Mum.

"Ophelia," he said. "I see your hen lays golden eggs. I was wondering, could I take one so that my Mum can have money for food?"

"Gosh, you're such a polite boy," said Ophelia. "Most of the youngsters I help just steal one. Go on, take that one she just laid."

So Jack did take that egg, and he ran back along the road. He climbed down the beanstalk and found Mum staring up with confusion at the enormous beanstalk that had taken over her garden. Jack showed her his treasure.

"Did you steal it?" she quizzed him.

"No. I just asked," he said, and Mum looked proud.

* * *

Jack and Mum were able to live off the money from the golden egg for a year, and even started a bicycle workshop. But neither of them was much good at fixing bikes. Soon, the pile of money from the golden egg began to dwindle. The beanstalk still stood in the garden.

"I'll have to go up there again," said Jack. "And, to be honest, I've been worried about Ophelia. She must be lonely up there with that ungrateful Englishman-eating husband."

"You're such a caring person, Jack," said Mum.

And with that, Jack was off up the beanstalk again.

“You’re pretty good at climbing too, if you ask me!” called Mum sweetly from the ground, her face already far below him.

When he’d passed the clouds, again he took the paved road to the giant house with the blue door. Again he knocked on it with all his might, and when it opened, Ophelia was standing there on the doorstep.

* * *

This time, she had her coat on, a weighty rucksack slung over her shoulder and a fiery look in her eyes.

“Jack!” she said. “I’ve been waiting for you to come back!” Jack saw that she was also carrying a cage with the perky hen in it—and a golden harp.

“Where are you going?” he asked, surprised.

“Last time you were here,” said Ophelia, “you asked me if I liked living with my husband. You were so gentle and curious. It made me think. I’m tired of him, Jack, and I hate cooking him pies—all those poor Englishmen! I’ve left him a goodbye note. Will you show me the way to the beanstalk?”

“Of course!”

“This hen is my friend, so she’s coming with me. This golden harp was my mother’s, and it plays the most beautiful music in the land. I’ll share the hen and the harp with you and your Mum.”

“Thank you, Ophelia!”

Jack led Ophelia to the beanstalk, and the two climbed down with Ophelia’s things. When they reached the bottom, Mum was shocked to see an ogre with a mashed potato face accompanying him.

“Don’t worry, Mum,” said Jack. “This is Ophelia. She’s been very kind to me.”



“And your boy has been very kind to me,” said Ophelia to Mum. “He’s gentle and caring, and he helped me see what I was feeling.” Jack felt himself beaming with pride.

“And she’s brought her hen—the one that lays the golden eggs—and a golden harp, which plays the most beautiful music in the land.”

“Oh, that all sounds wonderful!” said Mum.

“Wait,” said Jack to Ophelia. “What if your husband finds the beanstalk?”

“You’re right,” she replied. “He’ll be waking up around now. Do you mind if I chop it down?”

“Not at all,” said Jack. “I still have some of the beans left, so if you ever want to go and talk to him, we could grow another beanstalk.”

“I’m happy about that. I do love that old ogre. He just has a lot to learn. And I’m never going near him again until he stops eating Englishmen.”

So Mum lent Ophelia an axe, and she chopped down the beanstalk. Jack let the hen hop around the house; it seemed content, laying a golden egg later that day. As soon as they had exchanged it for money, they cooked up a delicious feast and sat enjoying the dishes to the sound of the golden harp’s melodies.

“Where am I going to live?” asked Ophelia from the garden, sipping from a bucket of soup. “I don’t fit into any of the houses here.”

“I know an abandoned warehouse, taller than you, up on the hill beyond the forest,” said Mum. “We can take our time and make it comfortable for you!” And Jack was happy because his belly was full, and he saw that Mum and Ophelia were going to be friends.

Beyond the Woods

by Aslı Karataş

Daphne was fast asleep behind the thick curtains in her room, yet the sunlight managed to slip between them and annoy her eyelids. She turned her head away. “Why do we have to live in this mountain village?” She had lived here all eleven years of her life—and it seemed like forever.

Daphne got out of bed and parted the curtains. What was the point of fighting the sun? She took out the amulet that her father had made for her, put it in her pocket and raced down the stairs.

Daphne was a hasty person and didn’t care too much about her appearance. She never chose fluffy skirts. They made it difficult for her to move freely. She preferred to pull on trousers. Moving slow was a waste of time. She didn’t care if her brown braids came loose. Messy was fine with her.

She was alone this morning. Her parents had already gone to the forest. She was late again since woodcutting was not the most exciting



thing she could do. She prepared a quick sandwich and went into the woods. While she was skipping among the trees, she heard her father's scream and ran towards his voice. She saw her mother, Feray, bandaging her father's wrist. He got injured when a tree fell and barely escaped being trapped under it, they told her.

Feray stared at Daphne and said, "You should have come earlier. This is a hard task for only the two of us." Daphne didn't reply. Several villagers came to check the cause of the scream. One of them said to her mother, "Poor you. Only one child—and a girl—a careless girl."

It was a long day. On the way back, Daphne was thinking about how much she hated the family job. Then again, it was not nice to look down on the family profession. She felt the amulet in her pocket, took it out and moved it to her nose. She took in the smell of lavender essence that she dropped on it frequently. She told herself, "I'll find my way, but how?"

When they arrived home, they saw the mukhtar, the village official, waiting for them with a paper in hand. He spoke to Daphne's parents. "You are not allowed to do any sort of woodcutting any more. There has been an order passed from the district governor." He pointed to the document.

"What's it all about?"

"They call it a protected area or a nature conservation area—whatever. Even picking weeds from there is forbidden. You could face a huge penalty that could lead to imprisonment."

None of them could sleep that night. Daphne dreamt of the forest, which, in her mind, was magical. An enchanted area that required special protection. She pictured flowers with glittering petals, butterflies with luminescent wings. It only made sense that such a place should be hidden from a saw and an axe. Her parents had other concerns. They

kept wondering how they could possibly make a living without stepping foot in the forest. It was the only job they knew.

The next morning, they sat together at the breakfast table for the first time in a while. Even the sunlight was dim. Nobody spoke; only the sounds of cutlery could be heard. Her father took a deep breath and said, "I have to find a way to go into the forest. But this time, I will go alone. You two must stay home; I can't risk us all."

The following dawn, Daphne's father set off on the forest path. Daphne woke up early this time to see him off. He was quickly enveloped by the trees.

When evening came, Daphne's father appeared right at the beginning of the path with his wooden cart, but multiple officers blocked his way. They told him that he would be charged a heavy fine. Her father argued with the officers, and they took him to the police station. Daphne and her mother didn't hear from him or the police officers for a long time.

That heavy fine was now added to their struggles of earning a living. Daphne thought, "If we can pay this money off, my father would come home again."

One night, while Daphne and her mother were sitting on the balcony, drinking their tea, a light breeze blew. It gently caressed Daphne's cheek. After a sip of her tea, Daphne took the amulet out of her pocket. Her father had made it for her from the enchanted forest wood. She ran her fingers on its beautifully carved grooves. She placed the amulet under her nose and inhaled the lavender scent. An idea popped into her mind. "I've got it!" she said to her mother. "I found our way out: we will plant lavender!"

"Lavender, my favourite fragrance," Feray said.



“It’s a wonderful plant. It can grow in almost every type of soil. It resists drought, heat and cold,” Daphne said. They chose a field to plant it in. Her mother rested her hand on Daphne’s shoulder. “I can’t believe my little girl has grown up and comes up with her own ideas.”

Until now, they had never thought of cultivating because any form of agriculture was difficult with the cold winds that blew from the mountains. However, lavender could be very different.

At the beginning of March, they plowed the field. Daphne murmured, “The spring would come with its blessings, I am sure.” They planted the seeds and watered generously. While they were working in the field one day, the mukhtar appeared again and informed them that Daphne’s father would not be with them for six more months. Daphne thought, “In six months, the lavender would be ready to sell.”

Days went by in the same way. They plucked the weeds one by one. But despite all this effort, insects haunted the seedlings and prevented the lavender from blooming. What bad luck.

While having lunch in the field, Feray said, “It is a must to spray medicine, my dear.”

Daphne didn’t understand, but she soon realized that the so-called medicine was indeed an insecticide for insects.

“No, Mother, we will not poison our beautiful earth. It would poison the caterpillars I smile at every morning and the trees in the magical forest too. Butterflies would not visit our garden any more. There has to be another way.”

“My dear, I can see you are disappointed, but this is how things go.”

“No, Mum. Please give me a week. I will find a solution.”

Her mother agreed. Daphne read, searched, scanned. She couldn’t find any other way. Finally, she decided to go to Grandmother Aida, the

oldest one in the village and the grumpiest! Grandmother Aida, with her wrinkled face and hoarse voice, was mocked by the children of the village, who called her ‘The Witch’.

She went into Granny Aida’s home. Old teapots, yoghurt pots and even rubber shoes were lined up in rows, full of soil and plants. Inside there was an intense spice smell that Daphne couldn’t identify and lots of peaceful cats sleeping or walking around.

Granny Aida seemed to have a remedy for every trouble. It was as if there were secret formulas written in her uncovered head equipped with white hair. She opened her wooden chest and took out a large glass bottle. “This one has an oil mixture. I made it from sesame, flax, cotton, poppyseed and olive. You will mix this with sunflower oil and soft soap and spray it on your plants, and no insects will come near them. If other pests come, let them share your crops. Nature will surely return what it takes, far better too. Remember that.”

Daphne’s eyes glistened. She finally found a non-toxic solution. Butterflies would continue to fly freely in their garden. As she left her grandmother’s house, she kept repeating Aida’s words in her head.

Daphne followed Granny Aida’s exact instructions. She sprinkled the oil mixture on each seedling as though it was a magic potion. Daphne and her mother watered the saplings as though they were feeding a baby. All through spring, as the tiny blossoms bloomed, the whole field smelled like her amulet.

Harvest time had finally come. They collected all the seedlings, laid them out on the terrace to dry and separated the dried lavender blossoms from their stems. The beautiful fragrance of lavender filled the whole house. They stuffed it in pouches and loaded them onto the trucks.



Daphne couldn't sleep all night out of excitement. On the way to the factory, she was bouncing in her seat. When they stopped in front of the factory, they saw sacks of dried lavender being unloaded from a truck much larger than theirs. Tears began to flow from Daphne's eyes. Feray took her hand. Daphne grasped her amulet.

They entered through the factory door and saw two men talking to each other. One of the men was unloading the sacks from the truck. "How is it possible, sir? You're saying these are not organic. But we grew them in the field."

"My friend, don't you understand? We want lavender that has been grown in chemical-free soil. The plant is going to be used for the production of oil for sensitive skin," the factory clerk said.

"But sir, without insecticides, all the crops we raise would be eaten by the insects. Don't be ridiculous."

"Insecticides? We cannot buy yours."

The factory clerk noticed Daphne and her mother.

"What are you here for, ladies?" he asked. Daphne saw a butterfly float away from his shoulder.

"We don't have insecticides. Granny taught us. Our lavender is organic," Daphne said.

The factory clerk offered to buy all of their pouches by paying right then and there, adding, "Since this lavender has been grown in special conditions, better conditions, the price shall also be special." After everyone shook hands, the factory clerk said, "See you next season."

On the way back home, they both had a warm smile plastered on their faces. Daphne brought the amulet to her lips. She closed her eyes.

"Father's coming home tomorrow," her mother said.

"We have so much to tell him."

The Woman of Flowers

by Bethan James

The story of the village that vanished begins with the woman made of wildflowers. Alys tells her grandchildren this tale every November on her birthday, turning the words over and over until they are worn smooth as pebbles by her tongue. The twin girls are sharing an armchair by the fireplace, mugs of hot cocoa clutched in moon-pale hands; they were playing outside, and hungry frost has licked the warmth off their skin.

Before the fabled vanishings, Alys continues, the Woman of Flowers, as the villagers called her, made her home in the abandoned windmill. They said this peculiar woman appeared from beyond the emerald hills, accompanied by the scent of buttercup nectar and fresh honey. Her petal-thin skin was the blooms of meadowsweet. Her gown was spun from blossoms of oak. Her hair was trailing wisteria vines. No one knew where she was from or why she was here. But those questions ceased to matter when she weaved her stories—the village folk would lay down their farming tools and gather outside the mill to hear them.

Moulding words like clay in the palms of her hands, she enchanted them with tales of forest women who could transform into birds quick as the blink of a star. Of fairy folk no bigger than a thumb who rode cobalt dragonflies like stallions. Of a cave-vast cauldron forged by giants that allowed the dead to rise, so bright when lit that it burned your eyes.

Then the Woman of Flowers would share out wicker baskets loaded with jars of boiled sweets a hundred shades of hummingbird wings, and chocolate bars in burnished bronze wrappers. Children licked tiny fingers clean while parents wiped smudged faces.

There was a quiet girl in the crowd who clung to each word as if it was dipped in sticky honey. One day, the woman asked her for a story. She spoke with quivering lips about the monster that lived under her bed and how she was afraid of the dark. So, the Woman of Flowers made a solemn vow that no villager here would ever fear darkness again.

That night, the little girl was too overjoyed to get a wink of sleep beneath moonbeams like smudged chalk, and she did not enter the land of dreams. When dawn broke, she found her parents were gone. A single tawny feather rested on their pillow. Perhaps it was a jest? She searched the other cottages, she searched the fields, she searched the barn. Deserted. The village was empty. The only place left to check was the mill. She turned the handle. There was nothing inside except a flock of barn owls hooting at her from the rafters...

As her tears fell, the girl noticed the overpowering scent of meadowsweet blooms. She turned. The Woman of Flowers entered the mill.

“What have you done with my parents? They’re gone.”

The woman placed a buttercup-petal hand on her shoulder, and it melted her worries a little.



“I made a promise to you that no villager would ever fear darkness again. Remember?” The woman gazed up at the rafters. “So I visited their dreams and transformed everyone into owls—rulers of the nocturnal hours. I thought this would make you happy.”

What had she done?

“You did not visit me.” The girl’s lips trembled.

“When I tried to enter your dreams, I could not find you. That means you are still human and still afraid. It is not too late for you to be freed from fear, though.”

The girl realized she had lain awake all night with excitement, thinking the monster under her bed would be vanquished at last. “But you planted the seed of stories in me—now I have so many more that I want to make and hear and share. Owls do not tell stories.”

“The choice is yours,” the Woman of Flowers said with a honeyed smile. “Will you join us?”

Hesitating, the girl felt her heart break bit by bit, like leaves falling from a tree in autumn. She shook her head. “Not today.”

“Very well. I shall return at the same time each year and ask you the same question. Your parents will still be waiting for you. You have my word.”

The girl looked back as she left the mill and saw that the woman had vanished.

* * *

Alys pours herself a whisky as her granddaughters return outside to play amid the maple leaves. The umber liquid scorches her tongue. She savours each sip. Beyond the windowpane, twilight brings a voice delicate as a feather, yet strong enough to make her heart soar.

To the sound of soft too-wit-too-woos, it says: “Join us, join us, join us.”

Soon, says Alys. She tapped her honeyed finger on her lips. Soon.

The Haughty Princess

by Deirdre Sullivan

There are stories we tell ourselves. And stories we are told. I am in a story that gets told. This story is called ‘The Haughty Princess’. It is the story of a princess who thinks she is too good to marry the princes who come to call, and of how her father makes her marry a beggarman. And how that beggarman makes her feel bad about herself, makes her feel small and silly. And how when she feels bad enough, and small enough, and silly enough, he tells her he is a king after all, and she doesn’t have to be a beggarman’s wife. She could be the wife of a rich king. And her lesson is learned, and they live happily ever after. Doesn’t that sound nice?

That is the story that gets told about me. And for a while, I believed it. That I was haughty. That I was proud. That wanting things was something I should be ashamed of. That I should be glad to marry any man my father chose.

In my father’s kingdom, the stories we tell about boys are different from the ones we tell about girls. We tell boys they can grow up to slay

dragons, fight battles, win bets, earn a better life than the one they were born into, marry princesses, become kings, even. If they're brave enough, and clever enough, and persistent enough.

I didn't want to slay a dragon or fight a battle. I didn't like hurting other living things. Though... there had been times when I wouldn't have minded hurting my father. It used to make me angry, the way things were. I felt like the castle was a glass bowl, and I was swimming round and round inside and always ending up in the same place, no matter how hard I tried.

In my father's kingdom, the stories we tell about girls are different from the ones we tell about boys. A girl can be a prize that someone earns, if she's pretty enough, or sweet enough, or rich enough. Pretty is something men get to decide in my father's kingdom.

My father was the King. It made him look good for his daughter to be pretty, and so the way I looked became what pretty was. The beauty standard.

My father was the King. He was rich. So I got to be rich. It wasn't my own money, but enough of it would go to my husband when I married for that not to matter.

I wasn't sweet, though. I couldn't be. I tried, but I would always end up doing something or saying something or wanting something that wasn't right. To ride my horse. To steal my brother's bow and arrow. To not be married off to a stranger. Even what I ate could be wrong, if I enjoyed it too much or too little. Too greedy, too ungrateful. It's hard to be sweet when the world seems designed to make you sour.

I could be quiet. And keep my eyes cast down. But not forever.

And when I turned fifteen, my father decided it was time for princes to come calling. He would let the ones he liked meet me, and I could

pick one of them. But I didn't want to get married. Didn't want to have to start having children of my own, or having to do what I was told by a husband. One was too tall, the other too short; one had too small a mouth, the other smelled funny. Rejection upon rejection. I could see my father getting frustrated with me. I was supposed to choose someone, not no one. He felt that giving me a choice was kindness enough, you see. So many other princesses didn't get to choose.

It was when I rejected a king for having an overly fancy beard that my father lost the plot altogether and roared at me that the next person who came was going to have me. Have me, he said. Like I was a sandwich, not a person. I could feel the tears behind my eyes. I would not release them. I bit my lip and stared ahead, as though it made no difference to me. I suppose that's part of why they called me haughty too. I always liked to hide my heart away. It was not for everyone.

So, the beggarman came, and right away I knew something was up. My father wasn't big on charity. But he was big on vengeance, so it could have been that, I suppose. I closed my eyes and got on with it. I thought I had no choice. And at that point, I didn't. There were no roads branching off my path. They came later.

He married me, he took me to his little house in the neighbouring kingdom, he made me clean and cook and sew and sell his pots at the market. He wasn't a bad man, the beggarman. He just wasn't for me. I did the things, though I was not very good at them at first. He would growl at me but never raised a hand to me or anything. He would say, "I never raise my hand to a woman," like it was a mark of character. Like I should thank him.

