



Violently Sensitive

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Retold Fairy Tales

The laundry room steamed and boiled. Its door opened and bright sunlight illuminated the steamy gloom as a woman fought her way through with elbow and shin, bent over an enormous basket. Her supple arms flexed as she gripped the basket again and walked heavily over to the large stone sinks.

‘One more girls!’ she bellowed boisterously over the steam, tipping her load into the broiling water and plunging her arms in after it.

‘Morning Tessa,’ greeted Myrtle, one of the two resident women, looking up through her damp hair at the newcomer. She forearmed a lock of it out of the way. ‘You’re looking well this morning. Pregnant again?’ The smirk was interrupted by a shriek as Tessa flicked the hot water at her.

‘It’s this sauna here keeps me skin fresh!’ she winked. ‘Not a lot going on your end, then, Myrtle?’

‘Shut your face.’

‘Well, says a lot about the a girl, doesn’t it, a question like that,’ interjected the second woman already in the laundry room, the older woman, turning the heavy mangle in the dark corner. She stared at Myrtle a while, a chuckle skipping round her eyes. Her arm went on mechanically wrenching the mangle as smoothly as if it were part of that machine.

‘Yes... I suppose it’s been a bit quiet,’ admitted Myrtle, hurriedly busying herself with the soap. The women all sniggered with good humour, then after the usual morning inquiries into the health of children and neighbours, and exchanges of news, mirth subsided as the heavy work of scrubbing sheets, ringing out and hauling up to dry got into its swing.

The women worked on, the hissing steam populated by grunts as laundry was lugged about. Then Tessa frowned, peering closely at the white sheet in her hand.

‘There’s quite a lot of blood on this one,’ she muttered into the sink.

‘Another miscarriage?’ Myrtle looked over, immediately. The older woman looked up from the mangle.

‘Bring it over.’

Tessa pulled it out of the tub and twisted it fiercely to ring out the excess water. Then holding it away from herself and leaning back so as to not soak her own breasts and stomach, she carried it over to the mangle.

The older woman automatically drew her finger in a crest behind her ear, clearing away thick strands of hair she could never grasp had thinned. She gripped the folds of the sheet in both hands, holding flat a portion of the stain. Her green eyes stared, narrowing as she considered.

‘No, the stain is too dark and it’s too near the top of the sheet.’ She pulled another handful of the linen up into view. ‘And here’s the menses, further down.’ Her eyes locked Tessa’s as she handed the sheet back and they remained this way for a moment. Myrtle had also stopped and all three women looked at each other over the blood smeared sheet with set mouths and jaws flinching.

‘Just clean it,’ the older woman directed.

Tessa took it back and scrubbed it viciously in the thickening silence. Turning her face, but not her eyes, she spat over her shoulder. Her mouth grimaced.

‘It’s nearly every week now you know.’

Myrtle also looked up again and slapped her brush against the tub’s side. ‘And it just seems a mindless—’
‘Clean it.’

Tessa scrubbed bitterly and the stain began to diminish. As if all the misery and ugliness in the world could be cleaned away just like a stain on a sheet could. With only a little effort and pain, as her knuckles hit the side of the tub in the violence of her scrubbing. Myrtle’s face also twisted as she wrung sheets until her hands hurt. Over it all; the faint creaking of the mangle as the older woman turned the handle. Rotated it rhythmically to impose order on a wrinkled sheet and a rumpled world; to smooth out and remove her sorrows and those of that woman upstairs, shivering alone on her tower bed.

All three minds wandered through different passageways to that same woman. Tessa thought of the ceremony, Myrtle of the girl’s arrival, drenched from a violent storm; the older woman the first miscarriage. All thought of the desire in the Prince’s cruel eyes and the delicacy of the pale girl.

Ripe for violence.

Myrtle cleared her throat. ‘It’s been over a year since she came now.’

‘No,’ Tessa corrected, ‘It was just such bad weather that week. She arrived at the start of August. It’s only spring now.’

