

Shoes, Ducks and Maids of the Sea

Irish Retellings of the Tales
of Hans Christian Andersen



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Shoes, Ducks and Maids of the Sea

Irish Retellings of the Tales
of Hans Christian Andersen

Edited by Gráinne Clear



The fairy tale is an unusual thing: part folklore, part carefully constructed literature; at once specific to time and place and with a vagueness that renders it relevant to any part of the world. These elements are also what make the fairy tale a perfect vehicle for powerful stories with an appeal to children and adults alike.

In this collection, we retell the stories of Hans Christian Andersen with an Irish touch. While some are accomplished rewordings of the traditional tale, others set their story in the streets of Dublin or add a fresh humour and voice to the original words of Andersen. The thirteen authors in this collection reshape and reword, expand and elucidate, bringing a freshness to these remarkable tales that forms a celebration of International Children's Book Day and the birth of Hans Christian Andersen.

With this book we launch www.imaginations.ie, a new website of international children's books with reviews of the latest and greatest in children's literature from all over the world. The website will also feature articles on the many different ways of bringing children and books together, whether through translation, digital media or the academic interest of children's literature.

To celebrate this day, we invite you to read these new stories, share them with friends and reshape them in your own imaginations.

Gráinne Clear

President of IBBY Ireland

Contents

Scabby the Dung Beetle in Search of Mightiness <i>by Paula Leyden</i>	1
Em's New Image <i>by Oisín McGann</i>	9
Lesson Learned <i>by David Rudden</i>	15
The Lighter Seller <i>by Sheena Wilkinson</i>	20
A Little Mermaid <i>by Deirdre Sullivan</i>	24
The Princess and the Pea <i>by Claire Hennessy</i>	28
The Saucy Boy with Fish Fingers <i>by Paul Timoney</i>	36
The Snow Queen <i>by Anna Carey</i>	45
Steadfast <i>by Siobhán Parkinson</i>	54
The Ugly Duckling of St Stephen's Green <i>by Sarah Webb</i>	58
Winter <i>by Ruth Frances Long</i>	64
Wild Swans <i>by Darragh Martin</i>	73
The Tinderbox <i>by Katherine Farmar</i>	86

Scabby the Dung Beetle in Search of Mightiness

A retelling of *The Beetle who went on his Travels* by Paula Leyden

A long time ago in a land where the sand was more plentiful than water, there lived a proud and rather bossy dung beetle. His name was Jeremiah Abdullah Winston Scarabaeus. We might call him Scabby for short. Not all dung beetles are bossy and, as far as we know, not all of them have such hopelessly long names. But Scabby was different.

One fine day in the desert Scabby sat and watched a young boy decorating a camel with all manner of fine things. First the blanket, woven with the softest thread in the land, burnt orange and fire red; then the head dress, pom-poms in every colour known to man and beast, tassels shimmering in the sunlight; and finally the rainbow necklaces, hundreds of them, draped around his long elegant neck. Scabby had to shade his eyes as he looked up at the fabulously bejewelled creature.

‘Hmmmph,’ he said quietly.

The boy did not hear.

‘Hmmmph,’ Scabby said, a little louder this time.

The boy turned his head, ‘You said something, dear beetle?’ He was a very polite young boy, reared to treat all with equal respect.

‘Well, I would have thought it was obvious,’ Scabby said, ‘but since you ask, I’m here and I’m waiting.’

The young boy looked puzzled, ‘Waiting?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ said Scabby rather abruptly, ‘If you’ve quite finished decorating that ridiculous animal with its useless great hump, you could start on me.’

This was of course quite the wrong thing to say to a young boy who loved his camel dearly. It was also quite the wrong thing to say about a camel who so generously produced the huge piles of dung upon which Scabby feasted day in and day out.

Scabby, however, was not renowned for thinking before he spoke.

The boy frowned at him, ‘Mr Beetle, sir, he is not a ridiculous animal and actually, his hump is *extremely* useful. Truth be told, we could all do with one in the desert. So, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from being unpleasant about him, he is a little sensitive... and no,’ he said, turning to pat the camel’s neck gently, ‘I don’t think I have any decorations that would either suit or fit a Dung Beetle. We made these ones especially for him.’

Scabby was taken aback as he was used to getting his own way most of the time, ‘I see,’ he said rather grandly, ‘Well, I’ll be off then as there’s nothing for me here. I will travel the world in search of ... *um* ... other things ... things more suited to me, for I am Jeremiah Abdullah Winston Scarabaeus, the dungiest dung beetle of them all.’

With that he flew off, leaving the young boy and his camel staring at each other, one as confused as the other.

As he flew Scabby muttered to himself, as was his habit. *Oh, I’ll show them, that camel and his boy; they’re not the only ones in the desert. My dear mother always told me that I was destined for greatness and she is about to be proved right.*

This will be a mighty journey where a mighty beetle shall find ... well mighty kinds of things.

Scabby, as you have probably realised by now, was a beetle who thought highly of himself.

He flew until he spotted what looked like an interesting bump moving about under the sand. As he came down next to it he saw that it was a very long, very wriggly bump.

‘Greetings,’ he said to the sand, ‘I am Jeremiah Abdullah Winston Scarabaeus, on my travels in search of mightiness.’

The shape moved slightly and a shiny brown head emerged, made distinctive by a pair of sharp little horns.

Scabby gulped. It was the Horned Viper, a creature feared far and wide in the desert and perhaps even further than that.

‘Mightiness you say?’ murmured the viper sleepily, ‘interestssssssssting.’

‘I Iwoke you up, I am so so so terribly sorry, most revered King of All Snakes in Africa. I will not trouble you further.’

The viper raised his head and smiled. It was one of those smiles that would send a shiver all the way down your spine, assuming you had one. Scabby, being a dung beetle, didn’t. But one look at the smile convinced him that this was not where he was going to find whatever it was he was looking for. And so, before the snake could raise his head any further, he scuttled off as fast as he could before taking to the air.

Once he was a safe distance away, Scabby looked down at the snake settling himself back under the warm sand and started muttering again. *Well now that was mighty, I think. A most fearsome adventure at the start of my travels. I'll bet that old horned viper was pretty scared of me. Yes, he surely was. I would swear he was shaking with fright.*

Scabby, you see, was not very good at admitting defeat. Not even to himself.

He flew on, his sharp eyes searching the ground for other creatures who might admire him greatly. Soon he caught sight of one and glided down to meet it. It looked like a small mouse on extremely long skinny legs. How harmful could that be?

As he flew down, the harmless creature leapt up towards him and before Scabby could say, 'Hello, you must be delighted to meet me,' it crashed into him. Very hard indeed.

'Owwwwwww,' howled Scabby as he tumbled to earth before landing – in a most undignified manner – on his back. This is not a favoured position amongst beetles, for reasons that are quite obvious. As he looked up he saw the strange long legged mouse peering down at him.

'Well,' Scabby said, 'There is no use in standing there staring at me. Turn me over immediately, you funny gangly mouse-like creature.'

'I'm a Jerboa,' she whispered, 'I have long legs so I can jump. You might have noticed that?'

'Jerboa, rat, crocodile, kangaroo; it's all the same to me,' Scabby grumbled, 'I don't have all day to lie here talking to you. Just turn me over and I'll be on my way.'

The Jerboa had never come across a beetle quite like Scabby. Which, she thought to herself, was just as well because she was finding him quite tiresome.

Jerboa looked down at him, her long tail flicking this way and that, and idly wondered whether she was hungry enough to eat him. He was, after all, a dung beetle.

As she pondered, Scabby became more and more impatient. He did not enjoy lying on his back in the shadow of a creature ten times his size, especially one that had crashed into him in mid air. Before he could start complaining again, she stood up on her hind legs, her whiskers quivered and her little head darted back and forth. Without saying another word she kicked back her legs and leapt into the sky. As she did so she moved the sand and Scabby was, luckily, tipped over onto his legs again.

‘Phew,’ he said, dusting himself off, ‘Finally! What took you so long?’ Because, of course, Scabby believed that she had only jumped into the air so that she could turn him over. He was soon to realise that this was not so. The Jerboa had disappeared, leaving Scabby facing a rather scaly something that was now staring straight at him.

This time Scabby hesitated before speaking, because the way that this particular individual was looking at him made him just a little more nervous than usual.

‘Hi,’ said the Monitor Lizard, for that is what he was, ‘And what make of a little insect are you?’

This did not go down well with Scabby. Of course he knew he was an insect but he didn’t always like being reminded of this fact. And, as insects go, he

surely wasn't the smallest of them. He forgot his nervousness and blurted out, 'A better make of insect than you are, you slimy, slithery, scaly type of a thing.'

The Monitor Lizard was so amused by the sight of this small dusty dung beetle spluttering and shouting in indignation that he threw back his head and cackled. One look inside that great lizard mouth was enough to send Scabby off on his travels again, and so he left, pretty smartly. This was one of the only sensible things he had done that day.

The muttering began again as he took flight. *No respect left in this world any more... the things I have to put up with! Lizards, rats, horned devils, giraffes, crocodiles... but I've seen them all on their merry way so I shall continue my travels. Mightiness and other good things must be just around the corner.*

By now the only thing mighty about Scabby was his tiredness. Back home, where he lived with the Camel and his Boy, he had no need to fly around much, as everything he wanted was close by: huge piles of steaming dung, warm straw, and plenty of other beetles in the neighbourhood. The thought of it all made him sigh. But the thought didn't stay there for too long – none of them ever did – because below him on the hot, hot sand was a beautiful bright green creature.

Oh my, he muttered to himself, what a startling sight. Someone almost as fine as myself. Not quite, but almost.

Once again Scabby started his descent towards the ground.

'Greetings,' he said loudly as he landed next to the exquisite bright green bit of loveliness. It turned its head and Scabby suddenly realised what a terrible mistake he had made. What stood before him, in all its glory, was the Deathstalker Scorpion. What's more, it was busy disposing of a rather

dead-looking grasshopper. One rule Scabby had learned from when he was a baby was this: *Never disturb a Deathstalker Scorpion in the middle of its dinner, because it might decide to make you the dessert.*

Scabby breathed in deeply. This was definitely not the kind of mightiness he had been in search of. He would have to gather what wits he had about himself and leave. No time for niceties, no lengthy goodbyes. He breathed out and flapped his weary wings. It would be nice to say he then went on his merry way but unfortunately this was not to be. He escaped the Deathstalker only to be swept up by a monstrous desert wind. It was one of those winds that came out from nowhere, as wild and wicked as an ogre's fart. A wind that nothing nor nobody could escape from, not even a dung beetle as fine and handsome as Scabby knew himself to be.

As he twirled and twisted, his eyes stinging from the sand, his muttering could be heard by all the other creatures swept up into the sky. *Of all the things to happen. As if the Deathstalker wasn't enough. And all this sand, there's no rhyme or reason to it. No respect for a beetle just travelling the world in search of things. Great things...*

His muttering only stopped because his mouth was filling with sand and this did not agree with him at all. The wind twisted and turned, whistled and howled. Poor Scabby was now no more than a shiny fleck in the middle of terribly wicked desert storm.

After what seemed to be, in a beetle's life, years of being battered and swirled about by the wind, Scabby found himself dumped without ceremony onto a bright soft cloth. He looked all around, up and then down, and slowly a small contented smile settled onto his face.

'Camel?' he said, spitting out mouthfuls of warm Sahara sand.

‘Yes, Jeremiah Abdullah Winston Scarabaeus,’ Camel replied. He was as polite as his boy.

‘I’m back,’ said Scabby.

‘You are indeed, and happy we are to have you here.’

‘Well, I must say that it was extremely kind of you to make me such a beautiful bed. Woven in the softest threads of burnt orange and fire red. It is a fitting resting place for a beetle such as I.’

Camel stretched his neck around to look at Scabby who had settled into the beautiful cloth draped over Camel’s hump. The windblown beetle looked for all the world like a pompous little Emperor. Camel looked down at his boy who was trying very hard not to laugh out loud.

‘Yes, dear Beetle,’ they both replied, ‘Because, of course, this finery is just for you, the finest dung beetle who ever lived.’

‘Hmmpmph’ said Scabby, ‘just as it should be.’



Return to contents

Em's New Image

A retelling of The Emperor's New Clothes by Oisín McGann

Yo!

Em-Per-R was a hip-hop star,
He sang insults for money,
Some people said he went too far,
But he just thought it funny.

He mixed with stars, he partied hard,
He ate a lot of take-out,
His well-toned muscle turned to lard,
His face began to break out.

His teeth began to fill with rot,
He didn't eat his spinach,
The muffin-top, the leaky spots,
They spoiled his tough guy image.

The time had come to film a dance,
The video for a song,
He knew it didn't stand a chance,
His body looked all wrong.

Em believed he could still hope,
To impress the lady dancers,
But his dancing really was a joke,
And so he found two chancers.

Two Danish-Irish brothers who,
Were wizards with their gadgets,

Hans and Christian Anders knew
How to dress up all Em's bad bits.

A boy was with them, Christian's son,
He sat off on his own,
He was ignored by everyone,
Just texting on his phone.

Em sought clothes to hide his flaws,
To have his image mended,
He was too hungry for applause,
To dance as nature intended.

'I'm just not at my best,'
He said, 'Things aren't looking well,
I have these moobs upon my chest,
And my belly's really swelled.'

'My face has broken out in spots,
My backside weighs a ton,
And when I bend or if I squat,
You'll see my builder's bum.'

'Don't panic, Em,' the brothers said,
'We know just what you mean,
We'll design some brand new threads,
To hide that stuff on screen.'

'To dress you up for that big dance,
You'll have to help us fake it,
You can't wear clothes, not even pants,
You'll have to dance butt naked.'

'I can't do that!' Em declared,
'The dancing makes me jiggle!
If I go nude you'll all just stare,
You'll mock my little wiggle!'

'We'd never mock such a cool guy!'
Hans and Christian swore,
'It's just that clothes in CGI,
Are like nothing you've worn before.'

'Our image work's the best you've seen,
It's really all the rage,
But our graphics are all drawn on-screen,
And your body's our blank page,

'Let's get started,' Em said then,
'Just make sure I look good.'
He stripped off then, before these men,
And they did all they could.

Yo!

Pounding sounds, pounding sounds,
Quick and wicked words,
Em was really prancing round,
And looking quite absurd.

Christian's boy, he watched the scene,
He saw the rap star's wiggle,
He watched his dad add clothes on-screen,
But couldn't stop a giggle.

Yo!

Pounding sounds, pounding sounds,
Quick and wicked words,
Em was throwing swear words round,
The worst you've ever heard.

Computer graphics worked their magic,
They covered all Em's flaws,
The boy thought all these changes tragic,
It looked better as it was.

He watched the naked rapper twirl,
He wouldn't look so silly,
If he left the dancing to the girls,
And covered up his . . . wiggle.

The boy thought this could be a hit,
Em didn't look that bad,
If he didn't act like such a twit,
It wouldn't seem so mad.

He dared to say this to his dad,
Who shook his head: 'Look, son,
You just can't have your star look bad,
That's just not how it's done.'

