

2011

Home is Behind, The World Ahead

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Home is Behind, The World Ahead

Chloe Perkins

For Americo, my indecisive knight

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Introduction

As a little girl, I had a simple aspiration: marry a prince, become a princess. I never questioned whether this was a feasible goal or not. After all, my parents told me that I could be whatever I wanted to be, so why not be a princess?

As I grew older, I longed for active heroines: princesses who didn't just sit and wait in their tower. In film, videogames, and children's stories, there were incredibly few female characters that went on journeys of self-realization. For most heroines I knew, her goal was marriage, or her goal was sacrificed for the sake of the hero.

The pages that follow are not decorated with passive heroines. Strong, active heroines who leave their home behind for adventures in the world ahead follow. Some of these adventures arise out of duty to their people or family (*Kanoni the Little Bird*, *The Rainbow Vase*), some arise out of necessity (*Marinela and the Tarot Cards*, *Deirdre and the Crystal Fife*), and other adventures arise out of self-exploration (*The Shepherdess*, *Tavishi and the Three Wise Beasts*). Whatever the reason, these heroines enter magical worlds of mischievous faeries and talking animals, where what one writes becomes reality and what one says can have dire consequences. They emerge brave, loyal, kind, talented, strong, intelligent, confident, adventurous, courageous, and honest, qualities that any well-rounded person should possess.

This book came about from my experience in two courses: fairytales workshop and feminist rhetoric. From my fairytales workshop, I discovered the magic of fairytales. From my feminist rhetoric course, I discovered the power of feminism. I set out to combine these two subjects into a collection that could provide girls with the strong heroines I longed for as a child.

I compiled a theoretical framework to judge whether my fairytales held to the main tenants of feminist fairytale analysis. I mainly drew this framework from four authors: Kay F. Stone, Marcia R. Lieberman, Ruth B. Bottigheimer, and Karen E. Rowe.

I began with Kay F. Stone's 1986 essay, "Feminist Approaches to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales". In this essay, Stone overviews the history of feminist fairytale analysis and the three schools that the discipline divided into: the early feminists believed that women in fairytales are "artificially separated from and wrongly considered unequal to men"; a later generation saw that "women were naturally separate from men and rightly superior"; some of Stone's contemporaries "consider both women and men as naturally separate but potentially equal—if men shape up" (Stone 234). The first school Stone describes is the one from which most of my framework is drawn. This school has sometimes been criticized for ignoring the deeper symbolic meaning of fairytales, but I believe that this deeper level of meaning is often unavailable to children without training in certain schools of interpretation. This first school of thought cuts to the core of what I was looking for in fairytales: heroines with agency and resourcefulness who can serve as active, positive role models for children. Initially, fairytales were only glanced over as one of the many socializing forces in our culture. The aforementioned Lieberman and Rowe examined fairytales in much more detail than earlier feminists and arrived at the conclusion that "The passive and pretty heroines who dominate popular fairy tales offer narrow and damaging role models for young readers" (Stone 229). This close reading of fairytales allowed feminists to argue against theorists such as Bruno Bettelheim, who argued that fairytales are "gender free zones" (Stone 230). They also cleared the way for writers of feminist fairytales to write fairytales with more active heroines. From Stone's critique of feminist fairytale analysis, I gained my first bench marker for my collection: The tales must present

children with relatable role models, among whom are powerful women who play a prominent role and take decisive actions in the plot.

I next looked at Marcia R. Lieberman's 1972 analysis "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation Through the Fairytale". Lieberman sheds some light on the points Stone makes by analyzing the tales of Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book*. Lieberman begins by stressing the importance of fairytale analysis, because fairytales teach children: "Behavioral and associative patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances" (Lieberman 384). Lieberman finds that, for the female characters, beauty is currency (and often a woman's only valuable asset), marriage results in wealth, and heroines are almost always passive (the few that are active almost never take the decisive action in the plot). Unfortunately, powerful female characters are often characters that children can't relate to, such as fairies, ogresses, or witches. Lieberman quickly dismisses these figures: "They are not human beings, they are asexual, and many of them are old... they do not provide meaningful alternatives to the stereotype of the younger, passive heroine... a girl may hope to become a princess, but can she ever become a fairy?" (Lieberman 391). She also notes that powerful evil women seem to outnumber powerful good women and that "Being powerful is mainly associated with being unwomanly" (Lieberman 392). Lieberman rounds off her argument by stating that these tales can be seen as a sort of "training manual for girls", reinforcing values that only serve to create passive, meek women (Lieberman 395). From Lieberman, I gained my second benchmark: The tales should not present girls with heroines whose sole or strongest asset is beauty, nor should it present marriage as the only way a woman can garner wealth, power, or happiness.

Ruth B. Bottigheimer's 1986 essay, "Silenced Women in the Grimms' Tales: The 'Fit' Between Fairy Tales and Society in Their Historical Context", looks at how German culture in

the nineteenth century led the Grimms to silence their heroines either directly (through a curse of silence) or indirectly (through stylistic choices in the writing itself). This essay is extremely important because it shows how culture can shape fairytales to silence a group of people. Bottigheimer begins by looking at how silence in Germany gained popularity in the 1830s as the best character trait a woman could possess. Nursery rhymes and fairytales soon linked talkativeness to witchcraft since a woman's voice was associated with the power to cast spells and conjure natural powers. This power over nature that women possess is common throughout many German fairy tales: Cinderella, Gretel, and many other heroines that we know today had to say a little spell to gain access to something. Silence permeates the Grimms' tales: many of the heroines suffer for long periods of time due to a curse of silence, but this silence is ultimately rewarded with a good marriage to a wealthy suitor. Bottigheimer also points out that many of these silenced heroines find themselves burning at the stake as witches until a male character saves them. Women who speak are identified as evil or undesirable, such as the stepsisters in "Cinderella": "Their very loquacity identifies them as wicked... a talkative woman meant trouble" (Bottigheimer 125). Silence is also expressed stylistically in the Grimms' tales: while the words of the antagonist and the male characters are articulated, the words of the female heroine are often described indirectly, and rarely stated. Bottigheimer believes this stylistic choice was a symptom of Germany's emphasis on silence at this time. From Bottigheimer, I drew my third bench marker: The tales should not silence characters solely based on their gender nor should it categorize characters as good/evil based on how little/much they speak.

My final bench marker came from Karen E. Rowe's 1986 essay "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale", which examines the ways in which women have traditionally acted as the weavers of tales and the purveyors of cultural truths. Rowe looks at the

importance of women as storytellers “whose role it is to transmit the secret truths of culture itself” (Rowe 57). This role is twofold: it is both the original creation of the story and the reproduction of the story throughout society. In this way, Rowe restores some of the agency that the female characters of fairytales have lost, by asserting that the cultural practice of storytelling is itself a woman’s art. Rowe also argues that Perrault and the Brothers Grimm were not the modern fathers of folklore, they were simply the ones who reproduced the tales that women have been “weaving” and retelling for years. I drew my fourth and final bench marker from Rowe: The tales should recognize the importance of storytelling as the reproduction of certain elements of society/culture. They should be aware of the ideological messages they may send to their target audience.

I used the bench markers from these readings to judge whether or not my tales measured up to feminist standards. In reviewing these tales, they all fit with the bench markers I’ve outlined. However, I have to acknowledge that, for most of my life, I was a consumer of these passive heroines. Some feminist readings might reveal that I was not as successful in my goal as I would have hoped. Still, I will leave the interpretation of this work up to the reader.

Aside from fulfilling feminist guidelines, I also wanted my characters to be situated in folklore and to embody a specific trait. I sat down and compiled a list of cultures I wanted to explore, and then I consulted folklore databases and international fairytale collections. Before I wrote, I read several folktales and explored the archetypes, themes, symbols, etc. that were prevalent in that culture. Some of my tales are more rooted than others. I have had extensive background in Russian culture and literature, thus *Vera and the Word Well* adheres much better to Russian folklore than *The Rainbow Vase* adheres to French culture. As for character traits, I sat down and thought about what traits I would want to see in my own son or daughter, and I

came up with: brave, loyal, kind, talented, strong, intelligent, confident, adventurous, courageous, and honest. These traits came to be embodied in Kanoni, Marguerite and Claudette, Shu, Deirdre, Pernille, Marinela, Ayaka, Amaryllis, Tavishi, and Vera. For some of my characters, their journey is defined by their trait (Shu's kindness), but for others, their journey defines their trait (Tavishi's courageousness). From these tales, I hope that girls may aspire to be as brave as Kanoni, as strong as Pernille, and as adventurous as Amaryllis. More importantly, I hope the pages that follow inspire girls to follow and achieve their dreams, leaving the comforts of home behind and embarking on a journey into the unknown worlds ahead.

Kanoni the Little Bird

Once there was a little girl named Kanoni, who was born in a time of great difficulty for her tribe. The monsoon rains did not return that year to water the soil, and none of the crops grew. One year passed without the rains and then two and three, until the soil had turned to dust and Kanoni's people were starving. All the while her mother would sing:

*Little Kanoni, who crawls all around,
Where are all the rains that water the ground?
Climb up to the top of the tallest tree,
Fly north to the clouds near the far off sea.
Bottle up the clouds and bring home the rain
And fly back home into my arms again.*

As Kanoni grew older, she suffered the pain that her people suffered. The men and women of her tribe became thinner and thinner like the stalks of tall savannah grass. Their hungry bellies rose up in chorus against the burning sun.

One morning, Kanoni went in search of the tallest tree. She passed an umbrella thorn tree, but its thin, sprawling branches were too weak to climb. She then passed a jackalberry tree, but its thick, leafy branches were too high for her to reach. At last she found a tall, thick baobab tree and climbed up a crack in the trunk. When she got to the highest branch, something magical happened. Kanoni leapt from the baobab and became a beautiful egret, gliding high over the savannah.

Kanoni flew and flew and flew until she became very tired. She landed on an island in a little pool of water and stretched her wings.

“Hey! Why are you standing on me?” the island said. Kanoni looked down and realized that she was standing on the back of a hippopotamus.

“I’m sorry,” Kanoni said. “Have you seen the rain clouds?”

“I have,” said the hippo. “I’ll help you if you help me. My legs are very short, and so I can’t reach my feet to my mouth. Can you use your beak to clean out my teeth?” The big hippo then opened his mouth wide and Kanoni looked in at his teeth.

Kanoni was afraid. Her mother told her never to go near the hippos. They were very fast and very dangerous. Many men from her village had been killed with one snap of the hippo’s mighty jaw. But Kanoni needed to know which way the rain clouds had gone, so she craned her head inside and plucked out the grass from the hippo’s teeth. It was bitter work, the chunks of grass were smelly and decayed, but Kanoni scooped every last piece out with her long beak until his teeth were all clean.

“Thank you,” the hippo said. “Why don’t you stay on my back for awhile? You could eat all the tasty grasses that are stuck in my teeth.”

“No thanks,” Kanoni said. “Which way did the rain clouds go?”

The hippo moved his head northeast, and off Kanoni flew into the gathering darkness.

Kanoni flew and flew and flew until she became very tired. She landed on the back of a zebra that was grazing in the high grasses.

“Hello little egret,” said the zebra.

“Hello zebra,” said Kanoni. “Can you tell me which way the rain clouds went?”

“I can,” said the zebra. “I’ll help you if you help me. My eyes are very bad, and I can’t see the lioness, though I know she is lurking nearby. If you see her, will you give your loudest call?” The zebra then went back to grazing.

Kanoni was afraid. Her mother told her never to go near the zebras. The lionesses loved to pounce on them and eat them for their supper, but the lionesses loved to eat humans even more. Still, Kanoni needed to know which way the rain clouds had gone, so she watched and listened all night long to the bushes around the zebra. Suddenly, Kanoni heard a twig snap and looked straight into the yellow eyes of the lioness!

