

Emma
Donoghue



KISSING
THE WITCH

Kissing the Witch

Emma Donoghue

PICADOR

To Frances,
my mother and first storyteller,
who read me Andrew Lang's 'Pinkel and the Witch'
more times than she can bear to remember,
this book is dedicated
with gratitude and love.

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I

The Tale of the Shoe

TILL SHE CAME it was all cold.

Ever since my mother died the feather bed felt hard as a stone floor. Every word that came out of my mouth limped away like a toad. Whatever I put on my back now turned to sackcloth and chafed my skin. I heard a knocking in my skull, and kept running to the door, but there was never anyone there. The days passed like dust brushed from my fingers.

I scrubbed and swept because there was nothing else to do. I raked out the hearth with my fingernails, and scoured the floor until my knees bled. I counted grains of rice and divided brown beans from black.

Nobody made me do the things I did, nobody scolded me, nobody punished me but me. The shrill voices were all inside. Do this, do that, you lazy heap of dirt. They knew every question and answer, the voices in my head. Some days they asked why I was still alive. I listened out for my mother but I couldn't hear her among their clamour.

When everything that could possibly be done was done for the day, the voices faded. I knelt on the hearth and looked into the scarlet cinders until my eyes swam. I was trying to picture a future, I suppose. Some nights I told myself stories to make myself weep, then stroked my own hair till I slept.

Once, out of all the times when I ran to the door and there was nobody there, there was still nobody there, but the stranger was behind me. I thought for a moment she must have come out of the fire. Her eyes had flames in their centres, and her eyebrows were silvered with ash.

The stranger said my back must be tired, and the sweeping could wait. She took me into the garden and showed me a hazel tree I had never seen before. I began to ask questions, but she put her tiny finger over my mouth so we could hear a dove murmuring on the highest branch.

It turned out that she had known my mother, when my mother was alive. She said that was my mother's tree.

How can I begin to describe the transformations? My old dusty self was spun new. This woman sheathed my limbs in blue velvet. I was dancing on points of clear glass.

And then, because I asked, she took me to the ball. Isn't that what girls are meant to ask for?

Her carriage brought me as far as the palace steps. I knew just how I was meant to behave. I smiled ever so prettily when the great doors swung wide to announce me. I refused a canapé and kept my belly pulled in. Under the thousand crystal candelabras I danced with ten elderly gentlemen who had nothing to say but did not let that stop them. I answered only, Indeed and Oh yes and Do you think so

At ten to twelve I came down the steps and she swept me away. Had enough? she asked, lifting a hair off my long glove.

But she was old enough to be my mother, and I was a girl with my fortune to make. The voices were beginning to jabber. They each told me to do something different. Take me back tomorrow night, I said.

So she appeared again just when the soup was boiling over, and took a silver spoon from her pocket to feed me. Our fingers drew pictures in the ashes on the hearth, vague shapes of birds and islands. She showed me the sparkle in my eyes, how wide my skirt could spread, how to waltz without getting dizzy. I was lithe in green satin now; my own mother would not have recognized me.

That night at the ball I got right into the swing of things. I tittered at the old king's jokes; I accepted a single chicken wing and nibbled it daintily. I danced three times with the prince, whose hand wavered in the small of my back. He asked me my favourite colour, but I couldn't think of any. He asked me my name, and for a moment I couldn't remember it.

At five to midnight when my feet were starting to ache I waited on the bottom step and she came for me. On the way home I leaned my head on her narrow shoulder and she put one hand over my ear. Had enough? she asked.

But I didn't have to listen to the barking voices to know how the story went: my future was about to happen. Take me back tomorrow night, I said.

So she came for me again just when the small sounds of the mice were getting on my nerves, and she told me they were coachmen to drive us in state. She claimed her little finger was a magic wand, could do spectacular things. She could always make me laugh.

That night my new skin was red silk, shivering in the breeze. The prince hovered at my elbow like an autumn leaf ready to fall. The musicians played the same tune over and over. I danced like a clockwork ballerina and smiled till my face twisted. I swallowed a little of everything I was offered, then leaned over the balcony and threw it all up again.

I had barely time to wipe my mouth before the prince came to propose.

Out on the steps he led me, under the half-full moon, all very fairy-tale. His long moustaches were beginning to tremble; he seemed like an actor on a creaking stage. As soon as the words began to lead out of his mouth, they formed a cloud in which I could see the future.