‘Oh yes,’ Myrtle looked up to search for the memory and nodded. Her eyes then glazed again. ‘She was so

straight-backed, wasn't she? You could tell she was beautiful even though her hair was plastered to her face and her cloak soaked with mud nearly to the elbow. And she didn't cringe in her wet things as she moved, she was...' Myrtle searched the high ceiling to her right again for the word. 'Proud. In the way she walked I mean.' Tessa grunted her assent.

'And she spoke nice. Quietly, but assured. Kind. They should have worked it out from that.'

'But there has to be the Test,' the old woman spat.

Oh of course. There must be the Test. Tension bubbling and steaming on the borders for months, allies desperately yet fruitlessly searched for and always the anxiety for an heir, an heir. Three years hunting for a suitable alliance as skirmishes broke out and trade lines were blocked until the kingdom was all but cut off and the Queen despairing while her son rode out to find soldiers at the borders and slaked his lust on the peasant girls the other side. And this bedraggled woman, claiming to be a Princess from another Kingdom who only asked for a night's board with her pledge of great royal future recompense for this kindness, was promising. She was already at a disadvantage; alone, in flight, in need. She could be compelled. Then alliance, an heir, stability. But to be sure. So the Queen made assurance double sure and with a painted smile, led the girl after dinner to her bedchamber heaped with mattresses. Twenty stacked to the ceiling; the Princess lay there like a fresco painter for the worst night's sleep of her life.

'Just a little pea under all those mattresses,' the old woman murmured.

'Just a little prick,' Tessa sneered.

'Oh Tess, honestly.'

Tessa defended her crassness. 'She looked worse the next morning than the night before! Haggard. Her eyes were hunted and black. And how she struggled down the stairs. She'd asked for help the night before. I know it is just a pea, but they knew what they were doing, how could they hurt someone so clearly in need?'

'Oh the elite are a cold lot I'd say,' Myrtle suggested. 'And it's a Princess's duty to be sensitive, to endure for her Kingdom. I suppose once she'd proven her worth, she knew they needed her and she owed them, so she had to stay. But look, when did you see her? I only heard about it from Mary because her Stephen was serving at breakfast.'

'Because I changed the damn bed,' Tessa retorted. 'Eliza couldn't manage it on her own, there was so much linen. So they sent me up. As I left with me arms full of bedding, she was still making her way down. Her face was contorted with pain, she was biting her lip to stop from crying out. And the Prince was there, with the Queen, at the bottom of the stairs. Watching intently to see if she had Passed. He had both hands in his pockets and that little smirk he does and he watched her all the way down. Every step. She was obviously in

agony and he never said a word to her or moved to help. Nor the Queen.'

'Breeding,' Myrtle sneered. Tessa snorted.

'Well you can keep it.'

With the Test passed the kingdom was saved. The prince took her as his bride and they had a real princess at last, from a powerful dynasty; a union, an alliance. They were married three weeks later at the start of September. Every servant was ordered to wash and turn out to throw the pink and blue flowers. There was, in fact, substantial largesse in the celebration. A feast was put on for the servants too, a fiddler was brought from the next valley, and there was dancing. Myrtle remembered the fiddler very well.

But not so well as they all remembered the couple walking out of the palace courtyard after the ceremony. The Prince in his finery, his black hair curling just a little above his collar. His overwhelming exotic scent of bergamot masking the sweat of the warm day as he walked amid the flowers through the double line of his cheering subjects. Hope for the kingdom! His long, straight nose curled his upper lip as he smiled right and left right over his bride's head and the desire was savage in his eyes. It chilled the women as he passed them. And his bride, squinting in the bright sunlight, looked down, still obviously suffering; chewing her lip as she controlled her pain in her slow walk half a pace behind the groom. Holding her grace, hiding her limp. And spreading upwards from the low cut of her bodice, staining her pearl white skin; the blue and black blush that in three weeks, had not faded.