Kanoni called as loud as she could, and the zebra galloped away as fast as lightning. She flew after the zebra, and soon the lioness had disappeared again into the night, searching for slower prey.

“Thank you,” the zebra said. “Why don’t you stay on my back for awhile? You could call out whenever the lioness tries to pounce on me.”

“No thanks,” Kanoni said. “Which way did the rain clouds go?”

The zebra pointed her head northeast, and off Kanoni flew into the yellow dawn.

Kanoni flew and flew and flew until she became very tired. She landed on the back of a wildebeest that was drinking at a watering hole.

“Who is that on my back?” asked the wildebeest.

“It is Kanoni, the little bird,” said Kanoni. “Can you tell me which way the rain clouds went?”

“I can,” said the wildebeest. “I’ll help you if you help me. My tail can’t swat away the flies very well, and those bugs are biting me to pieces! Can you shoo away the bugs from my back?” Then the wildebeest went back to quenching his thirst.

Kanoni was afraid. Her mother told her never to go near the wildebeests. When the wildebeests would stampede, anything in their path would be crushed, and certainly a little egret could be crushed very easily. But Kanoni had traveled so far that she couldn't turn back now, so she used her wings to swat away all the bugs from the wildebeest's back all afternoon until the sun began to set.

"Thank you," the wildebeest said. "Why don't you stay on my back for awhile? You could eat all the juicy bugs that try to bite me."

"No thanks," Kanoni said. "Which way did the rain clouds go?"

"They came through yesterday, in that direction." The wildebeest pointed north, and off Kanoni flew into the twilight.

Kanoni flew and flew and flew until she saw the rain clouds hovering over the sea. They were big and dark and heavy with water, but Kanoni did not know how to get them home.

She could not put them in a bottle or a bucket. She could not wrap them up in a cloth. Only the wind could blow the clouds from place to place, so Kanoni took a big breath and blew as hard as she could, but it didn't work. Her breath wasn't strong enough to move the heavy clouds.

So Kanoni the Little Bird called out to all the animals of the sea and the savannah: "Help me blow the rain clouds home!" And so the fishes in the sea all came to the surface and blew with their big lips as hard as they could. And then the herd of wildebeests stampeding across the plain looked up to Kanoni and blew as hard as they could. And then the zebras grazing on their grasses looked up to Kanoni and blew as hard as they could. And then the hippos floating in their rivers looked up to Kanoni and blew as hard as they could. Until at last Kanoni was home with

her tribe, and the rain fell to the dry earth. Kanoni then became a little girl again, and fell from the skies into her mother's arms, exhausted. And her mother sang to her:

*Little Kanoni, who crawls all around,
Where are all the rains that water the ground?
Climb up to the top of the tallest tree,
Fly north to the clouds near the far off sea.
Bottle up the clouds and bring home the rain
And fly back home into my arms again.*

The Rainbow Vase

Once upon a time, in a tiny village high up in the mountains, there lived two sisters who loved their mother and father more than anything in the world. Claudette was a little fair haired child, who loved to read stories about far off lands. Marguerite was a beautiful freckle faced girl who loved to draw and paint.

Marguerite and Claudette's father was a woodsman who would chop down great trees for the paper makers in the village. Every day he would come home carrying packets of paper from the paper stores he supplied. On the paper the sisters would draw castles and dragons and write stories about their adventures in the woods.

But one day, after returning from the forest, their father fell very ill and died shortly after. As they put him to rest in the village cemetery, Claudette looked up into her mother's once bright amber eyes, but they had turned as gray as gathering clouds. A week passed, and then two as the pink wilted from their mother's cheeks and the amber of her eyes did not return. Her russet hair fell limply to her thin shoulders, and Claudette and Marguerite could only watch as their mother withered away.

The next night as her sister and mother slept, Marguerite, who was still but a small child, saw a thin white figure standing at the window. The figure turned away, but Marguerite jumped out of bed, lit a candle and ran outside, following the figure to the bank of the mountain river.

The white figure stopped and turned, revealing its thin face and lifeless eyes. "I am Grandmother Death," it said. "Three days hence I will take your mother from this life into the next."

“But Grandmother, why?” Marguerite cried. “You cannot take Mama! What will we do without her?”

“Her heart has withered and turned gray since your father’s passing, and the heart cannot survive without color.”

“Please Grandmother, is there no way to save Mama?” Marguerite cried.

Death pitied the shivering little girl. She hated taking mothers and fathers from their children, and so she said, “There is but one way to save her. But the path is difficult, even for one much older and wiser than you.” Grandmother Death then crouched down and produced from her white robes a beautiful vase carved from a pale stone. “You must fill this vase with the colors of nature’s palette: the blue of the deep river, the yellow halo of the sun, and the red of earthen clay. Take only the colors I say, and no others, for greed will cost you dearly. When you have gathered these colors, tell your mother to drink from the vase. Only then you will see the rose return to her cheek and the amber to her eyes.”

Marguerite took the vase into her small hands, feeling the grooves along its edges. Grandmother Death then stepped into the mountain river and vanished from sight.

When she returned to the cottage, Marguerite shook Claudette awake and told her of Death’s visit.

“Oh Marguerite,” Claudette said, holding her sister close. “What are we to do?”

“We have to go and collect all the colors,” said Marguerite, holding up the stone vase feebly. “Or else Grandmother Death will take Mama.”

And so it was settled. Claudette bundled Marguerite in her warmest winter fur and wrapped as many flannel shirts about herself as would fit. Before they left, they hugged their mother and bid her farewell, each knowing that this might be their last goodbye.

They soon came to the mountain river in which Death had disappeared. Marguerite began wading into the water with the vase, but the water was terribly cold and the current threatened to carry her away. Marguerite grabbed onto a long piece of seaweed and pulled herself downward. When she reached the bottom of the riverbed, the middle ring of the vase lit with a pulsing blue glow. A huge blue fish appeared before Marguerite and spoke to her, “What will you trade me for my bluest scale?”

Marguerite thought quickly, “I have some gold earrings that I left on the shore. Could I give you those?”

“Earrings?” the fish scoffed. “What would I do with those? But I’m certain your eyes would be very tasty.”

“My eyes!” cried Marguerite.

“Too high of a price? What about your freckles? I could take those instead.”

Marguerite rubbed her face in despair. She loved her freckles. “If it’s for Mama,” she said. “You can have them.”

With that, the fish put his big squishy lips to her cheeks and sucked all the freckles right off. Then he dropped one of his blue scales into the vase, and the ring of stone became a beautiful glistening blue.

“Things won’t be so easy next time,” said the fish. “You’re lucky we’ve had a shortage of freckles, otherwise I’d have asked for more.” And with that, the big fish swam away.

Marguerite tried to swim to the surface, struggling against the current which pulled fiercely at the hem of her dress. The stone vase slipped from her grasp and she let go of the seaweed to grab it. In that moment the river regained its hold on her, and she and the vase went hurtling downstream.

“Marguerite!” Claudette cried, watching as the river pulled her sister toward several huge slabs of rock. Marguerite grabbed for something, anything near her to hold onto, but stone after slimy river stone slipped from her grasp. Claudette grabbed a tree branch and waded into the water ahead of her sister. “Take the branch!” she shouted to Marguerite. Marguerite reached out her small hands toward the branch, but her head disappeared underwater. Claudette cried out to her again, wading up to her waist in the river, reaching as far as she could. Finally she saw Marguerite’s tiny fingers lock onto it, and Claudette pulled her onto the bank. Marguerite collapsed before the waves, coughing up water and chilled to the bone. She released the heavy stone vase, and it fell with a thud upon the ground.

“Where are your freckles?” Claudette asked.

“I gave them to a fish in payment for this.” Marguerite held up the vase before her sister.

Claudette reached out to touch the glossy blue ring. “It’s beautiful,” she said, running her hands along the edge.

The day grew warmer as they walked on, and the sun climbed higher in the sky. When they came to a clearing, Claudette stopped and told her sister to listen. Sparrows tittered away in the trees, but among them flitted a blue headed wagtail with a wonderful array of yellow feathers.

“Look,” Claudette whispered, pointing to the bird. “Yellow feathers.”

Marguerite shook her head. “No,” she whispered back. “Grandmother Death told me to collect yellow from the sun.”

But Claudette did not listen. In a flash she grabbed the bird from its perch and plucked one yellow feather from its tail.

“Claudette, no!” Marguerite shouted. All of the birds scattered in fear.

Claudette dropped the yellow feather into the vase, and the sky turned black.

Grandmother Death then appeared in her flowing white robes and took the vase from Claudette. “You have stolen from the hand of Nature,” she cried. “Now Nature will steal from you.”

Death then touched Claudette’s hand, in which the bird struggled to be free. Claudette’s skin withered and shrank, becoming loose and leathery. Claudette recoiled in horror from Grandmother Death, staring at her hand in disbelief—it must have aged a hundred years. She released the bird from her bony fingers and the wagtail flew away. Her left hand was no longer that of a young woman, but the hand of a shriveled old lady.

Grandmother Death then handed the vase back to Marguerite, and in a flash was gone. Claudette wept and wept into the earth, flinching at the aching feeling of her new hand. “Why did she do this?” Claudette sobbed.

“It’s the balance,” Marguerite said. “You stole from the bird, so Grandmother Death stole from you.”

Claudette was not consoled. She buried the hideous hand in the folds of her dress, not wanting to look at it. Marguerite went to her sister, holding her as she cried. The sun came out from behind the clouds, and its rays warmed the girls who sat in despair upon the cold ground.

“There there, little one,” said the sun from her lofty perch. “Why do you cry so? Would it be better if I gave you my halo for your vase?”

“What do you want in return?” asked Claudette.

“Your hair shines so beautifully in my light. Give me the yellow of your hair and I will use it every morning to paint the dawn skies.”

“My hair?” Claudette said, wiping the tears from her eyes. “But my father gave me my yellow hair. It’s all I have to remember him by.”

“But if you don’t give it up, we’ll lose Mama too,” Marguerite said.

Claudette knew that her sister was right, and so she let the sun pluck the color from every strand of her hair. Claudette’s hair was now as white as starlight, and it shimmered eerily in the yellow sun.

“Magnificent,” said the sun, her rays dancing about Claudette’s hair and face. The halo around the sun then disappeared and fell into the vase with a beautiful flash of light.

Marguerite helped her sister to her feet, and they walked on a little ways toward a different path. Small wisps of grass and flowers sprouted up around their feet, and the worn path became a muddy red color. Claudette and Marguerite were so tired from walking that they could not see the dried clay beneath their feet.

With her next step, Claudette noticed her boot sticking in the ground. She struggled to be free, but her boot only sunk in deeper.

“It’s a clay pit!” she shouted to Marguerite. “Run! And grab a long branch!” Marguerite did as she was told, searching for something her sister could grab onto. Claudette sank deeper and deeper until she was up to her waist in the heavy clay.

Then there was a bubbling in the earth. “That vase,” said the clay, reaching out a muddy limb and taking it from Claudette’s hand. “You’re missing my color.”

“What could I give you for it?” said Claudette.

The clay laughed. “What indeed...” The clay thought for a long time, then said, “I wish I could get up and walk around. I have never seen the forest beyond this little corner of it. If only I had your shadow, then perhaps I might learn its form and leave this place.”

“My shadow?” Claudette asked. She thought about the shadow puppets she and her sister used to make in the firelight and the way her shadow grew shorter and then taller as the day wore

on. But then, she thought that the clay surely needed it more than she did. “Alright,” she said.

“You may take my shadow.”