I could hardly hear him. The voices were shrieking yes yes yes say yes before you lose your chance you bag of nothingness.

I opened my teeth but no sound came out. There was no harm in this man: what he proposed was white and soft, comfortable as fog. There was nothing to be afraid of. But just then the midnight bell began to toll out the long procession of years, palatial day by moonless night. And I leaped backward down the steps, leaving one shoe behind.

The bushes tore my dress into the old rags. It was perfectly silent on the lawn. She was waiting for me in the shadows. She didn't ask had I had enough.

I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful? I must have dropped all my words in the bushes. I reached out.

I could hear surprise on her breath. What about the shoe? she asked.

It was digging into my heel, I told her.

What about the prince? she asked.

He'll find someone to fit, if he looks long enough.

What about me? she asked very low. I'm old enough to be your mother.

Her finger was spelling on the back of my neck.

You're not my mother, I said. I'm old enough to know that.

I threw the other shoe into the brambles, where it hung, glinting.

So then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing

*In the morning I asked,
Who were you
before you walked into my kitchen?
And she said, Will I tell you my own story?
It is a tale of a bird.*



II

The Tale of the Bird

WHEN I WAS as young as you are now I learned how to save my own life. You think I have saved you but the truth is that your need has conjured me here. It was a bird that helped me, when I was young, but it could have been anything: a stick, a stone, whatever happened by. The thing is to take your own life in your hands.

As a child I weighed mine and did not think it worth saving. Scrubbing the great steps one day, I found an old bent copper knife. In its corroded curve, my reflection was barely a thumbnail high. Now I knew for sure that I was the least thing in the world. The dogs and cats mattered more than I did. They had their places on the earth; they merited their grooming, their feeding, or their drowning; no one questioned their existence. Whereas I was not a necessary animal.

There was a man I had been taught to call father. He saw to the horses in the great stables, their bright mouths and metal chorus; his eyes never fell to my level. There was a woman who called herself my mother. She wore an apron like a snow cloud; her hands blushed red as if ashamed. I could not imagine that I had emerged from her substantial flesh; it seemed more likely that she had found me caught in a cowpat, or behind the apple barrel, or while cleaning out a mousetrap. Once, eavesdropping in the laundry, I heard her tell a neighbour that she had spent twenty years pining for a child. I could hardly have been what she had in mind.

You must understand, I was not ill-treated; no one wasted breath flinging insults at my head. I did not belong, that was all. Nor did anything belong to me; mine was a borrowed life. Considering myself as the louse in their bed, the cuckoo in their nest, I felt a certain reluctant gratitude for the food and shelter they allowed me. I wore scraps of everyone's worn-out clothing: my shoes were made of the gardener's gloves, my shift from old handkerchiefs. My names were hand-me-downs too: *girl*, *the creature*, or, most often, *you there*.

Every story I ever heard of changelings, babies swapped at birth or abandoned in bulrushes, I repeated to myself at night to glean their secret message. But I had no idea how I had drifted into the path of these indifferent giants called father and mother, and I did not dare to ask.

Only in the fields did I find a sense of proportion. I knew we were all equally minute under the liquid eye of the sky, and equally precious in its sight. I used to sit so still that even the rabbits would not notice me. Seagulls wheeled overhead, gulping out their hunger. Swallows made letters against the sky, too brief to read. Once I spent a whole day there, a blade of grass in each hand to anchor me to the warm earth. I watched the sun rise, pass over my head and set. Ladybirds mated on my knuckle; a

shrew nibbled a hole in my stocking while I tried not to laugh. Such a day was worth any punishment.

My mother and father beat me when they felt the need, but only by the rule of thumb: thin sticks break no bones. What they wanted, I believe, was not to hurt me, but to teach me the way things were. The lesson was simple, and if I did not learn it I had only myself to blame. The birch pen wrote it often enough on the skin of my back. Keep your horizons narrow, your expectations low, and you will never be unduly disappointed. Keep your heart infinitesimally small, and sorrow will never spy it, never plunge, never flap away with your heart in her claws.

So when one spring in spite of all this good advice I fell in love, it felt like disaster. I took a tiny bite, and it exploded in my stomach. Love splashed through every cranny, hauled on every muscle, unlocked every joint. I was so full of astonishment, I felt ten feet tall. My shoulders itched as if wings might break through.