Day by day, I became more confident in the routine of what my life was now. The house was well-kept, and the food tasted better. My apron

was no longer full of holes. At the marketplace, I would call out proudly, “Pots and pans for sale,” and very often my arms would be empty coming home, my pockets full. I suppose I was getting too good at living the way my husband wanted me to live. Maybe he thought I was still too haughty for his tastes, too confident, too competent, too much. On my way to the market one morning before sunrise, I was knocked over by a drunken man who looked remarkably like my husband. He and his horse broke every single pot we had to sell, and when I stumbled home, bruised and furious, my husband sent me off, putting me to work in the kitchens of the castle. To earn a crust and, what’s more, to get a good long look at how nice it was, the life I could have had, if I had chosen the king with the fancy beard instead of being so proud and stubborn.

The work in the kitchen was hard and hot, but the food was good, and we could take home whatever the rich folk couldn’t finish. We would eat well. I filled my pockets with leftovers. But on my way home, who did I encounter but Mr. Fancy-Beard himself, who stopped me on my way and asked me to dance. When a king asks you to do something, it’s not a request, just a command with a question mark at the end of it. He took me by the hand and led me to an elegant ballroom full of Lords and Ladies, and he twirled me all around the dancefloor, so that the leftovers I had been saving spilled out all over the place and everybody laughed at me, of course. They still thought I was a servant then, you see, and had no issue making fun of someone poorer and ‘less important’ than they were. Of course, everyone is equally important. But that’s not the story people tell themselves.

Hot tears came to my eyes, and the king read them as sorrow, or shame. Which was good enough for him. I had learned my lesson. He then revealed himself to be the beggarman, the drunken man, my husband.

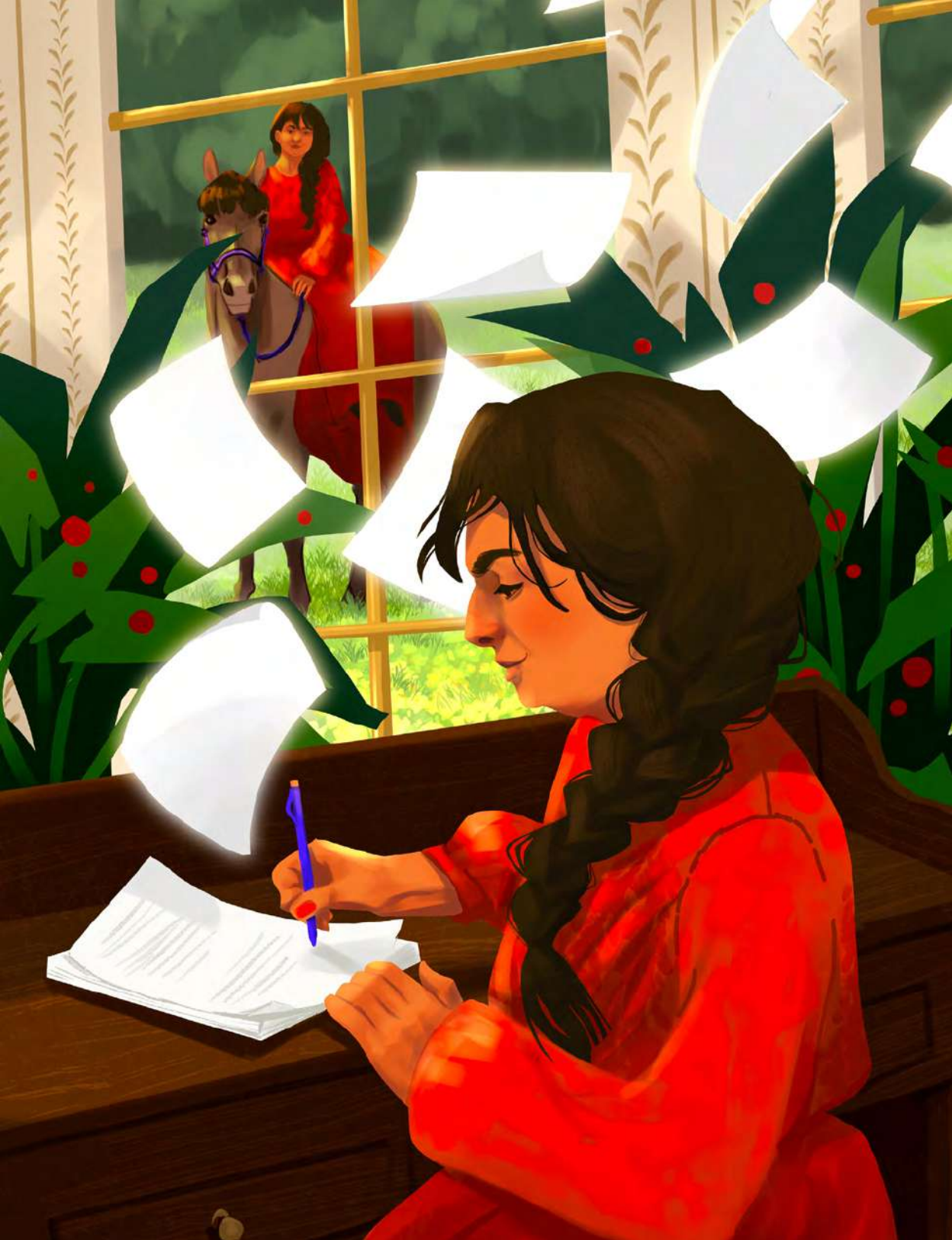
A fine trick had been played. He and my father had conspired for him to marry me anyway, no matter what I said. I wasn't that surprised. I had suspected something like that because the beggarman, the King and the drunken man all had the same face. They seemed to forget that I had eyes. What could I do, though? I smiled, pretended to be surprised and delighted and moved into his castle. To begin a happily ever after.

That is where the story people tell about me ends. But it is only the beginning, really. A wedding is a day. A marriage is a longer sort of thing. I had been confused, stubborn, frustrated and saddened by everything that was happening, but the first morning I awoke in the castle, I felt something else. A feeling that this was the only path I could have trod, with the way things were, the way the world was. No help and no escape. And with that came such anger. Not at the King, or my husband really, but at the structures that allowed them to get away with doing this to me. With treating me like I was less of a person because of the shape my body was the day that I was born. And I thought about all the stories I had heard from my nurse as a child, and how the princesses in them were gentle and good and beautiful and patient and never raised their voices. I thought about witches and stepmothers, and how the women with the most power always seem to be villains in these tales.

And I got out of bed, braided my hair, sat at my desk and began to write a new story. A story about a girl who found a way to escape the situation she found herself in. If she was clever enough, and if she was brave enough, and if she tried enough, I wrote, then surely she could make a future for herself where she mattered as much as any man. It might take time—and struggle. But she could do it.

And I was brave enough.

And I was clever enough.



And I would try. I was determined that no daughter of mine would have to live the story that I did. There would be a new one, for me, for her. For everyone. And maybe I was haughty to think that I could change the way things were. Or maybe haughty is just a word we use when women ask for what they need and want.

I needed change.

I wanted change.

We all did.

So I put down my pen and rolled up my sleeves.

The Ghost Rider

by Doruntina Vinca

They call me Jurendine, or the Ghost Rider. Before I was born, my mother had given birth to nine boys, my nine brothers, who resembled each other like nesting dolls: from the tallest to the shortest. “Is it a boy or a girl?” some neighbour asked. “It’s a baby! A healthy baby!” my grandmother cheered, as she showed me around to the guests while I slept soundly, wrapped in the softest wool blanket she had made for me. She placed my tiny body on top of a round wooden table where my aunts were sitting, waiting to dip tree branches in rose water and throw blessings at me. Then my mother made an announcement: I was to be called Jurendine.

This was my birth name. The Ghost Rider part came later.

I grew up in a noisy and busy household. My family owned a big horse farm, breeding race horses, lovely horses. Many curious eyes, young and old, from nearby villages and from distant lands, visited our barn. My brothers were excellent riders and would race one another to entertain us.

When they raced, a massive sea of dust rose from the ground, leaving visitors in awe.

When I turned twelve and my youngest brother Konstantin turned thirteen, we were gifted our own horses. I was given Mara, a young, soft-hearted, brown-haired beauty with the shiniest of coats. Oh, how I loved her! Her eyes were deep and dark, like two pieces of sparkling coal. Konstantin got Balo, a speedy horse with a coarse white mane. We went on a ride immediately that day, and every day after that. We'd race each other through the fields and rest under the shades of the walnut trees. These were the happiest days of our lives.

As summers went by, and winters came around, my older brothers left home one by one. They were eager to see and explore the world. Konstantin and I, the youngest of the lot, we stayed home. With them gone, there was more work for us. We'd ride Mara and Balo to the village square to buy honey and olive oil; we were sent to harvest the cornfield, unearth potatoes and fetch fresh water from the well. We'd clean the horse barn every day and help our aunts in the kitchen.

But, one cold and dreadful autumn, our horses, including Mara and Balo, fell gravely ill. Our aunts boiled many kinds of herbs and roots to help them heal. Konstantin and I spent all day at the barn, trying to feed them and make them drink the medicine.

"It's the evil eye! Our poor horses! We should have never let any strangers look at them," my mother cried.

"Burst the evil eye! Burst the evil eye!" my aunts said, following my mother to the kitchen. They pulled their cheeks in desperation and threw salt into the kitchen fire.

Konstantin and I followed them, praying for some miracle. Nothing seemed to help.

The oldest of my aunts, who was nearly blind, said the salt was too weak. Our only hope was to find the Mother of the Hearth, who lived in the foggy forest, and get some raw salt from her.

“I can go. I will leave right this moment,” said Konstantin at once.

“But it will not work, my boy,” my old aunt said. “This Mother is deaf to a man’s voice. It has to be you, Jurendine,” she said with her sleepy eyes.

All the eyes in the kitchen turned to me.

“But you must be quick,” she said calmly. “No soul other than the Mother of the Hearth can withstand the fog in the forest for too long.”

The next morning, I dressed in my thickest wool clothes and my leather boots and tied my hair in a tight braid under my hooded cape. My aunts had packed a small sack with some dry fruits and nuts and a flask of honey liquor for me to drink if my throat were to itch from the fog. Before I left, I went to the barn one last time to see Mara. She lifted her head up and uttered a gentle whinny.

“We will ride again together. Soon. I promise. I give you my oath,” I whispered in her ear.

I hugged everyone and left on foot immediately. It was the last day of October. A thin layer of frost had covered everything. I followed the narrow trail into the forest and kept my eyes alert for, what my aunts called, the eye of the fog. Tree branches spread over my head like frozen limbs, and the smell of musty earth seeped into the moist air. The only light was the whiteness of the fog. My wool cape felt heavier as I kept walking into the woods. Suddenly, a noise came. Was it a bird? A bear? What if it was one of those evil shadows that roam in the darkness? I quickly found a stout tree trunk and rested my back against it, trying to hide. My heart started beating fast, and my hands were sweaty. The sound was nearing. I closed my eyes and held my breath. When I opened my

eyes again, I could have sworn that some blood-thirsty lugat had emerged from the shadows to devour me, but there she was: Mara, my horse, was right there in front of me. I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Mara! What are you doing here?" I shrieked.

Her gaze seemed distant, but she smelled sweet and earthy like mushrooms. She lowered her neck, and I jumped on her back. I bent over and held her tightly as she galloped faster and faster, through the foggy forest. The fog made me dizzy, and I lost track of time. It was all so blurry and hasty, but suddenly, I felt my body tossed to the ground, right in front of a wooden house. I got up, light-headed, and then remembered to drink some of the honey liquor. I gathered my senses and knocked on the door.

"Come in! It's open, it's always open," I heard a soft voice coming from the inside.

I pushed the door open. I'm not even sure what I was expecting, but I felt relieved to see an ordinary room, with a bed on the right side and a kitchen on the left. There, in the middle of the room, was an old lady sitting on a stool, tending to the fireplace with a pair of tongs. She had long grey hair tied in two thin braids and a white cotton scarf around her shoulders.

"Come in, my child," she said gently. "Come sit close to the fire—you must be freezing."

"Are you the Mother of the Hearth?" I asked as I sat down across from her.

"Well, no, I am not the Mother of the Hearth. I am just the mother of this hearth," she replied. "Now tell me, my child, what is it that you need?"

I quickly told her how our horses became sick and how my aunts sent me to the forest to ask for some strong salt. She listened deeply.

When I was done, she got up, opened her healing cabinet and gave me a big chunk of rock salt.

“This should be enough. Tell your aunts to burn some of it in the kitchen. Save the rest for another time. Now leave before the night falls.”

I thanked her dearly and left. It took me a while to find Mara when I went outside. I could barely see her through the fog. I jumped on her back, and off we went on our fastest ride.

The night had just fallen over our house when we arrived. The full moon peeked through the heavy clouds. I left Mara in front of the barn and ran breathlessly towards home, straight into the kitchen.

Everyone was there. My mother jumped to her feet, looking pale.

“Jurendine! We thought you were gone forever!” she cried. “I thought I lost my only daughter.”

“But I came home as fast as I could. Look, the salt!” I said and turned to my aunts.

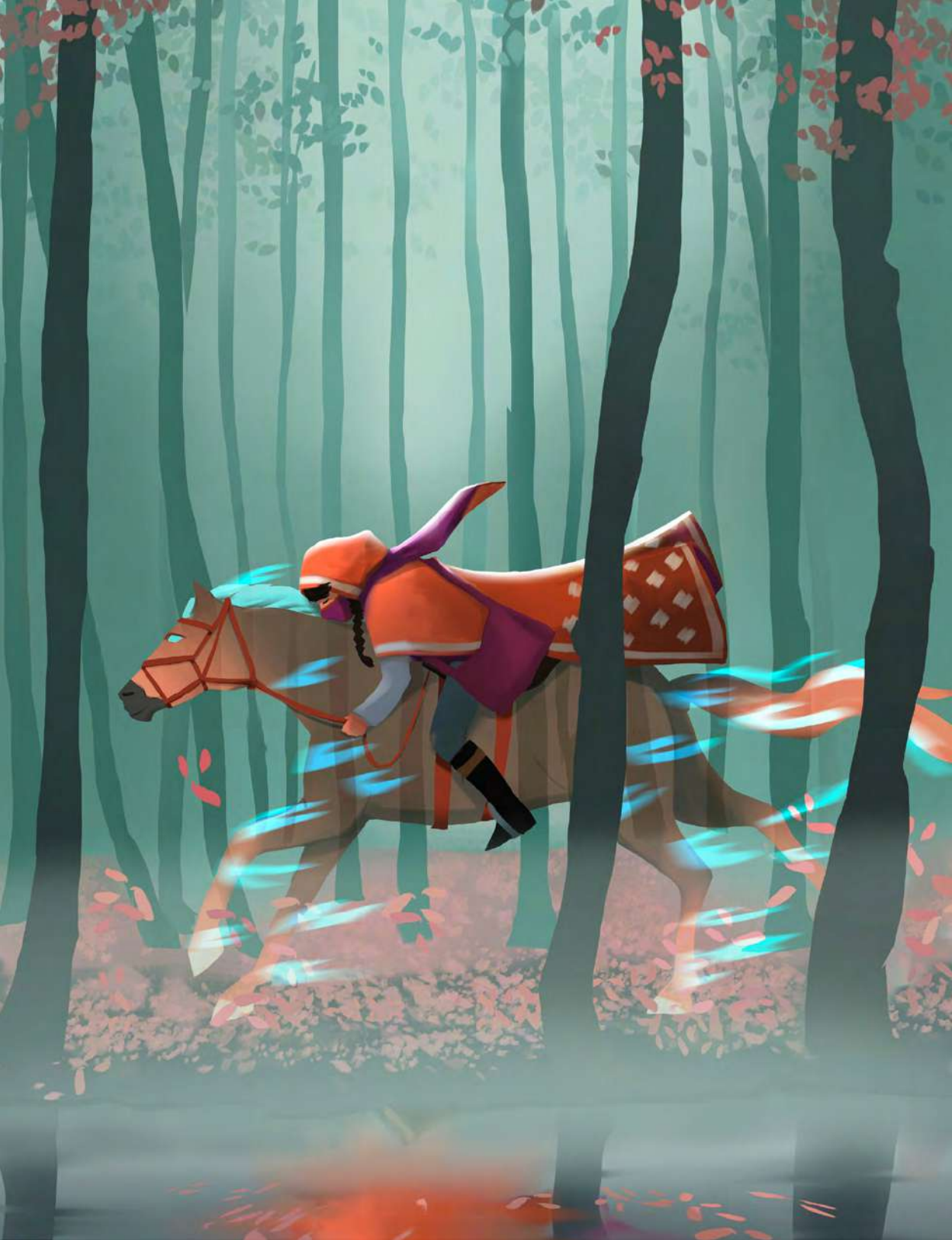
“You were gone for seven days and seven nights,” Konstantin said. “We were scared out of our minds. Are you okay? What took you so long?”

“Seven days? And nights?” I asked. “That’s impossible. I was with Mara all along. She found me in the forest and took me to the Mother of the Hearth. We rode back as fast as we could.”

A long silence followed. They looked at one another, distressed and in disbelief.

“But Mara... Mara died the day you left,” Konstantin said. “It’s impossible. I buried her behind the barn, where the mushrooms grow. Come and see for yourself.”

My knees grew weak, and darkness fell all around and inside me. I must have fainted, for when I woke up, I was laying in my bed. One of my aunts was patting my head with a piece of cloth soaked in cold water.



I slept for many days and kept fitfully dreaming of that long ride home. I could hear Balo and the other horses in the paddock, so I knew the salt had done its magic. When spring came around, people no longer called me Jurendine. They called me the Ghost Rider.

The Storyteller

by Aslı Tohumcu

The Storyteller was under the desk, moving around on the floor, making weird noises. His hands and feet were tightly bound with Rapunzel's thick blonde hair. His mouth was gagged with Little Red Riding Hood's cape. As he rolled angrily, the table shook. Dangerously.

But the crowded room couldn't care less if he was angry or moving around. Because he deserved it. With his pointless, stubborn attitude, he had asked for it himself. None of them had really chosen to do this, to eliminate him so miserably. They had tried to bring him round, telling him about their troubles one by one, time after time. Even Sleeping Beauty wasted the little time she gets awake from her sleep once every hundred years, trying to talk him round. And now, he ended up in this situation because he did not listen to anything that was said to him nicely.

Cinderella looked at him, disappointed. She said, "My sisters did not mind that I was their stepsister. But you didn't let them treat me well!" Her sisters hugged Cinderella, acknowledging that she was right.

Sleeping Beauty joined the conversation, hardly keeping her eyes open. “I have been sleeping for a hundred years for no reason, all because of you. Isn’t that a shame!”

One of the princes puckered his lips and got closer. Then, he put one of his arms around Sleeping Beauty’s shoulder. He said, “Calm down, darling.”

