



Once Upon a Time

Anyone who has watched children growing up and observed the magic of their transformations cannot help but be amazed by the process. It is an expected and yet unexpected series of changes that are almost imperceptible on a day-to-day basis. Yet they relentlessly evolve from microscopic dots to tadpoles to bug-eyed fetuses to naked squalling infants to mischief-bent toddlers to dirt-smudged schoolchildren to adolescents at the mercy of hormonal dreams. It is hard even for a mother to identify the toddler and the teenager as the same child or chart the changes wrought in a short fourteen years by time, by society, by the physical demands of life. Much of it must be taken on faith.

In the same way, we follow the changeling life of a fairy tale across centuries. It can only be done by a kind of faith in the integrity of the story and a few signposts. Just as one can check out the whorls of an adult's thumbprints against those infant-small prints that were pressed onto a page soon after birth, so one can find similar prints on the body of any tale. They are the thumbprints of history, but they are harder to read than any yellowing birth certificate or a well-loved photograph in a family album.

The tale of Little Red Riding Hood, for example, bears such prints, smudged but still readable. Despite the fact that Charles Dickens once claimed that Little Red Riding Hood was his first true love and that marriage to her would have meant he "should have known perfect bliss," there are many ambivalences about the tale.

Does it end with the snap of the wolf's jaws? Does it end with the woodcutter passing by as conveniently as the mounted troopers in old Westerns, his sharp axe at the ready? Or should it end like the Grimms' story number five, "The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids," in which the wolf is punished with a bellyful of stones and death by drowning?

A first-grade teacher in a private laboratory school attached to a major women's college conducted an interesting experiment in this regard. She was a children's book fan and a believer in the efficacy of storytelling. Brave soul, she taught the children about storytelling and variants, and concluded by reading them three different versions of the Red Riding Hood tale. This happened near the end of the Vietnam War, and the children came from academic families in which the parents were prone to discussing the horrors of war at the table and inviting the children to watch the instant replay of destruction on the television set as part of their education.

The teacher asked the children in her class to vote for their own favorite ending to Red Riding Hood: wolf feast, woodcutter-take-all, or the stone stomach-ache with a trip downriver.

Much to the surprise of every adult (although it would not have surprised William Golding, who charted childhood's thirst for cruel justice in *Lord of the Flies*), the children opted for ending number three because it made the wolf suffer more. It was a long, drawn-out, nasty ending but quite tidy, even to the neat disposal of the corpse.

But if endings differ according to the morality of teller and listener, the bones of the story have not changed. Scholars point to a thirteenth-century version of the famous story in the *Elder Edda*. Thor is disguised as the bride of a giant he wishes to slay. Loki must explain to the nervous bridegroom why his bride looks so strange:

"Why are Freya's eyes so ghastly?" asks the giant Thrym, catching a glimpse of them under the veil.

"Because she has such a longing to see you," says Loki. "She has had no sleep for eight nights."

And in an early French version of Red Riding Hood, as recounted by W. H. Auden in *The Dyer's Hand*, the wolf invites the little girl to "undress, my child, and come and sleep beside me." There follows a detailed disrobing as the child discards apron, bodice, dress, skirt, hose. Into the fire they must go because, as the wolf admonishes her, "you will need them no more."

And then the now-familiar ritual begins. But how different it sounds to an adult's ears:

O Grandmother, how hairy you are.

It's to keep me warmer my child.

O Grandmother, those long nails you have.

It's to scratch me better my child.

O Grandmother those big shoulders you have.

All the better to carry kindling from the woods, my child.

O Grandmother, what big ears you have.

All the better to hear with my child.

O Grandmother, the big mouth you have.

All the better to eat you with my child.

O Grandmother, I need to go outside to relieve myself.

Do it in the bed, my child.

At this point, the child realizes her mistake. That is not something that Grandmother would have said. There is more here than frilly nightgown, a lace-ribboned cap, and a hairy snout. Something else, something sinister, is lurking under the bedclothes. The child begs to go outside and finally, with a string tied around her leg to keep her chained to the false grandmother, she leaves. Once outside, she manages to untie the knot and run off home.