Little one, your skin is so soft, said the man as he stroked my cheek with one huge thumb.

I always started quivering as soon as I heard his knock at the door; when I opened it and curtsied, my knees dipped like a frog's; his first smile set me a-stutter. His eyes, cloudy under billows of black hair, were the only weak thing about him. He could always recognize me by the sound of my breathing.

Once I scrubbed the same corner for three hours, and when the man finally passed I upset my pail of dirty suds all down the passage. He stepped back at once, but his shiny leather shoes had been spattered like rocks by the seashore. I tried to wipe them with my apron, but he lifted me to my feet. Such force in his forearm; what an aimed bow was his elbow; how delicious the arc of his shoulder. His hands were backed with a faint black fur. He was like the boulder that parts the river, and he smelled like apples stored in darkness all winter.

I, who had nothing and no right to anything, would have him for my very own.

And so, somehow, it came to pass, as in the best of stories, as in the dream to which you cling like a torn blanket on an icy morning when it is past time to get up. My father, his words slurred with suspicion, told me that a great man had asked for me. My mother carried in a huge basket of linen and a needle. Unspeaking, we began to cut and sew my new life.

I would be a stain on my husband's line, I knew that without her telling. If it was his whim to stoop to lift me up, then I was never to delude myself that I deserved it. I was always to keep in mind the tiny smoky image of what an insignificant creature I had been before he honoured me with his gaze.

But when I was presented to him, in my new dress, he made me forget all my fears. He discovered my hand in my long sleeve and began to count my fingers. No sooner had my parents backed out of the room than he was bending over me to sink his face into my hair. His whisper boomed: what were they to us, now, or we to them? His ear, against my cheek, gave off a surprising heat; my finger crawled along its furred tunnels like a venturesome bee. He would take me away from all this, he promised, give me a new name, never let anything hurt me. I began to shudder with pleasure.

The morning after our wedding, I lay awake beside the hot mountain that was my husband. I traced the brown pattern we had made on the linen: was it a flower, a claw, a snowflake? At last I decided that it was the sign of two leaves growing round each other. I belonged to him now, and he to me.

With surprising ease I learned to rule a house greater than the one I had scrubbed for my keep. I knew who I was at last: this was what I had been born for. I liked to walk through the corridors, my train of brocade sweeping the flagstones; I found delight in every pane of glass I would never have to wash. When, within the month, I found I was with child, every mirror seemed to echo my grandeur. Shameless, I longed for it to show; I wanted to be the shape of an apple or the noontime sun.

One morning at midsummer I woke early and thought I would go out to see the grass grow and the birds rise, as I used to in the days when it was my only consolation. How different I was now; how I had grown rich in things of the spirit and flesh; how my skin felt taut as a tambourine. And then my

husband peered sleepily over his shoulder and asked where I was going.

It all made perfect sense the way he explained it to me as I sat on the edge of the bed: the danger of wandering under the scathing sun, the risk of exposure to rough men in the cornfields, the unsuitability of such a thing. I nodded, and laughed with him, and that morning it was true that I would rather climb into the cave of his arms and fill myself up with bliss again.

But as my hips widened the great house began to seem too small. I paced the corridors until I knew them by heart; I learned every angle of the courtyard. In their smooth leather, my feet itched for the stubble of the open fields, and my eyes strained for a far horizon.

I set out again one Sunday, when there could be no men in the fields, but still my husband said no, this time his eyes were a little bewildered. I tried again when he was away on business, but the housekeeper would not give me the key to open the gate. I sneaked off another day, while he was counting his money, and still he was gentle when they brought me back, though I could see anger stretching itself between his brows. Again, he put it to me in words a child could understand. He enclosed my two hands in one of his huge fists, and kissed the tears from my cheeks.

I nodded. I wiped my face. I knew it was unreasonable to pine so much for a walk in the sunshine. My husband laughed softly, and wondered aloud what a breeding wife would ask for next: to fly like a kite, or a fox for a pet, or charcoal to chew on? It was only then, staring into the blur of his eyes, that all became clear to me, and dread stopped up my mouth.

Oh, my husband was no tyrant; he would never sell my jewels, or steal my children, or cut off my head. But now I knew that what I wanted was not the same as what he wanted for me. What this good man had sworn to protect me from was not the same as what I feared. I trusted that he would never let anything hurt me, but he would never let anything touch me either.