The clay pit then took Claudette’s shadow and put a blob of itself into the vase. A ring of muddy red lit up the pale stone.

Marguerite returned with a branch, and pulled Claudette from the clay pit. They watched the clay play with the shape of Claudette’s shadow, molding itself into her image. A little girl made of clay then emerged from the pit and waved the sisters goodbye.

All the colors of the vase were now lit, and the girls struggled back down the mountainside as fast as they could toward their village. At last they came to the river just beyond their house where they stopped to fill the vase with water. They ran up through the back gate and scurried through the cottage door as fast as their legs would carry them.

There on the bed, their mother was gray and still. Claudette fell to the floor, sobbing. Marguerite carried the vase to her mother, spooning some water from the vase to her mouth with the cup of her hands, but Claudette pulled her away.

“She’s gone, Marguerite. We are too late.”

Marguerite lay upon her mother’s breast, crying over her silent heart. “No Mama,” she cried. “We love you.”

In that moment there was a great burst of light, and the vase shattered to dust. All the colors then escaped, setting the room alight with their vibrancy. The glistening blue of the fish scale, the bright yellow of the sun’s halo, and the muddy red of the clay pit combined to make greens and oranges, pinks and purples. The colors then disappeared into their mother’s heart, and Marguerite heard a familiar beat.

Their mother sat up in her bed. The amber of her eyes returned as she reached out to gather her daughters in her arms.

From that day on, their mother had more energy than ever. With her daughters she opened up a stationery store where all the villagers came to buy their paper and ink. Much of this was owed to the sisters' knowledge of colors, as they could dye any paper the most beautiful shades, or make inks to the exact hue requested. Though Marguerite's face was empty of its freckles, and Claudette's white hair and withered hand made her look much older than she was, the two were happy. They had their mother and their bustling little shop, but most importantly, they had each other.

Shu and the Dragon Girl

Long, long ago there lived a young girl named Shu who was so named for her great kindness and generosity. When the students at school would pick on her little sister, Shu would stand up against them. If her elderly neighbor had no money to buy food, Shu would take half of her own plateful and offer it to the old woman. And so it happened that Shu was known to possess the biggest heart of anyone in her village.

Ever since Shu could remember, her village was tormented by an evil dragon that lived in the mountain caves outside the town. In return for sending rain to the village, he demanded one of the villagers each week as a snack. That week, when the dragon came down into the village, he plucked Shu up in his mighty claws and carried her off to his cave to be his supper.

Shu's parents wept and wept. Her little sister cried when she thought of how the kids at school would bully her. The old woman who lived up the road thought that she would surely starve if Shu could no longer share her meal. All the village cried and mourned the loss of such a kind little girl as Shu.

When they reached the cave, the dragon set Shu to work in his garden. "Pull out all of the weeds in my garden as fast as you can," the dragon told her. "If you can pull them all out before sunset, I will wait until tomorrow to eat you." And then the dragon disappeared into his cave to prepare the side dishes for his supper.

Shu knelt down in the garden and cried. The sun would set in a few hours, and the garden was overrun with weeds. The dragon had set her to an impossible task. She would surely be eaten before midnight!

Suddenly the dragon's daughter emerged from the cave, crying terribly.

Even though she was the daughter of the dragon who had sworn to eat her, Shu's kindness got the better of her and she ran to console the Dragon Girl.

"There there," said Shu, stroking the Dragon Girl's shiny red scales. "Whatever is the matter?"

"My father is so mean!" cried the Dragon Girl. "He sets fire to all of my beautiful things! He ruins my jade and ruby rings and chars my lacquered boxes!"

"I'm sorry" Shu said. "Take my ring, for I won't need it when I am in your father's belly." Shu then took from her finger the beautiful jade ring that her aunt had given her and offered it to the Dragon Girl. The Dragon Girl accepted the ring and slipped it onto her scaly finger, admiring it in the twilight.

"Thank you," she said. "This is a fine ring indeed." The Dragon Girl sucked in a big breath and burnt all of the leaves off the weeds. Then she sucked in second breath and burnt all of the stalks of the weeds. And then with a third breath, the Dragon Girl burnt all of the roots of the weeds so that nothing remained but the vegetables and spices in the garden.

When the dragon returned at sundown he was amazed to see that all of the weeds in his garden were gone! That night, the dragon's stomach growled from dusk to dawn. He dreamt of honeyed orange glazes and spicy soy sauce, succulent sweetmeats and tasty fried rice, phoenix tail shrimp and five colors fish cake. These dreams made the dragon so hungry that he could not sleep, so all night long he thought up a new task for Shu, one that she could never complete.

The next morning he came to Shu in the garden and said, "If you can pull out all of the turnips and radishes in my garden by sunset, I will wait until tomorrow to eat you." And then the dragon returned to his cave to prepare for cooking Shu at sundown.

Shu pulled as hard as she could at the radishes and turnips in the dragon's garden. She tried digging them out with her hands and using a sharp rock to pry them out, but try as she might, they would not budge from the hard, rocky soil.

Just as Shu was about to despair, the dragon's daughter emerged from the cave sobbing into her claws. The Dragon Girl cried and cried, and Shu again took pity on her.

"There, there," said Shu, wishing to console her. "Whatever is the matter?"

"My father is so mean!" cried the Dragon Girl. "Even though it is his job to send rain to the farmers, he makes me do all of his work. Many farmers this year will lose their grain because of his laziness!"

"I'm sorry," Shu said. "From now on when I pray for rain, I will pray to you and not your father." Shu then bent down at the Dragon Girl's feet and prayed to her for rain.

The Dragon Girl smiled at Shu and flew up into the sky, sending a heavy spring shower to the dragon's garden. As the rain fell, the soil loosened, and Shu was able to pull out every one of the turnips and radishes from the dragon's garden.

When the dragon returned to his garden at sunset, he was shocked to find that Shu had again completed her task! That night, the dragon's stomach growled and growled: he was supposed to eat Shu two days ago. All night long he dreamt of savory sautéed mushrooms and silver fish fried egg, juicy sea cucumbers and scrumptious soy braised mandarin fish, yummy ginger duck and fried pumpkin dumplings. He said to himself, "Tomorrow I will eat that girl no matter what. I will have her chop up all the turnips and radishes and then I will eat her for my supper!"

The next morning the dragon came to Shu and set her to chopping up all of the vegetables that she had picked and weeded in the days before. "If you can chop them all up before sunset,

then I will wait until tomorrow to eat you,” he said. But the dragon had a hungry look in his eyes that Shu did not trust.

Shu searched everywhere for something sharp to chop the vegetables with, but none of the rocks were sharp enough. Shu cried and cried, when out of the cave emerged the Dragon Girl.

“There, there,” said the Dragon Girl, putting her claws softly around Shu’s shoulders. “Whatever is the matter?”

“I fear that your father’s patience has run out,” Shu sobbed. “Tonight he will eat me for his supper.”

“Oh no he won’t,” the Dragon Girl said. She plucked from her arm one fiery red scale, which was sharper than any of the swords of the village warriors. “Use my scale to chop my father’s vegetables, and when he eats you, use it to cut your way out of his belly.”

Shu accepted the Dragon Girl’s scale, and began chopping the dragon’s turnips and radishes. When the dragon returned to the garden at sunset, all of the vegetables were chopped and ready to be eaten. Shu hid the Dragon Girl’s scale under her tongue and readied herself for the worst.

“Very well done,” the dragon said. “You look dirty from working in my garden. Come here and I’ll pour some soapy water on you.”

Shu came closer, but instead of soapy water, the dragon poured a thick orange glaze all over her from head to toe. Then he dumped the chopped radishes and turnips all over her and said, “You look awfully cold. Come up to the table and sit near my plate full of warm white rice.”

Shu did as she was told, and sat in the middle of the dragon's plate. The dragon was so hungry that he couldn't resist: he let loose a terrible roar as he gulped Shu down in one monstrous bite.

As soon as Shu fell into his stomach, she took the Dragon Girl's scale from under her tongue and cut her way out of the dragon's belly. The dragon cried out in pain and tried to chase Shu down, but he could not move. The Dragon Girl met Shu in the garden, and she carried her back to Shu's village safely.

From that day on, Shu's village had a new dragon to send them rain. The Dragon Girl did not eat any of the villagers; she only asked for a few vegetables each week from the villagers' gardens. Shu was proclaimed a hero in her village for ridding the town of the evil dragon and for finding a new Dragon Girl who was just as kind and generous as Shu herself. Shu and the Dragon Girl started the most successful restaurant in town called "The Dragon's Belly", where they served only vegetarian dishes. Shu and the Dragon Girl remained best friends all the days of their lives.

Deirdre and the Crystal Fife

In far off days there lived a talented girl named Deirdre who grew up on the edge of a magical forest. In the forest, faeries played games all day and all night, snatching up stray villagers to dance and feast and serve them. But all of the villagers who feasted with the faeries had wasted away longing to return to their midnight balls. Deirdre's mother warned her never to enter the forest, or else the faeries would spoil her too with their beautiful faces and sweet voices.

But one night, when Deirdre could not sleep, she heard a beautiful fife coming from the forest. The faeries came in through her bedroom window and whisked her away to their ball. All night she played and she danced with them, but because Deirdre was an innocent child, she was not spoiled by the faeries' magic. The faeries foresaw great musical talent in the little girl, and so when they returned her to her bed, they left Deirdre a magical ring that would protect her from harm. They hoped that one day Deirdre would return to them, grown up and able to play beautiful music for them.

Deirdre came to love music and learned to play the fife better than any of the village bards. All marveled at the girl's music, and her mother took her to every house in the village to play her charming melodies.

One day, she played for a family that had just moved to the town. The family had a quiet son named Castan who loved to hear Deirdre play more than anyone else. From that day on, Castan and Deirdre were inseparable. Castan had a kind heart and an imaginative mind: sometimes he would even write little tunes for Deirdre to play.

In this way, many days came and went. As the years of pretending passed away, and their childish dreams were tucked away in boxes and drawers, something quite unexpected happened.

Deirdre grew into a blossoming beauty and Castan into a handsome young man. Where they had once played together as children, they now danced at the town balls. Deirdre's beauty afforded her many suitors, all offering gifts of lavish dresses and beautiful combs, but Deirdre had eyes for only one—the quiet and kind Castan.

Castan gave Deirdre fifes made from willowbark, expensive new music books from the village market, and even took her to the city so that she could hear the king's great musicians. The two were soon wed, and the couple looked forward to their happy future together.

So it was that Deirdre put the mischievous faeries out of her mind. She avoided the glassy eyed gaze of the spoiled villagers. She hid the magical ring at the bottom of her jewelry box. And she forgot the night she had spent among them, until her memory became nothing more than a far off dream.

One night, not so long after her wedding, Deirdre awoke to a beautiful fifing coming from the forest. But Deirdre recognized this music: it was sweet and light and magical. Deirdre made to nudge her husband awake, but he was not there. She went to the closet, but his shoes were missing. She heard a banging in the kitchen, and saw that the door was beating open and shut in the breeze.

Deirdre was about to run out the door, but instead she went to her jewelry box and put the magical ring on her finger. Then she ran through the meadow and into the forest as fast as her legs could carry her. She ran and she ran, ignoring the brambles and thorns that tore at her dress and scratched at her feet. But after many hours of searching for Castan, Deirdre began to despair. She fell at the foot of a mighty ash tree and cried: "What has happened to my husband? Even if he returns, he will come back to me spoiled forever!"

Deirdre then heard a laughing in the trees, and when she rose from her resting place, she saw hundreds of fireflies lighting a path through the wood. At her feet was a little scroll. It read:

At our midnight ball we invite you to play

Follow the fireflies and do not stray.