Sleeping Beauty’s eyes opened wide all of a sudden. She snapped at him and said, “Stop calling me darling, like I had a say when you kissed me!”

The prince took his hand back and scooted over.

The hunter threw down his knife, making a loud noise as it hit the floor. The gazelle hid under Snow White’s dress, frightened by the sound. Snow White tried to soothe the gazelle, stroking his back. With sadness in his eyes, the hunter looked at the gazelle. “You’re right to be afraid of me. But I beg you, please give me another chance. I know I have killed you for many years, but I carved your heart up with deep sorrow inside of me. Please, let me protect you from now on.”

The gazelle was surprised. As Snow White said, “Come on, go, don’t be afraid,” he got closer to the hunter.

The Queen watched this scene with tears in her eyes. She opened her arms and said, “Come on, come back to your palace, Snow,” to Snow White, with a tender voice. Snow White ran into her arms.

His hands and feet bound, his clothes covered in dust because of moving around on the floor, the Storyteller said, “If everyone acts their own way, there will always be chaos. You will have to untie me sooner or later. You need someone to put your stories in order. Don’t be childish and just accept it!”

The Queen said, “The Storyteller said something right for once. We do need someone to put our stories in order.”

Cinderella and her sisters yelled, “Great idea!” all together.

Hansel whined, “But how is that going to work?”

Then Cinderella asked, “Should we use the glass slipper?”

Gretel said, “What does that have to do with this?” all bored. Suddenly, she felt hopeless, thinking that they wouldn’t ever get rid of the Storyteller.

The Storyteller burst into laughter, with a fox-like voice. Rapunzel lost her temper and tied the Storyteller even tighter. She called for Little Red Riding Hood to gag his mouth again.

The Queen was walking back and forth in the room, whispering, “We need a new storyteller. Someone who really knows what literature is.”

Hansel just said, “Maybe we should ask your mirror, madam?”

The Queen said, “Oh, just let it go. That mirror is obsessed with beauty. We have to think of another solution.”

Rapunzel’s twins asked, “Maybe we can advertise on social media.”

The Queen frowned. “Where is this social media that you are talking about? I have been living in this dreamland for thousands of years, and this is the first time that I have ever heard of such a land.”

Rapunzel’s twins giggled, “You know, the place that the Storyteller checks on his phone... where you share pictures?” But the Queen shrugged her shoulders and walked away.

Just then, the bell rang. They all looked at one another in silence. Gretel rushed to the door after the Queen, with her sign. They passed through the living room and the corridor and reached the front entrance. Then they looked through the keyhole and saw a tiny person wearing navy sweatpants and a brick-red T-shirt, with her hair down her neck. She was tugging the strings of her backpack.

The Queen reached out and opened the door. The tiny person walked inside, with hesitation. When she saw the Queen, dressed in black with her white hair adorned with her crown, her eyes grew as big as basketballs.

The Queen said, "Hello, um... little person," smiling.

The little person said, "My name is Tomris."

Gretel added, "Who are you looking for, Tomris?"

Tomris frowned and said, "Um... I am here to have an interview with the Storyteller... for my homework."

The Queen noticed how unhappy Tomris was as she said her last sentence. "Don't you like homework?"

"No, the Storyteller...", said Tomris, looking at her little feet. "Actually, what he writes..."

Gretel grinned joyfully, and the Queen said giggling, "Great! Come in."

When all three of them reached the office and Tomris saw the scene, she started smiling. "Great move," she said finally. "Someone had to stop this man."

Sleeping Beauty's yawning jaw dropped. The princes anxiously looked at one another. The hunter winked at the gazelle.

Cinderella said, "If you help us, you can take my glass slipper."

Tomris stared at the narrow heels in Cinderella's hands, then looked at her own sneakers. "Thank you, but you can keep them," she said.

Snow White said, "You can have my dress if you want."

"And my crown," the Queen said.

Tomris gulped and said, "You don't need to give me anything. I will gladly help you. I want to, but... how can I help?"

Gretel said, "We need someone to put our stories in order."

Cinderella added, "We mean, a new storyteller."



The Queen continued, “We need a storyteller who will not torture us and put absurd ideas into readers’ minds. We know what kinds of stories we need, but we do not know how to write them. We live in the tales, after all—we don’t write them.”

Tomris said, “Wowww! I love reading and making up stories. But I don’t know if I can really do this...”

Snow White got closer to Tomris and pointed at the desk. “If you never try, you’ll never know.”

Tomris nodded.

Shaking with excitement, they all watched Tomris turn towards the desk, climb onto the chair and sit cross-legged.

Tomris put one of the blank papers in front of her. She took a pencil out of her pencil case. She nibbled the end of her pencil for a while. Then she stuck her tongue out and said, “Where to start?”

“I do not want to marry a prince just because he kissed me.”

“I would rather chop up and eat myself than eat a kid!”

“I do not want to be locked in a tower.”

“I do not want to go to balls, I want to visit new countries instead.”

“I do not want to rule countries, I want to write poems.”

The Queen stomped her foot. “Hey, stop! Calm down.” She thought for a while. “Let’s start with the worst: kings and princes. All they do is bring trouble. They are the ones kissing girls without consent, they are the ones fighting in wars...”

The princesses supported this proposal with applause. But still, there were complaints: “Seems like it will take ages for it to be our turn.”

“Ummm,” said Tomris in response. “I get you. It is terrible to be forced into a life that you don’t want.”

Yawning, Sleeping Beauty asked, “Wh-what?” Gretel pinched her to make her concentrate. Sleeping Beauty thanked the girl.

Without responding, Tomris started to write. “Once upon a time, there was a land where everyone could live their lives as they wish. A land with princes dancing ballet, princesses swinging through the treetops, kings thrilled to have daughters, queens loving their stepchildren as much as their own children, dragons having broccoli for dinner...”

One of the dragons interrupted, “*Ahem...* umm... Let’s not say broccoli...”

Tomris smirked. She crossed out the word ‘broccoli’. One of the princes added, “Can you also add singing after ballet dancing?”

The hunter interrupted, “Could you write in a farm for me? Where I can grow plants and take care of animals?”

“Maybe a witch could make a little trouble now and then?”

“And a sister might say something snide now and then?”

The old storyteller stopped groaning. Red Riding Hood and Rapunzel untied him. He stood and looked over Tomris’ shoulder.

Tomris kept on writing and writing.

Hana, the Girl Who Caught the Sun

by Rovena Rrozhani

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful village. But one day, a Jinni passed by and everything changed. He could not bear the happiness of the people, so he surrounded the village with seven high mountains. Then he froze the river and the forest. When the sun came up, the Jinni fought the light with ice, and the top of the mountains got higher and higher, so the light could not reach the ground any more. The whole village sloped dramatically into a deep abyss, and no light could reach it.

Without the sun, the village decayed. No more trees, no more grains, no more flowers to be found. The wild animals and the birds ran away. No one could pass the mountains, neither to enter the village nor to leave it. To bring an end to this misery, it was decided that the strongest men should fight the Jinni. So they went to face it one by one and never came back. It was said the Jinni's wrath turned them into ice sculptures.



Darkness consumed the villagers, and they squabbled over mere trifles. Poverty reigned everywhere. Even the rich mirror-maker became quite desperate. Nobody wanted to buy mirrors any more because nobody wanted to see their own sad reflection. One day, the mirror-maker fell ill. He had only a daughter, named Hana, who he nursed with lots of love through hard times. He kept her by his side in the workshop and taught her every skill and trick about mirrors. As Hana grew up discovering new things, her curiosity to learn more increased.

When she saw her father so ill, Hana could not bear it any longer. The girl crouched in the workshop and out of desperation began to cry. Her tears fell on one of the mirrors where the dim light of the candle was reflected. Suddenly, she had an idea. Hana wiped away the tears and went to her room. She thought long and hard through the night. The next day, she told her father that she was going to defeat the Jinni. Her father was really frightened by her decision, begging Hana to change her mind because it was too dangerous, but the girl insisted on going.

“You are just a girl. The Jinni froze all those men. No one came back alive,” he said.

“Father, if we keep living like this, we will all die frozen pretty soon,” she answered.

“Who knows? It might not last forever. The Jinni might calm down.”

“You know better. That is never going to happen. Do not be afraid for me. Do you remember what you told me, when you taught me how to make my first mirror?”

The mirror-maker recalled that day clearly and whispered the words he had told his daughter:

“You can achieve anything.”

Then he added:

“But I was referring to a mirror.”

“I will handle it. I will defy the Jinni, and I will catch the sun. But I need the strongest horse and seven mirrors.”

The mirror-maker blinked in disbelief, but he said, “So be it! You can take the best horse, and as for the mirrors, no one buys them any more, so you can take as many as you want.”

The mirror-maker prepared the best horse, exactly like his daughter asked for, and fastened seven big mirrors to the saddle. As she parted, she looked once more at her father, then at the ruined streets and houses. Suddenly, renewed strength and determination warmed her. Hana started for the first mountain. Trotting through the frozen forest, she saw a snake stuck under a log.

“Save me, please, and I will reward you,” he told the girl.

She managed to move the log, and the snake wriggled free.

“Where are you headed to?” the snake asked her.

“I am going to defeat the Jinni,” she answered.

“This is impossible. You are just a tiny girl.”

“A tiny girl who just saved your life.”

“Right,” said the snake, noticing her firmness. “I will tell you a secret. The Jinni sits on top of the seventh mountain. When it sees you, it will start screaming loudly to scare you, but you shouldn’t stop. Keep going, and look at it straight in the eyes. Don’t look away; that’s how to defeat it. Then get the bottles it keeps under its armpits. The one with the white potion freezes things; the one with the red potion melts them.”

The snake finished and went on his way. The girl continued on her track. She climbed the mountains one by one and placed a mirror on top of each. On the seventh mountain, she picked up two pebbles and stuck



them in her ears. As she went up the track, it was true, she saw all the men who had turned into ice sculptures. She recalled the snake's words; she got two small pieces of ice and used them to glue her eyelids open.

The Jinni faced her all of a sudden and whirled, unleashing such fury and mayhem that the mountain shook. But the smart girl heard nothing, thanks to the pebbles in her ears. She kept walking, never turning her gaze away. The Jinni looked her straight in the eyes, but she never blinked as the ice kept her eyelids stuck open. The Jinni kept screaming, and the girl kept walking towards it, until its powers faded. Eventually the Jinni gave in. The girl took the bottles and opened the one with the white potion. She poured it over the Jinni and it froze. Then she placed the last mirror on top of the last mountain. When she was done, she sprinkled all the ice sculptures with the red potion. The village men melted and stretched as if awakening from a long sleep. They were really astonished at the sight of the frozen Jinni and the small girl holding the empty bottle.

"How did you manage to defy it?" they asked.

"I will tell you all the details on the way back home. The Jinni is frozen now, and we have to smash it to pieces so it can no longer do harm," said the girl.

After smashing the Jinni, they set out for the village. Word of the defeated Jinni spread in a heartbeat. The villagers welcomed the girl cheering, with the high honours worthy of a real hero. Everybody was enjoying the return of the men and the smashing of the Jinni, until someone said:

"The Jinni is dead, and our sons are back home, but there is still no sun."

The village remained in the womb of a dark abyss. But the girl said, "Let's wait for the morning. It is still midnight."

And she went back home, sitting the whole night by her father's bed. The girl didn't sleep at all. She just kept looking at the big clock on the bedroom wall, to the slice of the sky she could glimpse from the window, and to her father's calm face. He was so happy at the sight of her coming back home! The girl looked at the clock and then back to the sky.

The dawn broke, and the sun started rising behind the mountains. The girl kept waiting anxiously until the rays touched the mirror on the first mountaintop. Then one by one, the rays struck all the mirrors and reflected all over the village. The light flooded the roads, and people found happiness again. They rushed to the mirror-maker's house to thank the girl once more. And they started to buy mirrors so they could keep the sun in their homes.

Day after day, the ice melted and the mountaintops lowered bit by bit until one day, a year after the Jinni's disappearance, the sun finally shone over all the mountains. The melted ice brought back the waterfalls, so beautiful that there are no words to describe them. The river thawed, and life started again. The animals returned, and people planted and harvested the best fruits and grains.

Hana's story spread over the mountains and raised curiosity all over the world. People flooded the village from everywhere. They wanted to meet the girl, who was now a mirror-maker of her own, and see the village surrounded by the mountains. Before leaving, they bought a mirror at her workshop, to take home a piece of the courage and wisdom of the girl that managed to defy the Jinni and catch the sun.

The Girl with the Short Hair

by Nina Horvat

Once upon a time, in the Seventh Kingdom of the world lived a wealthy merchant and his wife. They had a daughter that they adored named Lena. She had long dark hair, dark eyes and rosy cheeks. She grew up taught by the best teachers, and although she liked to study and read, she loved being outdoors. Since she was an only child, her father indulged her—he taught her how to ride a horse, how to use a sword, and he even taught her martial arts, even though it was not proper for a girl to learn such things.

One day, Lena made an announcement. “I want to cut my hair. I want it to be short like a boy would wear it.”

Her mother was horrified. “What on earth are you talking about, Lena?! No man will have you if you cut your hair.”

“I don’t need a man,” answered Lena.

“Every woman needs a man to take care of her!”

“Did you not see me wield a sword? I could slay a dragon! I could fight off a bunch of robbers!”



“Nonsense! Girls are not made to fight dragons and robbers...”

“What is this I hear of dragons?” Lena’s father entered the room.

“Talk some sense into our daughter, my darling. She wants to cut off her hair.”

“Whatever for? Your hair looks lovely!”

“It gets tangled into bushes and branches, and it gets in my way when I ride and when I fight!”

“Never mind then, you won’t be fighting for much longer,” her father said.

“What do you mean?!” asked Lena.

“The time has come for you to get married, my dear. I doubt your future husband will appreciate your fighting skills.”

“I don’t want a husband.”

“You must have a husband, Lena. It’s just the way it is. I have already arranged for you to meet some suitors.”

“But father...”

“Do not worry, Lena. Your mother and I won’t force you to marry someone you do not like. We will search until we have found you a suitable match.”

“Then you will search forever!” Lena stormed out.

Lena wanted to continue her studies and perfect her martial arts technique. She did not wish to be somebody’s wife and stay at home taking care of the house and children. She wanted to see the world and have adventures! She immediately started thinking how she could get out of having to marry. Maybe she could pretend she was sick all the time. Nobody likes to be repeatedly coughed on. She could make up a suitor, forge letters and feign a broken heart. Nobody likes to be cried on. She could try talking nonsense non-stop. Nobody likes to have their ear talked off. If all else failed, she could run away.

But as time passed, Lena was none the wiser, and the first suitor was introduced to her. He seemed nice, if not a little boring. They went for a walk in the apple orchard. But as he took a bite of an apple, he started to choke. His eyes began to water, and he was gasping for air and waving his arms. It was Lena's quick thinking that saved him from certain death by an apple—he swiftly administered the Heimlich maneuver, and he spat out the bit that almost led to his death.

“Thank you...,” he choked out.

“You are very welcome. Shall we continue our walk?”

They walked and talked, and Lena was bored. She could think of a hundred things she could be doing that were far more interesting. As she was going through her latest sword lesson in her head, she heard a scream and looked around. Her suitor had slipped and almost fell off a cliff. He was holding on for dear life to the root of a tree.

“Don't let go! I shall pull you up!”

“You cannot! I am too heavy!”

“Shut up and give me your hand!”

He reluctantly let go of the root with one hand, and Lena had no trouble pulling him up.

“Thank you...,” he breathed out.

“You need to be more careful,” said Lena.

They went back to Lena's house, and her suitor said goodbye to her parents and left.

“What on earth happened on your walk, Lena?!”

“Whatever do you mean, mother?”

“Your potential husband ran away, covered in mud and on the verge of tears! What did you do to him?!”

“Nothing! I saved him from choking and from falling off a cliff!”

“That... I... Well... Lena. This is not proper behaviour for a lady!”

“Would you rather I left him to die?” asked Lena. Her mother huffed and puffed but said nothing.

And so the second suitor was brought to meet Lena, and they went for a walk. This time, Lena did not take her suitor near a cliff, just to be safe. She may not have wanted to get married, but she wished no ill luck to her suitors. She chose a wooded path she often took, thinking no trouble would find them there. But as soon as they set foot into the woods, they were surrounded by three robbers.

“Surrender your money!” yelled one of the robbers.

“We haven’t any money with us,” Lena said.

“Fine. Then we will take your pretty self with us instead,” replied the robber, while Lena’s suitor promptly fainted.

“I’d like to see you try,” said Lena.

One of the robbers leaped and tried to grab her, but Lena threw him over her shoulder, delivered a few swift kicks to the other two robbers, and managed to steal their swords.

“Off you go now, before I really get angry!” said Lena.

“If there are more women like her in this town, I am not going near it!” cried one of the robbers as they ran away. Lena started gently slapping her suitor on his cheek to wake him.

“Where are the robbers?” he asked, coming to his senses.

“I fought them and scared them away.”

“You?!”

“Yes, me. Is that so strange?”

“Well... yes. After all, you are a girl.”



Lena pursed her lips but said nothing. What would be the point? This was not the man she would marry. They went back to Lena's house. The suitor said a quick goodbye to her parents and ran away.

"What did you do to this one?" her father asked, amused.

"Saved him from some robbers."

"Did you now? How do you always find trouble, Lena?"

"I like to say trouble finds me."

"Indeed, it does..."

Soon it was time for Lena to meet her third suitor.

"Third time is the charm, Lena!" her mother said.

"We shall see..." answered Lena.

Her third suitor was very nice and polite—and a bit more interesting than his predecessors. They went for a long walk, and Lena thought he was perfectly nice, but she could not see herself spending the rest of her life with him. She was so lost in thought while he was chattering away that she did not notice they were in the forbidden part of the forest, said to be occupied by dragons. She realized where they were when she stepped on the handle of a sword.

"Where are we?" asked her suitor.

"We are in the forbidden part of the forest. We should turn around."

"Did you hear that?!"

"Be quiet. There are tales of dragons in these woods."

"Dragons?!"

They could hear the shuffling of leaves and branches and then a loud roar. Before they could do anything, a dragon stomped its way through the trees towards them.

"Run!!" yelled Lena. The suitor was too afraid to move. The dragon was coming closer. "Move! We need to go, NOW!" but he was frozen



in place. The dragon started breathing fire and singed Lena's hair. She quickly put out the fire and grabbed the sword from the grass. When the dragon was upon them, she swung the sword with all her might towards the dragon.

"Stop! I mean you no harm! Let us leave!" Lena told the dragon and swung the sword a few more times. Her suitor finally unfroze and started running. Lena followed. She could move easily through the trees. The dragon lost sight of her through the thick forest, so she escaped.

