

The Wild Heart

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Nothing hobbles a good story as much as the truth.

So I saved my breath to cool the bowl of stew and swallowed the words along with the ale. Besides, I've heard this story in every village I've passed through.

Satisfied that she'd have an audience at least until the bowl was empty, the plump wife of the tavern owner wiped one end of my table with a damp, dirty rag.

"There was this magical frog," said the tavern wife, "and he jumped right out of the pond where the Queen was doing her washing up, and he told her she'd be having a babe right quick. Well, the King and Queen were that happy because they'd wanted a babe for ever so long."

I finished my stew while she told me about the fairy's curse and how the princess fell into a deep sleep after she pricked herself with a spindle, and how a briar hedge grew up suddenly and surrounded the old tower that stands next to the castle. When she told me the terrible fate of the brave, handsome princes who had come to rescue the princess, she dabbled at her eyes with an apron that was as dirty as the rag she'd used to wipe the table.

"So the princess still sleeps in the tower?" I asked, straightening the leather cap that covered my head from crown to neck.

She nodded. "It's been fifteen... ah, no, it's been ten years now." She smiled slyly. "I remember because that was the year all the young men were courting me." I drained the tankard and opened my coin pouch. All business now, the woman looked me over more carefully. My clothes were worn, but the quality was as good as her husband might buy. And I'm sure mine were much cleaner.

"What brings you to these parts?" she asked.

I smiled at her. "You tell the tale well, but I've heard it before. I thought I'd see if I could wake the sleeping beauty."

She laughed so hard she almost fell over. "You?" she gasped, clutching her sides. "You? You're not a prince."

My smile faded.

Her laughter died.

I carefully laid the coins on the table. "No, I'm not."

The castle's just over the next rise. To pass the time, let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there was a lovely queen who was married to a king almost twice her age. One day, while bathing in a secluded pool near the castle, she was joined by a companion who promised her a child. Only the queen knows for sure, but it's doubtful her companion was a talking frog. Which might explain why, a few years later when a guest at the castle teasingly said the little princess must have a bit of Gypsy blood, the king looked furious and the queen looked very pale.

Despite what you may have heard, the princess wasn't beautiful, and she wasn't plain. Like most people, she was somewhere in between. But what made people notice her was the inner light burning so brightly she seemed to glow. She embraced life joyously. Yes, she was polite. Yes, she was kind. Yes, she was gentle and caring. She also had curiosity and courage and an adventurous spirit. She laughed and jumped and ran. She skinned her elbows and skinned her knees. She climbed the trees in the orchard better than the boys. If her eyes swam in tears when she was scolded for tearing her gowns, it didn't stop her from embracing the next adventure, the next challenge.

Twelve of the nurses responsible for the princess's care would cluck their tongues, shake their heads, and talk among themselves about this stubborn, unladylike streak in their otherwise delightful charge. The thirteenth nurse, who, it was rumored, had a few drops of Gypsy blood and had been hired by the queen despite the king's objections, merely smiled and said only gentleness could tame the wild heart.

The other nurses didn't like the Gypsy nurse, probably because the princess liked her best. She was the only one willing to take long rambles or go riding. She was the only one willing to hitch up her skirts and wade in a stream. She was the only one who understood that the Wild Heart and the Gentle Heart were two halves of a whole, and both were as necessary as air and water, food and sleep.

Sometimes the other nurses would talk as they stitched and mended. Sometimes, if the princess was working quietly on the other side of the room, they would talk woman talk, forgetting how well voices can carry.

"The kitchen maid's belly is swelling," one of them would say, sniffing in disapproval. "She pricked herself with a spindle."

That's what they said when one of the lower serving girls was dismissed. "She pricked herself with a spindle."

But sometimes, when one of *them* came to the sewing room looking smugly pleased, the others would just as smugly tease, "Oh, did you sit on a spindle last night? Was it *abig* spindle?" And they'd laugh.