Deirdre quickly wiped her tears on the hem of her nightgown and rolled up the tiny scroll. "I mustn't despair," she told herself. "Crying won't bring Castan back."

The firefly path seemed to wind far through the forest, but Deirdre obeyed the summons, hoping to find her husband at the ball. She walked for a long time, keeping a careful eye on how the path turned and changed. The fireflies, it seemed, were not always sure of the direction. Sometimes they wandered and Deirdre had to wait for them to realign. Soon she came to a great ash tree, and scrambled up to the top. Before she stuck her head out above the canopy, she began to hear the faeries' fifes.

Deirdre was afraid that the faeries would spoil her too, but a sweet voice called to her. She peeked over the treetop slowly, and saw the magnificent faerie ball being held beneath the bright full moon. All around her hundreds of faeries danced in the moonlight on the leaves of the ash tree. Elevated above the dancing was a beautiful faerie dressed in a golden gown who sat on a wooden throne. Atop her head was a sparkling crown of cobweb and gossamer. The faerie queen raised her hand, and the music ceased. All the faeries stopped their dancing and turned.

"Come here, talented Deirdre, closer to my throne. I have heard much about your music." The queen snapped her fingers, and the fireflies clustered about her feet. They formed two

magical shoes that made Deirdre fly up into the treetops beside the queen. “Tonight,” the queen said. “You will sit beside me in a place of honor and play your fife all night long.”

One of the queen’s servants then offered Deirdre three fifes, one made from silver, another from gold, and a still finer fife, made from shimmering crystal. Deirdre plucked out the silver fife and played a few notes, but its sound was far too harsh. Deirdre then picked the golden fife and began a little melody, but its sound was far too mellow. At last, Deirdre took up the crystal fife, and its sound was perfectly light.

The faeries loved Deirdre’s music so much that they shut their eyes tightly and danced as they never had before. After a few songs, the faeries were so absorbed in Deirdre’s music that they did not notice her wandering about the tree tops in search of her husband.

As she played, she climbed down into the tree branches, kicking through piles of acorns and leaves. She searched through the branches and the hollows and the twigs, but Castan was nowhere to be found.

Deirdre returned to the tree top and saw a figure hunched over the faerie queen’s feet. He was dressed in tattered rags, and his face was splattered with mud. Deirdre approached the figure that was polishing the queen’s golden slippers. He turned to look at her: beneath the grit and the grime, Deirdre recognized her husband.

“Castan!” she shouted, tossing the crystal fife aside. She grabbed her husband by the hand and made him stop polishing the queen’s slippers. There was a gasp as the faeries turned in disgust.

“What on earth is she doing with that slave?” one shouted.

“Get her away from him! He’ll dirty her!” another said from behind her handkerchief.

“Deirdre,” said the queen. “You are not to touch the slaves.”

“But your Majesty, this is my husband! You must release him, and undo the effects of your magic as well.”

“We cannot do that, child. He is our best shoe shiner.”

“What if I could convince you that you no longer needed shoes?” Deirdre asked.

“That’s impossible. We love our shoes. We dance in them all night long.”

“If I can remove your shoes from your feet before sunrise, will you let Castan come away with me unspoiled?”

The faerie queen laughed. “Of course, but you have little chance of succeeding.”

Deirdre did not listen to the faerie queen’s taunts. She simply picked up the crystal fife and put her lips to the instrument.

Her fingers moved furiously over the fife, playing a dancing jig as fast as she could. She played and she played and she played some more. She performed every song she knew and then she repeated them all over again. The faeries struggled to keep up with her playing—they danced faster and faster, wearing down their shoes with every step.

Soon the sun rose and the faerie queen let loose a roar of laughter. “Do you see now, Deirdre? The night has passed and I have not removed my shoes. Worry not for your husband. You may come to visit him whenever you want. You can play your handsome tunes for us as he polishes my handsome shoes.” The queen then looked down at her shoes, but they were gone! She looked all around her and saw her magnificent golden slippers lying in shreds about the treetops.

“You were right your highness. I knew you would not take off your shoes willingly, so I removed them with my music.”

“Clever Deirdre, tricking me into wearing out my shoes,” the faerie queen said. “But I cannot undo our magic. It is as you said: he is spoiled under our spell. If you can make him remember you, then our spell will be broken. If not, he will stay here to polish my shoes forever.”

Deirdre had seen that Castan no longer recognized her face or her voice, but she knew one tune that Castan would recognize. Deirdre played a simple song that Castan had written for her as a child. In each soft note was a memory of their happy past; in each loud note a hope for their happy future. When Deirdre had finished their song, Castan looked away from the faeries, and saw his wife again.

“Deirdre?” he said. Castan ran to his love and picked her up into his arms.

Deirdre handed the fife back to the queen, but the queen stopped her. “Deirdre, I cannot take the fife back, for it is my gift to you for playing so wonderfully tonight. Take your husband and go with my blessing!” The queen then winked, and Deirdre found herself and Castan at the edge of the forest.

The next morning, Deirdre and Castan journeyed to the city, where Deirdre played her crystal fife before the king and queen. They were so moved by her music that they danced all night long, and they rewarded her with an invitation to join their court as a royal musician. Deirdre and Castan lived long and happy lives, and all of their days filled with music.

Pernille and the Wonderful Bow

There once lived a girl named Pernille whom no one ever seemed to notice. Pernille had two older brothers, both handsome and strong, who were the pride of their family and village. Her brothers could shoot an arrow farther, faster, and more precise than any other man in the village. In fact, it seemed that their only competition was each other. And in their long, dark shadow was Pernille, forever forgotten and ignored.

But little did anyone know that Pernille was a far greater archer than either of her brothers. She had the eyes of a hawk and a steady hand, making her incredibly accurate, even from a great distance.

When her brothers found her practicing in the barn, they were afraid that their little sister might upstage them. “Little sister,” they said. “Don’t ever let anyone know about your talent. For no one likes a strong woman. You’ll be a spinster forever, and a burden on mother and father.”

Pernille didn’t care who liked her or didn’t like her, but she did not want to be a burden on her parents, so she agreed to never tell anyone. Still, at every show of her brothers’ skill, Pernille would sigh: “I could have hit that target far better, and my arrow would have been lodged much deeper into the board.”

One day, an old man came to the family’s door and offered them a quiver of fine arrows in return for shelter from the night’s bitter cold. Pernille’s father gladly accepted the stranger’s gift, and the next morning, Pernille’s mother even cooked the stranger a big breakfast to send him off. After everyone had eaten their fill, the old man looked over the two brothers and said, “You two lads must be skilled with a bow. Let’s try out those new arrows I’ve given you. I’ll even make you a wager: If either of you can shoot an arrow farther than I can, I will give to you my wonderful bow.”

The brothers were enticed by this. “What does the bow do?” they asked.

“It never misses its target, and it can launch an arrow ten times faster and farther than any other bow,” said the old man.

Pernille thought that the bet was a bad idea. She was suspicious of the stranger, but her brothers accepted the challenge and went out to the yard. They laughed at the old man’s shaking hands, thinking that they could easily best him.

The old man then took from his satchel the most beautiful bow that Pernille had ever seen. It was carved from the finest yew and its limbs were encrusted with many sparkling gemstones. The wonderful bow must have been worth a fortune—enough for the entire family to live comfortably for a long time.

“Now,” said the old man. “That is my wager. What will the two of you offer in return?”

The brothers thought for a long time, but they could not think of anything valuable enough to put against the bow.

The old man then thought of a good bet, “If you lose, you must forever fetch back my arrows wherever they should land. You will be my servants until you die.”

Pernille’s brothers worried for only a moment before they accepted the old man’s wager. After all, they thought, how could such a feeble old man hope to defeat these two strong young men?

The elder brother nocked his arrow and shot high. The arrow flew a good distance and landed far into the field. The younger brother then took his turn, and his arrow landed very near his brother’s. Then it was the old man’s turn.

His knees shook horribly, and the hump in his back would not straighten out as he took his stance. His arm trembled so badly that it took him some time to nock the arrow. But at last he

released the string and the arrow flew high and straight. The old man's arrow landed far past both of the brothers' arrows, and with a laugh he collected his wonderful bow and told the brothers to fetch his arrows back to him.

Their mother wept and wept that her two precious sons should be taken from her to be slaves. Their father cried too and begged the old man to release them from the bet. But their little sister Pernille only watched the old man laugh and laugh.

"You fools!" he said. "Do you judge all your competitors by their appearance alone? Look what it has cost you!" And then he kicked the younger brother from behind and sent him out to the field.

It was then that Pernille stepped forward. "I will challenge you to an archery contest," she said. "If I win, I want my brothers back and your wonderful bow as well."

The old man smiled, "And what could you offer me in return?"

"I will sand and fletch your arrows for as long as I live, serving beside my brothers."

"I don't know," the old man said. "Your posture and stance tell me that you are a skilled archer, perhaps even more skilled than your brothers. I propose instead three challenges that will test both your skill and your cunning."

Pernille readily agreed and ran to fetch her bow and arrows. When she returned, the old man smiled and said, "Your first challenge is to shoot your mother."

Pernille turned to look at her mother, who was still weeping over the loss of her sons. Pernille could never harm either of her parents, but then she thought about the old man's words. Was not the Earth also her mother? Pernille aimed her arrow at the earth and shot.

"Very clever," said the old man. "Shooting Mother Earth, but your next challenge will not be so easy."

The old man then handed Pernille the strangest arrow she had ever seen. It had a tip and fletching like any other arrow, but the shaft was made of rubber. When Pernille tried to nock her arrow, it went droopy against the string.

“You must hit the side of the barn,” the old man said.

Pernille looked over to the barn, but it was very far away. She could not shoot the arrow as it was. The old man gave her until sundown to finish this task, so she decided to go into town to ask the advice of the villagers.

First she came to the blacksmith, who was hammering out some new horse shoes when Pernille came in. Pernille showed the arrow to the smith, but he could not help her.

“Heating up the rubber will only make the arrow melt,” he said. “Why not try the candle maker?”

And so Pernille travelled to the candle shop. The candle maker was dipping his candles in wax when Pernille came in. Pernille showed the arrow the candle maker, but he could not help her either.

“Wax may strengthen the string of your bow,” he said. “But it will do nothing for this arrow. Why not try the grocer?”

And so Pernille travelled to the grocer, who was putting away some meats into her ice chest when Pernille came in. Pernille showed the arrow to the grocer, and she had an idea.

“Rubber gets harder when it’s frozen,” she said. “But we must be careful, for cold rubber can also become very brittle. Let’s put your arrow in the ice chest for a few hours. By then it may be cold enough to shoot.”

And so Pernille helped the grocer with her work until it was nearly sundown. She then took the frozen arrow as gently as she could back to the field. The old man and her family were

waiting for her. Pernille took the arrow delicately in her hands and shot it. The rubber arrow shattered into a million pieces when it hit the side of the barn.

“Very good,” said the old man. “But I have saved the toughest challenge for last.”

He then commanded Pernille’s brothers to bring forward three bales of straw on which they had painted yellow targets.

By this time the sky had gone black, and Pernille was struggling to see in the darkness. There was no moon that night, and the clouds overhead blocked out the starlight. The painted targets were barely visible on the horizon.

“You must hit these three targets using only two arrows.”

“Only two? Can I rearrange the targets?”

“No.”

“Can I set a torch beside them to help me see?”

“No.”

Pernille squinted in the darkness. The bales were close together, but not close enough to hit two at once. She nocked her arrow and shot. The first arrow landed square in the left target, but how was she going to hit the other two with just one arrow?

“Maybe I can’t use a torch,” she said. “But can I use a flaming arrow?”

The old man smiled. He did not object.

