



## Chapter 13

# The Land Without Stories: A Threefold Tale

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**Y***ou should be asleep. What do you mean, you can't sleep? Of course you can; I've seen you do it every night.*

*You want another story? All right. You want three more stories? I'm not sure you're lucky enough for that. But I'll tell you what. I know one story that has three stories in it. So I'll tell you that story if you promise to go right off to sleep at the end. Not in the middle of it like last night. Now, unless I'm forgetting, I think it goes like this:*

Once or twice upon a time, in a faraway land that was just round the corner, there was not a princess. If there had been a princess, there wouldn't have been this story, you see. But the king and queen had no children, even though they wanted to very much.

The queen knew all the old stories and the old fairy tales, and she knew that most of them began the same way her story did. So she followed them all and tried to make them come true. She plucked three snake leaves and a rampion-flower and she wounded her hands with nettles; she pricked her finger on a spinning-wheel and let three drops of red blood fall on the snow. Still she didn't have a child.

"You mustn't put so much stock in those old wives' tales," said the king. "You know they're just stories."

“I don’t care if they are,” said the queen. “I’d do anything to have a little girl. I’d slay a dragon with a golden sword. I’d climb the mountains of glass in iron shoes. I’d weave seven sweaters from flax and tears. I’d walk through seven miles of steel thistles. I’d—”

“What’s the good of talking? There’s no such things as those,” said the king.

“I don’t care!” said the queen. “I want a baby! I don’t care if she’s no bigger than my thumb. I don’t care if she looks like a pea in a pod. I don’t care if she’s made of gingerbread or marzipan or porridge!”

“Who ever heard of a baby like that?” said the king. “You’re talking nonsense.”

“All I want is a child,” said the queen. “Is that so wrong? I’d love her even if she was twisted and crooked and homely and little and—”

“Hush!” shouted the king, in a rage. “What kind of daughter is that for a king? Don’t even speak such things.”

But sometimes wishes do come true, even if they go wrong in the wishing. A while later the queen had a child, her first child, a little daughter. And sure enough, she was a twisted and crooked thing, too small and too sickly even to cry. But oh, when she smiled, such a smile it was, and the queen thought her heart would burst for the love of her, even while she cried at the sight of her.

The king was not so happy as the queen. He called for the doctors. “Do whatever you like, only get me a strong and healthy daughter. I’ll have no withered child for my heir. Think what the people would say. That’s what science is for, so use it, even if you have to change this one with a doll.”

Ah! That was the second wish that went wrong, as wishes do. For not just the doctors but the Good Folk were listening, as they always are, through cracks and corners and crevices. By night, when the doctors were away, the Good Folk came and took the twisted child away with them, for they delight in all things uncomely and broken. In its place they left a perfect baby, with bright blue eyes and golden hair.

The next morning the king saw the golden-haired child in his daughter’s cradle, and he was pleased. He shook the doctors’ hands

and gave them bags of gold, for, he said, “That’s what comes of science and medicine! That’s proper book learning! No need for these fairy tales and stories when we have men of letters like you.” The doctors departed immensely richer, though privately perplexed.

But the queen knew the difference, as a mother always will, and she pined for her stolen daughter. The golden-haired changeling could move and walk and grow like a child, but for all her beauty she was just a clever doll made by the Good Folk in mimicry of life.

“You’re mad,” said the king. “That’s your own daughter, and she’s as hale and healthy and fair as a king’s daughter should be.”

“Don’t you have eyes?” said the queen. “The child is a changeling, a cheat. It’s the wicked elves at work. They steal from the cradles and leave their own young ones behind. I’ve heard it in all the old stories—”

“That’s enough!” yelled the king. “No more of your stories and lies. They poison your mind with that nonsense. I’ll not have my daughter growing up with a mind full of madness. Forget them. They’re dreams. Forget them all. There’ll be no more stories in my kingdom.”

That day the king made a decree and outlawed the telling of tales. No more stories, no more rhymes, no more fairy tales or nursery songs. And the king was content, and the changeling child grew, and the queen pined away in silence, never daring to show her tears.