Autumn. There were subsidies for trade, the economy improved. Even the women felt it in the price of flour and fish. More ribbon at market. More pennies to buy it. There were reinforcements at the border, and a peace of a kind had been sustained through to winter. Strong and stable. But still no heir.

That first infliction, the black flush after the storm-soaked August night, was only the start. Conceiving the heir was next. Uncharitable gossip ripped through the servants' hall about the Princess walking awkwardly, sitting gingerly. Then a breakthrough, whispers of a pregnancy at the start of Advent. A God given Christmas gift for the Kingdom! Then at the end of January the washerwomen found the bright red political disaster smeared all over the bedsheets and a cloud fell over the palace. The older woman washed that sheet herself, taking her time reverently, learning every spot and matching it to her memory, never mixing the splashes from her own eyes with the soap from the tub. Washerwomen; cleaning to purify the ugliness from the world. Then a storm shook the Kingdom one night in February. Without was all thunder and the screaming wind, beating the rain relentlessly against the fortress walls, and within the Prince was beating the Princess against the walls in his fury. Still no heir, no heir. How could peace last without one?

Three servants attended the Princess that night to bathe her skin and press it softly with witch hazel. But skin

is not like the sheets the washerwomen took, and while blood can be rinsed away, the blue blush cannot. The Prince was subdued in the days after this and the Princess kept to her chamber. The moon waxed and then when the washerwomen cleaned the menses off the sheets, blood from a battered face began appearing regularly.

'It's done,' Tessa said at last. She threw an end to Myrtle and they began twisting from both ends to ring out the water.

'It's all we can do,' the older woman sighed.

'It's like we're hiding it.'

'It's all we can do.'

'Can't she ask for help?' Myrtle blurted. 'Powerful family like hers, I'm sure they'd not like this happening to one of their line.'

'I suppose it's probably shame,' the older woman answered.

'You had none,' Tessa reminded.

'Well,' the older woman's eyes darkened. 'Maybe she has no one to ask. Perhaps it's different asking a neighbour as opposed to a far-off Lord who's married you off.'

'Our little coup de grace was pretty good, wasn't it?' Tessa snickered.

'Yes...' the older woman admitted, allowing herself a half smile. 'After twenty five years, another day drinking the rent and he never knew what hit him.'

'Tessa's poker did, I recall,' Myrtle grinned. 'And off away he went at last! A well co-ordinated operation girls.'

'Well, enough was enough, wasn't it,' the older woman leaned back from her waist to stretch out her shoulders.

'I make enough from the wash and it's peaceful enough indoors now. It's different for you and your men these days. You can build something. And your sons will be better. And your daughters will never have seen that sort of thing.' She finished her stretch and held out her arms. 'That's fine girls, bring it here now. It's the last one, then we're done and tomorrow is Sunday.'

'You seeing your fiddler tomorrow Myrtle?' Tessa asked with a devilish glint.

'Stop calling him that, his name's David.'

'He's good though, isn't he? At fiddling?'

'Stop it. Honestly Tessa, you've got no poetry in you. We'll walk up the crag to the tarn. He said he'll bring his violin. You know, when he plays, it's like being on the crags with the heather, it's lovely.'

'Yep, soaring up there, penetrating those clouds, all very...'

'That's enough girls, pack it in and go home,' the older woman interrupted as she emptied the tubs. The women

splashed cold water on their faces to cool themselves, then dried off their arms and folded the last sheet. Myrtle opened the door into the bright early May sunshine.

‘How did your apple wine come out in the end?’ she asked, turning hopefully to the older woman, who smiled knowingly.

‘Alright then, perhaps it needs a test.’ She stretched her arm through Myrtle’s to support herself and reached for the other girl. ‘You too Tess, come round to mine first and try it. If it’s any good, I’ll pack you both off with a jug. I’m sure you’d like some for your little outing tomorrow Myrtle, in case of a picnic, and Tess, I’m sure you and your husband aren’t averse to a weekend tippie.’

The women walked home in the sunshine.

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