Pernille dipped the tip of her arrow in oil and lit it on fire. Then she shot the right bale. The fire soon spread to the second bale and the third, until all the straw had burnt to nothing.

“You are very clever and skilled indeed,” said the old man. “Take my wonderful bow and your two brothers as your prize. I’m certain they’d make poor servants anyway,” he said with a wink.

Pernille took up the wonderful bow, feeling the beautiful gems encrusted in the limbs. The old man then released Pernille's two brothers from his servitude under the condition that Pernille teach them not to judge their opponents by their appearance alone. The brothers were forever grateful to their little sister, and she even gave them archery lessons.

From that day on, Pernille was sought after for her intelligence and skill with the bow. She taught many people archery and became a great warrior. With her strategic mind and steady hand, she led her people to many victories.

Marinela and the Tarot Cards

In days gone by, there once dwelt a farm girl named Marinela. Marinela was very adventurous, and she loved daydreaming about the faraway lands that decorated the pages of her school books. Every day, Marinela would climb to the highest branch of the tallest tree in her mother's apple orchard, trying to catch a glimpse of the far away sea. Then, one day, the sea came to her.

A group of travelling gypsies from across the Black Sea arrived in Marinela's town and set up camp in the forest near Marinela's house. Each morning on her way to school, Marinela would see the turning of their bright, vibrant skirts and hear the refrains of their light, tinkling music. The mysterious gypsies became more and more of an oddity to Marinela each day that she passed them, but her mother would say:

“Stay away from the gypsies, daughter, for they will steal you blind.”

And so, for many days thereafter, Marinela checked her curiosity and kept far away from the gypsies' camp. Yet, the wandering eye of a child is not so easily discouraged, and soon Marinela found herself straying into the tent of a gypsy fortune teller.

“Come in, child,” said the old woman. “What is it you wish to see? Future? Past? Come closer, my dear, and tell me what it is you seek.”

“I wish to see a future journey.”

“Very well,” said the fortune teller. She shuffled the long, worn cards in her wrinkled hands and put them forward for Marinela to cut. After she cut the deck, the fortune teller laid five cards on the table and told Marinela to flip over whichever card she wished. Marinela flipped over the top left card, and saw on its face a silly man with a white rose, walking dangerously close to the edge of a cliff. At his feet trotted a little white dog trying to warn him.

“The Fool,” whispered the gypsy. “This card represents you. You are young and untried by the world, but you will soon start a journey that will change all this. But beware young one, for those who look to the stars above risk losing sight of the ground below. Flip another card.”

Marinela reached for the next and saw a young man dangling upside down from a tree.

“Hmm, the Hanged Man, quite a way to start a journey. Do you know why the Hanged Man is hanging?” the fortune teller asked.

Marinela did not.

“He was once a fool who sought wisdom, and in so doing climbed a forest tree and hung upside down until he saw the true way of the world. His presence in this reading denotes a time of great trial, sacrifice, and knowledge. This must be the journey you asked for.”

Marinela then flipped over another card. “The lovers,” said the fortune teller, eyeing Marinela. “You’re a bit young to fall in love with anything, I think. This card means that you will find something or someone that you cannot live without. It will change your chosen path.”

Marinela flipped the next card, which showed a robed man with a wand in his hand and a figure-eight over his forehead. “This is the magician, and he reveals what you want the most. Flip the last card over.”

The last card showed a woman seated with a scroll in hand. “The High Priestess. You will meet someone who can show you how to put together what you have learned from this journey. You will come to a very important decision then.”

The fortune teller sat up straighter and looked at Marinela again. “A very strange and serious journey for a little girl if you ask me! Now, how will you be paying?”

“Paying?” Marinela asked. “I don’t have any money.”

The fortune teller turned a harsh eye on Marinela. “How will you pay me then?”

Marinela turned out her empty pockets. “My mama told me to stay away from the forest, so I cannot ask her. Can I just have this one for free?”

“No,” said the fortune teller. “For nothing in life is free. You have until the stroke of midnight to give me proper payment, or else I will place a curse on you.”

Marinela shuddered, turning quickly from the old gypsy’s tent, and into the dark forest.

The woods were dim and thick as she began to walk from the gypsy camp to her home. Every creak of the heavy branches and snap of the twigs beneath her feet made Marinela jump in fright. Suddenly there came a great commotion from the path before her, and Marinela ran to see what it was.

“Ahh!” cried a young gypsy man, who was dangling upside down from his left foot. Just below his head barked a little white dog that the man was trying to quiet.

“Who are you?” asked Marinela, coming closer.

“Who am I? Who are you?” said the gypsy, crossing his arms.

“I am Marinela, and you are in no state to be making demands of anyone, silly upside down man. Why are you hanging upside down?”

“I got caught in one of the hunter’s conibear traps while Jack and I were running through the woods to camp. Isn’t that right Jack?”

The white dog sat and barked in the affirmative.

“Jack’s a smart dog, very valuable in a pinch. Say, if you let me down I’ll give him to you!”

“Okay,” said Marinela. She quickly scooped a sharp rock up from the ground and cut the gypsy down from the hunter’s trap.

The gypsy man gathered himself from the ground, tipped his cap to Marinela, and set about his merry way.

“But wait!” cried Marinela. “I thought you were going to give me your dog!”

“Oh yeah?” said the gypsy. “Prove it!”

Marinela could not prove what the gypsy had said, so she decided to outwit him. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small strip of rabbit meat that had been left over from her lunch. She whistled quietly and broke off a piece of the meat.

“Here Jack, come here boy,” she whispered, breaking off another piece of the meat and throwing it toward him. The dog slowly turned and ran back toward the strips of meat, coming closer to Marinela with each bite until the gypsy man was far off in the distance.

When the dog fell on his back at Marinela’s feet, she scratched his belly and fed him the last bite. Jack licked the salty meat taste from her hand, and when Marinela rose, Jack followed. Marinela laughed at the gypsy man who was disappearing on the horizon, and continued on her path with little Jack at her heel. “Nothing in life is free,” she said.

Soon Marinela and Jack came to a cabin in the woods. Outside sat a young woman and her lover, both weeping upon the shoulder of the other.

“What is wrong?” asked Marinela.

“My father will not let us marry,” said the young woman, crying anew into the young man’s chest.

“Do you love each other?” Marinela asked.

“He’s my best friend,” answered the young woman.

“She makes me a better person,” answered the young man.

“Then why does your father say no?”

“My lover is very poor, and my father will only let me marry a rich man.”

“But what does that matter, if you love each other?” asked Marinela.

The lovers looked at each other, they had no answer. And so, Marinela approached the cabin door and knocked as loud as she could. The young woman’s father opened the door, expecting to see his daughter there, but he instead looked down into Marinela’s resolute eyes.

“What can I do for you, little girl?” he asked.

“Is it you who does not consent to the marriage of these two?” she asked.

The man was surprised at her candor. “Little girl, you know nothing of marriage. Go home to your mother and father, for one day they will tell you the same thing that I have told my little girl.”

“But do you not see? She is a girl no longer. She is a woman, and she has the right to marry the man she chooses.”

“The man she chooses would see her starve in the streets!”

Before the father could continue, his wife put a hand on his shoulder and said, “She speaks with a child’s honest wisdom. Husband, you forget that a life without love is a poor life indeed.” Her husband was silent. She next turned to the lovers. “You have my blessing, and that is enough.”

Marinela smiled as the lovers embraced and then bowed before her in thanks.

“What is it that you desire?” asked the young woman. “We have little money, but perhaps we might find something else to give you.”

“I want nothing. Your thanks is more than enough,” said Marinela, turning back to the winding forest path.

“Wait!” cried the young woman. She ran into the cabin and returned with a little red dress in hand. “I was saving it for when I have a child of my own, but perhaps your mother could gain some use of it?” She then handed the little dress to Marinela, which she accepted humbly.

The wood was now growing darker, but the moon trickled thinly through the trees, lighting her way. She had just decided to return to the gypsy camp when she saw a gleam of light flashing in the trees ahead.

Before her was a great wooden wagon on which was painted “The Great Jacobini, Master of Magic!” There was a fire behind the wagon, and Marinela saw a man in a ragged coat sitting beside it, cooking his supper. Marinela took a step forward, still hiding behind the wagon when a twig beneath her feet snapped and the man said, “You can come out now. I know you’re there.”

Marinela revealed herself, and sat on a log across the fire from the man. Jack settled in by the fire, happy to be warm.

“You are on a journey, yes?” said the man in a thick, foreign accent.

“I guess so. I’m collecting things as payment to a gypsy to whom I owe a great debt.”

“Gypsies are often tricky. They always have something up their sleeve,” he said, pulling a rose from his sleeve. “Whether they know it or not.”

“How pretty!” said Marinela, accepting the magic rose.

“Would you like to play a game?” he asked.

Marinela nodded.

“I will ask you the three hardest riddles I know, and if you can get them all right, then I will give you a prize that is sure to appease your gypsy.”

“Alright,” Marienla said. “Mother says I am very good at riddles.”

“I hope you are!” said the magician. “First an easy one: My friend the butcher is six feet tall, and wears the biggest shoes the cobbler can make. What does he weigh?”

“That’s simple! He weighs meat, silly!”

The magician laughed. “Correct! Now for another: Two fathers and two sons go fishing, and each of them catches one fish. How is it then that they only bring home three fish together?”

Marinela thought for awhile. Perhaps they lost one on the way home? No no. That is not how most riddles go. There was a trick here that Marinela had to find out. She thought back to her fishing trips with her grandfather, and then the answer came to her.

“It is a grandfather, a father, and a son because the father is both a father and a son!” cried Marinela.

“Good, good, very good, but now comes the hardest riddle I know: A black dog is sleeping in the middle of the road. Along comes a rider hurrying to the other side of town. There is no moon in the sky and the rider has no torch and there are no lanterns to light his way, but the rider steers his horse away from the black dog. Tell me, how did he know the dog was there?”

Marinela was at a loss. She thought that maybe the dog had barked, but she then remembered the dog was asleep. Perhaps the dog smelled bad? No, even if he smelled the dog he wouldn’t know where in the road it was. Marinela looked up at the moon and was about to give her stinky dog answer, when she realized what the riddle was missing.

“It was daytime when the rider came though!” she shouted.

“I’m very impressed,” said the magician, turning to his wagon. He emerged soon after carrying a large opal stone hanging from a thick leather band. “This is a very special necklace that can give its wearer the power to speak any language he or she wishes.”

Marinela accepted the necklace in awe and thanked the magician. He then wished Marinela well, and she left to return to the gypsy camp. The moon was nearing its highest point in the sky, and Marinela realized that her time was running out. Soon the gypsy would curse her forever if she could not settle her debt.

While she ran along the path, Marinela thought about a way to put the three things she had won together. Jack was a smart and loyal dog; he was certainly a worthy prize. The little dress had some very good stitching and even had some beading about the collar, a beautiful gown indeed. The amulet, though, was a prize far greater than either Jack or the dress, and for awhile, Marinela thought she might keep it for herself.

Marinela ran into the gypsy camp right before the stroke of midnight, and found the gypsy woman's tent. Marinela was not sure what to do—how could she put these three things together in a way that would make them valuable? She looked at the dress and the amulet, and slipped both on Jack just before her time ran out.

Inside the tent, the gypsy woman was shuffling her tarot cards calmly. “So, child, what is it you have brought me as payment?”

Marinela picked up Jack and set him on the table. He walked forward in his little dress and said, “Hello, do you have a scrap of food I might eat?”

The gypsy woman stepped back. “What trickery is this?”

“It's no trick,” said Marinela. “I have brought you a talking dog.”

“Wonderful!” cried the gypsy woman. “Absolutely wonderful! Tell me, how ever did you find such a creature?”