But it is still the same tale, though a variety of clean-minded nursery maid tellers have gotten their hands on it somewhere along the way.

There are very few wolves left in the world, a tragedy with ecological repercussions. But there are many wolves still left under the bedclothes, and that is why the tale still lives.

J. R. R. Tolkien has written: "If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy stories about frogkings would not have arisen." In the beginning, of course, there really was little distinguishing between frogs and men. That is, a totemistic tribe that worshiped a frog considered frogs as friends, ancestors, saviors, and infinitely more like themselves than any one of the human tribe of wolf-worshippers living down the road. So, too, a child relates easily to his pet goldfish, his kitten, and his stuffed bear while ignoring the new neighbor or an elderly aunt.

Allegory is a development of that childlike belief, for as the child and the race grow up, so does the ability to distinguish between frogs and men. That small, green, glistening ounce of hop over there is a frog. That tall, hairy, striding hulk over there is a prince. Even if each is wearing a crown, they are distinguishable.

But the growing intelligence says more. It says: There is something of frog in every prince and conversely something of prince in every frog. And so the frog-prince story arises.

It has been traced back through the Grimms' version to earlier German household tales; it has been traced even further in its English variants, to a sixteenth-century collection of story titles found amongst Scottish shepherds. And Sir Walter Scott, that often fanciful folklorist, who made up things when he couldn't find proper sources for them (or as he wrote: "I could never repeat a story without giving it a new hat and stick"), thought the frog was related to tales of crocodiles told by the Kalmuck Tartars. There has even been unsubstantiated argument that our friend the frog-prince is related to the famous Green Knight whom Gawain beheads but does not kill.

It is a transformation tale, one of a great line of shapeshifting stories that fill the world's fairy tale coffers. It contains this bit of wisdom: that a princely person might be contained in a loathsome skin. That familiar theme has been played on folk instruments, orchestrated in ballads such as "Allison Gross," myths such as "Cupid and Psyche," and tales such as Madame Leprince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast." And of course, it also lies at the heart of psychotherapy.

But the theme is buried in the tale, the golden yolk inside the egg

of story. So the German storyteller starts "In olden times, when wishing still helped..." And, more direct, the English version begins "One fine evening a young princess went into a wood..."

And there she meets a frog, a most persuasive speaker, nicer and even more humane than the princess herself. He, after all, keeps his end of a bargain made at the wellspring, the source of life for the frog. What he asks is not considered forward, since he is a frog.

Later on, the German and English versions fudge a bit about what happens in the princess's bedroom, skipping from night to morning in a single sentence. That is how it should be. This is a frog, after all, not a prince, who is locked up all night in her boudoir.

The English teller has the frog demanding matter-of-factly: "Put me in your little bed." And she does. Not once, not twice, but three nights running, whereupon the frog turns into a handsome prince who gazes at the princess "with the most beautiful eyes." That marriage follows immediately proves that, by his transformation into a prince, the frog has compromised her.

The German princess is not so easily beguiled. She listens to the frog's plea, "Carry me to your room and prepare your silken bed." But it is not a proper request for a frog to make. The implications disgust her. She refuses, until her honorable but obtuse father insists. A royal word is, after all, a royal word. Marriage for princesses has nothing to do with the niceties—only with treaties. So she carries the frog upstairs and puts him in the corner, as far from her silken bed as possible. But the frog is too smart for her. He has read the fine print in the contract. "I want to rest as much as you do," he says. "Pick me up or I will tell your father." Literally matching her deed to his word, she picks him up between her thumb and forefinger, and then flings him against the wall with all her might, shouting, "Now you'll get your rest, you nasty frog." He slides down the wall and falls to the floor and turns into a handsome prince "with beautiful smiling eyes."

The so-called Green Knight variant has the frog, after three nights in the princess's bed, asking her to cut his head off. She does so with alacrity. Then he, too, turns into a prince, "with the most beautiful eyes."

