



The Tale of Snow White and Rowan Red

Sue Strain
Retold Fairy Tales

If one were to gaze upon the vast expanse of field and forest that spread out behind No.1 Rosehill Lane one crisp Winter's eve, one would find two brothers, one lolling lazily upon a bed of reeds and wildflowers, the other tumbling fervently over thistles and thorns, taking only a small amount of care not to snag flushed dewy skin on their prickles.

The fairer of the two lay still, eyes drifting over the pages of a heavy leather-bound volume, cheeks holding a marble-like pallor. His cropped alabaster hair flopped idly to one side, revealing hints of slightly pointed ear and strong, slender neck. The second brother could not have appeared more of the opposite to his kin, with dark auburn locks and strong, chiselled features that greatly contrasted the slight, slim nature of the other boy's. His frame was wide and athletic, built for running, jumping and acrobatics, which he often enjoyed practising, unsatisfied by the still, languorous exercise of reading that his restful counterpart so much took pleasure in.

"Brother," Snow glanced up from his story to speak to his restless brother, still tousling across the field, silhouette flitting an effervescent shadow across the hazy sunset, "do you never tire of the endless hours that you spend out here, flipping before the sun and sky?"

"Never my friend." Rowan momentarily ceased in his laborious movement smile at his brother between panting breaths, chest rising and falling faster than the waves on the river that flowed just beyond the horizon,

“As you never tire of the page, and the everlasting hours that you spend fretting about the cottage, organising and reorganising, sweeping and dusting in such a manner that you have become compulsive in your ways.”

“You know that Pa has not been himself since the passing of Mama,” Snow sighed in response, “without me, our home would be a mess of broken cider bottles, littered with potato peelings and gravy-stained dishes, not to mention hunks of mud and goodness-knows-what from those ridiculous leather monstrosities that you refuse to replace.”

Rowan stared down at his dirt-caked, beaten brown boots that donned his feet, tongues flapping loose and the left sole peeling away from the once tightly-stitched seams. They had been a parting gift from the boys’ mother whom had died of influenza just 7 months before, and he had worn them everyday since her passing, as his brother had worn the item that had been left to him: a thick belt with a sturdy silver buckle. The larger brother straightened his spine, expression relaxed, almost exhausted, going through the motions of a thousand previous conversations alike the one that they were currently participating in. “A real man has no time to remove his boots. A real man spends his days out in the wilderness and his nights indoors, asleep. Only when preparing for his slumber may a real man remove his boots.”

Snow laughed in response, feeling the wind’s cool breeze between his bare pale toes, before stating:

“A real man has the mental capacity necessary to apply even the most basic rules of hygiene and does not take pleasure in the simple frivolities of turning somersaults. Oh no! A real man prefers to broaden his mind through the art of literature. Besides, how can we call ourselves ‘real men’ when we are barely 14 years of age? We have our entire lives to worry about being ‘real men’ but, for now, I think that I’m quite content being ‘just a boy’.”

“As am I, I suppose.” Rowan smiled, staring wistfully into the frost-tinted eyes of his brother, “And I think that it is time for us ‘just boys’ to go to rest.”

And so, together, the two strolled through the rickety threshold of their cottage, which seemingly leant to one side, crumbled stones barely held together by climbing ivy that stubbornly held strong, despite the many times that Rowan had run his blade through their constantly thickening stalks. The roof was no longer protected by the long Saturday mornings that their mother had spent lovingly tending its golden weave, left to shed its locks onto the cracked garden path. Overall, the house had slipped into an unfaltering state of melancholy, not a glimpse of the humble but happy family home that it had once been left in its dilapidated walls. As the sun caressed the skyline, the two brothers propped each other up beside the gently flickering glow of the hearth,

neither strong enough to bare the sickening feeling of another night spent without their mother to kiss goodnight to, lonelier than ever in their bland white-washed room. Their eyelids grew heavier and the comforting, heady warmth began to diffuse into their bodies, gently lulling them into the welcoming arms of sleep. Just as unconsciousness began to blanket their bodies, a snarl came from behind the door, followed by a sharp thud that left the wood quaking against its rusted iron hinges. Snow's first reaction was to cower behind the sturdy figure of the other boy, whilst Rowan's was to pull a blunted dagger from his mud-encrusted boot. "Do not open that door Rowan," the more timid of the two whispered, gulping for breath against a gratingly dry throat, "for only danger awaits us behind it."