Yo!

Pounding sounds, pounding sounds,
Quick and wicked rhymes,
Em's bare buttocks wobbled round,
Knocked dancers out of line.

The boy stood back, out of sight,
Holding up his phone,
He filmed the work they did that night,
Made a video of his own.

Yo!

Pounding beats, pounding beats,
Quick and wicked growls,
The Anders boys knew all the cheats,
To hide Em's saggy jowls.

They hid his moobs, his builder's bum,
They fiddled with his jiggles,
They toned his muscles, tucked his tum,
They hid his little wiggle.

In real life, Em looked very wrecked,
But the graphics showed a new man,
The chancers' tricks and slick effects,
Had made him superhuman.

'I wish you'd left it as it was.'
The boy said to the star.
'What's wrong with having a few flaws?
And being who you are?'

Em-Per-R said: 'Shut up, kid,'
You plebs might find it funny,
To see the things that we just did,
But it all makes me more money.'

'When I'm out insulting others,
I've got to look my best,

Your father and his brother,
Make me better than the rest.'

'Okay then,' said the little dude,
'I may just be a pleb,
But I've just filmed you dancing nude,
. . . And I've stuck it on the web.'

As Em's mean face turned white with fear,
The video went viral,
Em-Per-R's music career,
It took a downward spiral.

So . . .

To avoid a global giggle,
Be true to how you feel,
And if you dress to hide a wiggle,

Well . . .

It's best to keep it real.



Return to contents

Lesson Learned

A retelling of *The Red Shoes* by David Rudden

The girl danced in shoes of scarlet scale.

She had been dancing for a long time, and had been dancing a long way. Three months and two hundred miles, in fact, which is a lot longer and further than most people dance, given the choice.

Three months and two hundred miles ago, the girl had danced out of her big house and down the lane. She had shimmied her way out of the city, through the suburbs and into the forest. Then she had boogied for a few dozen miles through trees and bushes and thorns and grass, before tap-dancing into the Wilderness, which was mostly a bunch of nothing with a few scraggly weeds sticking out of it.

Then she danced across that as well.

The Wilderness was mostly full of monsters, who were terribly confused at the tiny girl dancing through their midst. Confusion is a good state of being in which to find a monster. Hungry is not. The girl danced through the Wilderness, and as she did she learned to live there – hiding during the day when great dragons of gold and black scales clawed and fought in the sky, stealing fruit and berries, learning how to hide her tracks so that predators couldn't find her.

And all the while, she danced.

Eventually, three long months and two hundred miles after she danced from her home, the girl found her destination, the Great Nothing beyond the Wilderness.

In the Great Nothing there was... nothing.

Nothing at all.

Black sand. Bright stars. Or maybe the stars were black and the sand was bright. It was hard to tell.

The girl danced and danced and danced. The tan she had gained from months of harsh Wilderness sun faded, stolen away by the half-hearted light of the stars. A trail of dust rose behind her, pointing back the way she had come.

Miles and miles of nothing, until eventually, in the distance, she saw...

Something.

A desk.

A man.

He nodded at her as she moonwalked closer.

‘Evening.’

The girl stared at him. She had once been rich, dressed in the finest clothes, but long months in the Wilderness had taught her that bright colours drew wolves, and going out in the sun without covering up was deadly.

Her beautiful coat had been turned inside out and the dark lining used as a head-dress. Once she had been plump and well-fed, and now she was as lean and sharp as an old knife.

The only thing that still remained of her old life were the red shoes on her feet.

Dancing from side to side, the girl folded her arms and stared at him. He couldn't have looked more different than her. She was covered in the dust of three months of travel. He was dressed in a grey silk suit, with a hat neatly placed on the desk in front of him. She was thin and scrawny, with eyes narrowed from squinting through the sun. He was round and comfortable and pale as a worm.

And she was dancing, and he was not.

‘Name?’ the man said.

‘Karen.’

‘Let’s see ...’ He examined her shoes without getting up from his desk. ‘Ah yes. Level Two Curse. One of those “teach her a lesson” hexes. Very popular right now. Let me see. I suppose you ... didn’t appreciate somebody? Or you ... I don’t know ... acted pridefully, or selfishly?’

The girl’s hands were curled into fists. Her voice was creaky from disuse.

‘I wore red shoes to church.’

The man *harrumphed*. ‘Ah, of course. They’re not really church shoes, are they?’ ‘THAT’S IT?!’ Karen shrieked. She had been keeping in that scream for a long time. The Great Nothing wasn’t used to girls shrieking. The sound echoed and echoed and echoed away. ‘THAT’S IT?! THREE MONTHS OF DANCING BECAUSE OF A FASHION FAUX PAS?’

The man looked down at his notes. ‘Apparently so. I think there was a lesson about something there too. Respect your elders; that kind of thing.’

Karen seethed for a moment and then took a deep breath, forcing politeness into her voice.

‘And who are you?’

The man smiled. ‘Wizard-for-Hire. Educatory Sorceries. Need your children taught a lesson? ZAP. Instant – well, not instant in your case – learning experience. We do all sorts.’

‘All sorts?’

‘Yes, yes,’ the Wizard said, ‘young princes needing a quest, third sons off to prove themselves, enchanting creatures – the whole shebang. Very busy time for us right now.’

Three months dancing had taught Karen not to waste time and energy on giving out, but even so a little thread of anger had entered her voice.

‘So this was just a lesson then?’

‘Could be worse,’ the Wizard said.

He indicated off to his left, where another girl was curled up on the ground. Karen hadn't noticed her at first because the girl seemed to be soundly asleep. Her dress was beautiful – white and gold and red – the kind of dress Karen used to wear when she lived in her old house, before she had been taken from it by a pair of Level 2 Cursed Shoes.

'She was asked not to touch a spinning wheel. Very simple instruction. Don't touch the spinning wheel.'

The girl mumbled a little and turned over in her sleep.

'And what happened?' Karen asked.

'She touched the spinning wheel. Again, very simple instruction. I don't know what you kids be doing.'

'And you're just going to leave her there?'

The Wizard shrugged. 'Hundred year clock on the curse. We'll stick her in some castle or something, try and send a prince her way.'

Karen's eyes narrowed.

'But this is cruel! This isn't *fair!*'

The Wizard's eyes had already returned to his notes. 'This is a fairy tale. Of course it's cruel and unusual. There's no *fair* in fairyt –' He frowned. 'Well. Anyway. Do you want the shoes off?'

Karen nodded. She didn't speak, because she didn't trust herself not to say a very rude word.

The Wizard snapped his fingers and the red shoes crumbled to dust. Karen let out a long sigh as her bare pink toes wiggled. She was in control of them again, for the first time in months.

Crossing something out in his notes, the Wizard flashed her a sympathetic grin. 'There we go. Lesson learned, right?'

Karen just stared at him.

'Errm... you have to say "lesson learned". Just for our files.'

‘Lesson,’ Karen said, grinding her teeth, ‘learned.’

‘Wonderful!’ The Wizard exclaimed. ‘Now, stand still and I’ll teleport you home. You have come a long way. We’re not monsters here. Well the Monster Division is, obviously, but you know what I mean.’

Karen looked at the Wizard, and then back the way she had come. The Wilderness hadn’t been that bad, actually, now that she thought about it. Dragonfire was quite pretty, and there was something nice about the quiet.

‘You know what?’ she said. ‘I’ll walk.’



Return to contents

The Lighter Seller

A retelling of *The Little Match Girl* by Sheena Wilkinson

It had stormed all through December and now, on the last night of the year, icy sheets of rain slanted across the city streets. Puddles grew into ponds; the river, which normally nosed along lazily, raged and slopped over the quay wall. People battled the wind, bent double, and said there would be some fun trying to go out to celebrate the new year.

Lilith crept along, cuddling her bag to her stomach. It was meant to be waterproof but she knew that the lighters inside must be soggy, because in the main street someone had run back after her with a lighter he had just bought, and said it was no good; it didn't light; it must have got wet. At least that's what Lilith thought he was saying. He had gestured and shouted and spat the words into her face and wouldn't leave her alone until she had handed him back his two euro.

And that was the only lighter she had sold all day.

If she went back – she didn't use the word home because nothing was home-ly in this wet cold city – with no money, He would rage louder than the river. He would tell her she was useless and ungrateful and didn't know how lucky she was that he had brought her here, to safety, away from the fighting and the swarming refugee camp and the hunger that burned from the inside. He would remind her that He had saved her life and that she was a child alone in a strange country – as if she needed reminded! – and all he expected in return was that she sell a few lighters to tourists. It wasn't much to ask, was it?

Lilith sighed and bent her head lower against the driving rain. It soaked through the thin cotton of her headscarf and she felt its cold fingers push

through her hair. She turned onto the pretty bridge where tourists liked to take photos. Some of her lighters had this bridge painted on them. The others had pictures of churches and grand buildings that Lilith had never seen. They must be in the city but not in the streets Lilith knew. The wind roared up the bridge, but if she could only find a sheltered place she could huddle up, her knees to her chest, and try again with the lighters.

She was in luck. Often the hollowed-out side of the bridge was busy with beggars but not today. Lilith settled down against the cold wet stone of the bridge, her lighters on her knee. People walked past with their heads down, and it wasn't just because of the rain, because it was always the same. Lilith had always been small but now she thought she must have become invisible. She would poke her hand out from under her sleeve and be amazed that it was still there. Their eyes slid past her, focussed on something in the distance, but if Lilith turned to follow their eyes there was never anything there. Just shopfronts and bridges and busses huffing away from stops. Sometimes they looked at their mobile phones instead. Lilith wondered what it must be like to have people to talk to. She had Him; he was the only one in this country who could speak her language; but he wasn't family.

What would He do if she couldn't sell any lighters at all? Lilith shivered.

Two little girls Lilith's age slopped past, their furry boots paddling in the rain. Their red hoods blew over their faces. They stuck their arms out ahead of them and pretended they couldn't see anything. A lady walking behind them called something out in a cross voice but Lilith knew it was only pretend-cross, because she took an arm of each girl and they leaned into her and giggled. Lilith imagined them going home together to a house where the weather couldn't get in. She thought of Mamma, coming home from market with her basket full of oranges.

Lilith's hands burned with cold. What if she lit one of her lighters? Maybe it would warm her just a little. Maybe the tiny flame in the darkening afternoon would make people notice her and buy one, and then she could get out of the wind and rain at last.

She pulled out a lighter with a picture of a castle on it. Her finger was so numb and so wet that at first it only slid off the top, catching on the rough metal and making her wince. She sucked her finger, and tried again. This time the lighter burst into life. The flame was blue at the bottom and then yellowish. It was the only colour in the gloom. Lilith huddled closer over the tiny flame. She saw home in it, the fire that always burned red in the corner, where Mamma cooked every day. If she closed her eyes she could smell the warm rusty sweetness of spices.

The flame sputtered and died. Lilith's hands were not big enough to shelter it from the driving rain.

Now there was nobody crossing the bridge. They had all gone inside. Lilith was so wet and so cold that she knew she would never be able to uncurl her limbs to move again. And anyway she could not go back to Him. All she had were her lighters. She might as well take from them what comfort she could.

She reached into her bag again and took out another one – a big church, painted in yellows and greys with writing across it that Lilith could not read. Again it didn't want to light, but she managed to coax it. This time in the spurting flame she saw the red dusty roads of her village, the bright colours of her big sisters' skirts as they played. Lilith could not remember what it felt like to wriggle her toes in warm sand. She could no longer feel her feet. She looked down at them, the toes of her boots peeking out from her sodden skirt, but they did not seem to be part of her.

She lit another lighter as fast as she could. She saw her own whitewashed house with the bright blue door. The hot sun blistered the paint, and pulled it off in curls. Dadda will paint it, Mamma said, when he comes home from the fighting.

She might as well lie down and rest. Nobody would buy a lighter now, and she could curl up and perhaps hug some warmth. But her limbs would not obey her; they screamed in pain when she tried to move. A burst of rain, heavier than ever, slapped down on her, and doused her bag. Lilith looked up at the sky. It was dark but there were no stars, only heavy clouds. She looked at the puddle on her knee. There could be no hope for the lighters now.

No. There was still hope for the one she clutched in her hand. When she shook it she could hear that it was not quite empty. With the last of her strength she pressed her finger down and a tiny reluctant flame struggled out. She looked into it. She saw Mamma's face, not as she had seen it when the bomb tore through the village, not as she seen it and her sisters' cold and dusty and still, but smiling. Mamma's lips moved and Lilith heard her own language, words of comfort and welcome.

Clutching the dead lighter, Lilith let her sodden body fall against the cold cobbles of the bridge. If she had been able to uncurl her frozen limbs and get up, perhaps she would have been able to withstand the huge wave which swept over the parapet. As it was, she was powerless.

They found her body miles downstream, outside the city, when the rain finally stopped in the early days of the new year.



Return to contents

A Little Mermaid

A retelling of The Little Mermaid by Deirdre Sullivan

The people of the islands live apart. The two legged. The breathers. They can't breathe in the water like we with air. They jump and stride all jerky like in pain. Nothing flows there. I don't like it but I like to hear about it. One by one, my sisters have all seen. They've all gone watching. They have these tails that aren't like a tail but two of them and clunkier they don't bend half as well and they call those things legs. Legs like a crab has, they have. Or a prawn. They only have the two though. It sounds funny and I want to see.

I like to look at things that are peculiar. I have a little garden that I've gathered. In it, there's a statue of a boy and bits of things from ships, and coloured pots they like to cook or grow things in. Up there they burn their food with fire before they eat it. I want to look at them. I want to see. All my other sisters have gone up and they tell me things the first few times and then they just get tired and flick my words away, like they were unimportant.

I am smaller than the rest by several years and I am pretty. I have yellow hair and the clicks and hums of me are ravishing. People want to marry me already. I know. They've asked my dad. When we are fifteen or we are wedded. That's when we can look. Look at the island people on their boats. They catch and eat us sometimes. Eat us, marry us. Take us home and show us to each other. Take us round in little coloured vans and laugh at us for money.

I would like to have that underwater, but it wouldn't work; they'd drown in it. I've seen their bulging, flattened faces pale. Fish eat them, and I once had a taste, it wasn't nice though. I don't think we're supposed to eat the flesh of man. I like their bones so white and smooth. Bones and coins the round, flat sparkling things when sunlight filters down into my garden how they light it up.

Their legs are different, and their faces too. Rounder, not as planed. Pale and soft. They look like they would pulp up if you poked them. Certain seaweeds have air bladders and when you push your nails right in to pop they hiss through water at you kind of gently. Human skin looks like it would do that, if it were living.

They turn different colours, sisters say. In sunlight and in rain they red and whiten. Some of them go brown as well and some of them, the old ones, are all creased in the face like sand that you bed down in when you leave. I want to look at them, I want to see. I am the smallest one, but it's not my fault I'm small. Smaller than everyone, even when they were the age I am they say that they were bigger. I was sickly as a child; it's why I'm watched, the reason I am treasured slightly more.