"Why would anyone want to sit on a spindle?" the princess asked the Gypsy nurse one time. "Wouldn't it hurt?"

The Gypsy nurse's lips tightened. She looked nervously at the other women. "There are spindles and there are spindles. Now hush. I've already said too much."

Not enough, not near enough, but still too much, because the next day there were only twelve nurses looking after the princess.

The day the princess turned fifteen, a great feast was planned. Since the king was out for the day doing

something kingly, the princess went up to the queen's rooms to visit. The queen wasn't in her sitting room, but a handsome stranger was. Believing he was a guest who had come for the feast, she brushed off her manners and greeted him as a proper young lady should.

Instead of conversing politely, he circled around her, blocking the door. "Do you like spinning?" he asked.

"Not really," she said, backing away from him.

He licked his lips. "Maybe you haven't used the right spindle."

She didn't like the strange look in his eyes. She didn't like the way he kept smiling as he walked toward her.

She ran for the queen's bedchamber, hoping her mother was there, hoping she could reach the door and lock him out.

Her legs tangled in her skirt.

Do I need to tell you what happened next? Let's just say that she fought with all her strength and courage, but it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

After he left the room, she heard voices murmuring, then turning harsh. When the queen flew into the bed-chamber, she drew some courage from her mother's fury until the first hard slap.

"You little bitch," the queen hissed. "You've ruined everything. *Everything*. How dare you come here, to *my* rooms, and tease him, entice him, spread your legs for him in *my* bed. He was *my* lover. *Mine!* You think this makes up for all the other ways you don't act like a proper woman? You think your husband's not going to know what a little slut you are when he mounts you on your wedding night? And your father's going to blame *me* for this when your noble bridegroom complains." She raked her hands through her hair. "And if your belly swells... Isn't it enough that you ruined the pleasure I've been looking forward to for *weeks* without me having to worry about that, too?" Her eyes glittered. She bared her teeth. "Damn your wild ways. Damn your wild heart. I've endured enough from you. No more, do you hear me? *No more.* "

The queen swept out of the room, locking the door behind her.

Caged by the Gentle Heart's fear, the Wild Heart raged in silence.

A short while later, the queen swept into the room again. She set a basin of warm water and a sponge on the wash table, and dropped a towel and an old skirt and top on the chest at the end of the bed. Yanking the torn gown and undergarments off the princess, she snapped, "Wash yourself, and do a good job."

While the queen bundled up the bloody sheets and ruined clothes, the princess washed herself. And washed herself. And washed.

Even though it, too, was afraid, the Wild Heart howled to be free to move, to act. But the Gentle Heart clung to it desperately.

Things blurred after that. The basin with the sponge and blood-tinted water disappeared. So did the

dirty towel. The queen helped the princess dress. With one hand wrapped around the girl's wrist and the other arm bugging a lidded clay pot, the queen hurried them through the servants' corridors and out of the castle to the old tower.

They climbed the narrow, winding staircase until they reached the room at the top. Inside was a bed, a piece of polished metal that was used as a mirror, a small table with uneven legs, a candleholder with a partially burned candle, and steel and flint.

"We have to hurry," the queen muttered. "The king will be back soon, and this must be done before he returns." She took the lid off the clay pot, which was filled with earth. She lit the candle and tried to smile. "In a way, what happened today was partly my fault. I should have done this sooner. Right after the first time you bled. That's, when my mother did it to me. For me. It hurts a little, but it's better this way. In a few days you won't even notice. Now more than ever, it's important for you to act like a modest young woman. You'll never do it while the wildness is in your heart."

Too frightened to move, the princess watched while the queen mumbled strange words and moved her hands over the clay pot.

The princess felt a queer tugging inside her, as if something was being pulled out of her and into the strange words and patterns the queen was forming. As her inner light grew weaker and weaker, her right hand felt heavier and heavier. It pulsed.

The Wild Heart howled in fierce desperation.