“It was just as the cards said. The dog came to me from a hanged man who was caught in a hunter's trap. I was given the dress in exchange for helping two lovers to marry. Then I met a

magician who gave me a magical amulet that allows its wearer to speak any language. Only, I did not find a high priestess to help me make sense of the journey.”

“What did you learn along the way?” asked the gypsy, setting Jack on her lap and taking up the cards again.

“I think I know what path I will take,” said Marinela. “I want to go on adventures in foreign lands, learn different languages, and help those in need.”

“A worthy cause indeed, and, if you don’t mind,” the gypsy woman fanned out the tarot cards in her hand. “Pick a card.”

Marinela took one card from the deck. It was the High Priestess.

“It seems to me that the High Priestess was not a person you were to meet along the way, but what you were to become when you reached the end of your journey.” Marinela marveled at the card, and then offered it back to the gypsy. “Keep it, child” the gypsy said. “I have a feeling you will come to a far greater end than this pack of cards could ever predict.”

Ayaka and the Magical Ink

Once there was a girl named Ayaka who was cursed to never say what she meant. In school, she would try to answer the teacher's questions, but her answers never came out right. At home, she would try to tell her mother about her day, but her story would come out jumbled and wrong. All of the kids in her neighborhood made fun of her because she couldn't speak well, and they wouldn't play any games with her.

One day, when Ayaka was getting ready to leave school, a girl bumped into her and fell down. This girl loved to get Ayaka into trouble, and so she pretended to cry, "Help! Ayaka pushed me down! She's going to hurt me!"

All of the students came running, and the teacher came to scold Ayaka.

"But of me it was the opposite of what it is that she was just saying!" Ayaka shouted.

The teacher couldn't understand Ayaka's cluttered words, so she suspended her from school. Ayaka tried to argue, but it was no use. No one would listen to a girl who couldn't speak well.

When Ayaka's parents heard about her suspension, they took her to an old tutor who lived in a house outside of town, hoping that she might be able to cure their daughter of her speaking problem. Ayaka's parents brought her things to the tutor's house, and the tutor gave Ayaka many tests. She looked at the girl's tongue and throat, asked her many questions and heard many long and messy answers.

"What is your name?" the tutor asked.

"The given first name that bestowed it was upon me by my parents is Ayaka," the girl said in one long breath.

“How strange,” the tutor said. “The best way to fix this problem is to copy down the speeches of famous speakers. Copying the speeches will help you learn how to piece your thoughts together into simple phrases. That’s the key to speaking well— speaking simply.”

And so the tutor set Ayaka to work copying famous speeches. She piled into Ayaka’s arms heavy leather bound books and parchments with many hundreds of speeches written on them. Ayaka sat at a desk in the corner of the tutor’s study, and began copying everything down. There were speeches about government and philosophy, beauty and religion, and many other subjects of which Ayaka knew little. Every now and then she would start reciting the speech aloud as she wrote it, but the words sounded strange on her tongue.

After a few hours, the tutor rose from her desk and said, “I must go into town to fetch some fish for our supper. You may go anywhere in my house that you wish, but you must not go into the attic. Continue your work, and I will return within the hour.” Then the tutor put on her shawl and left.

Soon after the tutor left, the inkwell that Ayaka was using ran dry. She tried to scrape up more ink from the bottom, but all that remained was dusty, dried black flakes. She had to find more ink to continue her writing. Ayaka searched high and low, through cupboards and closets, but she could not find another inkwell anywhere. She even tried mixing the dried ink with water, but the dusty flakes wouldn’t dissolve. Ayaka looked up the stairs and saw the door to the attic; it was the only place that Ayaka hadn’t searched. She walked up the creaky stairs and pushed open the door.

Inside, the attic was completely empty except for one little inkwell in the middle of the room. Ayaka was afraid to disobey the tutor, but she was more afraid to leave her work unfinished. So Ayaka took the inkwell and went back downstairs to the study.

“I’ll just use this for now,” she thought to herself. “When the tutor gets home I’ll take it back upstairs, and then I’ll ask her for more ink while she prepares supper.”

And so Ayaka set to transcribing the speeches again. An hour passed as she wrote down a speech about how much better the world would be if there was no money. Just as she finished the speech, she looked out the window and saw the tutor approaching the house. Ayaka was afraid that the tutor would notice if the ink in the attic was missing, so she put the cap back on the inkwell and ran upstairs to the attic as fast as she could. Then she scrambled back downstairs to her place in the corner of the study. By the time the tutor returned, Ayaka was innocently trying to scrape dried ink out of the older inkwell.

“That won’t do,” the tutor said. She left the study and returned a few minutes later with a new inkwell for Ayaka. Ayaka breathed a sigh of relief, happy that she hadn’t been caught.

She soon smelled sushi in the kitchen and left her work to see if dinner was ready.

The tutor was frustrated. “I didn’t realize that I was out of wasabi. Can you run back into the village market and buy some for our sushi?” The tutor pulled out her change purse. “That’s odd,” she said, emptying it out. “All my money is gone. Tell the shopkeeper that I’ll bring her the money tomorrow morning. She knows my credit is good.”

Ayaka then got on her shawl and ran to the village market, where everyone was in an uproar. People were shouting and pointing their fingers at one another.

“Who stole my money?” the baker cried.

“All of my grocery money is gone!” said a shopper.

“The cash register is empty too!” the shopkeeper wailed.

Ayaka turned out her own pockets, but the coins that had been there just a few hours ago were gone. Ayaka’s face went white as a sheet. The speech she had just copied was about a

world without money, and now all of the money was gone! Ayaka realized that the ink in the attic was a magical ink, and that she had to undo what she had written.

Ayaka ran back to the tutor's house and climbed up into an open window. The tutor was still busy preparing their meal. Ayaka snuck upstairs to the study and grabbed a piece of parchment, then she ran quietly up to the attic. The magical ink was just where she had left it.

Dipping her brush into the magical ink, Ayaka tried to write a sentence that would return the money to its rightful owners, but her words wouldn't come out right. After awhile, Ayaka decided to draw what she meant. She drew the people in the market with coins in their pockets and change purses. Then she folded the paper and put it in her pocket, and put her brush back in the study.

When she returned to the market, all was well again. Ayaka again felt the heavy coins in her pocket, and the shoppers were making their purchases as usual. Ayaka bought the wasabi on her tutor's credit and ran back to the tutor's house.

After supper, Ayaka returned to the study and transcribed speeches for the rest of the night, until the moon was high in the sky and her candle was burnt to just a nub. Soon the tutor went to bed, and Ayaka was all alone in the study.

Ayaka had been thinking while she was copying speeches. The magical ink could help her get back at all the kids who ever made fun of her. After she made sure that the tutor was asleep, she crept up to the attic with her brush and parchment. She removed the cap from the magical ink and drew all of the kids who had tormented her. Then she drew an Akkorokamui, a terrible giant octopus monster, attacking them. Ayaka then rolled up the parchment, put the cap back on the inkwell, and went to bed.

Ayaka was awakened the next morning by a horrible scream. She ran outside and saw the Akkorokamui, black as the magical ink and attacking the town with its giant tentacles! Ayaka just wanted to scare the other children, she didn't want the monster to attack the village as well. She quickly pulled out the paper on which she had drawn the monster and tore it in half, but the Akkorokamui remained. She ran up to the attic and grabbed the inkwell, picked up her brush and more parchment, and ran toward the market.

Ayaka scrambled onto the roof of the butcher's house and drew a picture of herself covered in magical armor, holding a big sword. Inky black armor then appeared on her body, and the huge sword appeared in her hand.

She jumped across the rooftops of the village until she was very close to the monster. Ayaka picked up her great sword and jumped, chopping off one of the monster's black tentacles. The Akkorokamui flinched in pain, and moved another tentacle toward Ayaka, but she chopped off that tentacle too!

Ayaka smiled. She was winning! She would save the town and be a hero like in the legends of old!

But then the Akkorokamui's spewed ink everywhere, sprouting two new tentacles where the old ones had been.

Ayaka returned to the parchment. She drew a quiver of arrows and a longbow, and tried shooting the monster, but it did not work. She tried drawing different blades and knives, but the Akkorokamui would heal its wounds too fast. Ayaka was out of ideas, and the magical ink was running low. Soon all that would remain were the dry flakes at the bottom.

Just then Ayaka saw the tutor in the road below.

"Ayaka, say what you need to say! You must write the monster away!" she said.

Ayaka tried to write her thoughts down, but she couldn't do it—the words still wouldn't come out right.

“Ayaka!” the tutor shouted. “Don't think! Just write!”

In that moment, Ayaka put her brush to the paper and wrote: “Everything is back to normal.”

The Akkorokamui then disappeared, leaving Ayaka and the dried up bottle of magical ink alone on the rooftop.

Ayaka and the tutor returned to the tutor's house, where Ayaka found that the curse was broken. No longer did she stumble over words and sentences. She recited the many speeches aloud, but they now sounded eloquent and familiar to her tongue. Ayaka returned to school the next week, and rose to the top of the class.

The Shepherdess

Nestled deep in a valley far away, there lived a humble farmer with three beautiful daughters. The eldest was very wise and chose to handle the farm's affairs in her father's old age. The middle daughter was very beautiful and chose to marry a wealthy man in a neighboring town. But the youngest, Amaryllis, was too beautiful to be just a farmer and too smart to be just a wife. So, with no role for her to fulfill, the farmer and his wife left her to wander the valley and tend to their sheep.

But it is known that the destiny of the youngest is always an adventure, and one day, as Amaryllis lay in the pastures of the farm, the thought crossed her mind that she might one day be forced to marry or take up a trade, as her sisters had. Amaryllis was afraid that she would never have an adventure, and so she told her parents that she would take her flock and leave on the morrow. Into her tiny knapsack, Amaryllis packed the book her father had given her, the fine comb that her mother had combed her hair with, and the strong leather sandals that her sisters had made for her soft feet. She then went to her bed and slept well before her journey in the morning.

Little did she know that her parents were worried for her. They had heard of strange happenings in the dark woods beyond their cottage. It had been said that a great forest people once dwelt there, but that they had vanished without a trace.

"Perhaps we should force her to stay," said her mother.

"It would be useless," her father said, "For our word cannot tie her here forever. One day she will leave without our blessing. Fear not, for I will make her a gift that will guide her in her wanderings."

That night, the farmer took a lantern and an axe and chopped down a dead juniper tree that had stood, knotted and gnarled, towering over their cottage for years. From its wood he carved her a new shepherd's hook and sang:

*“Carve from Juniper, ancient and wild,
This, a blessing, to mine youngest child,
Help her to guide and lead her flock,
Guard her ‘gainst wolves thence crows the cock.”*

The next morning Amaryllis' father presented her with the new shepherd's hook, and her mother sent her off with a loaf of bread for her meal and a cloth for her bed. Then she left with her sheep, driving them across the meadows until their cottage was lost in the distant hills.

She eventually came to a dark forest that loomed ominously in the distance, but she decided to cut through it rather than go around. As light filtered through the thick branches, Amaryllis looked upward to clusters of decaying cottages high up in the tall trees. If this had been once a village, its people were long gone. But the paths were still worn enough that Amaryllis could walk them, even though spiders' webs grabbed at her legs. She wanted to explore, to climb up into the little houses and wonder at where all the forest people had gone. But it was not long before the sheep grew impatient; they longed for the green meadows.

When Amaryllis and her flock stood at last in the tall grasses of the field, she took out her father's book and began reading it, lying at the foot of a mighty Alder tree. The wind brushed its fingers through her fiery curls and hummed a lullaby in the rustling of the trees.

She was about to nod off to sleep when a handsome young man with curling blonde hair and solemn grey eyes leaned over her.

