



Snee

Erin Murray
Retold Fairy Tales

On a winter day near the birth of their first child, Countess Ludmilla Romanovna spoke to her husband.

“Look, Viktor,” Milla said, “a cardinal has landed in the snow on the windowsill. Oh, I wish our child may have your black hair, and skin as white as snow, and lips as red as the cardinal who gazes at us!”

And a little girl was born to the Romanovs, with black hair, white skin, and red lips, features her mother did not live to see.

The grieving Count Romanov remembered his wife’s wish, naming his daughter Snigurka – “snow maiden” in his native tongue. Her nanny called her simply “Snee”.

Though he loved his little countess, Viktor was a mere husk. In time, the Count’s relations urged him to remarry. Snee needs a mother; besides, it is terrible form to appear at events without a suitable companion.

The Honorable Maleficent Bourke-Jones had been steadily working her way up the marriage ladder to obtain that honorific. The prospect of switching from a mere Honorable to a Countess blew the lid off her tactics. She purred her way into the Count’s befuddled graces, and expressed a lifelong desire to mother something. Scarcely caring, the Count gave in.

Helping herself to the Count’s wealth, makeovers for Maleficent became a weekly necessity. As a driver, she hired one Boris Bullkonsky to drive her each Thursday morning to Chez Christophe, where the owner presided personally over her renovations.

“Tell me, Christophe love,” Maleficent cooed each week, face slathered in honeyed cucumbers, and nails repainted with Murder by Red, “tell me I’m beautiful.”

“Why Countess, honey, you’re the fairest thing I’ve ever laid eyes on!”

The slather wrinkled.

“What am I thinking? Countess, precious, you’re the fairest thing in the world!”

When Nanny and Cook came down with colds, Maleficent was forced to drag her much-loathed stepdaughter along to the weekly renovation. Snee played pretend with two large curlers. She wore a large locket, inscribed with an “R.”

“Christophe darling. Who’s the fairest in the world?”

Distracted by the lovely child’s pantomime, Christophe lost track of his mind.

“Your daughter.”

He froze, his rediscovered mind scattering in fright.

“WHAT?” the Countess roared.

She roared most of the way home. Six blocks from the Penthouse, she growled instructions to Boris.

“You know what I have on you, Borishka. Make it good!”

Boris drove Snee to the Tribeca Wal-Mart, bought scissors, crawled in the back, and cut off her curls. He drove to Deepest Darkest South Bronx, opened the door, and said to the trembling child:

“Get out.”

At daybreak, sick with weeping for her Papa, Snee found herself beneath an overpass staring at several large freight boxes clumped together at odd angles. A hole had been cut in one, and outside stood a pot of red geraniums. Exhausted, Snee took one cautious look-see inside the hole, crawled inside, and fell asleep.

“What is that?”

Snee woke. A bulbous red nose loomed over her.

“Look what you’ve done,” another voice said, this time from a kindly face wearing spectacles. “You’ve scared it!”

More faces crowded round.

“Who are you?” Snee asked.

“Who are you?” Red Nose retorted.

“I’m Snee. This is your house? I lived in a penthouse.”

“Sure you did,” Red Nose said.

Spectacles said, “I’m Brain, this is Doofus, Drippy, Snoozer, Smiley and Shucks. The friendly fellow with the big schnozz is Cranky.”

“We’re homeless,” Smiley...smiled. “You?”

“I don’t know,” Snee sniffled. She explained as best she could.

Brain frowned. The papers by the Labor Exchange carried the news of her disappearance – and of the sudden death of Count Romanov upon hearing the news.

“Well, you can’t go back.”

“But Papa?”

Gently, Brain told her. The brothers gathered around, patting her shoulder or examining their toes in silence.

“No foster home for you kiddo.” Brain announced. “You stay right here. It’s warm; we can feed one more. You can look after the place, and on Sunday’s we can take you over to the liberry so you can learn.”

The arrangement was a happy one. Snee looked after the Boxes and the brothers, and sent them off to the Labor Exchange each day as presentably as circumstances allowed. They sheltered her and loved her like their own grandchild, and took her to the library on Sundays.

Snee grew into a lovely young woman. One Sunday, outside the Library, the traffic lodged a sleek Porsche in front of her. The driver gawked. As the Brothers taught her never to speak to strangers, she looked away, though the driver's oddly familiar red dreadlocks were hard to ignore.

The following Thursday, when Maleficent asked The Question, Christophe had the pleasure of a new reply.

"The fairest? I think it would be that pretty girl outside the Library last Sunday, the one with that big "R" on her locket? Why, she looked just like someone's long-lost stepchild."

"WHATDIDYOUSAY?" Maleficent roared.

"And more news! The Duchess of PopCork just moved into this neighborhood – and she tips better than you. Trot your ugly old baggage right out of my salon this instant. And take that caveman with you!"

It was Saturday before Maleficent calmed down enough to think.

"Boris, get in here! Get me a bag of apples and a bottle of poison. And get generic!"

On Sunday, Maleficent disguised herself. She drove to the Library and began searching the stacks.

There she is! In the poetry aisle! Barely changed!

Maleficent composed her features.

"Good morning, dearie. Do you love poetry, too?"

Snee smiled. "Yes, I do. Cowper's my favorite. Yours?"

"Why...er...um...yes! The Raven, that's it."

"That's a scary one," Snee said.

"A matter of opinion," Maleficent said. "Have you had lunch?"

“Not yet.”

“How about an apple?” The Countess took one from her basket and crunched it. “Yummlletons. Have one on me.”

Snee hesitated; the apple was flawless, its crimson dimples gleaming.

“Okay,” she said. The Countess smiled and swiftly made her escape.

The Brothers, coming to find Snee in her usual place, found her unconscious instead. Their cries attracted attention.

A young man shouldered his way through the onlookers.

“Let me see her,” he said, in a masterful voice. “I won’t hurt her,” the man added, more gently.

With tender hands, the man lifted Snee to a nearby table.

“Each Sunday I have watched her from afar, as she read poetry, seeing her heart and mind on her face. I love her!”

The crowd ahh-ed. The Brothers were amazed.

“Who are you sir?” Brain asked.

“My name is Arthur du Lac, and I am the Poet Laureate of the Duchy of Westphalia. And The Duke,” he added.

“Can you help her?” Cranky demanded.

“I will try,” The Duke said, and bent to graze his lips against Snee’s own.

Her eyelids fluttered. The Brothers gasped and hurrahed, tossing their trucker’s caps into the air.

By the time the ambulance arrived, Snee was recovered and very much taken with the dark eyes of her rescuer. Before many days had passed, dressed in new suits, the Brothers had the honor of giving their ward in marriage to the manly and benevolent Poet-Duke of Westphalia. They were given places of honor in the Duchy, and plenty of medals and titles, and a top hat each, so that even Cranky was satisfied.

Snee looked after them all their days, in love and gratitude.

And Maleficent?

Well, it turned out one can only stave off the effects of such meanness with a steady regimen of honey and cucumbers. But not a salon-owner would touch her, not after Snee's story became known, and the Duke saw to it was known. Eventually, the meanness overtook Maleficent, and her skin began to shrivel and wizen. At last she became like a dried apple, whereupon Cook took her and baked her in a tart, which she carried to the largest anthill in all of Westphalia, and set down upon it shortly after breakfast.

By lunchtime, the tart was gone.

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