Summer declined into chilly autumn. From my window I could see restless flocks of birds forming themselves into arrowheads, pointing south. Sometimes they faltered, broke from the shape, swung loose like hail, but always they came back together.

Day by day my belly swelled with life, but the rest of me was shrinking. My husband had taken to referring to me as if I were someone else. How is my dearest wife today? he would ask, and I would stare back mutely and think, I don't know, how is she? Where is she? Who is she? Bring her here, so I can ask her how I am to live this life.

One day he found me kneeling in a corridor, over a bundle of brown feathers. A tiny swallow: it must have flown down a chimney and battered itself to death. I was sobbing so hard he thought my time had come; he was stumbling away in search of the midwife when I turned to him and held out my hands. He peered, his face almost touching the skewed feathers, and for a moment I feared he would laugh, but his face was grave as he raised it towards me. My love, he said, what is a bird to us, or we a bird?

I had no answer to give him. When he tried to lift me up I was too heavy for him; my legs were frozen to the ground.

As I knelt there, aware of his steps dying away, I felt a tremor under my thumbs. When I brought the bird nearer to my face, I could sense a tiny pulse. Not quite dead, then: half-way to alive.

In the week that followed, I fed the brittle creature drops of milk from my smallest fingertip and kept it warm in my fur collar. Everything waited. I refused to think about myself: my exceptional fortune, my perfect house, my excellent husband, who could make any woman happy if she let him. I simply waited to see if the bird would live.

One day it swallowed. One day it stood. One day it flew, and the next it got a glimpse of sky and tried to smash through the glass. I could have kept it beside me, a silk-tethered plaything, but what would have been the use of that?

I took it to the highest window in the house and let it out. The kick of its wings was surprisingly

strong. The air smelt like frost, but there was still time to reach the summer land. I stood, watching the bird wheel over the rooftops. ~~Flesh weighed me down like a robe. The child within me was kicking, a~~ mute clamour for release.

Next time. Next year. I would get away somehow, sometime, with or without this child, heading somewhere I knew nothing about but that the sun would shine down on my naked head. I would be hurt and I would be fearful, but I would never be locked up again.

My life was in my own hands, now, beating faintly, too small yet for anyone to notice. I cupped freedom to my breast. I would feed it, I would love it; it would grow big enough to carry me away.

The bird circled back, and hovered outside my window for a moment as if it had something to say.

*In a whisper I asked,
Who were you
before you took to the skies?
And the bird said, Will I tell you my own story?
It is a tale of a rose.*



III

The Tale of the Rose

IN THIS LIFE I have nothing to do but cavort on the wind, but in my last it was my fate to be a woman. I was beautiful, or so my father told me. My oval mirror showed me a face with nothing written on it. I had suitors aplenty but wanted none of them: their doggish devotion seemed too easily won. I had an appetite for magic, even then. I wanted something improbable and perfect as a red rose just opening.

Then in a spring storm my father's ships were lost at sea, and my suitors wanted none of me. I looked in my mirror, and saw, not myself, but every place I'd never been.

The servants were there one day and gone the next; they seemed to melt into the countryside. Last year's leaves and papers blew across the courtyard as we packed to go. My father lifted heavy trunks till veins embroidered his forehead. He found me a blanket to wrap my mirror in for the journey. My sisters held up their pale sleek fingers and complained to the wind. How could they be expected to do with their hands?

I tucked up my skirts and got on with it. It gave me a strange pleasure to see what my back could bend to, my arms could bear. It was not that I was better than my sisters, only that I could see further.

Our new home was a cottage; my father showed me how to nail my mirror to the flaking wall. There were weeds and grasses but no roses. Down by the river, where I pounded my father's shirts white on the black rocks, I found a kind of peace. My hands grew numb and my dark hair tangled in the sunshine. I was washing my old self away; by midsummer I was almost ready.

My sisters sat just outside the door, in case a prince should ride by. The warm breeze carried the occasional scornful laugh my way.

As summer was leaving with the chilly birds, my father got word that one of his ships had come safe to shore after all. His pale eyes stood out like eggs. What he wanted most, he said, was to bring us each home whatever we wanted. My sisters asked for heavy dresses, lined cloaks, fur-topped boots, anything to keep the wind out. I knew that nothing could keep the wind out, so I asked for a red rose just opening.