Still the theme is the same: under the warty countenance, under the loathsome skin, there can still beat a princely heart. Sometimes the revelation comes after a night with the princess. Sometimes it comes with a blow to the neck or a splash against the wall. But the essence of the frog-prince story is the storyteller's belief that a loving heart could be encysted in a horrible form. Perhaps there is a cultural or historical perspective similarly hidden in the story's body, for as Iona and Peter Opie have written: "The idea that a kiss or the marriage bed could release a person from the curse of monstrosity was one that thrilled readers in the Middle Ages." It is just as thrilling for those of us in our own "middle ages" to know that we can be loved beyond our extra pounds and gray hair and wrinkled skin. Our delight in the tale carries over to the children we recite it to, and the child we still harbor within.

Besides, it is a simply wonderful feast for the Freudians, who can see in this particular story tumescence, detumescence, maidenhood, Oedipal regression, and the rest. Or one might prefer scholar Roger Sale's more cynical evaluation: "The rewards are clearly in excess of the princess's deserts..." he writes. "She *deserves* a spanking, if you like. But the strain in the story that creates this sense of unfairness is exactly what is required to overcome the fear of the repulsive object that has come to eat and sleep with the princess."

This is not simply a story about a frog and a prince. A story about a frog would be biological. A story about a prince would be historical. But a story about a frog-prince is magical and therein lies all the difference.

The magical story is not a microscope but a mirror, not a drop of water but a well. It is not simply one thing or two, but a multitude. It is at once lucid and opaque, it accepts both dark and light, speaks to youth and old age.

A reviewer writing about Isak Dinesen's tales once said that her greatest gift was that she could "accept opacities." Some critics would have us believe that opacities have no place in children's books; that a story must be transparent or apparent, that a child must not be frustrated in his or her understanding of a tale.

But to filter out the opacities for the child reader is to rob the tale

of its magic. And this is a loss for the adult reader, too. If a story is totally transparent, it has no interest beyond that first reading or hearing. A fine story—whether for children or adults—should reflect both dark and light, both shadow and glare.

Look back into folklore and legend, myth and religion, and you will find much of the emphasis is on the shadow. A shadowless man is a monster, a devil, a thing of evil. A man without a shadow is soulless. A shadow without a man is a pitiable shred. Yet together, light and dark, they make a whole. And these light/dark chiaroscuro figures walking about a magical landscape illumine all our lives.

The familiar tale of Cinderella is another case in point. It is part of the American creed, recited subvocally along with the pledge of allegiance in each classroom, that even a poor boy can grow up to be president. And even a poor girl could grow up and become the president's wife. This unliberated corollary, this rags-to-riches formula, was immortalized in the nation's children's fiction. It is the essence of the Horatio Alger stories popular in the 1860s and of the Pluck and Luck nickel novels of the 1920s, and it has made "Cinderella" a perennial favorite in the American folktale pantheon.

But it is a wrong reading of the tale. It is wrong on two counts.

First, "Cinderella" is *not* a story of rags-to-riches, but rather of riches-to-rags-to-riches; riches recovered; a winning back of a lost patrimony. "Rumpelstiltskin," in which a miller tells a whopping lie and his docile daughter acquiesces in it in order to become a queen, seems more to the point.

Second, Cinderella, until lately, has never been a passive dreamer waiting for rescue. The forerunners of the Ash-girl have all been hardy, active heroines who take their lives into their hands and work out their own salvations. (And not without a bit of finagling and vengeance to boot.)

The story of Cinderella has endured for over a thousand years, first surfacing in a literary source in ninth-century China. It has since been found from the Orient to the interior of South America, and over five hundred variants have been located by folklorists in

Europe alone. This best-beloved tale has been brought to life over and over so many times, no one can say for sure where the oral tale truly began. But as Joseph Jacobs, the indefatigable Victorian collector, once said of a Cinderella story he printed, it was "an English version of an Italian adaptation of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation of an Indian original." That is certainly an accurate statement of the hazards of folk-tale attributing: each reteller has brought to a tale something of his or her cultural orientation. The Chinese admiration for the tiny "lotus foot" is preserved in the Cinderella tale, as is the seventeenth-century European preoccupation with dressing for the ball.

