



Ember

Tay Laroi
Retold Fairy Tales

5 min read

Once, during the same time as another beloved fairy tale, lived a young boy named Ember. His parents had mistakenly named him Emily, thinking he was a girl, but once he was old enough to set the record straight, it proved an easy enough change to make. Ember spent so much time outside getting dirty, bringing home frogs, and sword fighting with the servants' sons and borrowing their clothes that they had thought something was different about him for a while.

But then an epidemic swept across the land, taking Ember's mother from him. In time, his father met a woman who had lost her husband as well and, taking pity on her and her two daughters, he married her.

His wife disapproved of Ember and his insistence he was a boy, especially since he had taken to wearing one of his mother's favorite earrings after her death. The family had lost the other one when they packed up his mother's things, you see. The step-mother thought Ember was making a mockery of her daughters, for he was quite beautiful while her daughters were quite plain. Their bitter, entitled attitudes did them no favors.

Still, the family lived in frost-thin peace until Ember's father died at the hand of a highwayman while traveling for work. He had always handled the family's money, but now that the responsibility fell to the step-mother, she realized that their fortunes had been dwindling for years. Her daughters were too old to give away as apprentices and they had few talents to speak of. Their only hope would be to marry well.

The step-mother cut costs where she would and doing without when they could. One of her attempts to stretch her late husband's fortune included firing all of the hired help and leaving the household duties to Ember. She insisted it was because he was the oldest, but truthfully, the step-mother didn't want him getting in the way of her daughters' future. Surely, she thought, no one would want to marry into a family with a child as strange as Ember.

For years Ember worked away scrubbing, mending, and cooking in his own home trying to hold a bit of joy in his heart. He was still fed, he knew he could find work in another household when his father's money eventually did run out—for he knew it would—and he didn't have to spend nearly as much time with his step-sisters now that their mother was constantly teaching them to be proper ladies as often as she could.

Then, one summer day just shy of Ember's nineteenth birthday, it was announced throughout the kingdom that the prince was looking to marry. A week from the day of the announcement there would be a ball and every young lady of marital age was welcome to attend.

No sooner did the step-mother read the announcement out loud to her daughters—and Ember, who happened to be pouring them tea—did they fly into a tizzy, rummaging through dresses, sorting through jewels, and hunting for their favorite pairs of shoes.

The step-mother was so tied up with calming and organizing her own daughters that she didn't notice Ember slip away to the attic to look through his father's old things. A few of his best suits had just barely avoided the step-mother's purge of selling anything they didn't need. She had spared a pair of his best shoes and his favorite cuff links as well.

But Ember was shorter than his father had been, with his mother's slender shoulders, narrow wrists, and small feet. His heart sank at the sight of how his father's clothes dwarfed him.

His step-mother's laughter when she went looking for him didn't help matters either.

"What on earth are you doing, child?" she cackled. "You look ridiculous. Take those clothes off. Tell me truly, now, were you thinking of going to the ball?"

Ember's face burned with embarrassment as he began to unlace the shoes. "I thought I could come along. The prince is looking for a wife, correct? I wouldn't be in the way."

"But you have nothing to wear. You're mad if you think I'm letting you embarrass us leaving like that."

"If I can fix one of the suits by the ball, can I go?"

The step-mother thought it over carefully. She didn't want the boy anywhere near her daughters while trying to secure a husband—if not the prince then a brother of one of the other girls vying for his attention—but to tell him "no" straight out would only cause him to fight her.

"If you can fix one of the suits in a week, you're welcome to come with us." Before a smile could cross his face, she added, "But you must finish all your chores first."

Still, Ember agreed, unaware of how much his chores would increase over the coming week. His step-sisters' dresses needed mending, their shoes, and jewelry polished. They needed him to fetch teas and creams in the market that fostered beauty. The house had to be cleaner than ever for future sons-in-law to visit. By the time his work was done, he only had a few hours to work on his father's suit. And every night he came back to it, most of the stitches he had put in the night before would mysteriously be unraveled.

The morning of the ball, he awoke to find everything in pieces. Not only did he have nothing to wear to the ball, but his father's best suit, the last memento Ember had of him, now lay in shambles.

The step-mother feigned surprise as Ember served them breakfast. "What a shame. It looks like you won't be able to attend the ball with us tonight after all."

The young man said nothing in response as his stepsisters snickered. What was there to say? His step-family had won. He'd let them ruin his father's suit, though he had no hard evidence of who had done it. He'd spend the night alone, like every other night since his parents had died. If he were to give voice to any of his thoughts,

he knew he'd break down and the one thing he still controlled was the ability to withhold that satisfaction from them.

At least until the three of them left for the ball.

With the house empty and his chores done, Ember slipped away to the labyrinth of weeds and vines that had once been his mother's garden. The gardeners who had tended to it were the first to be let go and Ember had no time to tend to it, so it had withered and wilted years ago.