Her suitor didn't even say goodbye to her parents; he mounted his horse and ran away. Lena's parents were beside themselves.

"You could have been killed, Lena!" her father yelled.

"But I wasn't!"

"The forbidden forest is no place for a lady!" her mother yelled.

"It's no place for anybody, but look, I am perfectly fine!"

"But look at your beautiful hair... It's singed..."

"At least now you will let me cut it," said Lena and stormed out.

A few days passed, and her parents sat down with Lena to have a serious talk.

"Lena, your mother and I thought a lot about what happened, and we decided you do not have to get married."

"And if anyone in town has something to say about it, I shall tell them my daughter fought off a dragon!" her mother added proudly.

"Will you let me cut my hair now?" asked Lena.

"I already brought the scissors," answered her mother, straightening out the back of Lena's hair.

"Would you like me to cut it for you?"

"I want to do it," said Lena as she cut her long hair.

And so, Lena lived happily ever after, unmarried. She went on to have many adventures, and she travelled throughout all seven kingdoms. Legend has it that Lena formed a group of female knights who saved many confused, lost and kidnapped men along their way, and little girls in all seven kingdoms listened to stories about Lena, the brave girl with short hair who knew how to fight, ride a horse and wield a sword.

The End

The Princes and the Peas

by Louise Young

Picture an ogre—what do you see? A huge troll-like creature? Maybe wearing raggedy clothes? They're probably not too bright, but definitely ugly! Am I right? You'd be able to spot one if they came lumbering into your playground. Wouldn't you?

Well, I'm sorry to alarm you, but these are not the kind you need to worry about. The worst kind of ogres look totally, boringly unremarkable. They live in our towns and villages, eat in our cafes and meet their friends in our parks; many of them have jobs, and some have fantastically well-paid jobs. Ogres worship in our churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, they own pets or have hobbies, and many of them have partners and children.

Amy lived with one of these ogres. His name was Valerian Imran Prince, but Amy called him Dad.

Valerian was a very successful businessman who had made a fortune from manufacturing and selling the comfiest mattresses in the entire world.

None of the other bed manufacturers had worked out the secret behind each Princely Night mattresses' ability to deliver a minimum of eight hours' blissful, uninterrupted sleep each time you went to bed.

"So important in these stressful times we're living through," adults were frequently heard to say.

No one outside the palace knew that each mattress had been soaked in a Princely Night sleeping potion—a herbal formula containing hops, lavender and critically endangered violet peas. In fact, if you were to fly over the Princes' grounds and peer through strong binoculars, you might just glimpse a sight of the last 99.9% of these precious plants known to humankind.

"That's me off, Princess. Come and give your old Dad a kiss!"

Amy came out of her second-best bedroom on the fourth floor, hitched up her skirt and began the long descent down the solid gold bannister.

Lately this way of moving around the palace had lost its appeal. Maybe it was because she was getting older, Amy thought, as she passed between the third and second floor. She was going to be ten next month after all, and that sounded so much more grown up than nine. Maybe it wasn't just that. Lately many things had been feeling not quite right, Amy reflected, as she reached the landing near the front door.

"Bye, Dad. Have a great trip."

Valerian was going to a faraway land to launch his latest product, Sleepy Cuddles blankets.

"Aww, thanks Princess. Hopefully, I'll make a killing," Valerian said, excitedly rubbing his hands together. "I'll bring you back a racehorse, or an elephant. You'd like that."

"NO. No, I don't need you to do that. Thank you, though. What I'd like, what I'd really like, is to do normal stuff with you."



“Normal? What d’you mean normal?”

“Well, I was wondering... I thought it would be nice for us to go to that area with grass and seats and people and dogs, on the other side of the moat.”

“You want to go to the PARK? Are you out of your MIND? Why would you want to go there when you have your own gardens and tennis courts and zoo and museum and art gallery and waterpark? Haven’t I slaved all these years to give you all this so you wouldn’t need to be a part of all of THAT?!!”

By now, Valerian was windmilling his arms wildly, spitting out the words as his daughter stared down at her emerald-encrusted slippers.

“I’m sorry if I sounded ungrateful. I am a very lucky girl. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Mmmm, I might forgive you. See you in a week, and no more funny notions. You’re beginning to sound like your mother.”

With that, Valerian stomped out of the palace, leading a team of personal assistants to the helipad.

Amy slumped to the marble floor. What *was* wrong with her? How could she be so ungrateful?

As she stood up, Amy became aware of something shiny lying by the door. It was a key, and on closer inspection, Amy saw, engraved in tiny letters, V.I.P. Testing Room. Testing Room? Amy didn’t possess any keys, so she was very keen to find the door that could be opened by this one.

She tried all the doors in the main palace, the stables, the galleries and greenhouses, the museum, the cinema and even the house where the peacocks lived when they weren’t busy showing off on the lawn. Two days passed, and still Amy had not found the door to which the key belonged.

That night, just as Amy was finishing her hot chocolate, the sky started to rumble. It rumbled and it grumbled and it rumbled some more. Velvet black clouds drew themselves tight around the palace, and then the rain started. This was no ordinary downpour—this felt like all the Gods and Goddesses had decided to dump their bath water at exactly the same time. The wind whipped itself into a whirl, and soon Amy found it hard to see anything clearly out of her window, just a blur of leaves and twigs and pea pods—lots and lots of pea pods.

The next morning, the sun rose and the world felt more at peace. The gardeners tried to replant what had been uprooted, and the tilers replaced missing slates on the roof. Amy decided to investigate the basement to make sure the storerooms were not flooded. Her Dad would not be happy if the caviar had floated away or the champagne bottles had smashed.

A little rain had got in through the cellar door, but it was nothing to fret about, assured the pastry chef. Relieved, Amy turned to go upstairs when she noticed a curtain ripple ever so slightly with the breeze from all the comings and goings of the kitchen staff. Curious about a curtain placed against a wall, Amy crossed the floor and lifted back the cloth. Behind it was a door—and yes, the key fit.

With just the slightest *creeeak*, Amy stepped through the door and pulled it closed behind her. The familiar smell of lavender, hops and violet peas engulfed her all at once. Adjusting her eyes to the gloom, Amy gasped at the sight of a gigantic pile of mattresses stacked in front of her. There must have been 80? 100? 120? It was hard to tell. The only light came from a small window near the top of the staggeringly high room.

Without any plan in mind, Amy began to climb the mattress mountain. It felt reassuringly stable, with handy footholds between each layer.



“35, 36, 37, this is a dawdle!”

“52, 53, 54, mmm, might need to pace myself.”

“82, 83, oh no, why did I start this?”

“94, OH NO. I should not have looked down!”

Amy clung to the mattresses, forehead pressed against the side, legs shaking in fear. She closed her eyes and tried to calm herself by counting to ten. Her heart rate slowed, and she willed herself on.

“95, 96, you can do this!”

Amy felt a little rock under her finger. No time to investigate, she put it in her cardigan pocket as a souvenir, should she ever get out of this situation alive.

“113, 114. Nearly at the top. Nearly there. 118. Made it!”

With a final burst of adrenaline, Amy clambered onto the top mattress. Not daring to peer over the edge, she shuffled towards a wall where the window was within easy reach.

Feeling faint and short of breath, Amy pushed the window open and guzzled the sweet air.

A window box had been securely fastened to the outside ledge. Only a little earth remained, and the space between the earth and the bottom of the box revealed a half-hidden red notebook and a bottle with clear liquid in it. Amy picked up the book and dusted off the earth.

Opening the first page, she read:

“My darling Amy, you have found me, just as I knew you would, my brave, clever child.”

“Whoa! No way this could be written by Dad,” Amy thought as she felt the tenderness in every word.

“Believe me, I never wanted to leave you, and I can understand if you are angry and want nothing to do with me. But know that I have never

stopped loving you and will wait my whole life to be with you, if you so wish.

I had to leave to keep you safe. I had to leave so I could live. I am ready, and I am waiting for a sign. If you would like to meet, bury the pea you have collected on your journey. Plant it in this window box, and water it with my tears in the bottle buried under the soil. I shall come find you. All my love forever, Mum XX.”

Finding herself in tears, life suddenly started to feel real to Amy. Her mother—who her father had said left them—was out there, waiting. She hadn’t left *them*. She had left *him*. But where was the pea? Amy rooted around the pockets of her cardigan looking for a tissue when she felt the stone. She took it out and smiled and cried some more as she realized it wasn’t a stone—it was the pea. She planted and watered the pea with her own tears of joy along with the tears from her mum. Each day, she returned to care for the seedling and watch it grow as she waited for her real life to begin.

The Wound of a Heart Too Kind

by Esther Obi Smith

In a small town in Biafra, during the war with Nigeria, Adalene Laroque, a nurse from France, was helping aid the wounded in a makeshift hospital, surrounded by other volunteers. She was truly young-looking, which made the patients distrust her at first, but it turned out she was a wonderful nurse. Every day, she took care of the patients and was overjoyed when she saw them return to health.

One day, she was checking on all of her patients, taking note of their progress, when she noticed someone new. Brought in by volunteers while she was asleep was a man, wounded and unconscious, around her age, tall and skinny, with a bandage around his heart. She looked at him and felt a curiosity that she had never felt before, like a magnet pulling her towards him.

“There is something very peculiar about this one,” said a doctor who had approached Adalene when he saw her turn towards the young man’s bed. “We have tried operating on him to close the wound but with no

success. No matter what we do and what we try, we can't seem to close it, or even figure out what caused it in the first place." That day, Adalene continued checking on her patients. However, she couldn't help but think about the strange man with the unhealable wound.

Days passed, and Adalene visited him more and more often and, eventually, decided to start spending her lunch breaks by his side. She sat down and, almost without thinking, took his hand in hers, softly. She marvelled at the beauty of their skin contrast. Suddenly, the man's eyes opened, and he spoke.

"Where am I?" he asked, as if Adalene's touch had brought him back to life. He looked down at their hands. "I guess we became friends while I was asleep?" he said in a friendly tone. She became aware of how strange it must have been for him to have a woman he didn't know close to him, so she stepped back.

The moment their hands stopped touching, it was as if the man suddenly remembered he was wounded. His calm face turned into a grimace, and he began crying in pain.

They tried operating on him time and time again, but the unhealable wound stayed open. Adalene continued to have lunch by his side, and now that he was awake, she began to learn more and more about him. His name was Muiyiwa Hanifat, and he was as kind as someone could be. With each story he told, Adalene felt that the pull towards him became stronger and stronger.

Muiyiwa had been injured while bringing food to starving children, sharing the little that he himself had. He didn't know how it happened, and he remembered no one around him when he fell to the ground. Filled with compassion, she held his hand again while she listened to him talk, and his pain faded miraculously, just like it seemed to the first time he awoke.

From that day on, Adalene spent as much of her time as she could helping him eat or bandaging his wound.

“You’re my painkiller, Miss Laroque,” he would say, and she would smile.

“Just while you keep entertaining me with your stories, Muiyiwa, it’s a fair trade.”

On a hot summer morning in August, Adalene was just beginning her shift when she noticed Muiyiwa was missing from his bed. She felt a wave of sadness, but then, hope. Maybe he had finally healed and had left. Why would he leave without saying goodbye?

“Doctor, what happened to the patient with the unhealable wound? Muiyiwa Hanifat, where is he?”

“Adalene, we’re going to have to move him to another hospital. I’m afraid you have grown quite close to him, and that is... frowned upon. We help these people because they need us, but you see, Miss Laroque, this doesn’t mean they are like us.”

Adalene was taken aback by the words of the doctor. This man, who was supposed to care about all people equally, was allowing skin colour to raise a barrier between his patients and those who cared for them.

“There is no place for you with a black boy. There’s definitely a man back in France who comes from a good family and can give you a good life—and beautiful children.”

The doctor said ‘beautiful’, but Adalene knew what was really meant: white.

Adalene glared at her superior, “There is no young man more wonderful than Muiyiwa, and your thoughts on who I choose to love are frankly irrelevant. There is no room for racism in this place of healing and care,” she told the doctor. She finished checking on her patients in silent disbelief, wiping tears from her cheeks all throughout the day.



When lunchtime finally came, she decided to look around for Muiyiwa; the doctor had said he needed to be moved, which meant he had not yet left after all. She found him in the operating room, staring at the ceiling blankly, with wet cheeks and sad eyes.

“Muiyiwa?” she whispered, and his eyes shot towards her, lighting up almost immediately.

“Oh, Adalene! They’re moving me...”

“I heard! They want to separate us, but they can’t.”

She leaned in and softly kissed him, for the first time and what they thought may be the last. Just as their lips separated, something incredible happened: there on the bed was a small pile of tourmaline stones—not the usual blue but black with white stripes. And Muiyiwa and Adalene were never seen there again.

Nobody ever really found out where they had gone. Maybe they ran away together, somewhere far away from war and prejudice, and built a beautiful family with whom they lived happily ever after.

The Sirens of Carraig Mhór

by Laura Niemeyer

They call us sirens. Witches. Worshipers of evil.
This is the story they tell about us—the story of the Sirens of Carraig Mhór.

Do you want to hear it?

Quiet, then. Listen.

Long, long ago, in a time before both you and me, the land and the sea were ruled by two deities: Carraig, the Sower, giver of life and guardian of the land and forest, and Fionnabhair, the Woman of the Waves, gatherer of storms and ruler of the sea.

Carraig was a gentle giant who ruled and protected all the lands touched by the sun. He lived in harmony with the people, who often came to his woods to give him offerings, praying for rich harvests and healthy livestock. He was honoured with great feasts and celebrations, filled with laughter, singing and dancing from dusk till dawn.

Fionnabhair lived alone in the deep wide sea. She ruled over all that could swim and all that could float, and it was her duty to maintain order throughout the sea—to keep the fish healthy and plentiful, to uphold the ebb and flow of the tides, and to gather storms to bring rain over the lands. For her, no celebrations were held—no laughter, singing or dancing.

You see, ships often got caught in the storms and sailors died, and while Fionnabhair had no intention to harm them, she had to do her duty. The people thought she was acting out of malevolence, so they feared her. They thought death was what she longed for, so they sent human sacrifices to appease her. Whenever a ship went out into the storms, they tied a young woman to the mast of a small vessel and sent her off into the waves—an innocent life offered to the mighty Woman of the Waves in exchange for her mercy. This was Fionnabhair's burden to bear, and she bore it for many centuries.

Over time, Fionnabhair became bitter and jealous that the people would fear her while giving Carraig such praise. After all, was she not also providing for the people, sending rain to grow their crops and keeping the waters full of fish for them to feast on? Could they not see the good that she was doing, despite the bad that came with it? Why was she destined to live in the dark and be feared while Carraig got to live a life full of light, joy and celebration?

It was not fair. Why did there have to be two deities to rule land and sea anyway? Why could she not be the one true ruler of all that lived and breathed, above and below, as far as the eye could see and beyond? She was powerful enough. She could do it.

She knew she could.

Once she realized this, there was no turning back. She had been hiding in the dark for far too long. She deserved to be seen. To be praised

and worshipped. And so, the Woman of the Waves took on a human form to rise out of the sea and step into the sun. But instead of offering her praise, the people were so much more frightened of her that they offered the grandest sacrifice they could think of: burning all the young women in the village, if only she would spare everyone else. This enraged Fionnabhair beyond imagination.

In her rage, her magic ran wild, and a wave of destruction overcame the lands. Gentle Carraig was too weak to fight off such powers, and so the lands suffered under Fionnabhair's spell. Storms raged across the lands, flooding the fields, destroying crops and harvest, drowning livestock and people all the same. The people were desperate, and in their desperation, Fionnabhair saw her chance to get rid of Carraig once and for all.

"Carraig has failed you!" she told them. "How can you worship someone with so little power? He cannot protect you. He takes all the glory when there is nothing to be frightened of, but when your lands and your lives are at stake, he does nothing to save you. He does not deserve your worship. He deserves nothing but death."

Her words planted hatred and darkness in the hearts of the people. Enraged, they gathered and drove Carraig out of the woods, chasing him all over the land until he reached the edge of a cliff and could go no further. Still under the spell of her words, they drove gentle Carraig off the cliff.

Severed from the land that gave him life just as much as he gave life to it, he turned to stone. Now Fionnabhair was in charge of everything, yet things did not work out as she had planned. Having spent all her powers rampaging, she had lost her divinity. The lands did not recover from the damage, all their richness and beauty destroyed. With nothing left to rule over, Fionnabhair turned her back on the lands and the people and threw

herself off the cliff to return to the sea. When her mortal form crashed into the water, she died.

Her ghost lingered in the dark below the surface, seeking revenge by dragging innocent sailors to the bottom of the sea. She became known as the first Siren of Carraig Mhór, haunting the sea to this day. Her voice still howls in the perpetual storm around the island. Those who follow Fionnabhair and seek to live in shelter on the island will carry the Siren's Curse, luring sailors into the treacherous currents.

"Beware of the Sirens of Carraig Mhór," people say. "They mean nothing but trouble."

This is the story they tell.

Yet it is not our story, for everyone knows, there are always two sides to every story—if not more.

Will you hear ours?

Over here, on the isle of Carraig Mhór, we tell a different tale. In our version of the story, Fionnabhair did not return to the sea after Carraig was killed. Realizing what she had done to the beauty of the lands, she was devastated, and she hurled herself off the cliff in desperation, still in her mortal form. Blessed by Fate's grace, she did not die, and so she braved the waves to swim across the bay, washing up on the shore of Carraig's body. But Carraig had become cold and lifeless, a mere rock in the sea. The desolation of the place broke her heart. Stripped of her powers, alone, exhausted, she fell to her knees and cried. As her tears touched the barren earth, the stone cracked and life sprang from the crevice, growing higher and higher until she stood underneath a grand white oak—Crann na Beatha, the Tree of Life.

The sight of it touched her so that she sobbed even more, for she had almost lost faith that anything good could come from her any more.



And so, she drenched the land in tears, watching life spring forth wherever she went, until the whole island had become lush and green and full of life and beauty again. She swore to always protect it at all costs.

With a final burst of magic, she conjured an eternal storm around the island—a barrier that would allow only those who were brave enough to weather the storm and follow her call to find shelter on the island. It would keep out all who might strive to claim the land and rule over it, for these lands should not be ruled by anyone but Fate and Time.

Having spent all her tears and all her magic to revive the land, life had drained from Fionnabhair, and she turned to stone as well. But water kept flowing from her eyes, trickling deep down into the earth to create a well that would never run dry, but be the source of life to all who sought shelter on the island.

This is how we survived, how we built a life on the island after our people banished us as sacrifice to a deity that perished long, long ago, in a time before both you and me. But we have heard the Siren's call. We have braved the storm and lived to tell the tale. And thus, a thriving community has grown on the isle of Carraig Mhór. A community of Sirens. Witches. Worshippers of nature. And the storm around us rages on, our call joining the echo of Fionnabhair's voice howling in the wind.