As the years went by, the queen spoke less and less, and finally stopped talking altogether. She sat by herself at the top of a tower, waiting by a spinning wheel and staring at the sky. All her stories were still there, but only in her head and in her heart. And she wished with no words and she wished with no songs that one day her child would come back.

*Yes, it is a sad story, isn’t it? Don’t go to sleep yet. It has another story inside.*

Ten years went by like this. Ten silent years, for the changeling child couldn’t speak, couldn’t cry, couldn’t laugh or even blink. She

walked graceful and fair through the halls and the gardens, always silent and unsmiling, taking no interest in the flowers or the trees. When anyone tried to talk with her or teach her, she would fix them with an indifferent stare that left them feeling uncanny. The servants whispered among themselves that the withering had left her legs to go to her head, and what kind of queen would that be?

But one day, as she was alone in her royal nursery staring at the blank white wall, she heard a rustle and a pop and squeak. She turned around and saw a little man, no bigger than an owl, with a wrinkly old face and a spark in his eye and a cap made of paper and leaves.

“Hullo,” said the man. “What luck. I got here as quick as I could, though that’s slower than it should have been. What’s your name? I mean, what do they call you?”

The false princess stared at him, not smiling or frowning. She just looked.

“Can’t speak?” said the little man. “Goblin got your tongue? Oh, oh, oh. I see how it is. Well, this will take some special work. I suppose you can’t sing a song. I can. ‘Tra la liddily loddy lay, and it’s hey and it’s ho and it’s nonny nonny nay.’ No good? Well.”

The little man paced the floor, stumping back and forth on his red shoes. “Well, then,” he said. “I don’t suppose anyone’s ever told you a story.”

The changeling’s eyes got a little bit wider, and she said, “Who are you?”

“Oh ho!” crowed the man. “Hip hooray, it’s your very first words, and they’re a question. It’s one I can’t answer, even. I fit through locks and I squeeze through keys. I get in people’s heads and I make them sneeze. I’m the little fellow who tells tall tales. Unless I’m among the gnomies, when I’m the tall fellow who tells little tales. And they’ll have my heart on a silver platter for it, but I’ve got a story for you.”

The changeling’s face didn’t move. “The king says stories are bad.”

“Hip hooray, it’s your very second words!” said the man. “And I have to disagree with them. The king only thinks that because he’s never heard this story. Ready?” And he started to sing:

A shoe and a pig and a crow and a dog  
All made their bed in a hollow log,  
They lived in a day that was far away  
Through the mist and the hill and the fog.

A dog and a shoe and a pig and a crow,  
Said, "All a-traveling we will go!  
"We'll go to the sea and the poddleby-tree,  
"To find out what we don't know."

A pig and a crow and a dog and a shoe  
All went to sea in a purple canoe  
And there they found gold in a bucket, I'm told,  
So that's what we all should do.

A crow and a dog and a shoe and a pig,  
Found out at last that the world was big,  
And the boat went down, and all of them drowned,  
And the angels danced a jig.

The changeling princess listened to the story with wide eyes, not saying a word, hardly breathing. When it was finished, she was silent for a moment. Then she smiled. Then she laughed. Then she cried. Then she cried some more and laughed some more. Then she laughed some more and cried some more.

The little man smiled. "I thought you would," he said. "Anyone can walk and move and be pretty, but it takes a person to laugh and cry. You're more real than you ever knew."

"A crow and a dog and a shoe and a pig!" cried the princess. "And they were all happy and then they all died! I've lived a thousand years and never heard something like that. Is that what a story is?"

"Exactly so, no less, no more," said the little man. "Now you remember that story and I'll be back for another. Ta-taa." And with a rustle and a pop and a squeak he was gone.

Now there was another little girl, far away, living in clearings and thickets. She had a crooked back and a twisted leg, and her hair

was all matted and tangled. She wore leaves and moss for clothes, but she had a golden circle around her wrist, because she was the plaything of the Good Folk. (We call them the Good Folk, you know, because it wouldn't do to offend them.) She was the queen's own daughter, the one that was stolen away ten years before.