My granny says I'm good. I have a good heart and she pulls the snarls from out my hair. It's nicer for her hands than for my head. Apparently once you break the surface, your hair and skin feel different, heavier on you. Sisters say it's strange but not unpleasant. They didn't like it but they didn't hate it. I want to like and hate things. I don't want to flow through life forever, I want to plunge and plummet, rise and rise and break upon the shore and know its secrets.

All the things I want are close to me but far from me as well and I am sick of wanting them. I want them though, I want them. I would give my little finger for a chance to look up at the moon unfiltered by the waves. What is light like when it's not through the water. They have a thing called fire there and sometimes they bring it to their mouths and brighten it and dull. Sisters say it's boring after the first few times. They like the ocean better.

Granny says I'll like it well enough and then forget it. That's called growing up. The things that are important get bigger and bigger and then smaller

and smaller, and they're always there, but it's like a puffer fish; they only swell so much and then they shrink. I want to see the surface coral bright. Sisters say that there are colours there that aren't here. Ones that only adult folk have seen. Would it hurt my child eyes just to look? I ask my granny and she tells me no but there are reasons why things are kept back. If you break the surface once before your time, then it's a sin. You've disobeyed your father and your kin. And when it comes to grow or help or marry who will trust you then? You break a thing, a little thing, a not so much a different thing like that and nothing happens then you've learned that doing wrong is fine and you'll be whole and blameless from it. Lies upon your tongue. A scapeconsequence, a little lying thing.

The punishment for liars here is hard. They put you in a cave alone for a year and if you leave then you are shunned forever, that's what keeps you in. There is a witch that I've heard tell of made her cave a home and lived there still and does things there, such horrid things for people. Sisters tell of her but hush their voice when other people come. I sing with them the stories and we're one voice altogether with each other blending like a family into song and into sense.

I would hate to live apart with my voice never to belong to them as well as me again. To slip right in and fit exactly right. The way that humans talk is a guttural and solitary thing. They only speak for themselves and they choose the things they say inside their heads before they let them out, so granny says. How can you ever know one properly if such things are let happen all the time are commonplace? Why do I think about them when I'm little and I'm loved inside the ocean. Picking sealice out of granny's tail and thinking stupid little private thoughts of mine alone.

I wonder what it would be like to only speak yourself, to not have your thoughts blend in to happy chimes with those around you? What would it be

to listen to just you alone inside your head forever? I think that it would hurt; not hurt like falling or like getting sick but the kind that makes a person mad. There was a mermaid once who was so sad. Nobody knew why, she wouldn't even sing of it and nobody could help her. She pulled out all her hair and rent her tail and when it didn't stop it hurt the song and so she was caved. The song we sing, the blend is all important. It has to be a smooth harmonious thing or what's the point. If we don't love each other and be kind there isn't any really. We cannot live apart like island folk; disjointed things and strange. We have to blend and rub, to smooth things out and flow. And that's the point of seeing other ways, of trying things. To swim back down and know our way is best and not be frightened that it maybe isn't.

To never think of magic something-elses, of all-consuming things that might be possible. Light weaves through the water as do we and breath weaves song and loving weaves a family. They love my questions and my hopes. And when the times comes up I'll go and wanting things will stop and all will calm.



Return to contents

The Princess and the Pea

A retelling of The Princess and the Pea by Claire Hennessy

The princess had always been told she was too sensitive. When the girls at the Royal Academy whispered about her behind her back, she wept for days and her eyes stung and her face swelled up. It was most unattractive, and not at all becoming of a princess.

When her father's sharp tone sent her into another flood of tears, the princess's mother sighed and reminded her not to take things so personally.

Everything felt personal. A stern look could slice through her like a knife. But it was, the princess knew, a problem.

In the Academy they had learned many useful skills and she put them to good use. She purchased silk from a local merchant and wove a cocoon around herself, then waited patiently for it to harden.

It kept the world's misery out. She could see the flurries of life pushing up against it – swirling stormclouds, dreary drizzles, gleaming sunshine, brisk winds – but she knew she was safe as long as the cocoon held.

Then she met the boy.

He had eyes so blue that she had to uncover her own to see them properly. She jabbed holes in her cocoon so she could see them clearly, and there they were – bluer than the deepest ocean and brighter than the midsummer sky.

His mouth opened and she freed her ears so she could hear what he was saying. When he spoke, he made her laugh, so she uncovered her mouth so the sound could escape.

When he looked at her something tugged inside her chest and it felt as though she mightn't be able to breathe. Then she realised she could, and that there was a sort of magic in the air whenever she did.

'Will you take the rest of that thing off?' he asked one day. 'I can't see you.'

She shook her head.

'Please,' he said. 'I want to see your face – all of it – when you laugh.'

'No.'

'I want to know what your smile looks like,' he continued.

'That's all well and good,' she said, 'but –' Her voice caught somewhere in the air between them.

'I want to know what your eyes look like when you're angry,' he said. 'I want to know what your face looks like when you're sad.'

'Princesses don't get angry or sad,' she said, even as the fury welled up inside her. 'We're not allowed.' She wished he would understand.

'Everyone gets angry. Everyone gets –'

'I think you should leave,' she said, and the sadness swirled around the cocoon, determined to get in.

When he was gone she mended the holes in her cocoon so that the world remained distant, behind a silk wall, and for a time all was quiet.

She did not weep. She did not screech with joy. She was quiet.

It was too quiet.

She missed the way the laughter bubbled through her. She missed the leap in her heart when she looked at his blue eyes.

And then one night she knew what she must do. The princess packed up her things, and tried fastening a cloak over her cocoon, but it slipped off. She sighed and set out into the world anyway – down the mountain and through the woods, across a river and to his land, his town, where there was a castle she knew must be his.

The sky darkened and the rain began splattering down, and when she felt the drops on her face she knew the cocoon was beginning to weaken. It could no longer protect her in this storm. She looked back to where she had come from, and she turned her face resolutely towards the castle.

Then she felt it – the sting of the rain on her skin, like pebbles pelted at her. The storm had worsened and her cocoon had dissolved. There were fragments left in her wake, like an old worn snakeskin its owner had outgrown.

Blue eyes, she told herself. Blue eyes and laughter.

It was not enough. She found shelter beneath a tree and sank against its trunk. What was she doing in this tempest, all for the sake of a joke or two, for the sake of a handsome face? What kind of fool was she?

She was asking for trouble. She had given her heart to someone who scarcely knew her. It was an act of madness.

She was furious with herself.

She stomped out from underneath the tree's shelter in the direction of home, and the rain pelted down once more. She let out a scream into the night, and imagined how she might look now, to an onlooker, and then her breath caught in her throat and she turned on her heel once more and marched towards the castle.

It took several knocks on the heavy door before someone answered. 'I want to see the prince,' she said firmly to the maid.

'The prince is sleeping, and cannot be disturbed.'

She exhaled sharply. 'Very well. I'll speak to him in the morning.'

The maid nodded.

She waited expectantly, and when there was no response, said, 'May I sleep here tonight?'

'Oh, I –' The maid looked uncertain.

She indicated her wet clothes. 'You can't possibly expect me to go out into that storm again,' she said, struggling to control her impatience.

'I – no. No, miss.'

'Who's this?' Another voice came from within the castle, and a woman appeared, dressed in fine clothing.

'Your highness, this ... girl. She wishes to see the prince,' the maid said.

The princess knew she did not look much like a princess. Her own mother would do the same to a stranger in her own kingdom, she was sure – look her up and down haughtily, as the queen was doing now. She wanted to hold her head up high, but she found herself tired and longing to sleep.

‘Very well,’ the queen finally said. ‘Come with me.’

The bed was the most absurd thing she had ever seen. There was nothing like it in her own palace – their beds were much closer to the ground, much less ornate. There was surely no need for quite so many mattresses, quite so many feathers.

She turned to the queen to ask if all the beds in this land were quite so high, but the door had already been shut behind her.

She wearily climbed to the top and settled in the bed. Tomorrow, she would see him. Tomorrow, she would –

There was something in the bed. She shifted uncomfortably. There was a lump in the bed, and no matter how she arranged herself, there it was, jabbing at her.

This was too much. She climbed down from the bed and grabbed the candle from the nightstand. ‘Where are you?’ she demanded of the castle’s passages, waiting for the boy’s head to appear from around one of the doors.

Instead the queen appeared. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise. ‘What are you doing out of bed?’

‘I couldn’t sleep. There’s a lump.’

The queen's mouth opened slightly, and then closed again. 'I see.'

'You see what?'

'Mother? What's going on?' And there he was – sleepy-eyed, his hair ruffled, standing not two feet away from her. 'Who's this?'

She held the candle closer to her face.

'Oh,' he said, stepping a little closer.

'This,' the queen said triumphantly, 'is your princess. We have proof.'

'Of course she's a princess,' the boy said irritably.

'The pea beneath the mattresses worked!' the queen continued.

'The what?' the princess said, and her voice grew louder. 'You were testing me? Testing if I was truly a princess?'

'Testing that you were suitable for my darling boy, you see. But now we know –'

'Suitable? What exactly do you mean by that?'

'Of course she's suitable,' the boy said at the same time. 'Mother, you must stop all this silliness.'

'Silliness? We must know if she has the appropriate sensitivity to be a true princess. That is simply how it works.' The queen frowned and looked at her. 'Though I thought you might be ... quieter.'

‘Quieter,’ the girl hissed.

‘Yes. You seem so – angry.’ The queen raised an eyebrow.

‘Of course I’m angry!’ she said. ‘I walked here in a storm just to see this son of yours, and then he was asleep, and all I wanted was to rest, and you decided to *test* me instead. And now you tell me I’m too angry, when anger is what stopped me from turning back or giving up.’

‘This is not behaviour becoming of a princess,’ the queen said coldly.

‘Mother. Stop it.’ The boy took hold of the candle, and stared at the girl for a moment. ‘I see them now, those eyes.’

‘That was what you wanted,’ she said. It was difficult to stay furious when he was gazing at her like that, but she knew there was still something she needed to say to the queen, so she forced herself to look away. ‘I am a princess,’ she said to the queen, ‘whatever you may think.’

‘No prince will ever love a princess who doesn’t behave like one,’ the queen said.

The boy let out a sharp laugh. ‘Mother! Are you blind?’ His hand slid into the princess’s, their fingers fitting together perfectly. ‘I love her.’

The words sent a warmth through the princess that she had never known before. Her eyes filled with tears, though there was no sorrow in her heart. How was it possible to feel so much in such a short space of time?

‘And you want to marry her, I suppose,’ the queen said.

The princess’s eyes widened. ‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.’

‘Someday, perhaps,’ the boy said. ‘For now I want to find her a real bed to sleep in.’

And when he led her to a real guest bedroom, not one for testing pretenders, the feathers were so soft, and she could feel every single one soothing her into sleep.



[Return to contents](#)

The Saucy Boy with Fish Fingers

A Retelling of The Saucy Boy by Paul Timoney

Imagine the sound of rain.

Lots of rain.

No. More rain.

A bit more.

Okay. That's enough. Well done.

Next include the wind. All of it. Keep the sound of the rain going and add the wind whooshing and whirling about so wildly that it makes your head move as you imagine it. Concentrate hard to make it so real in your mind that you feel a draught start to whistle through your ears.

If you have tried in earnest to do these things, then you may hopefully have a bit of a hint of a taste of tincture of a fraction of an inkling of a notion of an idea of just how ferocious the storm was on the night that this story took place. It instantly stripped any umbrella that dared to oppose it, leaving behind a mere metal skeleton with its bones pointing skyward in shock. It yanked down the hoods of raincoats, filled them with freezing cold water and then whipped them back up on the heads of their wearers. Its thunderous thunders were so thoroughly thundering that it startled many hibernating hedgehogs from their season's slumber.

And so to the story.

Once upon a time there was a good old poet. He was poeming away in his horrible hovel of a home, and as small and unpleasant as his dwelling was, he was delighted to be sheltered from the terrible ferocious storm outside. He sat at his writing desk, where the words flowed best, and wrote:

‘Hark, the storm marches
A fierce fearsome rhythm
On the roof of my tiny tin home...’

His home was actually made of aluminum, but the old poet decided to say ‘tin’ because he was fairly fond of a little alliteration. It literally littered his verses. He was considering what to write next, and trying to come up with something interesting that would also sound tremendous, when there came a knock at the door.

‘Oh, open the door! I am so cold and wet through,’ called a little voice outside.

‘Poor creature!’ said the poet. He put down his pen and opened the door. Before him stood a little boy, trembling with cold. If left outside for much longer, he surely wouldn’t survive, and the poet swept him in through the door and away from the grasp of the scabbling cold. ‘Poor little thing!’ said the poet and took him by the hand. ‘I will soon warm you. Come, stand next to the fire. You shall have some red lemonade and an apple, for you are such a handsome boy.’

As the poet removed a saucepan from his cupboard and lit the stove, he could feel a new poem starting to sparkle inside him.

‘A such beautiful boy
Came fish-finger-frozen
To my wind rattled door.
A such beautiful boy.
Blonde of hair,
Blue of eye,
White of tooth,
Rum of youth...’

‘Hmmm,’ thought the old poet, ‘It definitely needs work. I will have to summon up all of my skills as a wordsmith if I am to describe how handsome this wee fellow is.’

The good old poet soon handed the boy a mug of piping hot lemonade, which he guzzled with gusto. Suddenly revived, the boy began to jig around the old man.

‘You are a merry boy, too,’ said the latter. ‘Tell me, what is your name?’

‘My name is Cupid,’ he answered. ‘Don’t you know me? There lies my bow. I shoot with that, you know. And look! The weather is getting fine again; the moon is shining bright.’

‘But your bow is spoilt,’ said the old poet, eyeing the tiny weapon that lay by the fire. ‘It’s so very shrunk, and the arrows are all out of sorts.’

‘That would be unfortunate,’ said the little boy, taking it up and looking at it. ‘Oh, it’s quite dry and isn’t damaged at all. The string is quite tight. Let me show you.’

Drawing it back, Cupid took an arrow, aimed very carefully, and shot the good old poet right in the heart. ‘Do you see now that my bow was not spoilt?’ he

said, laughing loudly at his great trick. What a naughty boy to shoot the old poet like that, who had taken him into his warm room and been so good to him. I do hope you would never do such a thing.

‘What a rascal!’ cried the poet, for these are the kind of words poets use.

Cupid turned and made to run away, a grin stretched from ear to ear, but the old poet grabbed hold of one of these ears.

‘Stay right where you are, you mischievous monkey!’

The good old (and now angry) poet snatched Cupid’s bow and arrows and flung them onto the fire. Cupid tried to escape from his grasp and would surely have leapt into the flames to save them, but the old man was strong despite the arrow buried in his heart. The bow and arrows sizzled and burned to char.

‘My bow and arrows! You destroyed them!’ Cupid cried.

‘I did,’ replied the poet simply.

‘How can it be that you are not reeling upon the floor? I know that I shot in your heart.’

Cupid’s aim had in fact been true. The poet reached a hand into the front of his tunic and pulled out a book. The arrow was stuck deep into its pages.