Maybe you can hear it too, wherever you are.

Go on, listen.

Can you hear it?

We are calling for you.

Will you answer our call? Will you brave the storm and join us?

Come. We are waiting.

A Tale of Two Ševalas

*Emrah Güler, Amila Hrustić Batovanja,
Hatidža Gušić and Masha Durkalić*

*This story was inspired by the biography of Ševala Zildžić-Iblizović,
the first woman Muslim doctor in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as written
in the book #WomenOfBiH (2019), published by Amila Hrustić
Batovanja, Hatidža Gušić and Masha Durkalić.*

“**T**his is my street!” cried little Ševala.
She squeezed her mother’s hand, pointing to the street sign.
‘Ševala Zildžić-Iblizović’, read the sign.

“Your namesake,” said her mother. “A street for you and for another
Ševala.”

“Is the other Ševala like me?” asked the girl.

“I hope you’ll be like her,” said her mother. “Do you want to hear her
story?”

Little Ševala and her mother sat on a nearby bench, under the shadow
of the sign that bore the little girl’s name.



“There was a time when girls were not as lucky as boys.” Little Ševala’s mother began telling the story of her daughter’s namesake. “Many girls couldn’t go to school, and many of them didn’t know how to read or write. Ševala wanted to go to school more than anything, and she was one persistent little girl. ‘I will not’, ‘I cannot’ and ‘I don’t know’ were not in her vocabulary.”

“Like me!” said little Ševala.

“Like you,” smiled her mother. “And like you, she wanted to be a doctor. Lucky for Ševala, her parents supported her. She went to an all-girls school. She finished high school. At the time, girls were not allowed to study more to become doctors. Remember, ‘I will not’ was not in Ševala’s vocabulary. She found a way to continue studying. She became the first girl to go to school with boys.”

“Did the boys like her?” asked little Ševala.

“People weren’t happy about a girl studying with boys. Some threw rocks at her, others were mean to her mother. Like I said, she was one persistent little girl. After high school, Ševala studied even more for her childhood dream to come true. Finally, she finished university and became the first woman doctor.”

“What kind of doctor was she?”

“People weren’t happy about a woman becoming a doctor. She couldn’t find a job as a doctor at first. Still, some people were impressed. Many read the incredible story of the first woman doctor in newspapers. Remember, ‘I cannot’ was not in Ševala’s vocabulary. She began helping people, especially women and children.”

“Did she find a job being a doctor?”

“She became a very successful doctor. She treated children, she helped women in villages, she helped men wounded in battles. Ševala told

everyone who'd listen that the best thing for a woman to be happy was for her to study, study and study."

"Didn't she have any fun?" little Ševala asked.

"She had lots of fun. Like you, Ševala loved getting together with her girlfriends. She loved the theatre. She loved travelling. And like you, she loved going to the beach."

"Maybe I'll be a doctor!" said little Ševala. "Or a traveller. Or both."

"Or both," said her mother. "Remember..."

Little Ševala held her mother's hand, looked up at the sign that read Ševala Zildžić-Iblizović and finished her mother's words.

"'I cannot' was not in Ševala's vocabulary."

Marta

by Karina Bezrukova

Once upon a time, there lived a sister and a brother, Marta and Marko. Their mother died in childbirth. They were brought up by their father, Ivan.

When the children turned fourteen, the village Witch Doctor fell sick. No medicine could help him. People worried, “How can we live without him?”

Marko was the Witch Doctor’s disciple, but he was too young, so he didn’t know yet how to treat diseases or talk to the sky for wise advice.

Harvest time was close. Who will keep good weather? Who will drive away the winds? The villagers were concerned and keenly waited for the Witch Doctor’s recovery.

One summer morning, Marko brought news to his fellow villagers that the Witch Doctor had a vision of being healed with the water from the Abysmal Lake, sprinkled with human blood. He had seen the one who would be sacrificed. With tears in his eyes, Marko said the name of his father—Ivan.

The morning of the sacrifice ritual, Marko begged his father to hide or run from the village, but Ivan would not go. He had faith in his heart. His sacrifice wouldn't be in vain. He would save not only the Witch Doctor but also the whole village. And this would hopefully free him of his guilt for his wife's death.

The night before the sacrifice, Marta couldn't sleep. She was mournful and scared. She decided to walk to the whirlpool at the Abysmal Lake to think.

It was a moonlit night. Marta followed the path to the Abysmal Lake. On approaching it, the girl saw a strange figure of a small person sitting on the edge of the abyss.

"God bless you, mister," Marta said.

The figure spoke without turning around.

"I'm glad you've come. You are brave. Things are looking bad. Your Witch Doctor demands a human sacrifice. And that sacrifice is your father," the voice asserted, rather than asked. "You must know that the Witch Doctor knows that no sacrifice will help him."

The figure stopped speaking and turned to face Marta. The girl looked into its eyes and fell into the abyss. It had no end and was swirling with images, knowledge, words, faces. Marta recognized her mother in one of them. Even though she never met her, she was sure it was her. The face smiled at her and whispered, "Don't be afraid. You can do it. I love you."

Marta didn't know how long it took—a minute or eternity—but when she came to her senses, she saw the short little figure with long tousled hair and a long beard, still sitting in front of her.

"Abysman," it introduced itself. Marta was sure the creature didn't move its lips, but she heard it. Sometimes she noticed she heard people



speaking when they were silent. She didn't do it on purpose, but some people were thinking too loud.

Ivan said a final farewell and embraced his son but didn't find his daughter in her bed. He left the house dressed in his best clothes. The whole village was waiting for him outside.

He was looking around, trying to find his daughter in the crowd. But all he could see were his fellow villagers' sad eyes. The Witch Doctor was supported by his assistants. He looked terrible—he had become thin, gaunt and grey.

It was time. Ivan sighed heavily. He climbed onto the rock hanging over the Abysmal Lake. He turned round to address his fellow villagers, wanting to ask for forgiveness for the death of his wife before his own death, but he suddenly realized that he couldn't move.

Meanwhile, the sky above the lake became clouded over. It thundered menacingly. The lightning cut through the sky. Wind arose and started whipping people's faces, tearing their clothes, but they couldn't move either, pinned to the ground by some invisible force. Only the Witch Doctor understood what was going on.

"I hear you! I hear you, Abysman!" roared the Witch Doctor.

As soon as he had said these words, everything calmed down. People were able to move again, and everybody turned towards the Witch Doctor.

"Yes, the truth must be told. I'm dying. No sacrifice will save me. I made a horrible mistake. I fell in love with a woman named Iryna, but she didn't choose me. She chose Ivan. My jealousy overwhelmed me, and it made my heart black and cruel.

"In nine months, scared Ivan came running to me at night. He told me that Iryna was giving birth to the twins and something went horribly wrong, and the midwife could do no more to help Iryna. I ran as fast as

I could, but it was too late. She died in my arms. I had lost the one whom I loved more than anything in the world. I blamed Ivan.

“When it was time for me to choose a disciple, my teacher visited me in my dream and showed Iryna’s daughter. But she resembled her mother so much that every time I saw her, my heart bled.

“I chose Marko. He looked like his father. I enjoyed being a strict and cruel teacher. Marko was a good helper yet had no healing abilities.

“I knew I was dying. But I didn’t want to go alone. I wanted to avenge Iryna’s death. But those who protect us will not let me.”

The Witch Doctor pulled himself together and went towards Ivan. He motioned to Ivan to step off the rock and climbed onto it himself almost effortlessly.

“Oh, dear God!” someone from the crowd sobbed. “What are we going to do? Are we doomed to starvation and death?”

“Hush!” the Witch Doctor hissed. “The sky has already ruled. Marta, come here.”

Marta came out of the trees and approached the crowd. She walked steadily, with confidence and her head held high. The villagers made way for her. Marta stopped, and the Witch Doctor stretched out his hand with the healing staff.

“Take it. There’s no time for ceremony. The one who saw the eyes of the abyss at night is ready to be the next Witch Doctor.”

Marta made a deep bow, took the staff in her hands, pointed to the lake and said:

“The Abysman is waiting.”

The Witch Doctor turned round, spread his arms like wings and flew into the abyss. He was nothing but a dying bird.

Now, it was Marta’s time to soar.

The Discovery of Princess Jane

by Khulya Jafarova

Once upon a time, a princess sat gazing out her bedroom window. It was autumn—orange, brown and yellow leaves were tumbling from the trees, dancing and swirling in the wind. It was the day of the great Autumn Festival, and many noble families, dignitaries, princes and princesses were travelling to the palace to celebrate with her family. Princess Jane’s body was swirling like the leaves with a mixture of excitement, fear and anticipation.

Jane’s stepmother called out to both her and her stepsister, Princess Ella.

“Our guests will be arriving soon. Come downstairs so I can talk to you both.”

The sisters ran down the halls of the castle to see their mother, their dresses rustling along the wooden floor. They entered the drawing room where the Queen and King’s advisor sat by the fire. The Queen smiled with joy and admiration.

Jane glanced enviously at her sister—her tall, slender figure, elegant face and long hair, flowing like a waterfall from her shoulders. Jane spent hours trying to look as good as Ella, but no matter how much she tried, she always felt so uncomfortable in her own body. Her corset squeezed and pinched her belly—she could hardly breathe, never mind talk to their guests. After running down the hallway, her wig had slipped and was precariously balancing on her head. Ella, even after running, looked perfect, not one single hair out of place on her head. As she watched her sister laugh and talk with the Queen, Jane knew that all her hours of preparation—the tweaking and plucking, the poking and squeezing—were a waste of time.

“All the eyes of our guests will be upon you at the Autumn Festival because you are the princesses of this kingdom. You may find yourselves feeling quite uncomfortable,” the Queen said.

“Yeah right, especially me,” Jane muttered, mocking herself as usual. “Uncomfortable is my middle name.”

“Yes dear, especially you. One day you will see how special you are,” the Queen repeated sincerely.

Clearing his throat, the King’s advisor joined the conversation. “Your Majesty, as you know, the King wants his daughters to get married soon. There will be many suitors coming today...”

The Queen scowled at the advisor, then turned to face the girls. “Have fun. Don’t get nervous and enjoy! Don’t worry about any suitors, just be yourselves.”

Within the hour, the hall of the palace was teeming with hundreds of guests. Many young princes from across the different lands had come to see the princesses. Ella descended the stairs first, accompanied by the ethereal tones of the harpist below. The chattering of the crowd subsided, and one thousand eyes stared up at Ella as she glided down the staircase.

Jane followed Ella, biting her nails anxiously. She didn't need to look up—she knew in her heart that nobody was watching her. Although the room was crowded, Jane felt so alone. She stayed by Ella's side, sipping her drink, straightening her wig and adjusting her very uncomfortable corset.

As they walked across the hall, Jane looked up, making eye contact with Prince Charming! Her heart beat faster. Her cheeks turned a deep red. Her knees trembled, and her wig tilted even further to the right. The Prince had a warmth and kindness about him—she could see it in his smile.

“Your Highness,” he bowed, “it's an honour to meet you.”

Jane froze. She couldn't blurt out a single word. Turning to her sister, she saw that Ella had gone to play the piano for their guests. The crowd and the Prince looked over in admiration, cheering and clapping.

“Can you play?” Prince Charming asked Jane.

“No, I can't,” she said, “Ella is good at this stuff, not me,” her face still red.

“What stuff?”

“Playing music, painting, singing, cooking...”

“And what do you like?” he asked curiously.

“Hmm...,” Jane spoke excitedly with a sparkle in her eye. “Travelling and horse riding. I love geography, and my father has taken me horse riding all over our kingdom—I want to travel and visit every single country in this world.”

“Oh, really? I can't imagine a princess travelling by herself across the kingdom, let alone the world!” he said.

“Oh, I can!” she replied as happiness spread across her face. “I want to discover the world for myself. Our kingdom is so diverse and beautiful—imagine what else is out there...”

A young woman fell over beside them. Her goblet, full to the brim with cranberry juice, tipped all over Jane. Her cream dress turned a deep shade of pink. Jane leapt back; her wig fell to the ground with a *gflump*. “Oh, your Highness! I am so sorry, I didn’t see you...”

Jane looked down at her splattered pink dress and her deflated wig and fled upstairs, crying. The Prince called out, “Please wait...,” but Jane kept running.

Upstairs, Jane tore off her ruined dress and the uncomfortable corset and kicked off her shoes. She put on her favourite dress and her riding boots and slumped onto her bed.

From behind the curtain a fairy appeared.

“What happened, Princess?”

“I hate myself! I am ugly! Everyone is laughing at me. I embarrassed myself in front of Prince Charming!”

“Oh Jane, I have a spell that may help with these thoughts. I can beautify you with my magical beautification spell,” the Fairy said.

“Yes! I want to be as beautiful as Ella!”

The Fairy shook her magic wand, uttering the words of the spell.

Jane turned to the mirror. She couldn’t believe her eyes when she saw her reflection. She didn’t need that wig after all—her hair seemed longer, framing her freckle-free cheeks. She seemed taller and thinner, her favourite dress fitted her like a glove, and those boots made her feel so comfortable and confident—she could do anything!

“Now I feel like a real princess!” Jane said.



* * *

After a long winter, everyone was eagerly preparing for the Spring Festival. Since the Fairy had cast her spell, Jane noticed how others admired her beauty and her confidence. She felt excited to see Prince Charming again.

On the morning of the festival, Jane spent only half an hour getting ready—she curled her hair, wore another favourite dress and put on her riding boots (no one could see them under her dress). She ran down the stairs to the hall and stood with the Queen, the King and her sister, greeting the guests as they arrived.

Jane could see Prince Charming in the line of guests. He caught her eye and smiled.

“Your Highness,” he bowed, “there is something different about you. May I say how confident you look!”

Jane thanked him politely. Ella pinched Jane from behind and whispered in her ear, “Did you see the way he looked at you? I had heard he is going to ask for someone’s hand in marriage!”

Jane took a deep breath and walked out to the garden to gather her thoughts.

“What if he asks to marry me?” she thought. “What am I going to do?”

The Fairy appeared from behind the big oak tree.

“Are you okay, Princess?” the Fairy asked.

“Dear Fairy, Ella thinks that the Prince wants to marry me.”

“Don’t you want that?” the Fairy asked.

“What if it is not me but your magic spell that he loves?” Jane started crying. “Oh, Fairy, I want to go back to my old self. I want people to love me for the person I am!”

“I only pretended to put a magic spell on you. I just enchanted your thoughts, so when you were looking at the mirror, you were seeing yourself the way you thought you wanted to look. Everyone else was still seeing your old self.”

“So, Prince Charming really has fallen in love with me!” Thanking the Fairy, Jane walked back to the hall.

As Jane entered, Prince Charming cut his way through the crowd towards her. He knelt in front of her.

“Will you marry me? I haven’t stopped thinking about you since we met.”

A hush descended across the hall, and the thousand eyes and ears turned towards them.

“I don’t know!” Jane answered.

Leaving the Prince on one knee with a ring in his hand, Jane ran through the crowd towards the garden. The Prince followed her. One of her riding boots got stuck in the mud in the garden. The Prince picked up the boot and followed Jane.

“You left your boot,” he shouted.

Jane ran to the stables.

“If you are riding, you will need this boot! Where are you going?”

“I told you—I want to travel and discover the miracles of the world! I am not sure if I want to get married yet.”

“I want to come with you!” the Prince said. “I have never met a princess who wants to travel. If we got married, just think of the adventures we can have together!”

Jane turned to the Prince. “It sounds like we have a lot to talk about—and a lot to plan,” she said.

The next month, they rode off on their horses, happily ever after, to travel the world together.

The Room with Formulas on the Wall

by Kalina Maleska
based on a story by Irina Solomatina

This story was inspired by the biography of Sofya Kovalevskaya, the first woman with a doctorate in mathematics, as written in the book She Was: 16 Women Who Became Part of the History of Belarus (2019), prepared by Irina Solomatina and Natalie Kukharchyk.

The room was unwelcoming. Alena hated it the minute she stepped inside. The wallpaper on three of the walls was dark blue and made the room look gloomy and small. The fourth wall, just opposite the bed she was supposed to sleep in, had pieces of paper glued on it from the floor to the ceiling. Numbers and mathematical formulas were written all over the papers, and although Alena loved maths, this wall with old pieces of paper and pale numbers scribbled on it looked ugly. It was an alien room. She disliked it so much that she didn't even bother to ask whose room it was.

She knew her parents had to leave her at her Aunt's house in Vitebsk for some time and go back to Minsk to look for jobs since both had lost



their jobs during the pandemic. Her Aunt, who was her mother's sister, also looked gloomy and downcast, just like the room, and was not pleasant company when they sat at the table to eat together with her Uncle and her cousin, Alexei.

Alena could not sleep all night and slept very little the following few nights.

"When are you coming back?" she'd always ask her Dad when he phoned her.

"I don't know exactly, Ale, honey, but as soon as we can," he'd answer.

One night, she just could not bear to look at the old and partly torn pieces of paper, so she lay down on the floor to sleep. When she woke up very early the next morning, she looked around and under the bed noticed a book. She opened the book randomly and saw on the page some mathematical formulas. She turned the pages. There were stories of many mathematicians in it, accompanied with images of numbers, triangles, ellipses, formulas, diagrams. On one of the pages there was a lipstick print, as if someone kissed the page. Alena read a name: Sofya Kovalevskaya. "In 1889, the mathematician Sofya Kovalevskaya was appointed to the position of full professor at Stockholm University," the sentence below the lipstick print said.

Alena was impressed, since the word 'mathematician' meant something special to her. She tried to read more, but the words kept escaping her sight, as if they just passed through her eyes and brain and flew out the back of her head. Dyslexia—she remembered the word her Mum pronounced after they went to take some tests. It was a word that was repeated occasionally thereafter. "Oh, she'll be a mathematician," her father would usually say in response. "Like Sofya," Alena thought now.

It was still very early in the morning, so she was surprised to hear the sounds of the others in the house. They must have also thought that she was still sleeping, since they spoke of her parents.

“Oh, I told my sister that sooner or later they will have problems if they don’t continue their education,” Alena could hear her Aunt saying.

“There’s no point talking about it now,” her Uncle replied.

“And they didn’t even get married. I really don’t understand her. Now, if something happens to him, Alena won’t be entitled to anything that belongs to him,” her Aunt added.

“Well, they can still get married.”

“I wasn’t in touch with her for a few years after she moved to Minsk. He might not even be Alena’s real father.”

“Well, what does it matter? He loves...”

Before the Uncle managed to finish his sentence, Alena stormed into the living room.