Life among the Good Folk does strange things to a person. When all your playmates are goblins and elves and burnie-trows, you grow up with a sadder eye that thinks it's wiser, if you ever grow up at all, which is seldom. Even when they're with you, you're always lonely. And you have no knowledge of time. Sometimes the girl's keepers would come just to stare at her. Other times they would make her dance, or give her a sweet, or pinch her to see the water come out of her eyes. They would seldom speak, and they would never stay.

Today she sat alone by a hollow tree, searching for drops of dew. Then she heard a rustle and a pop and a squeak, and out tumbled the little man in a rush of leaves and paper.

"Hullo," said the little man. "My, you're a hard one to find. Lovely to meet you. Strange and wonderful things are happening, and I think they're mostly about you."

The girl did not look surprised at all. "Oh," she said. "Well, who are you, then?"

The little man looked a bit deflated. "You don't even know? All that and you don't even know? Suspender buttons, now I'll never find out. I have got the right one, haven't I?" He pulled an acorn out of his pocket and shook it around in the palm of his hand, consulting it carefully. "Yes, yes. How long have you been here?"

"A day or so," said the girl. "Forever. I don't know."

"Well, that's what you think, so it's probably true. So I'm going to tell you a story. Second story of the day or so, or forever. A story! A thing of danger and delight, of wonder and surprise! The king could have my head next!"

"What for?" said the girl. "It's just a story."

The little man blinked. "Just a story? Just a story? Who says that? Nobody says that. They're usually surprised. Unless they're missing something. What could you be missing, I wonder."

"I don't surprise much," said the girl. "I don't care."

“You don’t care? About what?”

“Anything. Why should I?”

“You don’t care about mollusks? You don’t care about fleas?  
You don’t care about honey or rabbits or peas?”

“No,” said the princess. “They’re just there.”

“Rumpety-bow!” said the little man. “I know they call your  
keepers the Good Folk, but I’ve a mind to call them what I think of  
them. But one more thing I must know. Do you care about love?”

“I’ve heard of that,” said the princess. “What is it?”

“That explains it,” said the little man. “The world’s more full of  
weeping than you can understand. Well then, I’ll tell you the story  
you’re in. It goes a bit like this.”

She sits all alone in an empty chair,  
(Sing nettles and spindles and snow, poor thing)  
Her true love is gone and she knows not where.  
Nettles and spindles and snow.

She lights seven candles alone every night  
(Sing nettles and spindles and snow, poor thing)  
And sets up a bottle to capture the light,  
Nettles and spindles and snow.

She plucks seven petals and presses them dry,  
And wishes inside what she never can cry,  
And blows on her fingers and watches them fly,  
Over nettles and spindles and snow.

The light from the bottle will water her tears,  
(Sing nettles and spindles and snow, poor thing)  
Tucked up in the weeping that nobody hears,  
Nettles and spindles and snow.

Her heart has a sorrow that nobody knows,  
And she’s weaving a wish into seven black crows,  
And she’s holding the image that blossoms a rose,  
Nettles and spindles and snow.

“Is that what love is?” said the princess. “Nettles and spindles and snow? I never knew. I always wondered.”

“Of course you did. Everyone does. More to the point, there’s someone who loves you precisely like that.”

The princess blinked. “Then why am I here all alone?”

The little man sighed. “That,” he said, “is the question I’ve asked for a thousand years. Some wishes are trickier than others. Some wishes come true in a day, and some wishes don’t come true in forever. But I think I can tell you the answer now. As a matter of fact—” And with a rustle and a pop and a squeak—

*That was the second story. Now there’s one more.*

The king sat on his throne, glowering and looking grave. The queen was still silent, and that put him out of temper. But he never asked her anymore what she was upset about, because that only made her sadder, and she wouldn’t ever answer.

It was quiet in the throne room, dull as a bank. In the old days there would have been a lute-player or a singer or a storyteller, but there had been none of that for ten years. The king liked it that way, staid and stolid and respectable. No nonsense.