But beyond the cultural accoutrements, the detritus of centuries, Cinderella speaks to all of us in whatever skin we inhabit: the child mistreated, a princess or highborn lady in disguise bearing her trials with patience, fortitude, and determination. Cinderella makes intelligent decisions, for she knows that wishing solves nothing without the concomitant action. We have each of us been that child. (Even boys and men share that dream, as evidenced by the many Ash-boy variants.) It is the longing of any youngster sent supperless to bed or given less than a full share at Christmas. And of course it is the adolescent dream.

To make Cinderella less than she is, an ill-treated but passive princess awaiting her rescue, cheapens our most cherished dreams and makes a mockery of the magic inside us all—the ability to change our own lives, the ability to control our own destinies.

In the oldest of the Cinderella variants, the heroine is hardly catatonic. In the Grimm "Cinder-Maid," though she weeps, she continues to perform the proper rites and rituals at her mother's grave, instructing the birds who roost there in the way to help her get to the ball. In the "Dirty Shepherdess" variant and "Cap o' Rushes" from France, "...she dried her eyes, and made a bundle of her jewels and her best dresses and hurriedly left the castle where she was born." Off she goes to make her own life, working first as a maid in the kitchen and sneaking off to see the master's son. Even in Perrault's seventeenth-century "Cendrillon, or The Little Glass Slipper," when the fairy godmother runs out of ideas for

enchantment, and was at a loss for a coachman, "I'll go and see," says Cendrillon, "if there be never a rat in the rat-trap, we'll make a coach-man of him."

The older Cinderella is no namby-pamby forgiving heroine. Like Chesterton's children, who believe themselves innocent and demand justice—unlike adults who know themselves guilty and look for mercy—Cinderella believes in justice. In "Rushen Coatie" and "The Cinder-Maid," the elder sisters hack off their toes and heels in order to try and fit the tiny shoe, and Cinderella never stops them. Her tattletale birds warn the prince:

Turn and peep, turn and peep,
There's blood within the shoe;
A bit is cut from off the heel
And a bit from off the toe.

Does Cinderella comfort her maimed sisters? Nary a word. And, in the least bowdlerized of the German and Nordic variants, when the two sisters attend the wedding of Cinderella and the prince, "the elder was at the right side and the younger at the left, and the pigeons pecked out one eye from each of them." Did Cinderella stop the carnage—or the wedding? There is never a misstep between that sentence and the next. "Afterwards, as they came back, the elder was on the left, and the younger on the right, and then the pigeons pecked out the other eye from each. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness all their days."

Of course, all this went into the Walt Disney blender and came out emotional pap. In 1950, when the movie *Cinderella* burst onto the American scene, the Disney studios were going through a particularly trying time. Disney had been deserted by the intellectuals who had championed his art for some time. Because of World War II, the public had been more interested in war films than cartoons. But with the release of *Cinderella*, the Disney studios made a fortune, grossing \$4.247 million in the first release alone. It set a new pattern for Cinderella: a helpless, hapless, pitiable, useless heroine who has to be saved time and time again by the talking mice and birds because she is "off in a world of dreams." It is a Cinderella

TOUCHMAGIC

who is not recognized by her prince until she is magically back in her ball gown, beribboned and bejeweled.

Poor Cinderella. Poor us. The acculturation of millions of boys and girls to this passive Cinderella robs the old tale of its invigorating magic. The story has been falsified and the true meaning lost—perhaps forever.

Yolen, Jane. Touch Magic.

Little Rock: August House Pub., 2000.

Once
listen
child
teller

An
the h
have
gorgo

An
unab
had b

It
migh
over
beach
active
ply th

W
spinn
and t