As Ember realized he felt just like the garden, he dropped to his knees and wept.

The first teardrops fell like any other, silently, leaving hardly a shadow on the ashy soil, but one by one they began to change. As they fell, they turned to crystals that shattered as they hit the ground, plucking out a crisp little melody.

Ember found himself so confused by the sound that he sat up and looked around, because who could believe that falling tears could make music. With a start, he scrambled to his feet when he noticed a tall willowy figure standing behind him.

She stood as comfortably in the dead garden as in her own home and smiled at Ember as if she had known him for years. Her pure white gown glowed in the moonlight, as did the bluish crystals that hung from her pointed ears. When she laughed, it sounded to Ember like rain after a drought. "It's about time you called me, child. With that stiff upper lip of yours and unwillingness to break, I thought I'd never get to meet you."

Ember stood stunned and blinking, unconvinced the woman could be real. "Away with you, spirit. I've simply lost my nerve, not my mind."

The woman laughed again, her shoulders shaking and tears of her own forming at the corners of her eyes. "You silly boy, I'm your fairy godmother, not a ghost." She frowned when Ember still regarded her with caution.

"Your parents never told you, did they?"

"Tell me what?"

With a disappointed sigh, the woman took a seat on a weathered stone bench and patted the empty side for Ember to join her. After a few more moments of skepticism, he obliged. If she were a ghost, she was at least a

kind one. But what sort of ghost could take a boy's hands in hers and warm them like a mother?

"You never knew her, but your grandmother was one of my people, a fairy. She gave up immortality to be with your grandfather and, while such matches are often scorned, none of us could find any fault in the man. So loved was the pair that, at their wedding, I offered her anything she wished for a gift. She told me, 'I know the human lands are cold and bleak. They do not care for each other with honor and fairness. Should any of my decedents shed a tear due to malice or cruelty, come forth and show them a kindness so that they know my people and may heal.'"

Ember shook his head and massaged his temple in an attempt to keep his mind from reeling. "My mother never told me. Did my father even know?"

His godmother shrugged and got to her feet. "Who knows? Maybe she lived such a blessed life that she never had to think about it. It would explain the mess you're in now. Such blessings hardly ever last long."

Ember looked down at his ragged shoes, embarrassed by the way he had done nothing to fix his current situation.

The fairy lifted his chin. "Fret not, child. You've fought long and hard to keep your head high in the face of adversity, which is why it's taken for me to come to you. Now, let's relax and have some fun, shall we? I understand you have a ball you want to attend, correct?"

Ember slumped. "It's for the prince who wants to find a wife. I don't have any eligible girls to go with, so I don't even think they'd let me in. My step-sisters barely made the cut, but they worked well enough."

The fairy chuckled and turned Ember around by the shoulders, studying his frame and clothes. "You've got your grandmother's mouth on you, I see. Fret not. You'll get in easy enough. Now, let's see...Close your eyes and think as hard as you can about walking into that ballroom. Stand tall. What do you look like?"

Ember did as he was told with his eyes squeezed shut. He pictured himself striding into the room with his head held high, broad shoulders, tall, a strong jaw and lightly tousled hair. His clothes were a bit more of a challenge. He imagined every dashing aristocratic man he had ever seen in the market and picked out his favorite pieces of each of their suits, careful to remember that his mother's earring had to remain a part of the

garb.

When he opened his eyes, his fairy godmother beamed at him with a mirror in her hand. “Not bad if I do say so myself. Take a look.”

Ember nearly dropped the mirror when he looked inside. The man staring back at him was everything he had ever imagined himself being, then some. For the first time, he saw his father in himself. It was enough to bring him to tears a second time, but he figured one fairy godmother was plenty.

He couldn't help but spin several times to marvel at his suit, classic like his father's, but charming with its updated colors and pattern on the vest. His father's gold cufflinks adorned his wrists.

“You can marvel at my handy work on your way there,” said the fairy. “We must be on our way. You've only got until midnight to go and return.”

Ember's heart sank a bit. “Midnight?”

The fairy gave him a sad smile as she waved her hands, turning an old bush into a carriage, patches of vines into lean, beautiful horses, and the angel atop a dry fountain into a horseman. “Your human world can only support magic for so long. I'm sorry, child.”

Ember shrugged off his ungratefulness and beamed as he lept up into the carriage. “It's more than I could have ever asked for. Thank you.” By the time she shut the door behind him, his fairy godmother was gone.

The angelic horseman got Ember to the ball in record time, mostly because no one wished to question such a strange carriage, nor fight with it for space on the road. One man even wailed that the end of the world was upon them.

The attendants at the palace allowed him in all the same, as scared as anyone else to cross a man with such a fierce servant, and Ember strode into the ballroom with his head held high and chest out.

