

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.