Suddenly the silence was broken with a rustle and a pop and a squeak, and into the throne room rolled the little storytelling man in a somersault. He sprang to his feet and clicked his heels and danced a little jig, leaving behind him a trail of dust and cobwebs and bits of broken leaves.

“What’s the meaning of this?” said the king. “Who are you? Speak, or I’ll have your head.”

“I crave your indulgence, much as you indulge your cravings,” said the little man. “In fact, I’m a person who adores that very question, ‘What’s the meaning of this?’ Because, you see, most of the time it hasn’t got one.”

“If you’re looking for a position as a court jester, you’ve been sadly misinformed,” said the king.

“Oh, gracious no,” said the little man, and did another dance for good measure. “I’d rather be the court storyteller.”



There was a gasp from all of the nobles and courtiers and guards, and the king narrowed his eyes and glowered. Even the queen looked alarmed.

“I do hope you know what you’re saying, because if you’re not careful those words will be your last,” said the king. “Hold your tongue or you’ll lose your head.”

“Heads are cheap. Everyone has at least one of them somewhere,” said the little man. “It’s using it that’s the tricky part. But never you fear, I know too much about words to just throw them away. So I’ll tell you a story without any words.”

“Oh,” said the king, with a nasty smile that made the noblemen shudder, “now this I must hear. You come to me talking about stories and now you’re not going to use any words? What story do you think could change the decree of the king?”

“This story,” said the little man, and he laid his finger on his lips.

From down the marble hallway came the clatter of running feet, and into the throne room charged the little golden-haired princess, laughing and crying and dancing. “Mother! Father!” she shouted. “There was a pig and a dog and a crow and a shoe, and they were so happy but then they all died! There was a shoe and a crow and a dog and a pig, and they all died but they were so happy! It’s a story, Mother! It’s a story, Father! It’s my very own story and I’m so happy I think I’ve never been alive before!”

The king’s face fell in astonishment and the queen gripped the arms of her throne to steady herself. “What?” said the king. “She’s never said a word before now. Who’s been telling her stories? What nonsense is this?”

In reply the little man smiled, shook his head, and put his finger to his lips again. Then he pointed down the other hallway into the throne room.

Into the throne room, more quietly this time because her feet were bare, and more slowly this time because she could only limp, came the tangle-haired princess in moss and leaves. She stopped when she reached the middle of the room and looked around slowly.

“I know you,” she said to the story-telling man. “You’re the man who tells the stories and the songs. And I think I know

you”—she looked at the golden-haired child, still laughing and capering—“you remind me of my sister. And I don’t know you”—she looked away from the king—“and you—oh!”

She was looking at the queen now, looking straight in her mother’s eyes. “You were the lady from the song, lighting your candles at night and making wishes on the flower-petals because you lost what you loved. And you didn’t think anyone knew you were crying. It was such a sad story you were in. What were you wishing for? What was it you lost that you loved?”

The queen’s eyes were as wide as the wonder and the doubt and the dreams that had been trapped inside her for so long, and now they filled with tears. She stretched out her hands to her lost child, slowly, as if she was afraid she would fade away. “It was you,” she whispered. “My little baby. It was you.”

Then the lost princess smiled, for the first time in ten years, and she ran toward the queen, and her sister came too, and they held each other close and cried and laughed and laughed and cried until their hearts were full again. And the king cried too, and he looked around for the little man who told stories, whether to thank him or shout at him or apologize nobody ever knew, because he was nowhere to be seen.

*And that was the end of the story, though I think the third story went on for quite a while longer than the story itself, really.*

*Why do you want to know how it ended? I just told you. I could say “They all lived happily ever and after,” if you like. I think that might even be a wee bit true. The queen still sends me a bundle of clover and honey and gold every Michelmas, any rate. That counts for something. And oh, those two weddings, you should have been there, with a faery hand in hand. But that’s another story and I just told you six. So you rustle and pop and squeak off to sleep, there’s a love.*