The first snow had fallen before my father came home, but he did have a rose for me. My sisters waited in the doorway, arms crossed. I ran to greet him, this bent bush who was my father inching across the white ground. I took the rose into my hand before he could drop it. My father fell down. The petals were scarlet behind their skin of frost.

We piled every blanket we possessed on top of him; still his tremors shook the bed. My sisters wept

and cursed, but he couldn't hear them. They cried themselves to sleep beside the fire.

That night in his delirium he raved of a blizzard and a castle, a stolen rose and a hooded beast. The next morning all of a sudden he was wide awake. He gripped my wrist and said, Daughter, I have sold you.

The story came wild and roundabout, in darts and flurries. I listened, fitting together the jagged pieces of my future. For a red rose and his life and a box of gold, my father had promised the beast the first thing he saw when he reached home. He had thought the first thing might be a cat. He had hoped the first thing might be a bird.

My heart pounded on the anvil of my breastbone. Father, I whispered, what does a promise mean when it is made to a monster?

He shut his trembling eyes. It's no use, he said, his tongue dry in his mouth. The beast will find us, track us down, smell us out no matter where we run. And then water ran down his cheeks as if his eyes were dissolving. Daughter, he said in a voice like old wood breaking, can you ever forgive me?

I could only answer his question with one of my own. Putting my hand over his mouth, I whispered, Which of us would not sell all we had to stay alive?

He turned his face to the wall.

Father, I said, I will be ready to leave in the morning.

Now you may tell me that I should have felt betrayed, but I was shaking with excitement. I should have felt like a possession, but for the first time in my life I seemed to own myself. I went as a hostage, but it seemed as if I was riding into battle.

I left the rose drying against my mirror, in case I ever came home. My sisters, onion-eyed, watched us leave at dawn. They couldn't understand why my father carried no gun to kill the beast. To them a word was not something to be kept. They didn't speak our language.

The castle was in the middle of a forest where the sun never shone. Every villager we stopped to ask the way spat when they heard our destination. There had been no wedding or christening in that castle for a whole generation. The young queen had been exiled, imprisoned, devoured (here the stories diverged) by a hooded beast who could be seen at sunset walking on the battlements. No one had ever seen the monster's face and lived to describe it.

We stopped to rest when the light was thinning. My father scanned the paths through the trees, trying to remember his way. His eyes swivelled like a lamb's do when the wolves are circling. He took a deep breath and began to speak, but I said, Hush.

Night fell before we reached the castle, but the light spilling from the great doors led us through the trees. The beast was waiting at the top of the steps, back to the light, swaddled in darkness. I strained to see the contours of the mask. I imagined a different deformity for every layer of black cloth.

The voice, when it came, was not cruel but hoarse, as if it had not been much used in twenty years. The beast asked me, Do you come consenting?

I did. I was sick to my stomach, but I did.

My father's mouth opened and shut a few times, as if he was releasing words that the cold air swallowed up. I kissed his papery cheek and watched him ride away. His face was lost in the horse's mane.

Though I explored the castle from top to bottom over the first few days, I found no trace of the missing queen. Instead there was a door with my name on it, and the walls of my room were white satin. There were a hundred dresses cut to my shape. The great mirror showed me whatever I wanted to see. I had keys to every room in the castle except the one where the beast slept. The first book I opened said in gold letters: You are the mistress: ask for whatever you wish.

I didn't know what to ask for. I had a room of my own, and time and treasures at my command. I had everything I could want except the key to the story.

Only at dinner was I not alone. The beast liked to watch me eat. I had never noticed myself eating

before; each time I swallowed, I blushed.

~~At dinner on the seventh night, the beast spoke. I knocked over my glass, and red wine ran the length of the table. I don't remember what the words were. The voice came out muffled and scratchy from behind the mask.~~

After a fortnight, we were talking like the wind and the roof slates, the rushes and the river, the cat and the mouse. The beast was always courteous; I wondered what scorn this courtesy veiled. The beast was always gentle; I wondered what violence hid behind this gentleness.

I was cold. The wind wormed through the shutters. I was lonely. In all this estate there was no one like me. But I had never felt so beautiful.

I sat in my satin-walled room, before the gold mirror. I looked deep into the pool of my face, and tried to imagine what the beast looked like. The more hideous my imaginings, the more my own face seemed to glow. Because I thought the beast must be everything I was not: dark to my light, rough to my smooth, hoarse to my sweet. When I walked on the battlements under the waning moon, the beast was the grotesque shadow I threw behind me.