‘This book protected me, both literally and, well, literally. It stopped the arrow from injuring my body by acting as a shield, and also because it warned me about you.’

‘Warned you? How?’

‘These are the tales of Hans Christian Anderson, my boy. You should read them. One in particular is entitled ‘The Saucy Boy’. It is about a beautiful infant, much like yourself, who on a stormy night, much like tonight, knocks on the door of a good old poet, much like me. The good old poet takes pity on the little wet wretch and lets him in. He warms him. He feeds him. He treats him with sympathy, decency, affection and kindness. Do you know how the boy repays him?’

‘No...’

‘Do you think he thanks the good old poet for probably saving his life?’

‘Perhaps?’

‘He most certainly does not. The naughty boy shoots the good old poet in his good old heart and runs away laughing. Laughing!’

‘Oh... It sounds like a tragic tale.’

‘Yes, it is. But those who are wise and who read can learn from a tragic tale. And if a tragic tale can teach someone to avoid a tragedy, then perhaps that tale is not so tragic after all. I wasn’t tricked like the poet in the story. I knew not to trust a sweet and vulnerable-seeming child who knocks at my door on a rainy night. Even though I was quite overwhelmed by your beautiful face, and even though I couldn’t help but help you, I was still clever enough to protect myself in case you made to attack me. Now that you are disarmed you may leave. Without your bow and arrows you won’t be able to harm and hurt anyone ever again. Goodbye, wicked little Cupid.’

But our story does not end there.

The next morning the poet awoke in his bed. He got up. He thought about whether or not he should have cereal for breakfast or if he should bother cooking an egg, and after much deliberation decided on a bowl of Wheat Crunchies.

He remembered the storm from the previous night and wanted to look outside to see if his house was damaged, and so after breakfast he opened the door and stuck his head out. He noticed that his chimney had been chipped by a branch that had broken. Normally he would have wanted to write those words down, because he would have liked the alliteration of the *chipped chimney* and the *broken branch*. Today, however, he just wondered how much it would cost him to buy a new chimney pot.

The good old poet sighed. ‘I suppose I should finish one or two of these verses. Hopefully I’ll sell them and fix this falling-down house.’ He sat at his writing desk and opened his journal. ‘How very peculiar,’ he thought to himself. ‘How terribly queer indeed.’

The pages of his journal were blank. He could not see any of the words that he had written. His verses about the storm and the beautiful boy seemed to have vanished. He squinted and pressed his nose against the page.

‘Heck, the storm smashes. No ... hack the stern marshes. No ... hook the stones missus?’ said the poet as he tried to read from a line of blurred text. He removed his spectacles and cleaned them with a handkerchief. He put them back on but the poems remained unclear, as if written on fog. Was his eyesight failing? He turned his head and looked at his stove. He could see it well enough. He spotted the faded numbers on the knobs that controlled all the temperatures. He could make out a faint stain from where some red lemonade had bubbled over and spilled on the hob. He even noticed some small orange crumbs that had fallen off the grill.

‘A such beautiful boy
Came fish-finger-frozen
To my wind-rattled door.’

‘Aha!’ he exclaimed. ‘Orange crumbs ... Fish fingers ... Frozen fish fingers.’

He wasn’t, however, focusing on the alliteration of the words *frozen*, *fish* and *fingers* in the way that he was used to doing. Instead, he was simply thinking about cooking up some fish fingers.

Which is what he did. But for some reason he didn’t pay any attention to the fact that he had *fried five fresh frozen fish fingers for fifteen* minutes, which had *felt* like *forever*. Nor did he seem to care much for the *crunch* of the *crispy crumb coating* as he *chewed*. He didn’t even notice the rhymes on his side-plate of *peas* and *cheese* or in his desert bowl of *blue berries* and *stewed cherries*. [Some play on the font here, perhaps?]

What at all was happening to the good old poet?

When he finished his meal, the poet took another peek at his journal and found, to his lack of surprise, that the poems were as blurry and illegible as ever.

‘What is a poem anyway?’ he thought. ‘A bunch of silly words to describe a stupid feeling that nobody could really care less about. It just seems so very pointless, doesn’t it? And dangerous too. When I think about the pain I would have felt last night if that arrow had invaded my heart. The safest thing is to avoid all feelings. I should make fish fingers. Everybody loves fish fingers.’

So the good old poet decided to stop being a poet and became a fisherman instead.

And yes, the story goes on.

Later that day he was sitting by the lakeshore with a new fishing rod. A bird walked by. It seemed very distressed. 'What is wrong with this bird?' wondered the poet. It was meandering about unusually close to him. 'Why don't you fly away little bird? I don't have any bread crusts, if that is what you are after.'

But the bird was not cadging for treats. It had a broken wing and could not fly. There was also a cat nearby who was stalking it. 'Do you expect me to get involved in your business? Do you hope that I will shoo away that cat? Goodness me. I don't involve myself in the affairs of people, so why do you think that I would consider getting involved in your drama? Your wing is broken. You can't fly, which means you can't go home to your nest. Face it, little bird. You are done for. You may as well allow yourself to be that cat's dinner. At least then your life will serve some purpose.'

The poet stopped. He could not believe that he had just said what he had just said even though he had just said it. 'Where are all my feelings gone? No wonder I can't see any poems. I am as cold and unfeeling as a set of stones. I am as cruel and as callous as a hungry cat. I am as lost and lonesome as a downturned dove. I am like a chimney that was chipped by a branch that had broken.'

He reached down and gently picked the little bird up from the ground. The bird looked so sad and forlorn that the poet held it against his chest and pain throbbed in his heart. A sudden tear fell from his eye. 'It's okay, little bird. I will look after you,' said the poet. 'First I will run that pesky cat so you won't be so scared.'

He turned to face the cat but there was no cat there. Instead, a most beautiful boy – Cupid.

He looked down into his hands; the bird was gone too. Where the poet had carefully held it just moments before, there was now an arrow protruding from his breast.



[Return to contents](#)

The Snow Queen

A retelling of The Snow Queen by Anna Carey

It all started with a goblin. Some people said he was a demon, but I was never sure. Anyway, whatever he was, he was never happier than when he was bringing out the worst in people, and that was why he made a magic mirror. It was a nasty, curdled sort of magic. When you looked at it, you saw all the bad things about yourself and none of the good. In fact, whatever was reflected in it looked like the worst possible version of itself. The goblin loved it.

Of course, Kay and Gerda didn't know anything about this until much later. They had been best friends since they were very small, and they lived next to each other in a large old building that had been divided up into flats. The flats weren't very big but they had nice big balconies, and the children's balconies were so close to each other that they could jump from one to the other. And of course, they often did, even though it was very dangerous and silly, as Gerda's grandmother often told her.

One cold winter afternoon they were in Gerda's flat playing a board game and laughing a lot when a snow storm blew up and big fluffy snow flakes whirled against the windows. There were so many that the children could barely see the world outside.

'The snow flakes are like fat white bees,' said Kay.

'Yes,' said Gerda's grandmother, who was reading by the fire. 'And they have a queen.'

'Oh, grandma, don't be silly,' said Gerda. 'Of course they don't.'

'Look out the window,' said her grandmother, who knew a lot of strange things, 'And you might see her.'

Laughing to show that they didn't believe her, Kay and Gerda went to the window. For a moment, they both thought they saw someone out there in the

whirling snow; a tall woman with a very white face, icy blue eyes and hair so fair it looked silver. But then another flurry of snow blew against the window and she was gone, and both Kay and Gerda thought they must have been mistaken. Neither of them mentioned the strange woman in the snow.

A few months later, when the snow was gone and the sun was shining, the goblin had an idea. He and his goblin friends decided to take the mirror up to heaven to see what would happen if all the angels saw themselves made wicked and hideous. But the higher the goblins flew, the more the mirror started to shake, and finally it shook so much it fell out of their paws and smashed on the earth far below. The goblin didn't mind, because when the mirror smashed all the tiny fragments went flying everywhere. Some larger fragments got made into windows, so everyone who looked out through them saw the world as a joyless place. And some got stuck in people's eyes and hearts, and those people were now unable to see or feel any joy or goodness or warmth at all.

One sunny summer day Kay and Gerda were sitting out on Gerda's sunny balcony arguing about which would be the best pet – a monkey or a tame crocodile (who would never bite you but might bite your enemies) – when Kay suddenly cried, 'Ow, my eye!'

'What's wrong?' said Gerda.

'Something must have blown into it,' said Kay. 'Ow! My heart!'

Gerda's grandmother hurried onto the balcony.

'What's wrong, Kay?' she said.

Kay looked up at her. His usually cheerful face looked different. Colder.

'I'm perfectly fine,' he said. 'But you look very old and ugly.'

'Kay!' said Gerda, horrified. Kay had always been funny and cheeky, but never rude or mean.

'Do I, now?' said Grandmother.

'Yes,' said Kay. 'What are you making that face for, Gerda? You look pretty ugly yourself.' And before Gerda or her grandmother could say anything else, he marched out .

Everything changed after that. Kay stopped spending so much of his time in Gerda's flat, and when he did he just told nasty stories about people in school or made fun of Gerda and her grandmother. Soon Gerda stopped inviting him around altogether. At school Kay became well known for his cruel impersonations of other students and teachers, but while he still made people laugh, they were all a little scared of him too. By the time winter came around again, he and Gerda barely spoke at all. It made Gerda very sad and she missed her best friend, but Kay didn't seem to care at all. He didn't seem to care about anything, really.

One day, when the whole town was covered in heavy snow, Kay's parents had to visit a sick relative in the next town and asked Gerda's grandmother if she could look after Kay after school. Gerda wasn't looking forward to it. Spending time with Kay was no fun anymore; it only reminded her of how good their friendship used to be. But when school finished, she went to look for him.

'Hey, Kay,' she said. 'Ready to go home?'

Kay looked at her coldly.

'Later,' he said. 'I'm going sledding first.'

There was a hill near the woods at the edge of the town that was very good for sledding, and lots of kids from the school played there.

'Right,' said Gerda. 'I'll see you later.'

But she didn't.

A few hours later, Kay hadn't turned up at the flat. Grandmother was worried.

'He should have come straight home with you!' she said.

'Well, he didn't want to,' said Gerda. 'You know what he's like now. I'll go and look for him.'

'Alright,' said Grandmother. 'I think it has to be you. But be careful. And don't forget that people aren't the only ones who can be helpful.'

'What do you mean?' said Gerda.

But Grandmother was too busy gathering up Gerda's warm coat and boots

and putting some sandwiches in her bag to answer, and soon Gerda was running off to the sledding hill. But although some of the other boys from school were there, there was no sign of Kay.

‘He went off in a sleigh,’ said a boy called Martin.

‘Whose sleigh?’ said Gerda.

‘A woman,’ said Martin. ‘I’ve never seen her before. She drove past when we were sledding and as soon as Kay saw her he pushed his sled after the sleigh and grabbed onto the back of it and let it pull him and the sled along.’

‘But what did she look like?’

‘I only saw her for a second,’ said Martin. ‘But she had really pale hair and weird pale eyes. She was all wrapped up in furs but she looked ... cold.’

Gerda was full of fear and fury because she knew who the lady had been.

‘That horrible Snow Queen has him!’ she thought. And even though Kay had been so nasty to her, and even though they were barely friends anymore, she knew she had to try and get him back.

‘What direction did they go?’ she asked Martin.

‘Through the woods,’ he said.

The woods looked very dark and quite scary, but Gerda walked straight in. After a while she saw a cosy little cottage, and an old woman came out and called to her.

‘Are you all right, little girl?’ said the woman.

Gerda didn’t like being called ‘little girl’ very much, but she said, ‘I’m looking for my friend Kay. Have you seen him? He’s a bit taller than me and he has brown hair and green eyes. And he was wearing a red jacket and blue snow trousers and might have been carrying a sled.’

‘I haven’t seen him,’ said the woman. ‘But why don’t you come in? It’s so cold outside, and my cottage is warm.’

It was very cold, and Gerda was tempted to go in to the cottage. But she had a

strange feeling that if she did, the old woman wouldn't let her leave so easily. 'No, thank you,' she said.

The old woman looked so disappointed that Gerda felt a bit sorry for her, but she kept walking. After a while her feet started to hurt and she sat down to eat a sandwich. While she was eating, a crow flew down and sat next to her.

'Kaw!' it said. 'Hello! Where are you going?'

'You can speak my language very well for a crow,' said Gerda, impressed.

'Thank you so much,' said the crow, who had lovely manners. 'I try.'

'I'm looking for my friend Kay,' said Gerda. And she described Kay to the crow. 'Have you seen him?'

'No,' said the crow. 'But I think my girlfriend has.'

'Where is he?' cried Gerda. 'Is he with that awful Snow Queen?'

'No, he's with a very nice princess,' said the crow. 'At least, he might be. This princess was tired of all the boring men who wanted to marry her, so she put an ad in the newspaper asking for a young man who could actually have an interesting conversation with her.'

'I don't think Kay can have answered that ad,' said Gerda. 'He's a bit young to be marrying anyone, let alone a princess.'

'Well, my girlfriend lives at the palace, and she told me a young person who matches your friend's description arrived last week, sled and all, and marched right past all the guards and in to the princess's throne room. And he was so funny and interesting she decided he was the one for her.'

'I don't think it can be Kay,' said Gerda. 'But I suppose it's worth a try. Can you take me there, please?'

'Of course,' said the crow. 'The palace is just on the other side of the wood.' They walked on and soon Gerda could see the spires of the palace above the trees. When they left the wood, they went into the palace through a secret way known only to the birds, and finally they came out into a large and beautiful room. Someone was standing at the end of it who looked so like Kay that Gerda starting running towards him.

But she quickly realised it wasn't Kay at all. It was a handsome young man who could have been Kay's older brother. He looked quite alarmed.

'Who are you?' he said.

'And how did you get into our throne room?' said the princess, who had just come in. She looked quite annoyed until Gerda told her the whole story.

'And now I don't know where to look next!' said Gerda miserably.

'Don't cry!' said the princess kindly.

'I never cry,' said Gerda, though to be honest she did feel a bit like crying.

'Well, we'll do anything we can to help,' said the princess, and she gave Gerda a cosy bed for the night. The next day, a carriage laden with food supplies was waiting to take Gerda off on her quest for Kay, so she said goodbye to the kind royal couple and the crow, and off she went.

She drove all day through a deep forest but there was no sign of Kay. Night was falling when suddenly a gang of robbers jumped in front of the carriage and a girl's voice demanded, 'Your money or your life!'

'I haven't got any money,' said Gerda. 'But you can have this sandwich.'

'Huh, sandwiches!' said the voice, and a girl of about Gerda's age marched up to the carriage. 'I'm the leader of this gang,' said the robber girl. 'Well, technically my mother is, but she's off robbing people on the other side of the forest. Anyway, you're my prisoner now. Aren't you going to cry?'

'I never cry,' said Gerda scornfully, though she felt very scared.

The robber girl looked at her for a long moment, then she grinned a wicked grin. 'Good,' she said. 'I don't want any cry babies in my camp. I think I'll train you to be a robber like me.'