"Then so be it." His bolder brother retorted as he lumbered to his feet and began to pace toward the timber frame, twitching muscles in his jaw the only betrayal of apprehension. With a single intake of breath, he flung open the door. What loomed behind startled both equally, with even Rowan taking a few staggering stumbles backwards.

A wide, thick-lipped sneer curled out from frothing corners, a set of fangs protruded from pink-gummed jaws that sat beneath a broad, black nose flaring upon examining the boys. Its eyes were wide and doe-like but not abnormally so, with slight glimmers of hope- almost humanlike -drifting in their inky depths. Thick ebony fur sprouted outwards, seemingly curving out from the centre of the face whilst rounded ears twitched slightly; it was angry. No. It was...Afraid. Snow, being the more observant of the two, noticed the bear's flitting gaze, the way its ears swivelled here and there, how its heavy shoulders clenched upwards, arms adopting a defensive pose. Just as Rowan lunged towards the creature, he screeched:

"STOP!" Rowan halted, dagger poised a mere inch above the bear's pulsing heart.

"Give me one good reason, Snow. Tell me now why I should not rid us of this...this...beast who will no doubt tear the flesh from my bones before moving on to the little that you have." But it was not a voice that he recognised that responded to his outrage, it was a gruffer, lower, more feminine one that began to speak.

"I-I mean you nor your...y-your brother any harm." The bear began, "I only wish to warm my f-fur by the fireside for the night, I will l-leave at dawn, I promise this much to you." Rowan's face fell, he had clearly been thirsting for violence, but still he dropped his stance and prowled back to the hearth looking like a wounded puppy. Obviously grateful for the shelter, the bear lumbered in behind, closing the door and nearly splintering it with the cumbersome weight of her paw.

"Please, sit." Snow comforted the animal, gesturing towards the heap of cotton blankets directly between him

and his brother, who was still in a sulk, staring glumly into the fire, lower lip jutting out just as it had when he was a tiny tot. "What brings you to these parts on such a cold winter's night?" The bear rustled the blankets, making a soft nest, then was still, contemplating her response. Tears began to seep into the fur that surrounded her eyes, further emphasising their beauty.

"I...I am a lost soul. Not too long ago, my cubs were taken from me. I have been searching for them ever since." Rowan gulped back a bought of tears; showing his first sign of remorse at his earlier outburst of aggression. "But how? How could somebody be so heartless?" His cheeks began to flush as he became suddenly aware that only moments before he had been close to taking the lonely creature's life. The bear turned to face him, the dark patches now streaming in thin pathways down her tufty face.

"That is the worst part of my story," She trembled, "I do not know their name. Lord! I can't even recall my own as I am so sick with grief! All that I can remember is that I had two perfect cubs, one small and fair, one broad and dark, and that I loved them both so dearly. Seven months I have searched with not a sight nor sound nor sign that my darling cubs ever existed in the first place." By the time she had finished recounting this experience, she was sobbing, lost in a memory that didn't feel entirely her own.

"There, there." Snow wrapped a comforting arm around her whilst his brother headed to the kitchen where he set to making a pot of his mother's loose-leaf tea. "Perhaps if you could describe the appearance of their captor, then we could find them." But the creature was so overcome with emotion that all she could spit out was:

"Evil little witch!"