“He is my real father!” she shouted and threw the book with all her might. The book nearly missed her Aunt and landed on the floor, a few pages partly torn. The force of her Aunt’s scream and subsequent crying was unexpected to Alena. Her Aunt picked up the book and started gently smoothing out the pages, tears wetting them.

“Get out,” she slowly said to the girl.

Alena went into the room and sat down on the floor. Several hours later, Alexei went inside the room, climbed the chair and then the table, and put the book on the highest shelf that was out of Alena’s reach.

“It was my sister’s book,” Alexei said.

Alena didn’t dare ask anything. That night, she dreamt that her Mum was in one of her classrooms, whispering in her ear: “Now you will meet your real father.” Alena was very scared since she remembered clearly in

the dream that she did not want to meet any real father of hers. At that moment, the father she had always known entered the classroom. “Ale, honey, try these,” he said in the dream and handed to her several pieces of pastry in the form of numbers. They had a bitter, salty and sweet taste at the same time. When Alena woke up, she approached the wall with the numbers and started examining everything that was written on the pieces of paper.

She did not want to leave the room for more than a week. Alexei would come in the morning to bring her breakfast. Her Aunt would come in the afternoon to bring lunch but would never say a word. Alena was going through the numbers every day and, though in the beginning she could not understand much, she gradually came to solve some of the maths problems. That was exciting.

One day, Alena dared to speak to Alexei.

“Did your sister love maths?” she asked.

“Yes, she was better at it than our teacher,” Alexei smiled. Then, after a pause, he continued, “Do you really read backwards?”

“No... I’m not good at reading. I turn the pages sometimes to the right, and sometimes to the left, and read what I see there, just a sentence or two,” Alena tried to explain.

Another day she asked:

“Did your sister wear lipstick?”

“She’d put my Mum’s lipstick on sometimes, yes. How did you know?” Alexei was surprised.

“There’s a lipstick print next to the mathematician Sofya.”

“That was my sister’s name, and Sofya Kovalevskaya became her favourite mathematician.”

As Alexei left the room, Alena climbed the chair, then the table, and managed to reach the book. She read how at the age of twenty-four, Sofya obtained a PhD, thus becoming the first woman to be awarded a doctorate in mathematics. On the previous page, it was written that four years before that, in 1870, Sofya was not even allowed to attend lectures at Berlin University because women were not admitted to universities then, so she had to take private lessons.

“Dad,” she said to her father over the phone that evening, “we are lucky to live in this time.”

“What do you mean?” Her father was a bit confused.

“It’s hard to explain over the phone. I’ll tell you when you come back.”

A few days later, she came to the first page of the chapter about Sofya in the book, which described her childhood. It said that when her family moved to their house in the Vitebsk region, Sofya was about eight years old. The wallpaper on one of the walls in her room was missing. It was covered with sheets of paper on which formulas and lectures of famous mathematicians were inscribed. Sofya was impressed with these signs that at first seemed alien and intriguing, and gradually became familiar and understandable.

As Alena was reading the sentences with some difficulty and was going through the numbers on the page with more ease, the door opened and her Aunt entered the room. Being so engulfed in looking at the book, Alena forgot that it was the usual time when her Aunt came to bring her lunch. Alena was frightened. She tried to justify herself for taking the book that was supposed to be out of her reach.

“Sofya must have been very smart to read such a book. Did she also write the formulas on the wall?”

“Yes,” her Aunt said, leaving the plate of food on the table. “She was fantastic at maths. If she had been here, you would have been solving maths problems together.”

Alena saw tears coming to her Aunt’s eyes.

“And she was so kind, you would have liked her,” her Aunt continued. “She would have let you sleep in her bed, and she would have slept on the ground.”

“When my parents come back, can I still come visit you and sleep in this room?”

Aisha in Dreamland

by Ana Stjelja

The Flying Carpet

Aisha was about to celebrate her sixth birthday. Aisha's mother used to tell her bedtime stories. But these days, her mother was more than tired from her illness, and recently she was unable to tell her stories. Not even their favourite ones from the Arabian nights. The desert was such a mysterious place where anything might happen—so unlike the countryside in Serbia. Aisha was sad, for without a bedtime story she couldn't fall asleep. So she made a wish! She opened her bedroom window, looked into the sky and said, "My name is Aisha. I wish to fall asleep fast and to dream beautiful dreams." The moon was shining so bright. It looked as if it was smiling for the little girl, as if her wish had been heard. Aisha went to her bed. She put her head on her pillow, which was so soft that it was like sleeping on thousands and thousands of cotton wool balls.

The whole room was sleeping calmly along with little Aisha. But, not for long. All of a sudden, the walls started to tremble, the bookshelf started to move forward, and shadows appeared dancing across on the wall. Eventually everything stopped. Aisha was still sleeping deeply, but her room was in disarray. Everything was upside down. The books were on the floor, all of them except one. It was the book *One Thousand and One Nights*. The pages of the book started to scroll so quickly it woke Aisha up. The girl was confused. Still sleepy, she got up and was surprised when she saw her room. She turned on the light and immediately spotted the scrolling book.

The window in Aisha's room burst open by the gush of a strong wind. Aisha approached the window, and her big, brown eyes saw an amazing sight. It was a carpet, large and colourful, with tassels the kind of which she had seen in her grandma's house. On the carpet there sat a boy whose appearance reminded Aisha of Aladdin, the hero of the stories her mother used to tell her at bedtime.

"Hello, Aisha. I'm Aladdin."

"How come you know my name?" Aisha asked shyly.

"The Moon whispered it to me. You made a wish, didn't you? I am here to make it come true. Are you ready to go on an adventure?"

"Where?" asked Aisha.

"To the Magic Desert," answered Aladdin.

Aisha was a little scared, but deep down in her little soul, she was also quite curious.

"Well, I'd love to. But I'm afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Aladdin.

The magic carpet landed on the floor of Aisha's room so that she could climb onto it. As soon as Aisha was seated comfortably, she was lifted off and into her first big adventure.

The Magic Desert

Aladdin took Aisha to a Magic Desert. The carpet landed safely in the heart of this vast and magical desert. Strangely enough, it was day, not night. The sand that covered this desert was golden, and in the distance it turned into the colour of amber, which was also the colour of her father's rosary. As a sign of welcoming little Aisha into the Magic Desert, the sand dunes performed a magic dance. The girl's face lit up instantly. Her attention was drawn to some silhouettes moving in the distance. Aisha asked Aladdin what that was, and he replied:

“Those are caravans, Aisha. Salt miners ride their camels and form caravans as they move through the desert transporting their salt. They are the kings of the desert now.”

A one-humped camel suddenly appeared before them.

“Hello, Aisha. I've come to welcome you to this Magic Desert of ours.”

Surprised, Aisha asked:

“You can talk?”

“Yes, and I can sing too. Do you want to hear one of my songs?”

Aisha nodded joyfully.

*The Magic Desert's where I live,
Its sand is hot beyond belief,
With caravans I travel on end,
And all salt miners are my friends.*

Aisha reached up and stroked the one-humped camel on its chest.

“I like your song a lot. Do you have any more surprises for me?”

“I could take you to a place I know you will love. Would you like that?”

The camel kneeled down, and Aisha climbed onto her back. Aisha and Aladdin parted ways there. And so, the white one-humped camel took Aisha to a wondrous place.

The Joyful Oasis

The singing camel entertained Aisha while they were on their way to the Joyful Oasis, which was a really wonderful place in the middle of the desert. Upon entering the Joyful Oasis, the two of them were passing between two lines of palm trees whose leaves were swaying in the wind to the rhythm of the song the camel was quietly humming. Aisha spotted a tall palm tree that extended its leaves towards her, wanting to embrace her. Aisha jumped off the camel and wrapped her arms around the amiable palm tree, feeling all its warmth. Dates started falling all around her from its crown.

“Here, help yourself,” said the palm tree. “I hope you like dates.”

“I love them,” said Aisha. “Mum would always buy me dates.”

While she was savouring the sweet and delicious fruit, Aisha continued to look around in wonder. The Joyful Oasis was adorned with a pond surrounded by olives, figs, orange, lemons and trees. This was the place where caravans stopped after a long and arduous journey for refreshment. Aisha went over to the pond for the very same reason. Her face was reflected in the clear water of this Joyful Oasis. Aisha saw something that took her breath away—it was the figure of her mother. She was holding in her arms two small babies. Her mother’s smile was so joyous that Aisha’s eyes welled up momentarily. She felt a great sadness because her mother was ill.

“Why are you crying, Aisha? Come on, climb up and I will take you back to Aladdin for your next adventure.” With her tiny fingers, Aisha wiped away the tears welling up and climbed onto the camel, who took her to where Aladdin was resting with the magic carpet.

Scheherazade’s Skein

“Aisha, I promised that I would take you on another adventure. If we wish to enter this kingdom, we have to find the elusive Scheherazade’s skein. When we find it, we will have to grab hold of its thread because that’s the only way we can enter the chambers of this well-hidden kingdom,” Aladdin said.

“My Mum once told me a secret. If I wish for something that I can’t get, I just need to say these words,” replied Aisha.

*When the heavens open wide above,
Aisha will be blessed with all the love,
No longer will she feel so blue,
And Aisha’s wishes will come true.*

As soon as Aisha said these words, she saw the mesmerizing Scheherazade appear at one of the windows of the stone tower. She was more captivating than all the princesses Aisha had seen in her books. Scheherazade let go of the skein, which began to unwind until it reached the ground.

Overjoyed, Aisha caught hold of Scheherazade’s thread, and she and Aladdin climbed into one of the chambers of this kingdom. They only spotted Scheherazade’s gilded veil for a moment before she disappeared. Aladdin explained to her:

“Scheherazade tells a story to the King every night.”

“Just like my mother did for me. I thought that stories were told only to children,” said Aisha.

“That’s true, but Scheherazade has to tell the King stories so he doesn’t take her life. She never completes the story and always leaves him wanting to hear more so she herself can live.”

Aladdin continued, “Come on, I’ve heard that there is a magic lamp in the palace—let’s go and find it.”

They climbed a long stone stairway and came to a door leading into the secret chamber. Little Aisha noticed a moon carved into the door. She traced the crescent of the moon and the door opened. The moonlight from outside shone very brightly, illuminating the interior of the hidden chamber. Aisha and Aladdin spotted the magic lamp.

The Magic Lamp

“Aladdin, you should rub this lamp.”

“No, Aisha, you should do it. This is your adventure.”

Aisha took the lamp in her hands and gave it a vigorous rub. At that moment, the chamber shook strongly and before them there appeared a female genie.

“Hello! Thank you for setting me free. I was imprisoned in this lamp for a very long time. I would like to grant you three wishes for my freedom.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a male genie, like in the tales my mother reads to me?” Aisha asked.

“Do you believe everything you read? My name is Ghina, and I am at your service.”

“I can make any wishes I want?” asked Aisha.



“Yes! What will they be?”

Aisha said:

“Firstly, I wish a safe return home. Secondly, I wish to see my mother recovered from her illness.”

“All right, and what is your third wish, Aisha?” asked Ghina.

“My third wish is to take my Mum on a visit to this dreamland.”

Aisha and Aladdin were soon back on their magic carpet and were ready for the journey back home.

The Return Home

Aisha and Aladdin were flying high up in the sky. Down below, those same sand dunes were dancing, the white one-humped camel greeted them with her song, and the palm trees joyfully waved their leaves at the two of them. Aisha flew over the whole world, as a real globetrotter. The scenes beneath her were breathtaking.

As the day was dawning in her country, she spotted her town below.

“We’re home, Aisha. There is your room.”

“Thank you, Aladdin, for taking me on this wonderful journey that I will never forget.”

Aisha lay in her bed and fell asleep peacefully.

* * *

“Aisha, Aishaaaa...,” her mother’s soft voice was waking her. The girl opened her eyes and exclaimed in delight:

“Mum, you look so much better!!!”

“Yes, my dear little Aisha, a miracle happened and I got well overnight.”

* * *

When the night fell, Aisha's mother came to Aisha's room to read her a bedtime story, as she had always done. Aisha said:

"We have somewhere to go. Take my hand."

Aisha and her mother embraced each other, and off they flew.

The Belted Sona

by Alex Chighvinadze

Once upon a time, there was a little town. The only thing it was good for was having a rest, a nice supper and then going on your way to other towns. But if you stayed there too long, the narrow streets you liked so much would start to stifle you, and the doors of the colourful houses you were so happy to open became heavy and started to squeak.

Travellers often stayed in the city forever—they forgot who they were, where they had come from and which way they were heading. People did, however, remember well what a traveller needed to have a good rest. That is why the town had everything a traveller could need: comfortable hotels, relaxing sulphur baths and all kinds of food and drink.

But one of the taverns was very special. This tiny tavern belonged to Sona. She was called the Belted Sona, as she never took off her silver belt. The ornaments and figures on her belt told wonderful stories that you could never find in any book. Sona's tavern was the only one that children could visit at any time and buy any wholesome dish they liked.

There were even two additional low tables for animals. One of them stood right by the window. Now and then, you could see different species of animals sticking their heads out the open window. Even camels knew where to find Sona's tavern. As soon as a caravan halted for a break nearby, the camels would gallop at breakneck speed to the tavern, where blocks of salt and cold water awaited them in the open window. They would lick the salt with their scratchy tongues and observe Sona's various visitors with their grateful eyes.

Nobody quarrelled in the tavern, as everybody had great respect for Sona. Yet, if some impudent customer turned up, Sona would just cast a glance, and that was enough! The troublemaker would drop his head and ask for forgiveness. Besides Sona, one kinto named Papooka and a white cat called Darejana worked in the tavern. They fought with each other like cats and dogs. Papooka suffered from insomnia, while Darejana would mostly lie by the window, dozing. Papooka was bald, while Darejana was hairy. One of the visitors even thought she was a bear cub and could never understand how the cub of a white bear got into the town.

Even the menu was special in Sona's tavern—sturgeon with cherry sauce, fluffy plum pies, barberry ice cream and moist sponge cakes. And, all the dishes on the menu were arranged according to colour. For instance, what if you wanted an orange meal? Well, you could help yourself to pumpkin porridge and pancakes with orange marmalade.

Once, an old traveller visited Sona's tavern. Not a single innkeeper in town took him in, as he was covered with such a thick layer of dust that a mole could freely dig a tunnel on his back. That is why everyone thought he was a vagabond. The traveller's face looked young and old at the same time. It was hard to determine how to address him: boy, sir or old man... You could have easily made a mistake.

The traveller stood in the doorway of Sona's tavern, all eyes directed at him. Sona invited him to the best table in her tavern, Papooka ran and fetched him some cold water, and Darejana rubbed the traveller's legs with her furry body. The visitor gulped the water and ordered mushrooms seasoned with tarragon and almond, then ordered some cornelian cherry custard to top it off.

Before taking his leave, the traveller went up to Sona, stood still before her and started rummaging through his huge bag for such a long time that it seemed to Sona as if somebody was dragging and holding him back. At last, he pulled out a box painted all around with bright flowers, put it before Sona and said:

"It is a magic musical instrument made by old craftsmen—a hurdy-gurdy."

"Magic in what way?" asked Sona. The traveller scratched his head as if looking for the answer in his curly hair.

"When you hear the sound of this hurdy-gurdy, you understand what your genuine desire is."

Sona confidently replied, "I know very well what my desire is."

"Well, here's the handle," the traveller offered. "Get hold of it and start winding."

And Sona indeed wound the handle. It seemed as if the instrument emitted light instead of sound. And the sound filled all the gaps in the hearts of the customers present in the tavern. All of a sudden, a boy, who had had no appetite all month long, ordered some cherry soup and gulped it down in the twinkling of an eye. Since that magical day, Papooka, who could not stand to even look at Darejana before, now could not pass her without cuddling her. And Darejana responded with magnanimous patience.



As for Sona, she kept sitting and playing. She wanted to play on and on, as she loved seeing people happy most of all. And so, every evening Sona would fetch her hurdy-gurdy and start playing. Some customers started to dance, some hummed. Others somersaulted, but they never disturbed one another.

Competing taverns envied Sona terribly. Although her tavern had always been popular, now everyone coming through town rushed to Sona's tavern. It seemed as if the hurdy-gurdy spun a twinkling web in which you could lie softly, like a hammock. Upon hearing its soothing sound, people remembered where they had come from, where they were heading, and that they were expected by somebody somewhere. After leaving Sona's tavern, they went on their way with a firm step and bright eyes because, even if nobody is waiting for you, it is essential to never abandon your own path.

Kukula, one of the merchants, envied Sona most of all. He tried every instrument he could find for his tavern, making musicians play them and even learning to play the diplipito himself. He dropped prices and copied Sona's menu almost entirely, but people still preferred Sona's tavern. So, Kukula made up his mind to get hold of Sona's hurdy-gurdy at all costs, but when the sound of the hurdy-gurdy reached his ears, Kukula felt an irrepressible desire to hop along and went hopping all the way home.

But he returned to the tavern again. This time he was much better prepared. He had filled his ears with cotton wool to block the music. Then he waited for the right moment. When Sona was seeing her last customer off, Kukula grabbed the hurdy-gurdy, rushed out, jumped into a waiting carriage and cried at the coachman:

"Drive as fast as you can!"

When they looked for the whereabouts of the hurdy-gurdy in Sona's tavern, everyone guessed who could have stolen it. They rushed out. Nearby the tavern there was a carriage with a dozing coachman, who was dreaming that he was running after a turtle he could not catch up with since it had started moving just two seconds before him. So, his dream came true as soon as he woke up. The race started. The wheels of the carriage flashed by the corners of the street and almost caught up with Kukula, who was clutching the hurdy-gurdy so tightly as if it were the last toy in the world.

Kukula's carriage rushed across the bridge so fast that he could not hold on to his seat and fell right into the river. Sona and her friends stopped by the bridge. There was no sight of either Kukula or the hurdy-gurdy. Only bubbles appeared over the surface of the river. Sona unfastened her belt, took off her robe and dived straight into the river. A while passed, and Sona resurfaced. With one hand she was swimming, and with the other she was holding Kukula firmly by the nape of his neck until they reached the riverbank. Darejana jumped onto Kukula's chest, and Papooka started to breathe air into his lungs. Kukula coughed up some water and opened his eyes. But alas, he could not look straight into the eyes of his rescuers!

"I'm sorry," he murmured once pitifully, but nobody heard his voice. It was overpowered by the sweet sound of the hurdy-gurdy filling the air.

Even though a long time has passed since then, people say that even now, the river sometimes starts to sing the tunes of the hurdy-gurdy.

The Sleeping Castle

by Tania Kasian

Summer

In the faraway Kingdom of Summer lived the curious and boisterous Princess. She spent her time in the library, sous-chefing for Cook in the kitchen and sharing advice from her favourite books with the Gardener of the castle grounds. In the evening, she could be found in her favourite tower, gazing at the stars and planets.