Gerda didn't much want to be a robber, but she thought if she pretended to go along with the girl's plans, it might be easier to escape. The robbers all got back on their horses, but the robber girl got into Gerda's carriage and drove it off the road and through the woods until they reached a cave.

‘You’ll live here with me,’ said the robber girl, waving around a large and scary knife. Gerda had no choice but to follow her into the cave, which was full of things the gang had robbed and was very smelly and warm. Wood pigeons roosted on shelves and a beautiful reindeer was tied up in the corner.

The robber girl went off to consult with her gang, and Gerda sat on an old fur rug and wondered how she would get away. Then she remembered her grandmother’s advice and looked up at the birds.

‘I don’t suppose any of you have seen my friend Kay, or know how I can escape and find him?’

‘We have seen him,’ said a wood pigeon. ‘He was taken away by the Snow Queen to her palace.’

‘Where is the palace?’ said Gerda.

‘It’s in Lapland,’ said the reindeer. ‘And if I were free I could take you there.’

‘Oh you could, could you?’ said the robber girl, who had come up behind Gerda without anyone noticing. ‘What’s all this? Who was taken by the Snow Queen?’ And because she had nothing to lose, Gerda told her the whole story.

‘Hmm,’ said the robber girl. ‘I wanted to train you as a robber, but I hate that Snow Queen, so if you’re her enemy, I suppose I must help you. Reindeer, you can take her there tomorrow. And you might as well go free afterwards.’ Even though Gerda thought it was a bit much to say thank you to someone who had just kidnapped her, she thanked the robber girl anyway.

She slept that night in a pile of rugs and furs, and in the morning she and the reindeer waved goodbye to the robbers and set off. The further north they went, the colder it got, until they arrived at a giant gate made of ice.

‘I can’t go any further, I’m afraid,’ said the reindeer. ‘Any reindeer who goes through those gates is taken by the Queen for her sleigh. But I’ll wait here for you and Kay.’

‘Thanks for everything,’ said Gerda, hugging the reindeer around his warm furry neck. Then she walked through the gates. The snow blew against her face in waves, but she kept walking until she reached the icy palace. And

there, standing in the open door, was the Snow Queen.

‘I’ve come to get Kay,’ said Gerda, trying her hardest to stop her teeth chattering and almost succeeding.

‘You can take him,’ said the Queen. She smiled her cold smile at Gerda. ‘If he’ll come.’

‘Of course he’ll come!’ said Gerda. She marched past the queen into a large room. And there, wrapped in furs on a seat made out of ice that seemed to burn with cold blue fire, was Kay.

Gerda felt her legs go wobbly from sheer relief.

‘Kay!’ she cried, running across the room as fast as she could. ‘Kay! It’s me!’

Kay looked up at her. He didn’t say anything.

‘Kay, it’s all right!’ said Gerda. ‘I’ve come to rescue you! You’re free!’

‘What do you mean?’ said Kay.

‘Come on!’ said Gerda. ‘We can go home!’

‘What are you blathering about?’ said Kay. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

‘But Kay,’ said Gerda, and despite herself she could feel her voice start to quaver. ‘Don’t you want to come home?’

Kay looked at her with his cold distant eyes.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘Why should I go back to all those ugly, boring people? What’s there for me?’

‘Your family!’ said Gerda. ‘Your friends! Your everything! Your... me!’

But Kay wasn’t even looking at her anymore.

‘Kay!’ said Gerda.

‘Stop talking,’ said Kay. ‘God, you’re boring.’

And that was when, despite herself, Gerda started to cry. When the first tears came into her eyes, she wiped them angrily away and sniffed loudly. But more tears kept coming, no matter how hard she tried to stop them, and she pleaded and pleaded with Kay to come away with her.

‘Please come home, Kay,’ she said. ‘I can’t leave you here with that...with her. You’re not yourself here!’

‘Are you still here?’ said Kay. ‘Go away, won’t you?’

Somewhere, the Snow Queen laughed. And Gerda knew that the queen had won. She flung her arms around Kay to say goodbye, though he barely seemed to notice what she was doing. But when her face pressed against his, her warm tears flowed into his eye and washed away the bit of the goblin's mirror that had been stuck there for so long. And as she kept on crying, her tears swept into Kay's heart and washed away the shard of mirror that had frozen all his good feelings.

He pulled away from her and stared at her as if he was seeing her for the first time that day.

'Gerda!' he said. 'What's going on? Are you alright?'

It was the first time in months that he'd shown any concern for another person. 'Oh, Kay!' cried Gerda, wiping away the last of her tears. 'We've got to get out of here. Quickly!'

She grabbed his hand and half dragged him off his icy throne. Kay was still slightly dazed but as they ran and slid through the icy rooms of the Snow Queen's palace, his strength began to return. The reindeer was waiting outside, and the two jumped on its back and were carried back to the hill at the edge of the woods where Kay had been taken so long ago. Then they said goodbye to the reindeer and ran through the town towards home, with snow melting all around them. When they tumbled through the door of Gerda's flat, her grandmother was waiting for them.

'Ah,' she said. 'So you're back.'

Kay looked at her with all his old warmth.

'Yes,' he said. 'We are.'



Return to contents

Steadfast

A retelling of *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* by Siobhán Parkinson

Once there was a girl who got some birthday presents. That is not so very unusual. Most girls get presents on their birthdays. Some of them get dolls and some of them get prams and some of them get computer games and some of them get gorgeous costumes or make-up or bracelets or magic sets or puppies.

But this girl didn't want dolls or prams or games or clothes or even magic sets or puppies. She wanted toy soldiers.

'We don't approve of soldiers,' her mother said. 'War is not a game.'

'Girls don't play with soldiers,' her father said. 'They play with dolls. That is how it is supposed to be.'

'I played with soldiers,' her grandmother said, 'when I was a girl. I played Bravery and Dashing and Drummer Boy and Comradeship and Uniforms.'

The girl's father looked at the girl's mother and the girl's mother shrugged, and on the girl's birthday, there was a box of soldiers as a present from her grandmother.

'War toys,' hissed the girl's mother.

'Boy toys,' hissed the girl's father.

'Look,' said her mother, 'we have bought you a lovely peaceful castle. It's so beautiful. It's got the cutest little windows. You can peek right inside and

see the rooms. And, look, out in front, it's got a little mirror for a lake. With swans swimming on it. You can see their reflections, upside down swans in the mirror. And if you press this little lever here ... it plays ... listen! ... that's "Swan Lake". Isn't it wonderful!

'And there is a ballerina,' said her father, 'look, in front of the castle. She is so beautiful. She has a tiny scrap of silk for a shawl and a puff of muslin for a skirt and it's all spangled and glittery.'

'She's only got one leg,' the girl said. 'Has she had an accident?'

'Her other leg is hidden,' said her mother. 'She's doing a pirouette.'

'How exhausting!' said the girl, and she took the toy soldiers out of the box and lined them up on the table. 'Oh, look. This soldier only has one leg too. Is he also doing a *parachute... pierrot... whatever you call it?*'

'No, he's been to war,' said her mother. 'He's a ...'

'... veteran,' said the girl. 'I know. He probably stood on a landmine. That was unfortunate.'

The girl's mother shuddered.

The girl's father put his head in his hands.

'And he's still in uniform,' said the grandmother. 'He must be a brave one.'

'He could marry the ballerina,' said the girl. 'Then they'd have two legs between them. They could share.'

‘But the ballerina has two legs already,’ said her mother. ‘It’s just that one is hidden from view.’

‘Well, then they’d have three,’ said the girl, and she moved the toy soldier over to the ballerina and put their faces together, so they could kiss. ‘Maybe they can live happily ever after,’ she said dreamily.

‘No,’ said her mother. ‘Not if he goes to war.’

‘No,’ said her father. ‘He’s just a common soldier. Beautiful young ballerinas with castles don’t marry one-legged soldiers. They marry dashing young heroes on horses, with titles and inheritances. That is the way of the world.’

‘Perhaps he is Finished with Fighting,’ said the girl. ‘Perhaps he has Learned his Lesson. Perhaps he has Amassed a Fortune.’

‘Nonsense,’ said her mother. ‘He is a Broken Man.’

‘Rubbish,’ said her father. ‘He is poor and stupid and crippled.’

‘How unkind!’ said her grandmother. ‘He is not stupid or broken or ... that other dreadful word. He is wounded, certainly. But he is steadfast.’

‘Steadfast?’ said the girl’s mother with a frown.

‘Steadfast!’ said her father with a snort.

‘*Steadfast*,’ whispered her grandmother.

‘Yes,’ said the girl stoutly. ‘He is steadfast. That means he is brave and true and he loves her for ever. Even if she is a silly thing who stands on one leg

all day like a heron and gazes at the swans and only wears a scrap of silk even though it is so cold that the lake has frozen over. I am tired of playing soldiers, though. I am going to play sailors.'

And she took a piece of newspaper and folded it into a boat and put the one-legged soldier into the boat and set the boat on the mirror lake and ran off to swing in the garden.

Her mother pressed the lever and the music started to play and the ballerina started to twirl and the one-legged soldier gazed at her and wondered when the girl would come back and take him out of this wretched boat and put his face up to the ballerina's face again, so they could kiss.

I have Learned my Lesson, thought the soldier. I will never go to war again. I will stay at home and marry the ballerina.

He is so handsome! thought the ballerina. I am sure he has Amassed a Fortune. We will marry and have beautiful babies.

And it got dark and the fire smouldered in the grate and still they gazed and still the music played and the ballerina twirled and the soldier admired her from afar, until the music stopped. And then it was silent as well as dark, but they still gazed in each other's direction and dreamed of their love.

In the morning, the girl came into the room again and put the soldier back in his box with the other soldiers and moved the castle aside and took out a book instead and started to read it.

But one day, the toy soldier knew, and the ballerina knew, she would open the box again and until then, they would just have to be steadfast and imagine.

 [Return to contents](#)

The Ugly Duckling of St Stephen's Green

A retelling of The Ugly Duckling by Sarah Webb

It was late spring and St Stephen's Green was blooming. The grass was lush and green and the flower beds were filled with bobbing yellow daffodils.

Songbirds twittered from the trees and every day the park was full of young children playing, office workers enjoying their lunch break, foreign students chattering and teenagers shoving grass clippings down each other's backs.

The duck pond was also alive with action and sound. In a laburnum bush beside the humpback bridge, a mother duck was sitting on her nest. Her eggs were about to hatch and she was growing tired of waiting.

She was starved of visitors and feeling very sorry for herself. The other ducks liked swimming around the duck pond and eating all the bread that was thrown for them much more than sitting with her and gossiping. She so missed hearing all the news about the park.

How tiresome nesting is, she thought to herself. I can't wait to see what my little ducklings look like, and I can't wait to get off this nest and stretch my flippers.

At last, one by one, the eggs began to hatch.

'Cheep, cheep,' the baby ducklings said as they pushed their way out of their shells. 'Quack, quack,' said the mother duck. 'Welcome to the world, my little ducklings.'

The ducklings peeked their heads out of the bush and looked around. 'How big the world is,' they said.

‘The world is much bigger than this,’ their mother told them. ‘It stretches all the way to the bandstand and beyond, to the world of the beep beeps and the green snake they call Luas. But I have never gone that far. Ducks do not venture past the duck pond.’

She got to her flippers and peered into the nest. ‘Are you all hatched? Why, no. The biggest egg is still there. I’d better sit back down.’ With a sigh, she settled herself on the nest once more. She waited and waited and waited. At last, the final egg cracked.

‘Churp, churp,’ said the young one as he tumbled out, his voice deep and booming.

She stared at him. He was big and ugly. What a monstrous duckling, she said to herself. He doesn’t look like any of my other chicks. How curious.

The next day was gloriously fine and sunny. The mother duck and her new ducklings waddled down to the water’s edge. *Splash!* Into the water she sprang. One by one the ducklings followed her. The water dashed over their heads but they came up again and floated like corks. Soon they were all swimming beautifully, even the big grey fellow.

The mother duck decided to introduce them to the rest of the ducks. ‘Follow me, my darlings,’ she said, swimming towards the far side of the duck pond. ‘Mother Mallard, who is that funny looking fellow at the back?’ a voice boomed from under the gazebo. It was Lady Mallard who fancied herself queen of the duck pond on account of the golden cuff she wore around one of her legs.

‘Leave him be,’ Mother Mallard said. ‘He’s doing no harm.’

‘He’s making my lake look untidy,’ the older duck said. ‘He is ungainly and odd-looking. Your ducklings are all a credit to you, Mother Mallard, but that fellow, well . . .’ She gave a shudder and a sniff. ‘It’s a pity you can’t make him over again.’

‘That can’t be done, Lady Mallard,’ Mother Mallard said. ‘He may not be handsome but he’s a fine swimmer. I fear he was too long in the egg and has come out with dull plumage and a dumpy figure. Perhaps he will shrink as he gets older.’ She patted her largest duckling’s neck and stroked his downy grey newborn feathers. ‘He is a good lad, he will make his own way in the world. Of that I am sure.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Lady Mallard. ‘And you are all welcome to the lake, ducklings.’ She looked at the grey fellow and frowned. ‘Even you.’

After that, the ducklings began to feel quite at home, except the Ugly Duckling, as they had all taken to calling him. His brothers and sisters thought it great sport to tease him for his large size and awkwardness.

‘If only the park fox would get you, you ugly thing,’ they said. ‘You are making us look bad.’

Even his mother had started to despair. ‘What are you, at all, at all?’ she asked him, shaking her head. ‘And what am I to do with you?’

And so it went on – every day, the Ugly Duckling was chased and hustled by all the ducks on the duck pond. Every night he was teased and pecked at by his own siblings.

One day, two wild Canada Geese arrived in the park. They spotted the Ugly Duckling sitting by himself under the humpback bridge. His mother had told him never to stray past the bridge, and never, ever to swim into the Far Away pond on the other side. ‘Stick with your own,’ she always told him. ‘It’s better that way.’

‘Look at the fine wings on you,’ the larger goose said. ‘You seem a strong fellow. Would you care to join us? We are flying to Cork today. We’d love the company.’

While the Ugly Duckling was thinking about the offer, a huge furry animal came charging towards them, making a terrifyingly rough noise. ‘Bark, bark!’ ‘A dog,’ the larger goose said. ‘Fly away, fly away.’ The animal was nearly upon him.

Before he knew what he was doing, the Ugly Duckling stretched out his wings and bared his teeth at the snapping creature. He gave a loud hiss. The dog instantly stopped barking and backed away, his tail between his legs. But the duckling’s new friends had flown away in fright.

The duckling sighed. I am so ugly that even a dog won’t bite me, he thought. I wish there was somewhere I belonged.

He decided to run away from the duck pond. No-one wanted to be his friend, and even his own mother didn’t seem all that interested in him. No, he’d run away and start again. Surely there was someone out there who might love him, grey feathers and all?

So the Ugly Duckling climbed out of the pond and started to waddle away from the humpback bridge, off into the great unknown.