"It's ready," the queen said. Taking a little knife out of her skirt pocket, she pulled the princess's right hand over the clay pot, jabbed the girl's fingers several times, and then squeezed to draw the blood. "This will get the wildness out. All it takes is a few drops of blood on the spelled earth and the wildness will be trapped inside the pot." She smiled grimly. "Don't worry. Some of it has to remain with you. Otherwise, you'll give your husband no pleasure when he comes to your bed."

The princess shivered. A husband. A bed. Another man wanting to use his spindle like the stranger had. And the Wild Heart gone.

It's hard to say whether it was fear or rage that reacted when the first drops of blood fell onto the earth in the clay pot.

The princess yanked her hand out of the queen's grasp. Unbalanced, she hit the table as she fell. The uneven legs rocked hard enough to pitch the clay pot onto the floor, shattering it.

Blood dripped from her fingers.

Air claimed some drops.

Her tears claimed some.

The candle flame claimed a few before it went out.

The earth, freed of both pot and spell, claimed more.

And from those things, an older, wilder magic gave birth.

Thunder shook the tower. When it faded, there were three people in the room where there had been two.

The third, with its savage eyes and bared teeth... it was more than a shadow and less than a soul.

It was the Wild Heart, unchained. "Go," the princess whispered as she struggled to sit up.

"Go before she finds a way to trap you."

It didn't question, didn't hesitate. It was out the door and down the stairs before the queen could gather her wits.

When it left the tower and ran into the woods, the princess collapsed, still living but no longer alive.

Once the queen realized she couldn't wake the girl, she dragged her over to the bed. Then, weeping hysterically, she made her way back to the castle just as the king returned.

The queen wept out a pathetic story about the Gypsy nurse returning and casting a wicked spell on their precious daughter, and how she, realizing the princess was missing and seeing the woman sneaking out of the old tower, had rushed to her daughter's defense while one of the guests — did the king see the scratches on the poor man's face? — had chased the woman, catching her long enough to discover that the spell could be broken by a prince's kiss. But she had used more of her wicked magic and escaped into the woods.

As you can imagine, the castle was in an uproar. So it was easy for the Wild Heart to sneak back in and steal clothing from the male servants' quarters.

The Wild Heart knew two things: it had to grow older and stronger before it returned to the Gentle Heart, and the Gentle Heart had to be protected until that time.

It waited long into the night, until everyone had wearily gone to bed. Then it called the old magic that had given it birth, and crying softly for the one who lay within, it circled the tower three times.

By the time it finished the third circle, the briar hedge had begun to grow. By the time the sun rose, a thick, tangled, thorny mass surrounded the tower.

Before the first servant stirred, the Wild Heart was gone.

You wonder about the princes? Oh, they came, and they did look splendid as they rode to the castle on their fine horses. But they didn't come out of love. They came for the prize hidden in the old tower. They came for a chance to rule a kingdom.

They didn't understand the nature of the briar hedge.

So they drew their swords and battled the thorns that were as long and as sharp as daggers. They hacked and slashed, slashed and hacked, and the more they cut, the faster and thicker and more tangled the briar hedge grew. Sometimes it grew so fast it surrounded one of them between one sword stroke and the next.

But they didn't remain caught there. As long as no one tried to push forward into the tower, a prince's companions were always able to cut away enough of the hedge to pull him free.

There were a couple of them who almost understood the magic. They kept their swords sheathed and used poetry and songs for their weapons. Moving gently, speaking softly, they coaxed their way through the thorns and tangles, all the way up to the room at the top of the tower. Once there, they discovered that the hedge had broken through the shutters of the window near the bed and filled half the room, arching over the bed like a canopy.

Being able to see the prize, they became frustrated and drew their swords to slash and hack their way through those final few feet. Violated so close to the Gentle Heart, the thorns retaliated.

They did cut. They did wound. But even then they didn't kill.

Finally admitting defeat, the princes who had understood enough to reach the room but not enough to win the prize were allowed to pass back through the hedge and rejoin their companions.