With a twinkle in her eye and a flash of golden hair, she flew along the corridors of the castle, knocking over vases and suits of armour. She even once knocked her own father down the stairs. “Summer, when will you calm down? You blow like a hurricane!” the King grumbled.

The fairies, who were in charge of preserving harmony across the four kingdoms, kept a keen eye on her.

“These behaviours are no longer acceptable,” frowned Bernadette, the purple fairy.

“Imagine what an inspirational leader she will be!” retorted the orange fairy, Valetta.

“If ‘Princess Hurricane’ survives! How can we allow our future leaders to behave like this—chaos will reign across the kingdoms. We must intervene!”

Valetta twirled her orange hair anxiously, its luscious colour fading.

“It is time to cast the Tradition spell. Princess Summer will fall into a long, deep sleep and on waking, she will be more like a ‘normal’ princess—demure, controlled and, most importantly, quiet.”

“What do you mean ‘normal’? Summer is supposed to be charismatic, intelligent and curious!” said Valetta.

“She is not queen material!” Bernadette rolled up her purple sleeves, pointed her wand towards the tower and whispered an incantation.

“No!” Valette cried, knocking the wand from Bernadette’s hand. The spell flew from the wand, missing the tower and crashing into the castle.

“Too late! It’s done,” Bernadette said, turned her wings and flew home. Valetta followed, her orange hair fading to a grey peach colour, neither noticing where the spell had landed.

Meanwhile, the unsuspecting Princess was scanning the sky for new planets through her telescope. Late for bed again, Summer rushed down the stairs and paused. “That’s weird.” At this time of the evening, the castle was usually filled with noise. But tonight there was not a single note of music, no chitter-chatter, not even a step on the stone floors to be heard—an eerie silence had descended upon the castle.

Entering the Great Hall, she almost tripped over a maid lying on the floor, fast asleep. “What on earth is going on?” She found her father slouched over the piano, her mother softly snoring in her armchair beside him. Summer shook her father’s arm shouting “Dad!” and prodded her

mother's shoulder "Mum!" Neither stirred. She ran to the kitchen. The pots were bubbling over, and the bread was burning in the oven. The whole castle had fallen into a deep, unawakenable sleep.

Summer ran to the library and logged on to the Fairy's Encyclopedia of Magic. "Everyone around me has fallen into an unexplainable sleep—what should I do? Search!" The encyclopedia search engine returned, "The story of Sleeping Beauty... The fairies cast a spell... The princess falls asleep... A strange prince wakes her by kissing her. Really? It's 2021! Do I still have to kiss a stranger to break this spell? The fairy magic world is clearly stuck in the past! There must be another solution.

"OK Google Maps, show me the way to these fairies." Summer printed out the map to the Magical Fairy Forest. She grabbed her leather satchel and headed towards the huge orchard at the edge of the neighbouring Kingdom of Autumn. Summer felt at home under the full moon and twinkling stars, with Jupiter illuminating her path. "Let me travel as fast as you spin, Jupiter!" Summer shouted to the sky.

Summer waved off a small creature who danced across the moon in front of her. The creature squeaked, "Hey! I am here to help! I heard you reading in the library." A little bat came into focus in front of her.

"Who are you? And how can you help me?" Summer asked in surprise.

"My name is Baron. But you can call me Barry!" it said, curtsying in the air. "I know my way through all the Kingdoms of Autumn, Winter and Spring. I travel at night across them to find my favourite moths to eat."

"And the Magical Fairy Forest?"

"That is my favourite feasting ground."



Autumn

Talking of feasts made Summer realize she had left without supplies. As they crossed the border, they noticed a small castle with its lights on. She tapped on the window.

A dark-haired young man leaned out. “Who’s there?”

Barry whispered to Summer, “That’s Prince Autumn. He is a famous artist—his work hangs in galleries around the world. Maybe a kiss from him could fix everything?”

“Shush!” hissed Summer. She looked at the young man and said, “I am Princess Summer of the Kingdom of Summer. I’m on my way to the Magical Fairy Forest to save my castle from an unfortunate spell. I left in haste and forgot to bring supplies with me. I would be grateful of your help.”

“What kind of fool embarks on a long journey and forgets food?” the Prince grumbled and slammed the window closed.

“I wouldn’t kiss him either!” Barry said.

After a few minutes, Prince Autumn returned with bread, cheese and water, and a warm poncho. “You will need this when you reach the Kingdom of Winter.”

“You are very generous,” replied Summer with a smile, putting the poncho and supplies in her bag.

Winter

They walked through the dark night and as dawn broke, the red and yellow fields of autumn had turned to white. Snow swirled around them. The winter sun shone through the trees as Summer wrapped herself in

her poncho and folded Barry inside her shirt against her chest for warmth. She giggled as she walked along the snow-covered trail listening to the sweet sound of Barry snoring.

Ahead, a hunter emerged from the forest, a bow and arrow across her back, and a horse with a deer draped over it. “What brings you to our Kingdom?” the hunter demanded. Summer noticed she was a similar age.

“I am Princess Summer, and I am travelling to demand that the fairies remove a spell placed upon my family!”

“I heard rumours of your predicament,” the hunter bowed her head. “I am Princess Winter. I can guide you to the border of our Kingdom. Please take my spare horse to hasten your journey.”

“Thank you, Jupiter,” Summer whispered to the sky.

They journeyed into the next night, sharing their hopes for their kingdoms. As darkness fell again, Barry poked his face out of Summer’s bag, asking, “Who is this?”

“The Princess of Winter.”

“Should you...?”

“Give it a rest! I won’t be kissing anyone—although she is enchanting!” Summer smiled as the bat stretched his wings and flew over her head.

Approaching the border at midnight, Winter bid Summer farewell.

“She gave you the horse. Perhaps Winter is enchanted by you too?” whispered Barry.

Spring

Night could not hide the beauty of the Kingdom of Spring. The path was thick with cherry and apricot blossoms, their glorious scent filling the air. Summer had noticed a young man following them on horseback.

“I see another prince behind us—this is your final chance for salvation... although, you haven’t brushed your teeth in two days, so a kiss...”

“That’s enough. We are holding those that created this mess to account. The fairies must break the spell.”

Summer turned round to introduce herself. He was Prince Spring, an organic farmer who was himself travelling to see the fairies.

“We are losing our natural pest controllers like your bat friend here. Many farmers are turning to pesticides that poison such creatures and are destroying our ecosystems. I am hoping the fairies can enchant our farmers to protect the whole environment, for all our sakes.”

The Magical Fairy Forest

“Not far now,” Barry said, pointing towards a tall tree in the large meadow ahead. “Can you see the fairies?” Summer galloped towards them.

“Good afternoon. Which one of you put my castle to sleep?”

Valetta twirled round in shock. “Summer? You are awake? How on earth did you get here?”

“By map,” she said exasperated. “And with the company of good people along the way,” nodding towards Prince Spring and Barry.

She continued. “I’ll ask again. Why did you cast a spell on my castle?”

“It was Bernadette! I tried to stop her. The spell was meant to bewitch you, not the whole castle.” Bernadette stayed hidden behind the tree.

“Bernadette, why did you want to put me to sleep?”

“To make you quieter, more demure,” said Bernadette defiantly. “You, my dear, are too boisterous. You smash everything in your way—you are so unqueen-like.”

Summer shook her head. “Your ideas are outdated! On my journey here, I met three very different princes and princesses—none of whom are quiet or demure. Prince Autumn is an artist, Princess Winter a great hunter, and Prince Spring here is an environmentalist and a farmer. We are as different as the kingdoms we live in, and we all bring different skills and passions. Just like autumn, winter, spring and summer.”

“Imagine,” offered Prince Spring, “if spring were to disappear... or summer... What would become of us? With no spring, we could not plant our crops; with no summer, the crops wouldn’t grow. We would all starve.”

“What have I been telling you?” Valetta shook her head.

Bernadette turned from purple to red with embarrassment. “I am most sorry. I was upholding tradition as it is written!” Bernadette waved her wand and whispered a reversing spell.

“Please forgive us,” said Valetta.

The Princess smiled and waved her hand.

“It is in the past. Perhaps it is time all four kingdoms came together and refreshed the Fairy’s Encyclopedia of Magic.”

Waiting for the fairies to give the Prince his enchantment spell, Summer reached into her poncho and stroked the sleeping Baron. She thought about how much she missed her parents and couldn’t wait to hug them.

The Myrtle Tree and Pomegranate-Shaped Mirror

by Katerina Paouri

Once upon a time, a loving and happy couple lived on the outskirts of a village, nestled at the top of a mountain. Their window took in the expansive view of a forest that wove its way across the mountain. Many villagers did not dare to enter the forest, believing it was ruled by dark powers.

The couple longed for a baby girl to complete their family. Unlike the other villagers, the woman loved the forest and went there often. One day on her way back from her walk, she heard a little bird sing above her and to her surprise, the bird flew and spoke to her:

“Dear lady, find the myrtle tree, find the old woman, answer correctly, and you will be granted your wish.”

Unafraid, she followed the bird’s advice and went deep into the forest, deeper than she had ever travelled before. She was just starting to think that she had imagined the bird when a beautiful, sweet and cool smell wafted through the air. In front of her was a tree laden with white flowers.

“How have I never noticed you before?” She stepped closer to admire the beautiful flowers and inhale their intoxicating aroma.

A calloused hand gripped her shoulder, and a deep and eerie voice growled:

“Do you wish to steal the flowers in my garden?”

The woman turned her head and saw a goddess-like older woman dressed in midnight blue with threads that twinkled like the stars. Looking as though she had lived a thousand years, her face shone just like the light of the moon.

“Forgive me, I had no intention of stealing. A little bird told me to seek out the myrtle tree, to find you and to pray to receive a baby girl.”

The old woman looked her directly in the eye.

“If this is so, you will have to answer this question: What is the soul’s secret?”

“I can’t speak on behalf of everyone,” said the woman, “but I do so wish to follow the dance of my own soul.”

The old woman clicked her fingers, and a tree appeared behind her, so tall that its crown was lost in the sky.

“Please come inside!” The old woman carried her years with the lightness of the blue sky and white clouds.

The tree’s inside was cavernous, full of books, an eternal fire and a tsoukali, full to the brim with nourishing food. The aromas of cinnamon and clove from the tsoukali, together with the smell of wood and books, enchanted the woman.

“I will share with you a song and dance and a tale you must share with your daughter. The soul is a garden, and you must always remember to sing, dance and breathe so the flowers can grow. Take this myrtle branch, and drink the tea that you make from its leaves and flowers. Lastly, sow the seeds in your garden when the moon is full.”

So indeed, a baby girl, Mirtiya, was born soon after. Along with the baby, a small myrtle tree appeared. Everyone was overjoyed.

True to tradition, silver coins were thrown into the bathing basin at the baby's first bathing ceremony. Through the window a bird flew and threw something small from its beak into the basin. In the evening, as the water drained from the basin, the mother found a two-sided, silver, pomegranate-shaped mirror. The mirror shone in the moonlight—on one side shone the face of the baby daughter, and on the other side, that of the mother.

As she grew, the girl and her mother took many walks in the forest. The mother shared many stories, including that of the old woman of the forest who many people spoke of but few had actually seen.

On cold winter nights, their favourite game to play was Little Mirror. Mother and daughter would sit opposite each other, turn the pomegranate mirror and ask:

“Mirror, my little mirror, who is the kindest and bravest of them all?”

“You!” they would both answer together and burst out laughing.

Years passed, and the mother was struck down with a grave illness. One afternoon, she called out to Mirtiya:

“My precious daughter, it will soon be time for me to leave this world,” she said as she handed Mirtiya the mirror. “Live with kindness and bravery, and do what will make your soul dance.”

Time passed, and Mirtiya's father married another woman, who herself had a son. This woman was afraid of the forest and its darkness within. “It will steal your soul,” she warned Mirtiya and forbade her to go there. Slowly, the laughter that had once filled the house ceased all together. Only the pomegranate mirror brought Mirtiya joy.

One quiet evening, Mirtiya was in her room looking at her mirror. Sobbing as she grieved her mother, the pomegranate mirror reflected her pain with autumnal leaves and withered flowers falling from the trees in her beloved forest.

Her stepmother, fearful of any gift that had come from the forest, burst into the room and grabbed the pomegranate mirror from Mirtiya. “This mirror brings darkness into your heart and into our home.” She locked the mirror in a dowry chest in her room.

That night, the stepmother talked to her husband: “I fear for Mirtiya. The magic charm her mother received from the forest brings her only such darkness. She must start a life of her own. Her mother would have surely wanted that.”

“Perhaps it is time for us to arrange for Mirtiya to marry,” her father sighed.

Overhearing this, Mirtiya knew she must leave for the forest. At dawn, she carefully opened the dowry chest with her hairpin and was reunited with her pomegranate mirror. She glided out of the house like a shadow. Only her beloved dog heard her leave, barking as she closed the gate. The household awoke, finding Mirtiya’s bed empty.

The stepmother was alarmed and went to her son, now a young boy. “Mirtiya has gone to the forest. My son, you must find her! Bring her back home before the villagers know she is missing,” she demanded.

He eventually found Mirtiya sleeping under a bay tree. He crept quietly behind her and tied her tightly with a rope. The little bird appeared again.

“To untie the rope, hold your breath and then shout loudly to make it unravel.”

Mirtiya did as the bird said, and the rope loosened and fell to the ground. Mirtiya immediately fled.



When the boy returned home without Mirtiya, his mother fell to the ground and wept. “Our household will be cursed if she doesn’t return,” she believed. “Take this sack, and capture her in it, so the villagers will not see you bringing her home.”

As Mirtiya walked along the path immersed once again in a nightingale’s song and the beauty of the forest, she failed to notice the stepbrother’s trap that was set with the sack in the undergrowth. She was captured again.

The boy made his way home with Mirtiya trapped in the sack.

As he walked, a deer followed close behind. The deer whispered to the girl:

“Don’t worry, Mirtiya, I will take your place so you will be free.”

“Mother, I have Mirtiya!” he said on his return. As he opened the sack, the deer leapt out, bucked and ran towards the forest. The stepmother was frantic. “What magic is this? What will become of us?!”

Mirtiya, meanwhile, walked deeper and deeper into the forest. Looking up, she saw a tree so tall it was lost in the sky, just like the one from her mother’s tales. A calloused hand gripped her shoulder.

“Who are you to try to break into my house?”

“Forgive me, good-hearted woman, I am Mirtiya.”

“Oh, Mirtiya! You must know the secret of the soul!”

“It is to follow the dance of our souls.”

“Feel free to stay as long as you want.”

Time passed, and one day Mirtiya was out collecting saffron from the edge of the forest. Her stepbrother was collecting wood for the fire and spotted Mirtiya in the distance. He ran home to tell his mother. “Go quickly,” she said. “Tell Mirtiya her father is on his deathbed and she must return immediately.”

The boy, accompanied by Mirtiya's dog, rushed to the edge of the forest. The dog ran into the girl's arms, spilling saffron stems on the ground.

"Mirtiya," the stepbrother called out, "I have something to tell you. Your father is seriously ill, and he wants to see you one last time." He ran and grabbed her by the arm to lead her home. "Come now!"

The bird appeared again and whispered in her ear, "It is not the truth he speaks." Mirtiya screamed and the dog grabbed her stepbrother's sleeve and dragged him away from the forest. Not to be deceived again, she fled into the woods, vowing never to return.

The boy returned alone again. His mother was furious. "We have to end this once and for all!" She grabbed an axe and struck the myrtle tree in the garden. Mirtiya, running through the forest, fell to the ground. The stepmother hit the tree again, snapping a branch of the tree. Mirtiya felt her wrist break and writhed with pain on the ground. The stepmother, about to strike again, felt a hand grab the axe.

"Enough of this superstition! Let Mirtiya have her freedom!" Her father wept as he tenderly wrapped the broken branches with cloth.

Mirtiya, bruised and broken, found her way back to the old woman and the safety of the tree. In time, she healed and became a healer herself. The myrtle tree in her father's garden bloomed again. He knew she was safe and well. Every time Mirtiya looks in her pomegranate mirror, on one side she sees her own image, and on the other, that of her mother. And so Mirtiya followed the dance of her soul and lived a life filled with kindness and with bravery.

Zumrad and Kimmat

by Saida Rashidova

In a country called Uzbekistan, in the city of Tashkent, Zumrad and Kimmat lived in an old rambling house with their mum and dad. Zumrad loved her second mum, and Kimmat loved her second dad. Zumrad's birth mother and Kimmat's birth father had died when the girls were very young. The family spoke fondly about each parent who had passed away.

Many people around them didn't believe that stepmothers and stepfathers could be kind and loving to their stepchildren. Zumrad and Kimmat had heard many fairy tales and folk tales where stepfathers and stepmothers were evil, cruel and unkind. One such story they read at school was that of Cinderella. Zumrad and Kimmat would smile to one another:

"Who makes up these fairy tales?!"

"Our life is so much better than these stories."

Zumrad loved spending time with her stepmum, cooking in the kitchen and tending to a variety of vegetables and herbs in the garden. She became a great cook herself, learning many recipes from her stepmum. Zumrad enjoyed it most when they cooked her favourite chocolate cake from her mother's old recipe book. One of the few clear memories she had of her mother was of standing on a chair in their old kitchen, watching her measure and mix the cake, patiently waiting to lick the sweet chocolate off the wooden spoon.

Kimmat, on the other hand, felt disinterested about gardening, cooking or cleaning. She enjoyed eating the delicious food cooked by her mum and sister, and she would watch them in the kitchen and wish she had their passion for cooking. It was numbers that fascinated Kimmat, and she loved to solve interesting and complex mathematical problems. If it was her choice, she would do maths all day long. When the whole family sat together in the evening, Kimmat would enjoy annoying them by reading maths puzzles out loud. "Can anyone guess the answer?" she roared with laughter. She loved nothing more than telling her family they had got the answers incorrect: "Wrong! You didn't guess it! It's 3,457,221, silly!" She loved to explain the correct answers in great detail.

One day, Zumrad walked through the door after school and burst into tears.

"I failed my maths test," she said, throwing her bag to the ground with frustration. "Now I have to take this stupid maths test again!"

"I'll help you," offered Kimmat. "You know how much I love maths."

"Would you?" Zumrad sighed with relief.

Every day after school, Kimmat sat at the kitchen table with Zumrad, helping her with her maths homework. Zumrad would watch their

stepmum showering praise on Kimmat for teaching her sister. She saw how easily Kimmat understood maths, but no matter how hard she tried, it was all just a jumble of numbers to her. After three weeks, Zumrad still could not solve one single maths problem from her textbook without Kimmat's help.