Until he remembered that attending a ball meant talking to girls, something his step-mother had ensured he had next to no practice at.

He stood on the sidelines, watching the chat and whisper as they watched the prince dance with every girl in

the room. Even the ones he had already danced with gave him their full attention. It wasn't until Ember noticed a curious curtain near a bay window that he had his chance.

The curtain had a pair of slippers sticking out from underneath.

Ember's heart stopped the moment he pulled back the curtain. The girl whom the slippers belonged to scowled at him, her radiant blue eyes like daggers and her stunning brown hair like waves of chocolate. Ember had never been so sure of anything in his life before knowing that this girl would have the most beautiful smile in the world.

"Do you mind?" she snapped, turning the page of the book in her hand. "I'm trying to be invisible."

Ember dropped the curtain. "My apologies, ma'am." Seeing as she was the only girl he had spoken to all night, he decided to see if she would talk to him any more. "Good book?"

"My favorite," she said through the curtain. "A collection of fairy tales from when I was little."

Ember chuckled to himself. "Always a good option." He tapped his toes for a moment. No one else seemed to even realize any man but the prince was there, especially since he was now apparently dancing with a strange mystery guest that no one recognized. Women whispered out of confusion rather than bitterness they were so startled by the turn of events.

"May I ask why you're trying to be invisible?" Ember asked.

The girl sighed. "I didn't want to come to this, but the rest of my family's here. They forced me to come. There's a festival I wanted to go to down in the town square instead. Everyone's so much more fun when they're not fretting about the prince choosing a bride."

Ember shrugged. "Well, I for one don't care if he finds a bride."

The girl poked her head out from the curtain. "You don't?"

"Why would I?"

"You don't want to see your sisters or cousins or whatever married off to nobility?"

Ember scowled. "They could marry toads for all I care. I just wanted a chance to get out of the house and meet a pretty girl such as yourself." Realizing how flirtatious his words sounded, Ember added a sly smirk. "The fact that you like to read makes me feel like quite the lucky man indeed."

The girl's cheeks glowed red and she closed her book. "My family says this book's for children."

"Fairy tales are for anyone who needs a little bright spot in their day, and it sounds like you could use more than a few." His heart pounded against his chest as he held out his hand. "Might I add one more, ma'am?"

The girl wanted to say no. She didn't want to have fun, if for no other reason than to spite her family, but this strange man who had come out of nowhere made her forget all about them the second she took his hand and let him sweep her out onto the dance floor.

The only thing she could protest was the way he called her ma'am. "My name is Autumn and you shall refer to me as such."

He clearly had never danced before. Not formally, anyway, but he laughed at his own awkwardness and lack of skill and didn't protest when she took the lead for a moment to show him the steps. He asked about her favorite fairy tales and what she liked to do other than reading. She couldn't resist the way his eyes lit up with excitement when she said she loved gardening, despite the way it got her hands dirty.

"My mother loved gardening before she died," he explained as he twirled her under his arm. "She died before she could teach me how to do it and I have little time to learn myself."

"I'd love to teach you." The words were out of Autumn's mouth before she could think better of it, but it was true. She wanted nothing more than to learn everything about this strange boy, despite the way he said little about his own life. He was orphaned and lived with his step-family. Judging by the way he wilted at the mention of them, she figured they didn't treat him well, which made her heart sink.

Who could be unkind to such a gentle soul as this?

Before she could ask him, the bell struck twelve and he froze on the dance floor. When he looked at the clock in the bell tower outside the window, his face paled. "I have to go."

Those words broke Autumn's heart. She hadn't even realized this stranger had found a place in it.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I just have to get home. I'm sorry. I don't have time to explain."

Ember disappeared into the crowd as quickly as he had shown up, leaving Autumn to chase a ghost down the corridors and out onto the staircase. All she had to convince her she hadn't imagined him was a single silver earring dropped on the stairs outside.

Ember, on the other hand, didn't stop to think of Autumn until he was safe at home, his clothes again shambles and his feet blistered from having to walk home halfway across the town since the magic hadn't lasted long after his escape.

Lying in bed, exhausted, sweaty and blissful, he thought of Autumn and how one evening with her had been worth all the years of loneliness. He prayed to his fairy godmother that her memory would be strong enough to keep him happy for the rest of his life, for surely she wouldn't want him she saw him without the magic: slender, slight, and feminine.

Little did he know, however, that a young woman across town had been blessed with a similar magical night and had caught the eye of the prince. Instead of an earring, however, she left behind a single glass slipper on the staircase for the prince to find.