Rowan sauntered back into the room and sank down onto the coarse woollen rug, managing not to spill a drop of tea from the three clumsily crafted clay mugs that sat upon the wooden tray in his hands; one of the many benefits of his acrobatics training- unshakeable muscles. He handed the bear one of the mugs, noticing how small it looked inside her huge, padded paws, before Snow's slender finger snatched up his own. Collectively they took a sip, all staring into the flitting flames, bewitched by their fading glow, all pondering upon the idea that, perhaps, the boys could help the kindly bear to find her cubs. That night sank into a collection of beautiful nothings and before long it was morning. As they said their goodbyes to the bear, the brothers vouched their eternal friendship and promised that they would assist the creature who, in turn, swore that one day she would find a way to repay them, however she could.

For the rest of that winter, each night the bear returned and soon the beast and the boys became great friends, with even their father accepting her visits (though he had been quite surprised upon discovering a woodland

creature sat in front of the hearth gulping tea from a fruit bowl- Snow had thought it more suitable than the impractically small mug). But as the days spread into months, still there was no sign of her missing young. When summer finally arrived, the bear said her goodbyes to Snow and Rowan, intent on spending the mild summer eves continuing her search. Soon she became just a beloved memory in the minds of the brothers, who went back to their slow-beating rhythm of days out in the sun and nights by the fire, a never-ending cycle of jesting and supporting.

One day just a few short months after the bear had left, the brothers found themselves in a rather peculiar predicament indeed. It was a rather gentle, warm day and so the two had decided to take a trip into the forest that guarded their humble country cottage from every angle in order for Snow to pick berries with the garden shears that he had received for Christmas and for Rowan to chop some wood for their evening bonfires with the small axe that he had received for Christmas. As the two entered a large clearing they found a foreboding, slightly withered tree standing sentient over them. However, it was not this that was such an unusual sight, but the small figure that was writhing beside the thick trunk. Upon closer inspection, they found that this figure was a woman, standing at just 2ft tall with thick grey tresses that tumbled down past her waist, past her feet, onto the mossy grass and up into a.....a.....tree? Noticing the dwarf struggling, wrestling with her hair, the boys looked at each other before sprinting across the clearing towards her, where they could hear her jabbering moans.

“What’s the matter?” Rowan asked, brow furrowed, heavy over his dark eyes.

“Can we help?” Snow added, reaching for the tree’s trunk, only to be slapped away by the angry woman who was still muttering under her breath, until she shouted at the two boys who were making a rather futile attempt at slicing the tree(Rowan) and calming the dwarf(Snow).

“Don’t do that you incompetent fools!” She spat, “Help me properly! I was trying to split the wood for my fire when this intolerable tree caught my hair and now refuses to free me!” Almost instantly, Rowan dropped his uselessly blunt axe and began to claw at the creaking bark of the oak whilst Snow tugged at the thick wisps of grey, but both quickly ceased in their efforts as the enraged little woman screeched out a devilish cry. The larger sibling turned to face his brother, whose expression was contorting, deep in thought. After a few short seconds, his face beamed with an idea. He knew exactly what he should do. Without a second thought, he swiftly pulled his modest garden shears from the wicker basket that sat dutifully on his arm and nimbly swiped their tiny blades through the woman’s thick locks. With an ear-piercing yelp, she leapt from the tree’s trunk, all

the while scowling at the pair who had just saved her from the lone predators that prowled the woods after dusk.

“How dare you!” Bewildered by the enormity of disdain in the dwarf’s tone, Rowan blinked in startlement whilst Snow took a timorous step backwards. “How dare you cut an elderly dwarf’s hair! I had been growing those tufts since I was just a babe! Curse you! Curse you Snow! Curse you Rowan! Curse both of you, and your blasted family! Curse your father!” The boys had not been particularly interested in any of the dwarf’s tantrum, until she uttered the last few words to herself, “I would say curse your blasted mother but...” The dwarf then began to cackle and stomp senselessly, arms flailing above her head whilst the boys stared at each other in utter confusion, for neither had mentioned their names, neither had mentioned their father, neither had mentioned that their mother had...

Somewhere from the most distant corner of the boys’ minds came a voice, a voice that they would later recall as being that of their bear friend from long ago, a voice that whispered:

“Evil little witch!”