“What are you doing here?” said the man.

“Grazing my sheep,” said she, peeking out at him from beneath an eyelid.

“Aren’t you afraid of the wolves?”

“Later I will bring my sheep out far into the meadows to make sure the wolves don’t find us.”

“But what if they do find you?”

“Then I’ll guard my flock as best I can.”

“Wouldn’t you run into the wood?”

“Of course not,” she said, closing her eyes. “If I did, then who would tend to my flock?”

Some moments of silence passed, and when Amaryllis glanced up from her book to look at the stranger, he was gone. She then shut her eyes for a quick nap.

Amaryllis awoke that night to the howling of wolves, and struggled to count her flock in the moonlight. It was late now; too late for her to drive them farther into the meadows and away from the forest. There was uneasiness in the woods, yellow eyes pierced the darkness between the trees. A deep growling settled in the voice of the wind.

She closed her eyes, frightened, listening beyond the wolves’ howls to the sounds of the earth and the sky, when the Alder tree on which she’d rested sang to her in a whisper:

“Cut from myself one growing branch

Hollowed out by bloodless hands

*To pipe a song on merry whistle
That rouses alike both bark and thistle.”*

And so Amaryllis cut a young branch that grew from the side of the alder and began to carve out a small section of it. She stripped the bark faster and faster and whittled the wood smaller and smaller as the wolves inched away from the forest and into the meadow. When she had finished, she blew an eerie tune on the whistle until the wolves ran away, yelping in pain.

Amaryllis thanked the Alder and touched its bark softly. She then took a strap of leather from her pack, strung the whistle upon it and fastened the strap about her neck.

When the sun chased away the shroud of night, the shepherdess led her flock far from the forest and into the meadows, where her sheep grazed all day. When she was tired, she sat down in the grass beside a patch of white meadowsweet and began unknotting her wild curls with her mother's comb. A man cast a shadow over the sun's warm kiss and Amaryllis looked up; the young man from the previous day stood before her.

“Why do you come so far from home?” he asked.

“Because I am the youngest,” said she. “I must seek an adventure, lest I become a spinster or a housewife like my sisters.”

“Aren't you afraid that your family will find you a husband and beckon you home?”

“No, I'll hide my flock and wait till they pass.”

“But why? Wouldn't you go home with them to a roof and a bath?”

“Of course not,” she said. “If I did, then who would tend to my flock?”

Amaryllis was about to speak again when she looked up and saw that the stranger was gone. She then put away her comb and shut her eyes for a quick nap.

When Amaryllis woke, the meadow was dark but for the glimmer of a lantern in the distance. The light grew closer and she saw the silhouette of her father nearing her in the darkness, but her father's voice was too deep, and his eyes shone yellow as the lantern's flame.

She quickly hid in the grasses and listened beyond her father's calls to the sounds of the earth and the sky, when the meadowsweet flower, beside which she'd rested, sang to her in a whisper:

*“Take from me a flowered strand,
Then tied to the staff in thy hand,
Circle ‘round your flock to hide
From treacherous wolves that wait outside.”*

So the shepherdess snapped a strand of flowers from the meadowsweet, but had nothing with which to tie the meadowsweet onto her hook. The leather strap about her neck was too small—it barely fit her slender neck, and she feared that the meadowsweet would snap if tied too tightly. She quickly ran to one of the ewes and combed through its wool with her mother's fine comb.

But her time was short. More wolves came now, disguised as her sisters, her mother, a neighbor, all of which called out her name and crept evermore closer. She quickly twisted the last of the wool into a strong thread and tied the strand of meadowsweet to her staff. Then she made a circle in the ground around her flock and waited in the grass. The wolves shook off their disguises and approached the flock with teeth bared. There they waited, until the rising sun drew them back into the woods.

Amaryllis waited in the circle until the morning fully dawned, when she drove the sheep farther into the meadows. She kept the meadowsweet bound to her staff and thanked the flowers before leaving them.

When the day was nearing its end, the shepherdess put on her sister's sandals and drew a circle around her sheep to hide them from the wolves. She then lay down in the meadow just outside it. As before, the strange young man came to her once again.

"Where are your sheep?" asked the man.

"Grazing as they always do," said the girl.

"But I can't see them."

"Of course you can't," said she.

"Why can't I?"

"Because you want to eat them." And with that, Amaryllis sprang from her grassy bed, and with her staff quickly drew a circle in the ground around the man.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm protecting my sheep." Amaryllis then played the same eerie song on the whistle as before and stuck her staff firmly in the ground. The staff was ablaze with a white fire that drove the man mad until at last he shed his human skin. In his place stood a huge black wolf that snarled and snapped its jaws at her through the meadowsweet's magic.

But Amaryllis listened past its growls to the sounds of the earth and the sky that said to her:

"Meadowsweet flower of calm and peace

Alder whistle to summon the beast

Juniper staff, alight with fire,

Send this monster to its pyre”

Suddenly the white blaze of the staff caught onto the fur of the wolf. He writhed in pain as his skin burned away to reveal the young man, curled in a ball, asleep in the grass.

The next morning, the young man awoke and looked up into the eyes of the shepherdess who had saved him. They walked back to the forest, Amaryllis' sheep trailing behind.

“I am the prince of the forest people, but many years ago, our kingdom was put under a spell by a wicked sorceress,” he said. “She made us some into wolves, some into flowers, and some into trees, but only I could walk as a man in the day, to suffer the guilt of not protecting my people.”

As they neared the forest, villagers began to appear. The Alder trees stretched their tall branches and shook off the spell like a long sleep, becoming the villagers they once were. The flowers trembled in the wind and were changed into yawning little children. The wolves emerged from the trees and shuddered—their fur fell to the ground and they tumbled to the grass as men and women, laughing.

The prince grabbed Amaryllis' hand tight and they ran through the meadow to meet his people. As they walked through the forest, the women threw crowns of flowers about them and all the forest was alive with happiness and cheers.

Slowly, the forest people rebuilt their kingdom atop the strong alder trees of the wood. After witnessing the guidance and care that Amaryllis spent on her flock, the wolf-prince asked Amaryllis to become his chief adviser. She served the kingdom for many happy years, advising

the prince on important matters and travelling to other villages to consult with their leaders.

Amaryllis' days were filled with many happy adventures.

Tavishi and the Three Wise Beasts

There once was a girl named Tavishi who came of marrying age on the banks of the Ganges River. She was a very smart girl who loved to build miniature bridges from sticks and mud, dreaming that one day, her bridges would be real. She longed to go to the big university in Kolkata, where she could learn how to build roads and bridges to connect her little town to the hustle and bustle of the big cities. Then her little brother would no longer ride an elephant, for he could drive a car. Her mother would no longer need to travel to the faraway markets, for the market in town would become bigger than even the markets in the cities. All this flashed before Tavishi's mind, and she wanted it more than anything.

But Tavishi's parents were very poor, and even if they could afford to send her to the university, she would not be welcome there. "Women are meant to be wives," said the professors, "Not engineers." So it was with a heavy heart that Tavishi put her math books away and took up her mother's red bridal veil.

The boy she was to marry was tall and slim, on the very cusp of manhood. He was a farmer, just as Tavishi's father was, and the eldest son of his family. He would be the head of his house when his father died. Tavishi's mother looked on her daughter with pride—how fortunate she was to marry a first born son! Tavishi liked this boy, but she was sad to give up her dream of becoming an engineer for wifedom.

One day as she was walking home from the market, she decided to pray at the temple for the courage to give up her dream and make a good marriage to this boy who would please her mother and father. The way to the temple was long and the day was growing short, but she walked through the jungle road as fast as she could.

After some time she came to a swamp in which floated a huge crocodile. She looked for a bridge, so as not to dirty her dress, but there was none. She turned to the crocodile which blocked her path.

“Will you let me pass?” Tavishi said to the crocodile.

“Maybe,” he said. “Come closer.” Tavishi inched nervously toward the beast, but when she got too close, he snapped her leg up in his great jaws and held on tight.

“Why do you hurt me so? What have I done to you?”

“Nothing,” he said. “But in your tearful eyes I see great fear. Tell me what it is you are afraid of.”

Tavishi thought and answered from her heart, “I fear my marriage. I don’t want to marry; I want to build bridges and roads. But the university doesn’t want me, and my parents would be so ashamed of me.”

“You must have the courage to respect old traditions without letting them block your path. If you can free yourself from my mighty jaws, then I will let you go.”

Tavishi pushed against the crocodile’s massive teeth, but the more she pushed against them, the deeper they dug into her leg. She cried out in pain as the crocodile’s jaws began to shut around her leg like a trap. If she didn’t free herself quickly, she would lose her leg. Then Tavishi thought about the crocodile’s words: *respect old traditions without letting them block your path.*

“Mister Crocodile,” she said. “Your grip on me is indeed very strong, and I respect your might. But I must get to the temple, and I cannot let you stop me from getting there.”

The crocodile smiled, “You are very clever.” He opened his jaws and Tavishi’s leg was free, though badly hurt. “Please, hop on my back and let me take you across the river.”

Tavishi drew her leg from his mouth and stood up in the water. "I'm sorry," she said, flinching from the pain. "But this is a journey I must make on my own." She waved goodbye to the crocodile and waded through the swamp to continue on her path.

Tavishi walked and walked until she could walk no more. She left the path and sat on a rock to rest for a while. Just as she settled down to look at her leg, something slimy coiled up her arm.

"Ssstop," hissed a cobra, when Tavishi tried to move. Tavishi froze, but then felt a sharp pain in her left arm around which the cobra was twisted. She leapt from her seat on the rock and shook the cobra off her.

"Why did you bite me?" said Tavishi. "What have I ever done to you?"

"Nothing," hissed the cobra. "But in your shaking hands I see much uncertainty. What is it that makes you uncertain?"

"I don't know if I can become an engineer. They don't let women into the university, and it would bring disgrace to my family if I even tried. There's no way I can do it." Suddenly Tavishi's hand went numb, and she knew the venom was spreading fast through her veins. In a few minutes, she would be dead.

"Now lisssten," said the snake. "Just as you can reject the venom in your veins, so too can you reject the old ways that bind your true self."

Tavishi thought and thought of a way to reject the poison. She tried to ignore the dull ache that crept higher and higher up her arm, but time was running out. Soon the venom would reach her heart, and she would lie cold and still in the jungle forever. She thought hard on the cobra's words: *In your shaking hands I see uncertainty... So too can you reject the old ways that bind your true self.*

“Mister Cobra,” said Tavishi, “Your poison may be deadly, but I cannot let it prevent me from reaching the temple. Your poison has no power over me.” Suddenly the poison rushed back down her arm, and seeped out of the bite.

“You are very ssstrong,” said the cobra. “Why don’t you take me with you to defeat your enemies?”

“Thank you, but whatever enemies I meet, I must overcome on my own.” Tavishi then continued on her way through the forest.

After a long while, Tavishi came to a clearing in the jungle where an enormous tiger lay sprawled in the grass. Tavishi tried to tiptoe around him, but the tiger sprang to his feet and let out a terrible snarl that echoed through all the jungle. Tavishi tried to run from him, but the tiger leapt from his place and pounced on Tavishi, pinning her beneath his massive claws.

“Why did you trap me?” Tavishi cried. “What have I ever done to you?”

“Nothing,” said the tiger. “But in your tiny voice I hear much cowardice. What is it that you run from?”

“I run from my family, for I cannot bear to face them if I should fail.”

The tiger licked his paws for a moment and thought. “I want you to roar your dreams as loud as you can. If you can roar louder than me, then I will let you go.”

“But how can I roar louder than you?” Tavishi asked.

“A roar without fear is the loudest roar of all,” said the tiger.