When the prince vowed to find the girl who owned the glass slipper, his sister, Princess Autumn, vowed to find the boy who wore the earring. She had been quite fed up with the way he thought he was the center of the kingdom, crowned prince or not. And so, the two made it a race to find the mysterious strangers they had fallen in love with at the ball. The two gleaned their kingdom, from the highest member of the court to the lowliest peasant.

A week passed and Princess Autumn swore she had her brother beat, for she had searched nearly every

household for her young man, but when Saturday rolled around, she began to worry. Her brother may have had more young ladies to search through, but she had run out of households with young men and her love was nowhere to be found.

And so, she began the search anew, going to every house with any children the proper age at all, asking questions, wondering if they had sent any of their sons away. Her brother won, finding a girl named Cinderella working as a maid in her own family's household, and yet Autumn searched on.

Tired, her hope dwindling, and on the brink of tears for fear of losing her young man forever, Autumn knocked on the step-mother's front door herself, too impatient to have the servants announce her properly.

Ember heard the knocking from the kitchen and hollered for his step-mother. He had been forbidden from ever answering the door, but his step-mother never answered, nor his step-sisters. They were all locked away in the study for a music lesson—at least, that's what they called that racket screeching from the step-sisters' vocal cords—and the knocking sounded urgent.

So, Ember answered the door himself and stood frozen in the doorway.

"Um, hello," Autumn said, surprised the lady of the house let one of her servants answer the door in such a ragged condition, but not wanting to be rude. "Is your mistress home? I need to speak with her. It's a matter of the crown. Tell her Princess Autumn needs to speak to her at once."

"Princess?" Ember took a few stunted steps back and shook off the shock. "Of course. I'll fetch her for you." He turned and darted away, hoping Autumn would not recognize him, but she called out to him the second his feet hit the staircase.

"Wait."

He obeyed and slowly turned around.

Autumn let herself into the house and studied Ember's face, knowing full well she knew those kind eyes, expressive lips, and that unruly, but charming, hair. "Have we met?"

“Of course not, ma’am—I mean Your Highness.”

Autumn marched to the staircase, heedless of the way Ember flinched as she placed a foot on the first step.

“Don’t lie to your princess. Tell me true. Have we met before?”

Ember took a deep breath and swallowed hard, despite his dry mouth. “We have, Your Highness.”

Autumn’s heart raced, but she did her best not to show it. She could still be wrong. “The last time we met, you forgot something. What was it? And I forbid you to lie to me again.”

Ember reached for his ear before he could think of it. It was all the answer Autumn needed, but still, he spoke.

“A single silver earring that belonged to my mother.”

Autumn took several more steps, which Ember matched with steps away from her.

“Your Highness, let me explain,” he stammered. “There was a spell, and a fairy godmother I didn’t know I had. I didn’t mean to lie to you. I’m sorry this is what I actually look like, I just—”

“You’re him, aren’t you? You’re the boy I met at the ball.”

“...Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I told you to call me Autumn, did I not?” she snapped. “Your penance for lying to me and for not seeing how beautiful you are just like this is a single kiss.”

All Ember could do was blink, frozen in place, so Autumn took it upon herself to close the space between them and collect the penance. Ember melted against her at the touch of her lips, losing himself in the realization that she would be the only one he wanted to kiss for the rest of their lives.

It was quite a tender moment until his step-mother came out shrieking at the two of them. She promptly stopped and turned bright red in embarrassment once she realized who she was screaming at. No amount of apologies could curb Princess Autumn’s tongue as she berated the woman for how Ember had been treated all those years. Nothing but her true love’s hand on her shoulder could calm her.

“Leave her and my step-sisters alone, love,” said Ember. “Let the bitterness and hatred stewing in their hearts

be punishments enough. That'll eat them up more than any order you could set against them.”

Begrudgingly, Autumn agreed and turned to leave with Ember's hand in hers. He paused for a moment in the doorway to take in the home that had once been filled with so much love before it had been tainted by shallowness and hate. The change struck him so, that he made an offer to his step-mother.

“When the money runs out, come and find me. I won't let you starve, but I won't let you three stay so haughty and evil either. There will always be three spots open among the palace servants for you. Hopefully, the lesson in humility and charity will feed your souls while we're feeding and housing you.”

The two left the step-mother standing on the staircase slack-jawed and speechless.

The second Autumn pulled Ember into her carriage, she kissed him again, delirious with joy that she had found him and that everything wonderful about him was still intact, although a tad different.

Not bad. Not wrong. Just different.

Still self-conscious and shy as he had ever been, Ember pulled away when he felt eyes on him and his love. Outside stood the fairy godmother, grinning and waving as the two drove away.

“Do you know that woman?” Princess Autumn asked as she waved back with Ember.

“I do. She led me to you and blessed me with the most kindness I've felt since my parents died.” Ember placed a tender kiss on Autumn's hair as the carriage rounded the corner. “That makes her the greatest family I've known since.”

THE END

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