He passed humans, large and small. Some stopped to talk to him, others ignored him. One man in a dark suit was so busy talking into a silver box in his hand, he nearly stood on him.

After waddling and waddling, over paths and grass, over sweet-smelling flowerbeds and past hulking bronze human heads on stone, he came to a building. It was red and it looked squat and friendly.

‘What have we here?’ said a tall man. He had a navy cap on his head and Parks Department was embroidered onto his matching navy jacket. ‘Hello, little fellow. I think you’re a bit lost.’

The duckling cocked his head. The human was quacking at him but he couldn't understand his strange language.

'You don't belong here, do you? Will I take you back to your family?' The man smiled. It made the edges of his eyes crinkle up. 'Wait there, little one.' The man disappeared inside the red building. He came back out a few minutes later with a cardboard box. 'I'm not going to hurt you,' he said. 'This is the safest way to transport you.'

Suddenly everything went dark. The duckling was frightened. He started to quack. 'Let me out, let me out.'

He heard the human's voice and it sounded gentle and kind. 'Stay calm, little fellow, nearly there now.' So he stopped quacking. He tumbled against the side of the box and felt the world move all around him. Where was the man taking him?

There was a bump and then light. The duckling could see water. He poked his head out of the box. There was the humpback bridge to the right. But this was another pond, a larger pond.

An enormous white duck was swimming towards him, cutting through the water without a splash. As it drew nearer, the duckling realised that the duck wasn't a duck at all; it was something else, something very different.

'Here we are,' the human said. 'The swan pond. I expect she's been looking for you.' The man nodded at the majestic figure that was still gliding towards the duckling.

Me? The Ugly Duckling wondered. Why would such a heavenly creature – a swan – be looking for me? He retreated back into the box.

The swan stopped in front of the box. The duckling plucked up the courage to stick his head out again.

‘My darling boy,’ she said, her voice smooth and elegant. ‘It worked, you are safe. The park fox burrowed under my nest, sneaky fellow, and stole two of my eggs. So I hid my final egg somewhere he’d never think of looking – in Mrs Mallard’s nest. And here you are. Safe. My little miracle.’

The Ugly Duckling was astonished. ‘I’m not a duckling?’

‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘You’re far too elegant to be a mere duckling. You may be grey, but one day you shall have plumage as white as the driven snow and the strongest legs in the kingdom. When you glide past the lowly ducks, they will envy your grace and power. You, my darling, are a baby swan. A cygnet. Come, swim with me. I will tell you all the secrets of the Green.’

The cygnet was filled with so much happiness he thought he’d burst. He rustled his feathers, raised his slender neck aloft and waddled proudly into the swan pond with joy in his heart. He had a place in the world and, best of all, he had someone who loved him.



Return to contents

Winter

A retelling of *The Ice Maiden* by Ruth Frances Long

Rudy's pencil whispered across the page as he drew. Art therapy, they called it. All he knew was that this was a time when he could be quiet and people would leave him alone. He could feel it all again as he drew: the wind, the snow, the mirror of the ice, and that face leaning towards him. That cold kiss which saved him from death. Icy breath sighed through his lips, down into his lungs, and frozen arms wrapped him in a cold embrace. This was what he tried and failed to capture in the drawing.

'Wow,' said Barb, leaning over his shoulder, too close and too intrusive as always. She was the same age as Rudy, twelve years old, but she always seemed older. She led a vicious little clique with such precision and everyone obeyed her every word. 'There's another freaky one. Way to go, Reindeer.' Barbara looked at him through her sheet of golden hair with eyes the colour of honey. Everyone loved her, but Rudy saw through the dazzling façade and knew what she was: Barb the bully.

Rudy turned away and continued drawing. If he listened to Barb, he'd never pick up one of the brightly coloured pencils Miss Ryan laid out for them at the beginning of each session. Not being able to draw would surely kill him; it was the only way to feel, to let others know that he could feel. It was the only way to reach out and touch all he had lost.

It had been a freak accident. That was what everyone said: unseasonably warm weather and bright sunshine that weakened the ice. Who knew there was a crevasse underneath the glacier? He'd held his mother's hand so tightly, too tightly. They'd fallen together, her scream high and desperate, cut off abruptly on the way down into the shining, green-blue shadows,

where their breath was a mist and the cold had teeth. She'd died before they reached the bottom, but still she had managed to cushion him against the blow.

Rudy didn't know how long he had been there, but his world had changed from the moment the Ice Maiden had found him. She had called to him with songs, her delicate voice ringing out around him, echoing back through hollows and caverns deeper and colder than any place meant for people. She had kissed his lips and all the feelings had gone away. She had kept him alive, after a fashion.

Trauma and hallucinations, they said. Rudy heard the doctors talking about him, telling his grandfather everything. They called the Ice Maiden a childish fantasy, a coping mechanism he shouldn't need anymore. But he still remembered and knew what he had seen and all he had felt. In his dreams, the same voice sang and the same lips touched him.

And when he drew, when he lost himself in lines and colours, he could almost recall her face.

His way of 'dealing with it', the psychiatrists said, praising his art and encouraging him to create more pictures. He always drew the same face, over and over again, and they assumed it was his mother. But it wasn't.

'Why don't you ever draw something else?' said Barb, while the others tittered and whispered behind her. 'Something more upbeat. Like a funeral.'

'Well, I like it,' said another voice, one he didn't recognise but which was strangely familiar. Musical almost. He looked up from his picture, something he rarely did because the picture was all that mattered, usually

It was a new girl. She'd only joined them this morning. Her long blonde hair

was pale as cobwebs and she wore heavy black boots, propped up on the stool beside him. Her legs made a barricade between Rudy and the rest of the class. No one told her to sit up straight or to stop talking and get back to her own work. She grinned at him.

‘I’m Win,’ she said. ‘Short for Winter, but only my parents call me that because they’re unrepentant hippies. I’m here because I have an attitude problem. You?’

He ducked his head down, gazing at his picture again; the blues and greens, the smile, the flint in her eyes. Then he looked back to Win. ‘What did you say?’ ‘Such a freak,’ muttered Barb, a little too loudly and the others laughed. Miss Ryan called out her name sharply, silencing her.

‘Win,’ said Win, ignoring them. She waved her hand in front of him, her fingers fluttering like flurries of snow. ‘Win-ter. Hello.’

‘Win,’ he said very softly, so that no one else in the class would hear. ‘Rudy,’ he said after a moment’s hesitation. ‘I’m Rudy. For... um... my other grandfather, I think.’

‘Really? Not the reindeer? That’s a shame. I kind of like the reindeer. What do you do for fun around here, Rudy? So far, it kind of sucks.’

No one else talked to them. No one even noticed them. It was the way Rudy normally liked it and it felt strange to be with someone else, inside the shell that always protected him from the rest of the world. Strange, but good. He hoped she would stay.

After school, while he waited for his grandfather to collect him, Win kept him company. She talked about the school and about the other students. She made him smile, and he marvelled at the way words came so easily to her.

She quizzed him effortlessly. He struggled with each sentence, and still she managed to drag more information from him than he'd shared with anyone in over a year.

His grandfather arrived in the car which rattled and clattered into the car park. Rudy winced, knowing that the other kids laughed at his grandfather and his broken-down car, at their ramshackle house and the fact that his father was always away on work trips. Like he didn't want to come home. Rudy knew better. His father *had* to work, and Grandfather did the best he could.

'You'd better go,' said Win. 'See you tomorrow. More art?'

'Final project is due in tomorrow.'

'Have you done it?'

'Lots of times. But I haven't got it right yet.'

Win smiled. It wasn't the reckless grin she had used so far, but a real smile, gentle and familiar as a dream forgotten on the moment of waking. 'You will,' she told him, and squeezed his hand. And though he never usually let anyone else touch him, he didn't pull away. He couldn't, but he wasn't sure why. Her fingers were so very cold, but he didn't care.

The North Wind rattled at the windows all that night. It whispered words in a forgotten language and sang songs of long ago and far away. Rudy tried not to listen, because it was the same song he'd heard under the ice. It inched into his dreams and woke him. It tormented him on the edge of recognition. In the end, he gave up on sleep and picked up his sketchbook and pencils, opened the window and — as he had promised a hundred times not to do — climbed up onto the roof to wait for the dawn.

The cat was already there, waiting for him, white as moonlight, and made to thread her way through his legs as soon as he stepped on to the roof tiles. He stroked her fur and told her about Win. If the cat was impressed he couldn't

say because it was impossible to know what impressed her, apart from tuna. She had arrived over a year ago and had moved in to live with them, though she mainly spent her time up on the roof. From the start, Grandfather had insisted that no one should feed her, that she couldn't stay because — and he would point a long bony finger at her while uttering the pronouncement — “she's Not Our Cat.” From then on, the name had stuck.

Not Our Cat curled up on Rudy's lap, purring loudly while he watched for the morning. The first rays of sunlight came over the distant mountain like eager explorers. The cat stretched out like elastic and then rolled over to expose her belly to him. He knew better than to tickle her; she could use her teeth and claws like a bear-trap. He pushed her off, very carefully, and opened the sketchbook.

The wind blew, stronger and harder, fluttering the pages of the sketchbook. The wind didn't want him to draw, not this morning. It wanted him to go inside, as everyone else said he should, to behave, to be normal. The wind wanted him to hide and obey, to conform, to stop drawing and drawing and drawing the same thing over and over again. The wind told him that he was a freak. The wind, his father, his grandfather, Barb and everyone at school. Everyone but Win.

Rudy sketched the early morning light, transforming it into images of ice and sunlight on that face, that whispered song, of Win and Not Our Cat. He drew until his body ached and his mind whirled with colour, light and form. It swallowed him up until only the picture remained and he was just its way of reaching the world beyond him. He wasn't real anymore. He was frozen inside and the only way out was through the picture.

Rudy finished just before Grandfather called him for breakfast. He packed the sketchbook carefully in his schoolbag, but couldn't resist checking it every so often, making sure it was safe and that it was real.

He'd never drawn anything so perfect.

The trip to school seemed to take forever. He worried about the picture. He wondered what Win would say.

But there was no sign of Win outside school and Barb and her cronies were waiting at the door instead. He was so eager to get inside, to give the picture to Miss Ryan, that he didn't think twice about them with their golden hair and pretty sun dresses. He pushed by them, but he wasn't quick enough.

Barb grabbed the bag from his back and before he knew what was happening she had the sketchbook in her hands.

'Is this it?' she asked, pulling out the final sheet. 'Another freakshow?'

'Give it back!' he said, turning on her.

'Why would I do that, Reindeer? I just want a look.'

He felt his face heat, blood rushing to his cheeks. Something knotted in his throat. She held it out of his reach and he struggled to snatch it back. 'Give it back!'

'We want a look. Seeing as you're *so good* at this.' She laughed a nasty little laugh and pulled the picture out of the sketchbook, casting the rest on the ground. Pictures scattered over the steps; the same face, the same colours, the ice, the blue-green shadows of another world.

Barb stared at his picture and the others gathered around, peering over her shoulders.

A collective silence fell on them all. The picture fluttered in the wind, as if it was trying to get away, or waving at him to taunt him. And no one said a word.

'It's okay, Rudy,' said Win. He hadn't heard her come up behind him but she was there now. Her icy hand fell on his shoulder. 'Don't panic. It's going to be all right.'

Barb looked up at him over the top of the sheet and in her eyes Rudy saw that

it was never going to be all right, no matter what Win said. It was there for anyone to see, Barb's true face, but no one ever looked closely enough. Barb hated anyone who could do something she couldn't, who didn't worship her. Barb hated him.

She fixed him with her most triumphant glare and tore the picture in half and in half again and again until it was just pieces of confetti fluttering in her hands. Snowflakes made of paper.

'There,' she said, and threw them at him.

Someone cried out in dismay and the mood of the group changed. They stared at her in horror.

'It's only a picture,' she said, flicking her hair over her shoulders.

'Barbara!' Miss Ryan's voice shattered the rising hubbub of dismay, and Barb's little clique darted backwards like fish away from a dropped stone, abandoning her in an instant.

Rudy screamed. He didn't know what else to do. He opened his mouth and the cry that came out wrenched itself from deep inside him. It was the grief he'd never given voice to when he lost his mum, when his grandfather didn't know what to do with him. It was pure pain, as icy and hard as the world beneath the snow when he'd last been himself, when he'd been just a boy, before the Ice Maiden.

He folded in on himself and felt Win try to hold him, her hands trying to keep him from shattering while the scream reverberated through him over and over again.

Rudy woke up in the quiet room beside the nurse's office, lying on the day bed with a blanket wrapped around him. Outside he could hear Miss Ryan and the Principal talking to Grandfather in hushed and urgent tones. There were a lot of apologies, and the word "meltdown" was used more than once.

So was “medication”. He tried not to hear that.

Win stood by the door, watching him, her arms folded across her chest. Her pale blue eyes were hard as ice.

‘Are you awake?’ she asked.

Rudy nodded.

‘No more screaming?’

He shook his head. His throat hurt and really he just wanted to lie down again and close his eyes, to shut out the world and give in to the quiet.

“Coming?”

“Where?”

‘We have a picture to fix.’ She held out her hands and he saw all the scraps of paper that had once been the drawing in his sketchbook. ‘It’s going to be okay, Rudy. But only if you get up and try. Come on.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Yes you do. What else are you going to do? Lie there and never move again?’ It was tempting, but she wasn’t going to let him. He knew that determined look. ‘Okay.’

His body ached as he got up, but that didn’t matter now. Winter opened the door silently. Rudy didn’t ask how she had come in or moved so quietly, or how no one else seemed to see her. He didn’t need to now.

They crept past the office, while Grandfather ranted and threatened and made no sense at all. The art room door was unlocked too, although Miss Ryan always locked it up when no one was in there. Locks didn’t seem to mean much to Win who breezed in wherever she wanted to go.

‘Here,’ she said and pulled out a huge sheet of card, much bigger than he

had used before. He dropped the scraps of paper on it, watching the way they fell, snowflakes on a frozen landscape. And he knew what he had to do. They found the glue and put the pieces back together like the most intricate jigsaw. And when they'd done that, Win laughed and threw glitter in the air, covering the two of them and the picture.

His perfect, beautiful picture.

Miss Ryan found him not much later. 'What are you doing in here alone, Rudy? They've been looking for you everywhere.'

But he didn't answer. The picture was all that mattered, Win and her picture and if no one else could see Win, what did it matter? They could see what he had made -- her image, her face, shredded by tears and put back together with love. She was always with him, and she made everything better. She had explained it all as they worked, that she'd looked for him for so long, that she'd sent Not Our Cat out into the world to find him, and that now at last, they were never going to be apart again. She'd saved him long ago, his Ice Maiden, his Winter. And she'd come back to save him again.

She always would.



Return to contents

Wild Swans

A retelling of *The Wild Swans* by Darragh Martin

Elly Swan had more brothers than fingers. Even when she used her thumbs to count them, she still had to use one of her toes for Cascarino, her youngest brother. You might think that Cascarino was a strange name for a three-year-old boy, but Mr. Swan named all of his sons after legendary soccer players. He was very excited to have eleven boys so that they could compete in the Large Families League. Elly didn't mind that she wasn't named after a famous footballer because even though she had been christened Elisa she was a much better striker than Dunne or Quinn or either of the Keane twins.