One night at dinner the beast said, You have never seen my face. Do you still picture me as a monster?

I did. The beast knew it.

By day I sat by the fire in my white satin room reading tales of wonder. There were so many books on so many shelves, I knew I could live to be old without coming to the end of them. The sound of the pages turning was the sound of magic. The dry liquid feel of paper under fingertips was what magic felt like.

One night at dinner the beast said, You have never felt my touch. Do you still shrink from it?

I did. The beast knew it.

At sunset I liked to wrap up in furs and walk in the rose garden. The days were stretching, the light was lingering a few minutes longer each evening. The rose-bushes held up their spiked fingers against the yellow sky, caging me in.

One night at dinner the beast asked, What if I let you go? Would you stay of your own free will?

I would not. The beast knew it.

And when I looked in the great gold mirror that night, I thought I could make out the shape of my father, lying with his feverish face turned to the ceiling. The book did say I was to ask for whatever I wanted.

I set off in the morning. I promised to return on the eighth day, and I meant it when I said it.

Taking leave on the steps, the beast said, I must tell you before you go: I am not a man.

I knew it. Every tale I had ever heard of trolls, ogres, goblins rose to my lips.

The beast said, You do not understand.

But I was riding away.

The journey was long, but my blood was jangling bells. It was dark when I reached home. My sisters were whispering over the broth. My father turned his face to me and tears carved their way across it. The rose, stiff against the mirror, was still red.

By the third day he could sit up in my arms. By the fifth day he was eating at table and patting my knee. On the seventh day my sisters told me in whispers that it would surely kill him if I went back to the castle. Now I had paid my ransom, they said, what could possess me to return to a monster? My father's eyes followed me round the cottage.

The days trickled by and it was spring. I pounded shirts on black rocks down by the river. I felt young again, as if nothing had happened, as if there had never been a door with my name on it.

But one night I woke to find myself sitting in front of my mirror. In its dark pool I thought I could see the castle garden, a late frost on the trees, a black shape on the grass. I found the old papery rose

clenched in my fist, flaking into nothing.

~~This time I asked no permission of anyone. I kissed my dozing father and whispered in his ear. I couldn't tell if he heard me. I saddled my horse, and was gone before first light.~~

It was sunset when I reached the castle, and the doors were swinging wide. I ran through the grounds, searching behind every tree. At last I came to the rose garden, where the first buds were hunched against the night air. There I found the beast, a crumpled bundle eaten by frost.

I pulled and pulled until the padded mask lay uppermost. I breathed my heat on it, and kissed the spot I had warmed. I pulled off the veils one by one. Surely it couldn't matter what I saw now?

I saw hair black as rocks under water. I saw a face white as old linen. I saw lips red as a rose just opening.

I saw that the beast was a woman. And that she was breathing, which seemed to matter more.