It resonated, echoing, amplifying, filling every crack and crevice of their minds. Before either had a chance to deliberate or digest the thought- not even Snow who was uncannily quick for his age- the entire wood began to quake. The ground shuddered underfoot as a coal-smudge of a shadow emerged from between the trembling trunks. It was only when a huge, heavy paw could be seen clutching at the larynx of the dwarf that the brothers recognised the hulking figure of the bear.

“Where are they?” The creature barked, drops of spittle flying into the woman’s sharp, narrowed eyes.

“W-w-where a-are w-what?” Gulped the dwarf.

“You know full well what I am looking for you witch.” The bear’s grip on the woman’s neck visibly tightened as she scratched at the paw, scraping manically at the unmoving claws. Her body went limp. In defeat, she weakly raised a fragile arm to point a lanky finger.

“Th-there.”

The bear circled to face the direction in which the dwarf had gestured. Her gaze landed upon two boys, one tall and broad, one small and slight, both gaping back at her, finally agreeing on something. Fully immersed in her surprise, the bear relaxed her grip slightly, allowing the dwarf to take a single helpless plea of “P-please, spare me, I beg of you.”, before it tightened, steel-like once more. Now, grimacing at the limp figure, the bear’s eyes filled with realisation, smothered by rage and resentment.

“This,” the animal boomed, raising her free paw over her black-snouted, fur-clad head, “is for my sons.” With an almighty roar, she brought it down onto the crown of the wailing dwarf, resulting in an awful crunch. Silence resumed for a moment but was shortly followed by a gentle twinkling and a sharp intake of breath. Before the brothers’ eyes, the bear began to transform, its entire body reconstructing. The thick sprouts of fur that covered its body faded white then proceeded to interlace into a gauzy cotton nightgown whilst the bear’s hips shrank drastically and rounded off. Bulky shoulders became petite, rubbery lips softened and heavy brows thinned, curving into a perfect arch. The hair that once encompassed the creature’s face was now pulled back into an elaborate braid, revealing to the boys, a set of features, each one embedded with faint lines, showing the age of the woman who stood before them but not making her any less elegant, instead rather emphasising her simple beauty, a simple beauty that the boys knew.

“Mama?” Snow choked, eyes glazing with tears, blurring his vision.

“Mama!” Rowan cried out, pulling himself and his sibling into the open arms of their mother who was now also sobbing between stolen smiles.

“My boys.” She sighed.

“But how? How did you become a beast?” Questioned Snow.

“How are you alive when we were beside you when you passed?” Rowan added. Their mother looked down.

“Snow, Rowan, there is something that I must tell you.” Both boys looked at her attentively as they had when she was about to tell them one of their favourite bedtime stories in their younger years. “Do you remember The Story of the Runaway Prince?”

Rowan paused to think for a moment, but snow gave him no chance to respond.

“Of course. The prince runs away from his kingdom in search of true love, unadulterated by his archaic mother who only believed in alliance for power.”

“Yes.” Their own mother smiled, though her eyes were full of remorse, “That story...it is true, in fact, it is my own.” The boys were so taken aback that they could do nothing but gawp, yet again, at the woman before them, slack-jawed and bug-eyed. “My father, or the queen, as you know him, passed away just 18 months ago, and I intended on confiding my secrets in you and your father, I swear that I did, but before I could, whilst delivering a message to my kingdom, that ghastly dwarf placed a curse on me, convinced that he could somehow steal my crown. He transfigured me into that creature and must have conjured the memory of my death in the minds of you and your papa.”

“How awful.” Snow breathed, daring to glance over at the disfigured body of the evil creature, immobile except from the very tips of its fingers that twitched ever-so-slightly.

“How can we be sure of anything anymore?” Rowan shook his head before reaching a rough, cracked hand to his cheek. It was damp.

“Yes, it seems as though there is only one thing that we can be absolutely certain of.” Snow murmured, expression suddenly smug. Their mother remained quiet, quite aware of the familiar silent energy that was passing between the two.

“And what is that, dear brother?” Rowan responded.

“It is the fact that, despite popular belief, real men do cry.”

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