In fact, Elly was the best thirteen year-old striker in Ireland. Footballs were like yo-yos to Elly: she'd be running along the field and the ball would keep coming back to her foot. And then she'd get close enough to the goal and the ball would whizz through the goalposts and if Elly was on television, she was sure that the crowd would be roaring and some sort of classical music would be playing.

One problem was that there were no television cameras in the fields behind their house and the mice and robins who watched Elly practice weren't all that great at roaring. Another problem had eleven parts: Elly's brothers never let her play with them.

'Sorry, Elle-belle,' Brady said in a voice that sounded more happy than sorry. 'Girls aren't allowed play in the League.'

Brady had the mistaken view of eldest siblings that being born first was a big achievement.

‘It’s not fair,’ Elly said. ‘Duff is scared of footballs and Cascarino hasn’t a clue how to play.’

Cascarino had only just turned three. He ran around the field, pretending he was a lion and biting the ball whenever it came his way. At least he didn’t run away from the ball like Duff, who was five years old and afraid of everything. Elly knew Duff missed their mother, so she didn’t give out to him like Brady did.

Elly’s mother had died two years ago and nothing had been the same since. Mr. Swan spent all his time coaching the team, as if football could fill the parts of the day that made you sad. Little Duff cried himself to sleep most nights. And Brady had become even bossier because nobody was there to stop him.

‘Elle-belle, get out of our way!’ Brady said, showing off as he bounced the ball on his knee. ‘You can cut up some oranges for us if you want to help. Or make me an orange and mango smoothie: it’s hard work being a Captain.’

Brady wiped his forehead as if he was sweating, but Elly knew he was just trying to show off his muscles to Aoife. Aoife was the prettiest girl in their school and was writing about the match for the school newspaper. ‘Are you going to make me that smoothie?’ Brady asked.

‘No need! I’ve already made you an orangino and chococcino muffin-milkshake!’

Elly looked around, unsure which was more disgusting, the jug of bright liquid that looked like vomit or Maxine, the person holding it.

Maxine was Mr. Swan’s new girlfriend and the absolute awfulness of Maxine was one thing that Elly and her brothers agreed on. Maxine’s fake smile was always stretched so wide that it threatened to break her face. She called

Elly and her brothers her ‘friends’ even though they all hated her. And she supported Man. United because it was the only football team she’d heard of. Despite the awfulness of Maxine, Elly’s brothers never said no to food and all eleven of them gulped down her muffin–milkshakes.

‘Elisa, don’t you want any?’ Maxine asked (another awful thing about Maxine was that she always called Elly by her full name.)

‘I’m okay,’ Elly said.

‘I’ll drink yours,’ Staunton said.

‘No, no,’ Maxine said. ‘I don’t want anybody to be left out.’

Elly was about to protest that she’d rather drink a snot smoothie when Maxine shoved the liquid down her throat.

‘Isn’t that delicious?’ Maxine chirped. ‘I wish I could have some too, but oh dear, it’s all gone!’

Maxine was too busy smiling to notice that Elly had spat the milkshake onto the grass.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ Elly said. She didn’t want to watch her brothers lose to the Anderson team.

‘Yes, dear, walk while you can,’ Maxine said, giving a real smile that was much creepier than her fake one. ‘Just don’t get lost in those dreadful woods.’

Maxine was a property developer and hated the woods and overgrown fields behind their house. She was always trying to get Mr. Swan and their

neighbours to let her build new apartments, but Mr. Swan wanted his team to have somewhere to practice.

Elly loved the woods. There were some brilliant trees to climb and Elly liked racing up them against her squirrel friends. This time, Elly sat on her favourite monkey-puzzle tree and just breathed in the quietness around her. Elly's mother had been a great fan of the woods too and they had spent some wonderful weekend collecting herbs for her mother's medicines, snacking on some of the edible berries and counting the clouds through the gaps in the leaves.

Elly picked at a scab on her knee. Her mother had shown her how to read the colours of scabs like a book: Elly always knew exactly when she could peel them off. Now that her mother was gone, Elly felt as if she had all sorts of invisible scabs inside her, ones that she had no idea to read. It had been two years since her mother died and Elly still felt sad. Elly wasn't sure if the sadness inside her was the kind you could ever scratch off and she wished she could play football because at least then her mind would be busy.

And then something happened that kept Elly's mind very busy indeed.

'Elly!'

Elly looked down at the girl on the ground. It was Aoife, the pretty girl who was always watching Brady play.

'Shouldn't you be watching the match?' Elly said.

Elly hoped Aoife would go away and leave her in peace. Instead, she clambered up the tree.

‘The match has been cancelled,’ Aoife said.

‘Oh no, did Cascarino bite the ref again? He’s only three, it’s not his fault he thinks he’s a lion.’

Aoife shook her head.

‘What happened?’ Elly asked.

Aoife took a deep breath.

‘Maxine turned your brothers into swans.’

It was lucky that Elly was holding onto the branch tightly, otherwise she might have fallen right out of the tree.

‘It was that muffin-milkshake,’ Aoife said. ‘The latest issue of *Mysteries Monthly* has a whole article about the dangers of magic muffins.’

Aoife flipped through one of the many magazines she carried in her satchel and pointed to the article.

‘I bet Maxine put in bird food too or something. The grass where you spit out the milkshake turned into swan feathers.’

‘But why would Maxine turn my brothers into swans?’ Elly asked.

‘Because she had to get rid of them so that she could buy the land,’ Aoife said darkly. ‘I’ve been following Maxine for a while. I’m writing an article for the school newspaper. She’s bad news: she turned a family in Leitrim into pandas because they wouldn’t sell their side garden to her.’

‘She’s not going to get away with it this time,’ Elly said, standing up and clenching her fists.

‘No, it’s too dangerous,’ Aoife said, grabbing onto Elly’s arm. ‘You can’t go home until we have a plan.’

Elly was surprised at Aoife’s *we*. They were in the same class at school but they’d never talked much before. Aoife wasn’t very good at football and Elly wasn’t interested in the school newspaper or the Fairy Story Book Club that Aoife had set up in class. But now that all of her brothers had been turned into birds, Elly supposed she could use any friend she could find.

Over the next week, Elly was very glad to have Aoife’s help. Elly decided that it wasn’t safe to go home, so she built a small tree-house in the woods, eating berries and the cans of beans and chocolate hobnobs that Aoife smuggled to her. Aoife spied on Elly’s house, with some help from Elly’s squirrel friends. She learnt that Maxine had consulted a prophecy hotline which explained her curse: Elly’s brothers had to live on a craggy island in the Atlantic until the day of the Football Final in the Large Families League. If the Swan family didn’t win the match, they would remain actual swans forever.

Nobody else in the neighbourhood suspected Maxine, who was filling the Swan’s sink with her fake tears. Maxine’s brother Max worked for the city council and was just as full of fake smiles and evil intentions as his sister. Max had a study done that said the weeds in the fields had turned Elly’s brothers into swans. All the grown-ups said that it would be much better for the land to have new buildings instead of weeds that would turn their children into birds so they let Maxine buy the land. Mr. Swan sat in his room with the door closed, his sadness so big that it could have filled the National Stadium.

‘There has to be a way to turn them back to humans,’ Aoife said, flicking through back issues of *Mysteries Monthly* in Elly’s tree-house.

‘Maybe we can just turn Maxine into a dung beetle,’ Elly said.

Elly wasn’t feeling great after a week away from home. The trees she loved to climb were less good for sleeping in and the rain always found the spot between her t-shirt and the back of her neck.

‘I know I read something about swans,’ Aoife said. ‘They’re very popular right now: there’s an interview with the Children of Lir in the November issue but nothing about how they transformed.’

Elly felt even worse when she thought of her brothers. She was surprised how much she missed them. Little Duff would be frightened of the waves and the cold and none of her brothers were any good at giving him hugs. Elly hated to think of her brothers being swans forever: even Brady didn’t deserve that.

‘Of course!’ Aoife said, looking up from one of the many editions of fairy tales that she had borrowed from the library. ‘You just have to take a vow of silence and knit them jerseys with a special plant. Oh no-’

Aoife looked up from the library book, crestfallen.

‘Somebody’s ripped out the next page, so we don’t know which plant. I hate it when people do that.’

Elly felt a pang of sadness so strong that it almost knocked her off the branch she was sitting on: her mother would have known immediately which plant to use. Of course, if her mother hadn’t died her father would never have met

Maxine and her brothers wouldn't have any feathers to begin with. Elly left Aoife with her stacks of books and walked through the forest in the rain. Her legs brought her to the spot where they had sprinkled her mother's ashes. A lonely tree stood there now, its leaves no protection from the rain. Elly felt as if the cold raindrops carried sadness with them, as if she might never be happy again.

And then the tree moved.

It couldn't have been the wind. The tree's trunk tilted to the side, its branches pointing to a clump of weeds below it.

'Nettles?'

The tree swayed its branches up and down, as if it was nodding. Elly felt goosebumps on her arm that had nothing to do with the cold.

'Mum?'

Elly was never quite sure if the tree had nodded again: its branches moved slightly forwards, but it might have been the wind. Second later, the tree's trunk had returned to its normal position as if nothing extraordinary had happened. But Elly felt a warm feeling all over, as if somebody had placed a hot water bottle inside her.

She raced back to the tree-house and wrote in the margins of one of Aoife's books.

'Of course,' Aoife said. 'Nettles have a lot of medicinal properties but human voices rub them the wrong way, that's why you can't speak. I read all about it in *A Nettle's Unauthorized Biography* by Sting. Well, we better get to work: it's only a few days before the Football Match.'

Elly and Aoife collected nettles every morning. Nettles were harder to find as Maxine's company was clearing more and more land, but Elly was friends with the mice and birds of the fields, so they helped her find supplies. Elly didn't mind not talking. She would write notes to Aoife in the sides of her magazines and Aoife would write back and it made the things they said more special somehow, as if they had their own secret language.

Aoife had the brilliant idea of making dock leaf gloves, which made knitting with nettles a lot easier. Aoife also borrowed some fashion books from the library and helped Elly design a fashionable jersey for Brady and a cosy one for little Duff. Soon, they only had Cascarino's jersey left to knit. Elly wasn't sure how her brothers would arrive at the match or why they would be there but Aoife told her not to worry, because in all the stories she had read prophecies were never wrong and you couldn't question them too much.

But then something happened that Aoife hadn't read about any of her stories: Elly and Aoife were arrested for trespassing.

One of Maxine's sisters, Maxi, was a *beangarda*, who snatched the pair of them from the fields while they were gathering their last batch of nettles.

'Nasty little children collecting weeds on private property,' she said, leering as she bundled them into a jail cell. 'In the olden days, you would have been burned at the stake for being witches!'

Maxi's smile wasn't fake, which was a shame, as nobody should have a real smile that nasty.

'I'm going to leave you here all night. And you won't even have a bed, just these horrible nettles to sleep on. We'll see how much you like them then!'

The heavy door clanged behind Maxi.

Elly looked up at the tiny window: the iron bars were far too strong for her to move and she had no tools to invent something with. Even if they could get out of the cell, she had no idea how she'd get over the coils of barbed wire on top of the wall outside.

'At least she left us the nettles,' Aoife said, doing her best to look on the bright side of things, which was quite hard in a dark jail cell. 'We can finish Cascarino's jersey.'

Elly had left her gloves in the fields, so the nettles scratched her hands as she worked. Elly thought of how much she loved Cascarino and Duff and all of her brothers. She thought of how kind her mother had been to them and how brave Aoife was to be in jail just for helping somebody she hadn't even been friends with a few weeks ago. Somehow, the pain didn't bother Elly as much and she kept knitting and knitting, even after the sun set. Elly and Aoife stayed up all through the night. The birds from the fields sang songs to encourage Elly and even the rats in the jail cell joined in, rapping between the choruses. By the time the morning sun crept into the cell again, Elly had almost finished Cascarino's jersey. She had no idea how she was going to find Cascarino until she realised what had happened overnight.

'The bars have turned to daisies!' Aoife exclaimed.

Elly shook her head and spelt out 'dream' with her fingers.

'You couldn't feel this in a dream,' Aoife said, pinching Elly's elbow and laughing. 'Look, the barbed wire has turned into tulips too. We can escape!'

The birds outside chirruped in delight as Elly gave Aoife a boost up to the

window and they both clambered outside. Elly didn't know what sort of deep magic could turn iron bars into flowers but she felt its power in the air, as if there was more than enough good for all the wickedness in the world.

'Come on, we'd better hurry,' Aoife said. 'The match starts at noon and we have to get the other jerseys from the tree-house.'

Aoife and Elly ran like they never had before. Even though they'd only had an old crust of bread to eat yesterday, Elly felt full of energy. Hope was a powerful fuel and it carried their legs to the tree-house and through the back-streets of Dublin and to the stadium where the Final was being held.

At first, Elly was worried that her brothers wouldn't come. Maxine was sitting beside Max and Maxi, and the three of them gave Elly a smug little wave.

And then something wonderful happened. It started with a speck of white on Max's shiny silver suit. Then Maxi's dark *beangarda* uniform suddenly developed white polka dots. A large glob of white liquid plopped onto Maxine's blonde highlights. Maxine looked up, which was a mistake, because at that moment eleven swans did something that birds are quite fond of doing to humans who annoy them. Max and Maxi screamed, which was not the best thing to do when eleven swans were pooing on top of you.

'Arrest those birds,' Maxine yelled. 'They didn't pay for tickets!'

Nobody could hear her, because the cheers of the crowd were so loud. The swans flew down to the pitch. Elly raced over and placed the nettle jerseys over their long necks. One by one, Elly's brothers transformed in front of her. Elly hadn't managed to finish Cascarino's jersey, so he still had one swan feather poking out of his side, which he didn't seem to mind.

‘Girls aren’t allowed onto the pitch,’ Max shouted. ‘Arrest them!’

‘We’re staying,’ Elly shouted. ‘And I’m playing: we have to win the match if you want to stay in human form.’

Elly was surprised at how loud her voice sounded after a week of not talking. Even Brady didn’t argue with her. The McGinty family did not look very happy to have any opposition: Maxine’s other brother, Maximillian, was the manager of their team and he’d promised them that they’d easily beat a team of swans.

Suddenly, they had to play Elly and her brothers. It was the best match Elly had ever been part of. Duff sat on Aoife’s lap on the side and cheered whenever Elly got the ball or Cascarino tickled one of the McGinty brothers with his feathers. It wasn’t just Duff cheering. The whole crowd was screaming and Elly felt all their voices behind her, helping her as she scored one goal after another. By the end of the match, Elly had scored a double hat-trick. All of her brothers lifted her into the air in triumph and Brady coughed something that sounded like ‘nice one.’

Quite a lot of things happened after that. Mr. Swan ran onto the pitch: he’d seen the match on TV and had rushed there. He gave all of his children a huge hug and told Maxine that he didn’t think their relationship would work.