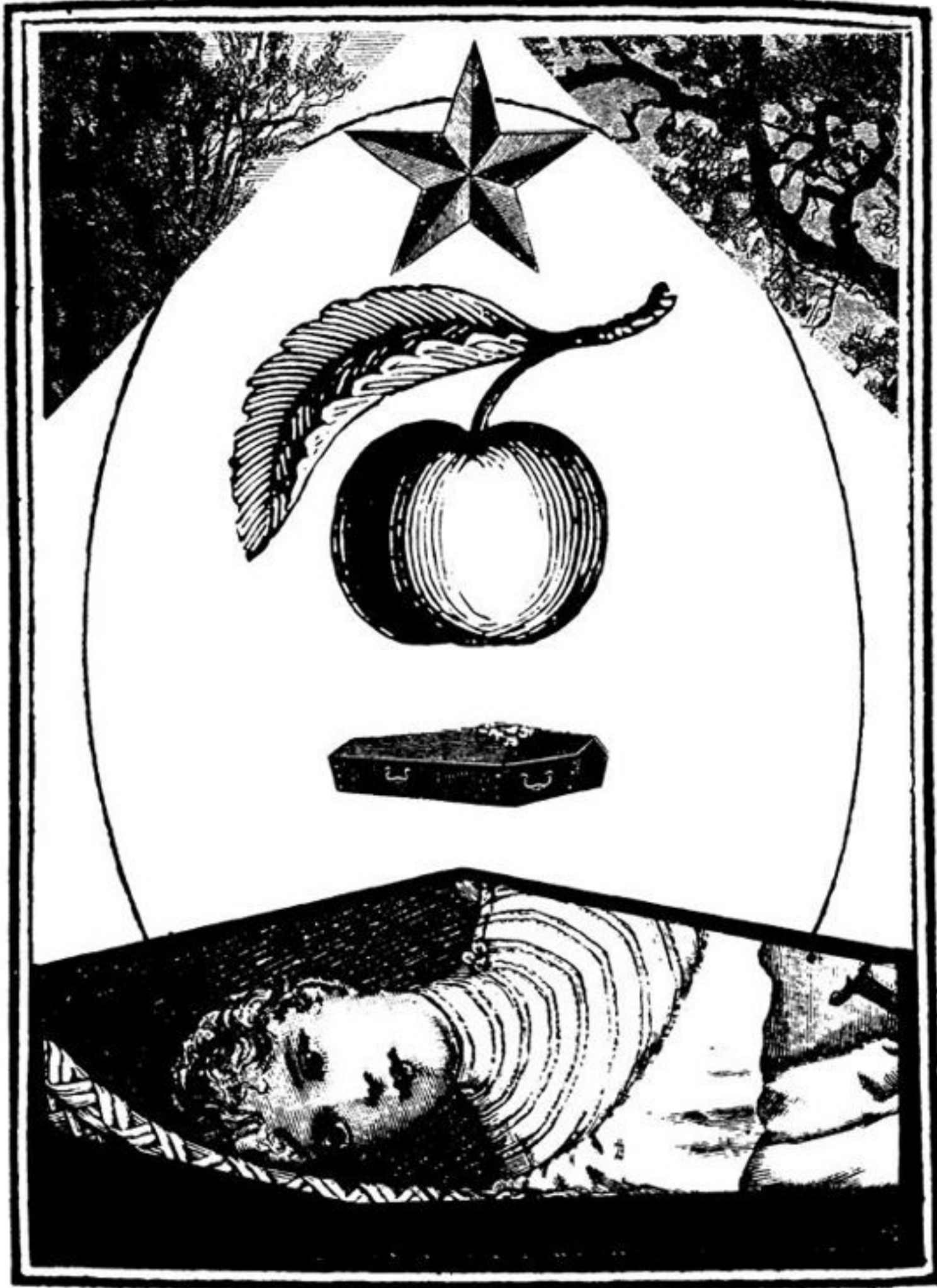
This was a strange story, one I would have to learn a new language to read, a language I could not learn except by trying to read the story.

I was a slow learner but a stubborn one. It took me days to learn that there was nothing monstrous about this woman who had lived alone in a castle, setting all her suitors riddles they could make no sense of, refusing to do the things queens are supposed to do, until the day when, knowing no one who could see her true face, she made a mask and from then on showed her face to no one. It took me weeks to understand why the faceless mask and the name of a beast might be chosen over all the great world had to offer. After months of looking, I saw that beauty was infinitely various, and found it behind her white face.

I struggled to guess these riddles and make sense of our story, and before I knew it summer was come again, and the red roses just opening.

And as the years flowed by, some villagers told travellers of a beast and a beauty who lived in the castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts.

*Another summer in the rose garden, I asked,
Who were you
before you chose a mask over a crown?
And she said, Will I tell you my own story?
It is a tale of an apple.*



IV

The Tale of the Apple

THE MAID WHO brought me up told me that my mother was restless. She said I had my mother's eyes always edging towards the steep horizon, and my mother's long hands, never still. As the story went, my mother sat one day beside an open window looking out over the snow, embroidering coronets on a dress for the christening of the child she carried. The maid warned her that she'd catch her death if she sat in the cold, letting snow drift in and sprinkle her work. My mother didn't seem to hear. Just then the needle drove itself into her finger, and three drops of blood stained the snow on the ebony window frame. My mother said to her maid, The daughter I carry will have hair as black as ebony, lips as red as blood, skin as white as snow. What will she have that will save her from my fate?

The maid had no answer, or not one that she could remember.

Then the pains seized my mother and carried her away.

Though I was so much smaller than she was, I was stronger; I had no reason not to want to live.

It was the maid who cared for me as I grew. Every autumn in her pocket she brought me the first apple from the orchard. This was not the mellow globe they served my father a month later, but the hardly bearable tang of the first ripening, so sharp it made me shudder.