One night after dinner, as Kimmat was begrudgingly washing all the dishes, Zumrad called over to her from the kitchen bench.

"What if you do all my maths homework for me and I do all the dishes every day?"

Kimmat threw the dish cloth into the sink, bubbles splashing up onto her nose.

"You're a genius! And you have made me the happiest sister in the world!" she exclaimed, throwing her wet and soapy arms around her.

That night, a secret deal was struck between the two sisters. Zumrad felt relaxed for the first time in months. She didn't have to worry about maths any more and could get back to writing the recipe book she had started. The arrangement suited them both—every day maths, maths and more maths was a joy and a treat for Kimmat. Zumrad's dad would often check in on her, knowing she was struggling with maths.

"Are you getting your head around that maths, Zumrad?"

Kimmat and Zumrad would smile at each other and wink, "All over it, Dad!"

One Wednesday afternoon, Zumrad's maths teacher asked her to stay after class. The secret deal had been exposed.

"How do you think you are doing with maths, Zumrad?" her teacher asked.

"I'm getting my homework done."

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Your homework is excellent, A+. However, your work in class tells me a different story. You are failing every test. Am I missing something?”

Zumrad lowered her eyes, shame engulfing her. She clenched her fist and banged it on her desk—she was angry at maths, angry at her teacher and, most of all, she was angry at herself.

When she got home, she didn’t tell anyone what had happened. The unravelling of the secret deal had given Zumrad a thumping headache. After dinner, she didn’t feel like washing the dishes, choosing to slump in front of the TV instead. Her stepmum scolded her in front of everyone. “These dishes won’t wash themselves, Zumrad! Kimmat is doing homework. Stop watching TV and get to work!”

Now Zumrad was not only angry at her maths, her maths teacher and herself—she was angry at her stepmum. She stomped over to the kitchen sink.

“How has she not noticed that I do all of the dishes, all of the time? A thank you wouldn’t hurt,” she grumbled to herself. “Clearly she loves Kimmat more than me! Maybe there is something in those fairy tales...”

Zumrad cleared the table in a huff, throwing the dishes into the sink, splashing water and food scraps across the bench. Sighing and muttering under her breath, she washed and dried the dishes and mopped the floor. She stopped for a moment as her thoughts collided.

“I am Cinderella! She treats me like a slave, evil stepmother,” she roared to no one in particular.

Storming out of the house, she slammed the door. She ran and ran, following the familiar streets near home. Seething with anger, she didn’t notice when the driver of an old Lada just missed knocking her over by a whisker—there was a gasp, “ZUMRAD!” behind her. She didn’t hear that either.

Finally, exhausted, she sat down on a bench overlooking a canal. She held her heavy head in her hands, sobbing.

She heard someone approaching and saw a shadow stop beside her. She felt the someone sit down next to her. It wasn't a fairy godmother but her stepmum, holding a piece of chocolate cake as an offering. Zumrad turned to her, fresh tears of hurt rolling down her cheeks.

"You love Kimmat more than you love me!" she spat out.

"Why on earth would you think that?"

"I've read Cinderella, and I know what stepmothers are really like!"

"I love you both—equally! You bring so much to my life that I never had before."

"No, you don't. No I don't! You haven't even noticed I have been doing the dishes all by myself for weeks—every morning and every night. You say nothing to me, yet you constantly compliment Kimmat for doing her homework."

"Zumrad, qizim, let's go home. If you want, I can help you with your maths."

"What did Kimmat tell you?" Now Zumrad was furious with Kimmat for betraying their secret.

"Nothing, your teacher rang us; she was worried about you. And I did notice that you were doing all the washing up. I have been waiting for you to tell me that you were struggling with maths. I was frustrated this evening; I'm very sorry that I yelled at you. Did you know, qizim, that I wasn't good at maths at school either? Don't be so hard on yourself. Give yourself time to figure it out. And remember what makes your heart sing. You are such a talented cook, just like your mum. Do you see the joy on Kimmat and Dad's faces when they watch us cook and eat our food?"



Zumrad rested her head on her stepmum's shoulder. They walked home together in a peaceful silence, sharing the sweetness of their chocolate cake.

"More cinnamon next time?" Zumrad said.

"You read my mind."

The next evening, they sat with Zumrad's maths textbook and studied together. Mum explained the concepts, the steps—everything in a new way that made sense to Zumrad. She could now solve a couple of the problems herself. Zumrad sighed happily, sat two inches taller, right there next to her stepmum, who loved and understood her.

After dinner, Kimmat decided to read her maths puzzles to everyone like she always did. Dad asked her to stop and do something else.

"No, Dad, let her read them. I am interested too," said Zumrad.

She and Kimmat loved their family's story, and really it had nothing to do at all with the likes of Cinderella's.

House 92

by Natalia Remish

House 92 on Kalver Street was always full of children. They ran in the hallways laughing, sat on the windowsills staring up at the sky, and played hide and seek in the garden. Sometimes you could hear them arguing loudly, and sometimes they were quiet.

Although from the outside it sounded like a lot of fun, other children, who did not live in the house, preferred to walk on the other side of the street. House 92 was an orphanage.

Angela lived in House 92. Her mother always longed for a son, and when the nurse brought her baby girl to her bedside, she cried sorrowfully. She pushed the baby away, neither kissing nor holding her.

This is how Angela came to be lying in a crib in House 92.

“She looks just like an angel,” said the nurse when she saw the baby’s sweet face. “Let’s call her Angela.”

As Angela grew up, she could see through the slits in the fence that separated them in House 92: the boys were treated differently from

the girls. The boys seemed to be having a lot more fun, and she knew that wasn't fair. While the girls were taught to cook and make meals for themselves and for the boys, the boys were taught to make toys that only they played with afterwards. At other times, the boys made birdhouses and even went on a trip to hang them in trees around town. Angela longed to make a birdhouse and find the perfect place to hang it, for everyone to see. Instead, she had to stay with the other girls and mend clothes for the boys.

Angela made herself a promise that one day, she would become Head of House 92 and would change all the rules. "The girls in my House 92 will stop doing everything for the boys, and these boys will learn to do things for themselves. Then the girls will have time for adventure too!" she whispered to herself.

This whisper inside of her grew, and Angela decided to take some immediate action! She would go and see the boys' world for herself. In the morning, when everybody left for lessons, she went into the sewing room and borrowed some of the boys' clothes to change into. Looking in the mirror, she tucked her hair under a hat and snuck through the fence into the boys' section.

The boys had a sports lesson that morning. They were standing in a row in the courtyard. Angela quietly came downstairs and joined them. A boy standing last in the row turned to look at her and nodded hello.

"I'm Jack," he said over his shoulder.

"I'm Ang—," she caught herself just in time. "How you doing? I'm the new boy."

Mr. Jaap was shouting at the boys, explaining the rules of football. When he looked her way, Angela's heart skipped a beat. What would happen now? But Mr. Jaap just continued talking. He didn't even notice

the ‘new boy’. The boys were divided into teams, and he blew his whistle and threw them the ball.

Angela, never having played football before, had no idea what she was expected to do. She just ran alongside the other boys, doing her best to copy them.

“Hey, new boy! You’re on the other team. Go to the other side,” Jack shouted to her as he ran past.

“Thanks,” Angela puffed. She could see how confident all the boys were and she mimicked their confidence.

After the lesson, Mr. Jaap was praising some of the boys: “Great job, fantastic goal, what a tackle! The national football team needs to look out—it’s got some competition!”

When it was Jack’s turn, Mr. Jaap patted Jack on the shoulder. Angela was standing next to Jack, looking down at the ground. Her palms were sweating furiously. “What if they discover my secret now?” she worried to herself.

“He’s the new guy,” Jack said to Mr. Jaap. “It was his first game! Not too shabby either!”

“He was alright; he’ll learn soon enough,” said the teacher.

Mr. Jaap nodded his head towards a boy sitting on the bench, adding, “Although some people never learn. Tim, you’re such a wimp!”

The other boys, looking at their feet, all laughed along with the teacher.

“Wimp?” Angela said to herself and looked across, trying to make eye contact with the boy on the bench. Tim curled his shoulders and wrapped his arms around himself, his head hung heavy.

“Eyes up!” Mr. Jaap kept on at him. “We will have to send you to the girls’ section, won’t we, boys? And you’ll be making our porridge with them!”

Angela shook her head incredulously, thinking, “So, that’s what they say and think about us girls!”

Mr. Jaap was unrelenting. “We’ll make you mend all our clothes as well. Look, this T-shirt has a hole in it,” he said in an exaggerated, high-pitched tone. Mr. Jaap threw the T-shirt at Tim’s face. The boy caught it without raising his head and angrily tossed it onto the bench.

“Come on! Say something! Do you want to stay on the boys’ side or do you want to look out of the windows with the dumb girls?” Mr. Jaap provoked.

Angela rose to her feet; the hat fell from her head. “It’s not like that!” She couldn’t believe the words had actually come out of her mouth. “Girls are not dumb. They are smart and brave. They can play football and build birdhouses! Why don’t you cook your own food and mend your own clothes?”

As Angela’s hair fell onto her shoulders, they could all see this was not a new boy—she was a girl. The group of boys and Mr. Jaap were staring at Angela.

Angela looked straight back at them. “Why aren’t any of you saying anything?”

Her voice was loud, and her face grew crimson with anger.

“How did you get in here?” asked Mr. Jaap, trying to compose himself.

“I live here in House 92. Over there, on the other side,” she pointed.

She knew that in a matter of minutes, she would be taken back there and punished. She did not have long to tell those boys and that teacher what it really felt like to be a girl in House 92.

“How is it fair that you are playing while we are mending your socks?” she asked firmly. “And how come you can do things we are not allowed to do? And who says that it’s ‘dumb to be a girl’? Over there, we do not put



each other down, or call each other wimps.” She looked disapprovingly at Mr. Jaap. “We support each other and help each other with our troubles. Who decided that you are better than us?”

“We don’t think we are better than you,” Jack responded.

“It is unfair that you have to mend our clothes, while we are playing football,” whispered Tim.

“It is unfair that we are not allowed to play football with you,” replied Angela.

“Why don’t you all join the game? There are never enough of us to play properly anyway,” added another boy.

“They could, couldn’t they?” Jack turned, seeking permission from Mr. Jaap.

Mr. Jaap looked at the faces of the boys. They were united against him. “Oh, well. I can’t see why not. It would be great to play a proper game of football for once, with twenty-two players on field!”

One of Angela’s teachers arrived in the yard to take her inside. Angela was certain that she would have to spend the rest of the day in her room as a punishment.

“I was watching what happened from my office. You were so courageous, Angela. I’ve got an idea.”

A few days later, it was arranged for the boys and girls to gather in the kitchen for the first time. The teachers helped them cook their first meal together. They laughed as they ate and argued a little about whose food was the best as they did the dishes. Afterwards they all played football. It was a fun day for everyone, and it was the start of a new tradition, a new way for boys and girls to be together in House 92. Soon enough, the trees of the town were adorned with birdhouses made by both the boys and the girls.

Twenty years later, Angela did become the new Head of House 92. She continued to make sure that all of the children played football together and built birdhouses together, and she made sure that everyone learned how to cook for others and mend their own clothes. The children listened, enthralled by the way things used to be at House 92, and Angela listened, enthused by the ideas the children shared for living better together.

The Wyvern of Lake Léman

by *Noémie Pétremand*

One day, there were two little children
playing beside Lake Léman:
Maëlle, the bold adventurer
and Jeannot, the fearless knight.

Busily looking for treasure—
(a trunkful of pieces of gold)—
searching the nooks and the crannies
on a beach when suddenly,
right there, in the midst of the pebbles,
they saw that one shone bright.

Curiously, they ventured near
to the source of this great light
and came upon a diamond
shimmering blue and white.

“Ooh! How beautiful it is!”
Maëlle cried out aloud,
“It brings to me a story...”
said Jeannot to her. “Let me see!”

The boy took hold of the diamond
and pointed it at the sun.
It was practically transparent:
a miraculous gem indeed.

“It is said that once, in this country,
there lived a female winged dragon,
and she was called a wyvern.
They say gracing her forehead
shone a diamond beyond compare
that she only removed when she stooped
to bathe in the waters clear
of our lakes, our ponds and our rivers.

It is said that this jewel would offer
great riches to he who would own it:
that is why many men have attempted
so often to steal it away.
And now here it is, in our hands!
Hush! She cannot be far away...”

And with that, confirming his words,
they saw, coming out of the water,
fangs, enormous eyes,
wings and a great long tail.

Fearful, the two backed away
hiding behind a great rock.
The wyvern placed her feet on the ground
and shook herself well to get dry.

And then, she began to look
for her stone so rare and adored.
“For pity’s sake!” I am sure
that I left it around about here!
Hmnh! ... What if, by chance,
someone has stolen it from me?”

She stopped herself then and listened
whilst not far away from that place,
the children, in their hiding-hole,
tried to stop their trembles and shakes.

“Quick! Let’s run!” said the boy.
“That’s out of the question! No!
This stone is not ours:
we’ll give it back, and that’s that!”
said Maëlle as she snatched away
from his hands the diamond so rare.



And despite all the pleas of Jeannot,
she stood up and shouted out loud:
“Madame, are you looking for this?
We found it right over here...”

They then saw a column of fire
and the creature rose up beside them.
Her eyes were as red as hot coals:
she seemed about to attack.

The young girl then fell to her knees,
the diamond held out in her arms,
and the mythical creature, in disbelief,
spoke out loud to the children two.

“You could have taken it from me
but you’re here to give it back?
Your heart is good and great.
I’m forever indebted to you.”

Under Jeannot’s admiring gaze,
she replaced the jewel on her head:
“You truly do exist! Wow!!
Incredible! It’s really so hard to believe!”

The wyvern blushed and smiled at them
and said in a joyful voice:
“If one can only imagine me
then truly I must exist!”

And at these words the beauty
opened wide her wings
and under a shower of sparks
flew away high up to the sky.

As for Maëlle and Jeannot,
they just stood there, mouths agape,
awestruck and still at the water's edge,
watching her flying away.

They then looked at one another,
their faces and eyes alight
and both of them exploded
with an astonishing burst of joy:
and although they never did find
the trunkful of pieces of gold
there was yet a happy ending to
..... their treasure hunt!

The End

A Tale of a Brave Daughter

by Zebuniso Rasulzade

Dear daughter, I'll tell you a tale from the past
That our ancestors have passed down to us.
In olden times, a Shah grew old and took to bed,
His eyesight failed, just like his legs.
He knew a healer, a renowned doctor,
But he lived far away, Shah had only a daughter.
"Why would God not give me a son?
I could be cured if I had just one."
Brave daughter said: "Father, do not fret.
I know, with a son, your needs could be met.
I'll get the potion, Father dear,
I'll be back in time, never fear."
The Shah agreed, sent her off with great fanfare.
He gave her dua and she saddled her mare.
By dusk she arrived at an old cottage on the way,



Now feeling tired, she decided to stay.
The old woman in the house was lying in bed,
She was emaciated, a scarf wrapped round her head.
She told the girl, "I am sick, please bring me water.
I see you're a kind and careful daughter."
The girl brought water and a loaf of bread,
And helped her to drink by lifting her head.
"How can I help or advise, my dear?
Don't keep secrets from me, let me lend an ear..."
The girl told her about her journey's aim,
And the old woman felt the young girl's pain.
She said, "I support your mission, my dear,
You should know this is a dangerous idea.
A doctor will only give the potion, you see,
To the one who brings seeds from the magical tree.
These seeds are hidden by Monster Div,
Tight inside his sleeve they do live.
Many men have fought this monster for the seeds,
Many have died, it is impossible to succeed..."
"Oh, Grandma, I'm grateful for your guidance, to hear,
To take on Div I have no fear,
For I am braver than many a man,
And for my Father, I will do all that I can."
The old woman replied, "Such bravery succeeds!
Let me tell you how to get the seeds.
When you come to Div's castle,
You'll see his servants and many a vassal.
Monster Div treats them badly, that is true,

But if you are kind instead, they will help you.
Quickly run, my girl, when you get the seeds.
When Monster Div chases, don't lose your speed.
Take this magic mirror and throw it behind your back,
And it will stop him cold in his track."

* * *

The brave daughter thanked her, riding off in the night,
And in the distance she saw a dark looming sight.
In front of her stood Monster Div's castle,
Everywhere she looked was a servant and vassal.
They were exhausted, miserable and terribly weak;
They were so hungry, they could hardly speak.
The girl brought them cheese, water and bread.
They drank and they ate. "Thank you," they said.

* * *

She lit a great fire with sparks of orange and red.
While they warmed she listened, to all they said:
"Is it magic tree seeds that bring you to this terrible place?"
"Yes, to save my Father, it's a life-or-death race."
"If you hide in Div's bedroom, once he falls asleep,
You can take the seeds, when his snoring is deep."

* * *

Monster Div arrived, more frightening than she had feared.
He came in, demanded dinner and guzzled tankards of beer.
Then Div stormed to his bedroom to take his rest.
The girl controlled her fear, watching his heaving chest.
A quarter of an hour passed, she crept over to look,

With both his eyes closed, the seeds swiftly she took.
Not a moment longer in the room did she stay,
Out the door to her horse and galloped away.

* * *

Monster Div awoke and shouted aloud.
He was angry and brooding like a heavy storm cloud.
He ordered to his servants, “Stop her, catch that thief!
She has stolen the seeds! That’s an order from your chief!”
The servants said, “No, we will not obey!
She’s saving her father; we won’t block her way!”
All alone Monster Div chased fast at her heels,
Just one inch closer, the horse’s tail he could feel.
In that moment, the mirror, behind her she threw,
And a river appeared—deep, dark and blue.
With a splash Div fell in, the girl turned around,
She reached out her arm too late, Div had drowned.

* * *

With the seeds in her pocket, she rode three days and nights,
Arriving to the very Doctor she’d had in her sights.
“I could make your potion, but I need you to bring
The magic seeds—which for a girl, I expect, is an impossible thing.”
“I’ve brought them!” she proudly replied.
“The monster, I’m afraid, fell in the river and died.”
The Doctor was shocked, he leaned back to crow!
“Let’s plant them, and into healing herbs they will grow.
While we wait, stay here, I will teach you all that I know,
About cures and healing before you must go.”

* * *

With the potion ready, it was time to head home,
The Doctor bid her farewell at the crack of dawn.
The girl she came back, her Father's greatest treasure,
The Shah smiled with joy, relieved beyond measure.
She gave him the potion, he recovered remarkably soon,
She told of her adventures, how she rode under the moon.
The Brave Daughter had saved the Shah just as she had planned,
She had cured her Father and learned much from travelling the lands.
She ruled for a long time, she was wise and just,
And now her wisdom is passed on to us.

UN Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; all women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; and women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, as well as benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.








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