Tavishi took a deep breath and shouted as loud as she could, “I want to be the best engineer in all of India! I want to rebuild the bridges and roads that are broken! I want to build new ones that will connect my village to Kolkata! I want—”

Then the tiger started to roar and Tavishi's cries were lost beneath his thunderous voice. Tavishi grabbed a chunk of the tiger's fur to get him to stop, but all the tiger did was roar and roar. Tavishi put her hands over her ears and tried to think on the tiger's words over all the sound: *A roar without fear is the loudest roar of all.*

"I'm not afraid," Tavishi began. "I've escaped the jaws of the crocodile, the venom of the cobra, and I will escape your claws too, tiger. For I will reach the temple, and nothing you do can stop me!" The tiger's roar became nothing more than a timid meow as Tavishi's voice rose and rose until it became more deafening than the roar of the tiger.

"You are very brave," said the tiger. "Let me come with you to the temple, and I will announce your coming to all the jungle creatures along the way."

"Thank you, but it is time I used my own voice."

Tavishi left the tiger behind her and soon came to the temple that she had endured so much to reach. Temple monkeys leapt from statue to statue, but did not dare approach Tavishi. She was strong in a way that even nature revered. Tavishi bowed down and recited her mantras, praying for guidance in the next phase of her journey. When she had finished, a wandering monk, fresh from his travels, laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"What could such a young girl have to worry over?"

"I pray for a journey," said Tavishi. "A journey whose end I do not know."

"True journeys are taken without knowing where they will end," said the monk. He produced from his robes a crumpled train ticket and pushed it into her hand. "Take this ticket and ride the train to the very last stop. Perhaps in the city you will find the answers you seek."

Tavishi did as the monk instructed and soon saw the tall buildings of Kolkata looming high against the dawning sun. The train conductor directed her to the university, and Tavishi

soon found herself standing proudly before the large wooden doors of the academy's offices.

Tavishi knocked, and then opened the doors wide before her.

Many years later, Tavishi returned to her village, but no one recognized her. She walked with a limp where the crocodile had bitten her. She wrote with her right hand, since the cobra's venom made her left hand swollen and disfigured. As she spoke with the villagers, her voice was forever hoarse from her roaring with the tiger. But, after some time, bridges and roads began to spring up from the jungle. The market began selling beautiful silks and bright fabrics. The elephants on the road gave way to cars and bicycles. And through all this hustle and bustle, this new found city, walked Tavishi, the brave young engineer.

Vera and the Word Well

Once upon a time in a faraway land, there was a village of people who loved to talk. They talked so much and so fast that conversations came and went in the blink of an eye. Stories were related and repeated over and over again. This in itself was harmless, but when the conversation slowed and trickled to nothing, trouble would begin. For when the villagers had nothing to talk about, they would tell naughty lies about their neighbors.

On the outskirts of this very village lived an old widow who was the subject of much of the village's gossip. This old woman had never harmed anyone. She passed her days binding books for the village school in return for the small amount of money on which she lived. Though she tried to live quietly, the villagers were quick to single her out.

"She's a witch," one would whisper.

"My neighbor saw her flying on her broomstick just last night," said another.

And in this manner, so many lies spread about the widow that the villagers banished her from the town. As the poor old woman packed her bags, she cried, "Take heed you fools, for your careless tongues will wag no more. This is my curse: you and your children and your children's children will forever be silent, save for the words that you draw from my well." And with that, the old widow left the village forever.

The villagers tried to laugh at the old widow's curse, but suddenly found that they could not speak. The village was silent for the first time. Babies cried silently, and children grasped at their throats in fear. The old widow's curse had come to pass.

The villagers quickly ran to the well in the corner of old widow's yard and peered deep down, but they could see nothing. The old wooden pail was lowered down and then pulled back

up. In the bucket many different words floated about. One man reached his hand in, fished out a few words, and then ate them.

“Does it work?” he asked. All the villagers rushed toward the well, trying to get at the words. They threw the bucket back down and pulled it back up, scrambling for the words that spilled over its sides. Soon, others came to the well with buckets and jars, trying to get all the words they could from the well.

It was not two days before the villagers grew tired of fetching their words from the well, and met in the town square to talk. People dragged huge jugs full of words all the way from their houses, so they could say all they needed to say.

“We need to find the old widow, and reverse the spell,” said the farmer.

“She won’t listen to us,” said the weaver.

“Let us send a child,” said the school master. “For who could turn a cold eye the innocent face of a child?”

The town square was silent. The villagers brought forward all of their children and thought about which one to send.

“Let us send my son,” said the farmer. “For he is very strong.”

The weaver said, “No, we should send my son, for he is very handsome and charming.” There was a clamor of voices as each parent put a child forward.

The school master interrupted them, “The widow left because we spread lies about her. We must find the most honest child in the village to send to her. Is there an honest child among us?”

The square was quiet until the cobbler stepped forward and presented his plain looking daughter, Vera. “My daughter tells no lies. She is as honest a child as there ever lived.” And so it

was decided that honest Vera would journey into the world to find the old widow. They packed her a bag, covered her up in her warmest winter fur, and sent her off on the same path that the old widow had taken.

On and on walked Vera over the worn path. She saw many farmers along the way, tending to their golden fields of ripe grain. She walked over big bridges where the fishermen fished, and then through a dark forest where the hunters hunted.

“Have you seen an old widow walking this way?” she asked them, picking her words carefully from the bucket at her side.

“Beyond the dark wood and over the swift flowing river there lives a widow among the farmer’s fields of grain.” The hunter then pointed out the direction she should go and left Vera to her lonely trail.

Not long after she left the hunters, she began to hear a laughing in the forest like the tinkling of bells. Vera jumped with every rustling in the trees that she heard, but the words in her bucket were growing thin. She carefully picked two words from the bucket.

“Who’s there?” she called.

Again there came a laughing from the trees. Vera ran faster along the path, but a rusalka, a spirit of the forest, swooped down from the trees and tickled Vera to the ground. The bucket that contained all of her words spilled out, and some of them quickly disappeared into the earth. Vera squirmed and struggled against the rusalka’s tickling fingers, but she could not get free.

“What will you give me if I let you go?” the rusalka whispered.

Vera could only reach in vain for the bucket at her side, until her hand happened upon a dirt-covered word. Her father told her to never lie to a spirit, but Vera did not know what word she was about to swallow. Still, she swallowed it and said as honestly as she could, “Booties.”

“Booties?” whispered the rusalka. “For me?”

Vera nodded and removed the beautiful booties her father, the cobbler, had made for her. The rusalka put them on her feet and walked around in them. Then she scrambled back up into the trees and waved Vera goodbye.

Some words still remained in the bottom of the bucket. Vera then dusted off the few that hadn't sunk into the ground and put them back in with the others. When she finally emerged from the dark forest, the swift flowing river stretched out wide before her in the morning light. A sturdy looking bridge crossed the river, and a vodianoï, a water devil, stood on it.

“Little girl,” said the vodianoï. “Why do you deserve to cross my bridge? Answer truthfully or I will drag you to the bottom of the river to be my bride.”

Vera searched through the words in the bucket, but all of the words for “journey” and “important” were gone. So instead she fished out two clever words and swallowed them.

“Bad bride,” Vera said, pointing to herself.

The vodianoï laughed, coughing up some little fish. “You answer wisely, and for that you may pass.” The vodianoï then disappeared into the river and let Vera cross the bridge into the waving fields of grain.

Soon the midday sun made its way high into the sky and the farmers in their fields went inside to eat their lunch. Only Vera haunted the lonely cart trails. The fields of grain stretched on before Vera, waving at her in the breeze. In the bucket at her side, only five words remained. Surely this was too few to make an apology to the widow. Her journey, it seemed, was doomed to failure.

While all these thoughts passed through Vera's mind, she did not see that a poludnitsa, a spirit of the fields, stalked behind her with a sickle in her vengeful hand. Vera, the daughter of a

poor cobbler, did not know that it was forbidden to walk the wheat fields at midday. The closer the poludnitsa came, the more Vera sensed that she was being followed. She turned around to see if anyone followed her, but the poludnitsa was nimble and thin like a stalk of wheat, and avoided Vera's eyes.

At last, when the poludnitsa readied her sickle to make one fateful sweep, Vera plucked two of the words from the bucket and cried, "No harm!"

The poludnitsa heard honesty in Vera's words, and drew close to her ear. "Do not walk in my fields at midday. Remember this next time, honest daughter."

Vera turned around, but the poludnitsa was gone. Vera ran on until the wheat fields gave way to meadows, where she encountered a group of peasants. She posed them a question with one of her last three words: "Widow?"

"That cottage up there on the hill," said the peasant woman.

Vera nodded a thank you and approached the stone cottage. The door was open, but Vera gave the doorpost a loud knock.

"Come in," said the widow, who was hunched over her work binding together the pages of a book. "I know who you are and I know where you came from. But before I say more I want you to answer a question for me, and I want you to answer honestly. What do you think I am?"

In the bucket were two remaining words: "woman" and "witch."

Vera trembled. She did not want to make the widow angry, but she felt it would be equally wrong to lie. Vera reached into the bucket, plucked out her choice and ate the word.

"Witch," she said. Vera thought that she would be flung out of the door, but the old widow simply sighed. Vera felt the weight of silence lifted from her tongue, and realized that she could speak freely again.

“I do not blame you for your answer,” said the widow. “I am glad that you answered honestly instead of flattering me with a lie.”

“The villagers say they have repented,” said Vera, sitting on a stool beside the widow. “They ask that you come home.”

“The villagers say many things, but the truth is rarely among them. They have not yet learned the lesson that I am trying to teach them.”

“What if there was another way to teach them to tell the truth?” Vera flipped over the cover of the book that the widow was binding. “You bind many books that contain many untrue stories. Why not set the villagers to this task instead?”

The widow turned away from Vera’s honest eyes. “They will not listen to me,” the widow mumbled. “Not while they call me witch.”

“Then I will speak with you. Instead of taking their words away, let us teach them how to use their words for good.”

That very day, Vera and the widow packed up their things and headed back to the village. The widow had read every book she bound, so she taught the villagers how to write stories under the condition that they contained no gossip against their neighbors. They erected a big library in the town where the word well had been, and kept all the villagers’ writings there. As lies disappeared from the village altogether, the villagers found that they could speak again, and they eagerly thanked the widow for their voices. Honest Vera became the town’s librarian, and she was forever after happy and wise.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Professor Hilary Masters, in whose workshop I first discovered the wonder of fairy tales and under whose guidance this entire manuscript was produced, gaining your feedback, having your guidance, and just knowing you has made my college career unforgettable.

To Dr. Jennifer Andrus, who introduced me to feminism and the study of rhetoric, you moved me to always question my views and look critically at media, and it was your teaching that truly inspired me to write this collection.

To Dr. Andreea Ritivoi, in whose course I first devised the framework for judging this manuscript, you are an incredible professor and it has been a pleasure exploring rhetoric in your classroom.

To Sandra Walker, Jill McGee, Wendy Boyles, Marlene Palo, Emily Randolph, Karen Mitchell, and Jean Metzger, who have fostered my interest in writing since I was a child, you are fantastic, and I am so grateful to have been blessed with such amazing teachers.

To my father, who has always supported and believed in me, you brought wonder and adventure to every day of my childhood. To my mother, who has been my sounding board for fairytale ideas, this collection would have been impossible without your help, love, and encouragement.

To my sister, on whom one of my characters is based and who patiently endured story time on

many Sundays, you were an immense help in working on this collection and I wish you the best of luck in your college adventures next year.

Finally, to my wonderful fiancé, who is my muse and my private editor, even these tales will never come close to the magic of our life together.

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