After a while, they all decided the prize wasn't worth the pain, and they returned home.

Nothing died among the thorns except greed and ambition.

Ah, there's the castle. That dark, tangled mass beside it is the old tower.

The princess is still up there, living but not alive.

The king died a few years ago. After the year of mourning ended, the queen married one of the handsome princes who had come to claim the prize. She lives in another castle now, a long ways from here, but when the royal procession passes through this part of the land, she and her prince-husband spend a few days at the castle.

No one talks about the tower or the one who lies within. No one tries to understand the nature of the briar hedge.

The princess is neither mourned nor missed by anyone except the Wild Heart.

It's better that way.

You like the other tale better?

Well, nothing hobbles a good story as much as the truth.

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I left my traveling pack at the edge of the woods and walked toward the old tower, wondering if I would be welcome.

It was easy to find the starting point. The briar hedge was thicker and more tangled near the tower door.

I pricked my finger on one of the thorns. Let it taste me. It quivered. Inside the tower, something else stirred.

I slowly circled the tower, walking widdershins to unmake what had been made. As I walked, I touched the hedge gently, sang to it softly.

By the time I completed the first circle, the hedge was covered with green leaves. By the time I completed the second, buds were swelling. By the time I completed the last circle, the tower was covered with beautiful, blood-red flowers nestled among the thorns.

I stood before the hedge, waiting.

It stirred, untangled, formed an archway leading straight to the tower door. I climbed the narrow, winding staircase and entered the room. The hedge parted. I walked into the thorny, blooming bower, leaned over the bed, and gently kissed her lips.

She sighed, stirred, opened her eyes.

"It's time to go," I said softly.

I helped her stand, supported her as we passed through the hedge. By the time we reached the other side of the room, she was able to stand on her own.

I stepped back and studied her while I waited.

Protected by the thorns, she, too, had grown in her own way.

She took a deep breath. Took another.

I pulled off the leather cap that covered my head from crown to neck. My hair tumbled down my back.

"I've missed you," I said quietly. "I've needed you."

She stared at me. "You're —"

"More than a shadow and less than a soul."

Her eyes filled with tears, but she smiled. "I've dreamed of you."

"And I of you."

We studied each other for another minute before shyly opening our arms and stepping into an embrace.

The wind sighed. The hedge stirred.

When the sounds faded, there was one person hugging herself where there had been two.

We wore my leather jerkin and shirt over her skirt. We wore my boots instead of her slippers.

We made a neat bundle of the leftover clothes and left the tower.

Stopping just beyond the hedge, she broke off one of the thorns and slipped it into our skirt pocket. I picked one of the flowers and tucked it into the jerkin's ties.

We wanted to jump and run. We wanted to cry healing tears.

Instead, we sneaked into the kitchen, snatched a carry sack, and filled it with bread, cheese, and joints of cooked meat. Finding a litter of newly weaned kittens in one of the storage rooms, we were tempted to take one.

Nuzzling the small bundle of fur, I offered to find a quiet village where we could settle down.

Gently returning the kitten to its littermates, she said she wanted to see a bit of the world first.

We had to slip out of the kitchen quickly before our muffled laughter woke the servants.

Gathering up our traveling pack on the way, we stopped at the orchard, climbed a tree, and picked all the apples we could carry.

Laughing quietly, we feasted on our stolen bounty. Alive and once more whole, we slept in the orchard for a little while.

By the time the sun rose and the servants began to stir, the briar hedge was sinking back into the earth, and the Gentle Heart and the Wild Heart were gone.

Anne Bishop

Anne Bishop lives in western New York and enjoys gardening, a variety of arts and crafts, storytelling, and music, especially playing Celtic folk music on the hammered dulcimer. Her stories have been published in Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears and Black Swan, White Raven. She is also the author of two dark fantasy novels, Daughter of the Moon and Heir to the Shadows .

"The Wild Heart" blends Bishop's interest in psychology, women's studies, and archetypes with her love of fairy tales and fantasy.

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