Maxine and her siblings got into a whole heap of trouble and would have been sent to jail if it hadn’t been full of flowers. Instead, they were forced to do community service in the fields so that the nettles could have a home again.

Brady said that Aoife should marry him, because fairy stories always ended with the most handsome boy marrying the most beautiful girl. But Elly didn’t want the story to end that way and Aoife agreed. When they were old enough,

they moved in together and adopted a whole soccer team of children and Elly always let the girls play if they wanted. Every year, Elly and Aoife took their children to a special tree in the woods that sometimes moved even when there wasn't a breeze and had a way of making scabs heal, even the invisible ones.

In case you're wondering, Cascarino never did get his arm back. He liked being part swan though. He was able to fly half-way up to the clouds and he was able to do something else that swans are very good at. Cascarino liked to drop special white presents from the sky, especially whenever he saw Maxine and her siblings or anybody who was mean to nettles. He still flies around Ireland, so if you're lucky you might see him. And if you're unlucky, he might see you...



[Return to contents](#)

The Tinderbox

A retelling of The Tinderbox by Katherine Farnar

In a long-ago time, in a far-away place, there was a soldier walking along a road. The soldier did not have a gun; this was before there were guns. He did have a sword, and he kept it shiny and sharp, for although the war was over and he had no more enemies to fight, he had heard that there were bandits along the roads and you could never be too careful.

But in fact, the soldier had no money in his pockets or in his knapsack or tucked into his boots or hidden under his hat, so any bandit who tried to rob him would soon find it was not worth the bother. Nonetheless, the soldier kept a cheerful smile on his face and a sweet whistle on his lips, and soon enough he met an old woman on the road.

‘Good day, soldier!’ said the old woman. ‘I see you have fallen on hard times.’

‘Hard times have fallen on me,’ said the soldier, ‘but I try to keep cheerful all the same.’

‘You’d find it easier to be cheerful if you had money in your pockets,’ said the old woman, ‘and if you do a favour for me, I can fill your pockets and your knapsack and your boots and your hat with more coins than you will ever have time to spend.’

‘Goodness!’ said the soldier, ‘that is a lot of coins! I will gladly do you this favour.’

The old woman took off her apron and handed it to him. ‘Do you see that hollow tree-trunk there? Climb down inside it. I’ll tie a rope around your waist, because you can never be too careful. You will find yourself in a tunnel,

and in the walls of a tunnel you will see three doors. Open the first one and inside you will see a dog with eyes as wide as saucers, sitting on top of a chest. Don't worry, she won't hurt you. Just pick her up and set her down on my apron, and then you can open the chest and take out all the coins inside. They are copper. But maybe it's silver you want! Then you should go into the second room. There you will see a dog with eyes as wide as millstones sitting on top of a chest. Don't worry, she won't hurt you. Just pick her up and set her down on my apron, and then you can open the chest and take out all the coins inside. They are silver. But if you want gold, there's one more room you need to try. There you will see one more chest, and sitting upon it, a dog with eyes as wide as the tower of the King's castle where he keeps his daughter the princess locked up for fear she should fall in love with a commoner. Don't worry, she won't hurt you. Just pick her up and set her down on my apron, and then you can open the chest and take out all the coins inside.'

'Marvellous!' said the soldier. 'I will do as you say. But tell me, old woman, what is the favour you want me to do for you?'

'Oh,' said the old woman, 'nothing, nothing, only there is a tinderbox in the tunnel, that was left there by my grandmother. It is quite worthless! But it means a lot to me. Bring it out and give it to me, and then we will be even.'

'A tinderbox?' said the soldier. 'What's a tinderbox?'

The old woman scowled. 'Young people today!' she muttered. 'A tinderbox is for making fire! You youngsters with your matches don't know how to really make a fire. You strike a special kind of flint with a special kind of blade, and let the sparks fall onto a piece of special cloth called tinder-cloth, so that it smoulders. And the box you keep the flint and blade and cloth inside is called -'

'A tinderbox!' said the soldier. 'What a useful thing that must be.'

‘Very useful indeed,’ said the old woman. ‘So you’ll fetch it for me?’

‘Of course,’ said the soldier.

Now, the old woman tied a rope around his waist and he climbed down inside the tree. Just as the old woman had said, there was a tunnel with three doors. He opened the first door and sure enough, there was a chest, and sitting on the chest was a dog with eyes as wide as saucers! The soldier bowed politely, and lay out the old woman’s apron on the floor, and picked the dog up and sat it down. ‘Nice doggie,’ he said, but the dog did not reply, only stared at him with her eyes as wide as saucers. The soldier opened the chest, and filled his pockets with copper coins. When they were as full as they could get, he closed the chest and lifted the dog back up onto the lid, and went out into the tunnel to open the second door.

In the second room, there was a chest, and sitting on the chest was a dog with eyes as wide as millstones! The soldier swallowed a little when he saw it, because millstones are very big indeed, and to hear the old woman say ‘eyes as big as millstones’ had not prepared him for what they would really look like. Nonetheless, he had been to war and seen many terrible and frightening things, and he was brave, so he lay down the apron, bowed politely, and lifted the dog down from the chest. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he said as he did it. The dog only stared in reply, and the soldier opened the chest and quickly stuffed his boots and his hat with silver coins. When they were as full as they could get, he closed the chest and lifted the dog back up onto the lid, and went out into the tunnel to open the third door. In the third room, there was a chest bigger than the first two chests, and on it was sitting a dog with eyes as wide as the tower in the King’s castle. The soldier stood and stared for a very long time, then shook his head. ‘Forgive my rudeness,’ he said to the dog, and lay out the old woman’s apron on the floor and picked the dog up and sat it down. The chest was full of gold coins, and he stuffed his knapsack full of

them, and then he went back out to the tunnel and tugged on the rope to let the old woman know that he was finished.

‘Have you got the tinderbox?’ she cried.

‘Oh!’ said the soldier, for between the dogs and their enormous eyes, and the chests full of coins, he had quite forgotten about the tinderbox.

The soldier was a man who kept his promises, so he went back down the tunnel and found the tinderbox, and when the old woman pulled him up she grabbed the collar of his coat and said ‘Where is it? Where is it?’

‘Hold your horses,’ said the soldier. ‘There’s no need to be rude.’

‘Give me the tinderbox or I’ll slit your throat!’ said the old woman, pulling out a knife from her belt.

The soldier drew his sword. ‘Will you, now?’ he said, and he looked in her eyes and saw that she meant to kill him, whether he gave her the tinderbox or not. ‘None of that!’ he said, and he struck out with his sword. And because he always kept his sword shiny and sharp, he cut off her head with a single blow.

‘Well, now,’ he said to himself, ‘that proves the value of being well-prepared.’

And on he went along the road.

Now that his pockets and his knapsack and his boots and his hat were stuffed full of coins, the soldier had no trouble being cheerful. He walked along the road until he came to a town, and once he was there he rented the finest room in the town’s finest inn, and he began to live a fine and happy and

jolly life. He rode a fine horse and dressed in fine clothes and gave money to the poor, for he had been poor once, and he hadn't liked it much. He had a great many friends, who would toast his health in wine every night, as long as he was the one paying the bill. But before too long, he had spent all the gold coins in his knapsack, and then all the silver coins in his boots and his hat, and finally all the copper coins in his pockets, except for two small ones which were not worth enough to buy even a slice of bread. He was forced to leave the finest room in the town's finest inn, and to sleep in a tiny little attic room in a house that was not even really an inn, but belonged to a blind old woman who often forgot to ask for his rent (which was the only reason he could afford even such a tiny room). His friends all said they couldn't visit him there, because there were too many stairs.

One night the soldier was shivering in his room and staring out his one dirty window. It was the night of the new moon, and there were clouds covering the stars, so the sky was very dark and the soldier longed for a light. Suddenly he remembered seeing a little stub of candle in the old woman's tinderbox. He dug the tinderbox out of his knapsack and struck up a spark. He had only hoped to create a little light, but to his great surprise, there at the window was the dog with eyes as wide as saucers!

'Good day sir,' said the dog, 'and how may I serve you?'

'Serve me?' said the soldier. 'Goodness! I hardly know. Can you bring me some money?'

The dog was gone in a flash, and in two flashes, she was back, carrying a bag full of copper coins. 'Marvellous!' cried the soldier. 'Now I know why the old woman was so keen to hold on to this tinderbox!'

The more he used the tinderbox, the better he liked it. If he struck it once,

there would appear the dog with eyes as wide as saucers. If he struck it twice, there would appear the dog with eyes as wide as millstones. And if he struck it three times, there would appear the dog with eyes as wide as the tower of the King's castle.

You can well imagine that the soldier's life was jolly and happy once more. Now that he could summon the big-eyed dogs any time he liked, and could order them to bring him bags of coins if he needed them, he was able once again to rent his fine room in the inn, wear fine clothes, and ride a fine horse. His old friends suddenly appeared again, happy to drink his health; but the soldier had learned a lesson, and he no longer paid for other people's wine.

Now that the soldier no longer had so many friends, he found himself lonely many nights. And on one of those nights he took out the tinderbox and struck the steel against the flint, once, twice, three times! and at the window of his room appeared the dog with eyes as wide as the tower of the King's castle. Looking at the dog's eyes reminded him of something the old woman had said.

'Tell me, my fine canine friend,' he said to the dog, 'what do you know of the King's daughter?'

'She lives in a tower the same size as my eyes,' said the dog, 'and she is very bored and very lonely. When she was born, there was a prophecy that she would fall in love with a common soldier. Ever since, the King has kept her locked up in a tower, away from the eyes of commoners. It is treason for any common soldier to look on her.'

'Goodness!' said the soldier, who was as common a soldier as ever there was, and yet felt a powerful desire to see the princess, even if it were treason. So he said to the dog, 'Take me to her!' and the dog let him ride on her

back while she flew all the way to the highest room in the tower where the princess was locked up.

When he appeared at the princess's window, all he meant to do was look; but the princess was awake, although it was late, and she saw him, and she saw the dog, and she said 'Goodness!' and ran to the window to let them both in.

'Good evening to you, Your Highness,' said the soldier, bowing politely. 'Forgive the intrusion, but I thought perhaps you might like some company.'

'Oh, yes!' said the princess. 'I am ever so bored in this tower, and I have no one to talk to. Is that your dog? Is she a husky? Have her eyes always been that big?'

'Yes,' said the soldier, 'that is, yes, and no, and yes, as far as I know. Would you like to stroke her?'

'Oh, may I?' said the princess, and the dog lowered her shaggy head and let the princess stroke her fur and scratch behind her ears.

The princess and the soldier stayed up all night talking, and it was not until the Queen knocked on the princess's door crying, 'Time to get up, my darling!' that the soldier leaped on the dog's back and flew away -- but not before he gave the princess a kiss. 'Come again tomorrow night!' she whispered as she got into bed and tried to make it look as if she had been sleeping soundly. 'Come again, and bring me on a trip!'

But although she whispered, the Queen heard the end of what the princess said. She said nothing to the princess, but that very night, she told one of the ladies in waiting to keep watch over the princess and make sure that she didn't go out. When the dog and the soldier appeared at the window, the

lady-in-waiting hid behind a curtain and watched, and ran down the stairs of the tower as fast as her legs could carry her, and followed the dog all the way to the inn. She marked the inn's door with a cross so that the king and queen could find it in the morning, and went back to the castle and to her own bed.

But the dog noticed the cross on the inn door and decided that it meant no good. So she drew crosses on all the doors of all the houses and inns and shops in town, and the next morning when the lady-in-waiting led the king and queen out into the town, there were so many crosses on so many doors that they couldn't for the life of them work out which door was the door to the soldier's inn.

Still, the queen was not discouraged, for the lady-in-waiting had seen with her own eyes that the princess was spending time with a common soldier. The next night, she carefully sewed a small bag full of tiny grains of buckwheat to the waist of the princess's nightgown, and left a tiny hole in the bag, so that when the princess went out the window onto the dog's back, she left behind a trail of buckwheat grains. The king and queen followed the trail, and quickly found the soldier, who was arrested for treason and thrown into prison.

'What a sorry mess I'm in!' cried the soldier from his cell that night. He was due to be hanged the next day, and he couldn't even defend himself, because it was true that he had looked upon the princess, and more: he had spoken to her, even kissed her! And that was treason, as everyone knew. And he didn't even have his tinderbox with him, for when he was being arrested he had left it behind in the inn.

As the sun rose, he looked out the window at the people running through the streets to the square outside the town where the hanging was to take place. One of them was a young apprentice shoemaker, who had the same kind of

worn-down shoes the soldier used to wear, before he found the tinderbox and became a wealthy man. 'So it's true what they say,' the soldier mused to himself, 'about shoemaker's children going poorly shod. Ho there!' he cried out loud, startling the apprentice, who looked up straight away. 'Yes, you. Would you like to earn a silver coin?'

The apprentice made one copper coin a month, which he had to spend on rent and food, and he had never seen a silver coin in his life. 'Yes!' he said, not even pausing to think.

'Good!' said the soldier. 'Go to the finest inn in town, and when you're there, go to the finest room, and there you will see a tinderbox. Take that tinderbox to me. If I am not here, I shall be at the scaffold, waiting to be hanged.'

'Goodness!' said the apprentice, for now he knew that he was working for a man condemned for treason. But he ran to the inn all the same, for a silver coin was a silver coin, and he had always wanted to see the princess himself, so he could hardly blame the soldier for doing what he did.

Soon, the soldier was tied to a cart and driven to the square outside the town, where a scaffold was ready for him. As the hangman slipped the noose around his neck, the soldier saw the apprentice running pell-mell towards the scaffold and shaking the tinderbox in the air. 'Wait!' said the soldier. 'I want to smoke one last cigarette. Will you grant me this request of a dying man?'

'Cigarettes are bad for you,' said the hangman.

'At this moment, that's the least of my worries,' said the soldier, and the hangman had to admit he had a point. He let the apprentice hand the soldier the tinderbox, and the soldier struck the flint -- once, twice, three times,

and all three dogs appeared out of nowhere and stared at the crowd and the King and Queen, with their eyes as big as saucers, as big as millstones, as big as the tower of the King's castle.

'They're staring!' said the King.

'They're staring at US!' said the Queen.

'Oh, hurray!' said the princess. 'It's my old friend with the big eyes!'

'I don't want to be hanged!' said the soldier. 'Help!'

And the three dogs ripped the noose to shreds, and lifted the soldier from the scaffold, and then ripped the scaffold to shreds for good measure. The hangman ran away screaming, and the King and Queen were quite baffled.

'What shall we do?' said the King. 'What shall we do?'

The crowd had gathered to watch a hanging, but the dogs had made them much happier, and now they wanted the soldier to live. 'Pardon him, and make him king!' they cried, and there were so many of them that the King and Queen had no choice but to do as they said.

The soldier married the princess, and they were king and queen together; and the wedding feast lasted seven days and seven nights, and the three dogs sat at the top table and made eyes at all the guests.



Return to contents