Let it be said that my father did grow to care. After the maid, too, died in her turn, he found me wandering the draughty corridors of the castle and took me up in his ermine arms. In the summertime he liked to carry me through the orchard and toss me high in the air, then swing me low over the green turf. He was my toyman and my tall tree. As I grew and grew, he bounced me on his lap till our cheeks scalded.

But the day there was a patch of red on my crumpled sheet, my father brought home a new wife. She was not many years older than I was, but she had seen one royal husband into the grave already. She had my colouring. Her face was set like a jewel in a ring. I could see she was afraid; she kissed me and spoke sweetly in front of the whole court, but I could tell she would be my enemy. There was room for only one queen in a castle.

Yes, I handed this newcomer the ring with its hundred tinkling keys, the encrusted coronet, the velvet train of state, till she was laden down with all the apparatus of power. But it was me the folk waved to as the carriage rattled by; it was me who was mirrored in my father's fond eyes; mine was the first apple from the orchard.

I know now that I would have liked her if we could have met as girls, ankle deep in a river. I would have taken her hand in mine if I had not found it weighted down by the ruby stolen from my mother's

cooling finger. I could have loved her if, if, if.

~~Her lips were soft against my forehead when she kissed me in front of the whole court. But I knew from the songs that a stepmother's smile is like a snake's, so I shut my mind to her from that very first day when I was rigid with the letting of first blood.~~

In the following months she did all she could to woo my friendship, and I began to soften. I thought perhaps I had misread the tight look in her eyes. Eventually I let her dress me up in the silks and brocades she had brought over the mountains. It was she who laced up my stays every morning till I was pink with mirth; last thing at night it was she who undid the searing laces one by one and loosed my flesh into sleep. With her own hands she used to work the jewelled comb through my hair, teasing out the knots. Not content with all this, she used to feed me fruit from her own bowl, each slice poised between finger and thumb till I was ready to take it. Though I never trusted her, I took delight in what she gave me.

My father was cheered to see us so close. Once when he came to her room at night he found us both there, cross-legged on her bed under a sea of velvets and laces, trying how each earring looked against the other's ear. He put his head back and laughed to see us. Two such fair ladies, he remarked, have never been seen on one bed. But which of you is the fairest of them all?

We looked at each other, she and I, and chimed in the chorus of his laughter. Am I imagining in retrospect that our voices rang a little out of tune? You see, her hair was black as coal, mine as ebony. My lips were red as hers were, and our cheeks as pale as two pages of a book closed together. But our faces were not the same, and not comparable.

He let out another guffaw. Tell me, he asked, how am I to judge between two such beauties?

I looked at my stepmother, and she stared back at me, and our eyes were like mirrors set opposite each other, making a corridor of reflections, infinitely hollow.

My father grinned as he kissed me on the forehead, and pushed me gently out of the room, and bolted the door behind me.

But as the full of a year went by and my stepmother stayed as thin as the day he had first brought her to the castle, my father's mouth began to stiffen. He questioned every doctor who passed through the mountains. He made his young wife drink cow's blood, to strengthen her, though it turned her stomach. Finally he forbade her to go walking in the orchard with me, or lift a hand, or do anything except lie on her back and wait to find herself with child, the child who would be his longed-for son.

My stepmother lay on her back and grew so limp I could see the bones below her eyes. When I brought her red-bound books and jewelled earrings she turned her face away. I took to walking in the orchard on my own again, and once or twice boredom drove me a little way into the forest that lay beyond the castle walls. Fear enlivened those afternoons; I kept my back to the light and turned my head at every creak of wind. The forest was like a foreign court, with its own unspoken rules. The birches moved to a music only they could hear; the oaks wanted for nothing, needed no touch.

As another year stretched into spring it was not my stepmother who lay swollen and sick, but my father. He curled up on his side like a bear troubled by flies. I stood by his bed, on and off, but he was past caring. He cursed the doctors, he cursed his enemies, he cursed the two wives who had failed him, and finally with a wet mouth he cursed the son who had never come.

My stepmother had me called to the throne room where she sat, huddled in ermine, fist closed around the sceptre.

Say that I am queen, she said.

You are my father's wife, I replied.

I will be queen after he is dead, she said.

I made no reply.

Say that I am queen, she repeated, her fingers whitening around the sceptre.

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