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FAIRY TALE

by Pauline Holdstock

There was once a queen who sat sewing by her window. And that is enough to begin, for if you know there is a queen at her window, sewing, then you know that the window frame is ebony, that outside there is snow on the ground and that small birds are shivering on the bare twigs of the trees. And there has to be blood. You know that or there is no tale. And now that we have a queen and we have blood you know too that it will be her blood and if not hers then the blood of her child.

Black and white and drops of bright, bright red. There is no other way to compose this picture.

But we are still at the window, the drops of red are berries still and the queen has not yet looked towards the wood.

Thus.

There was once a queen who sat sewing by her window and as she sewed she sighed fondly for she was dreaming of a child.

Now the queen was very beautiful but she lived alone in her castle, there being a certain nameless dread about her, within her, not to mention a persistent rumour that had to do with a raven, a cradle and the day of her birth. The elements of the rumour were variable. The dread was constant.

Such was the icy nature of this dread, that princes, if they gazed on her, had been known — seen indeed — to have their eyeballs frozen in their sockets. And so none dared approach her. And who can blame them? Besides, their absence is expedient, for if a prince should enter here the blood would flow in streams or not at all, and the child when it came would be a poor thing cobbled together in haste and incomplete. But our child will be magic. This too you know or this is not a fairy tale.

So the queen was sad, counting her long years of splendid loneliness amid her tapestries, remembering the glitter of her girlhood and thinking how it had settled now into a still pool of beauty and deep, deep longing.

And as she sewed, the queen of course pricked her finger and three drops of bright, bright blood spotted the linen and she smiled, for she knew as well as you or I that it takes only blood and a small piece of one's heart to make a child.

And so the queen closed her eyes and let her heart crack just a little while the drops of blood bloomed like roses on the linen.

When she looked up again, there was the child hurrying in a flurry of snow towards the castle in the darkness of the dusk-filling wood.

At once she knew more joy than in her whole life before and she ran outside laughing, holding her arms angel-wide. And as she bent to gather the child to her she saw that it was a dark haired boy and her tears fell on his face.

Now the child, it hardly needs saying, was as perfect as it was inevitable. From his hair that gleamed like midnight, to his skin that shone like snow, he was beautiful. And as he grew so did his goodness. Never did he lay his hand to a wicked act and never in his heart did he hold for the queen anything but love.

And yet the queen could not be happy (and didn't you suspect this all, along?) for, while her love for the child was as strong as the wind, the dread

that was within her began to send out shoots, tendrilled and fast-rooted: *what if?*

It was as if a very crow upon the castle wall had spoken the words. They were clear to the queen, were near, as a footfall in the forest is near to a traveller walking alone.

Which is exactly the trouble with wishes. From "*I wish*" to "*what if*" is no distance at all. They are two sides of the same mirror. Tasting the fruit of her own power, the queen found it — much like knowledge — very bitter.

She reasoned thus: had she been able, merely with a wish, a spider's thread of longing, to draw the child hurrying in a flurry of snow from the dark heart of the wood, then might she be able equally, on the merest filament of fear, to lose him.

The queen ceased to be happy. She resumed her sewing.

Always she would watch the child as it played and always she would guard her thoughts with care, leaving her fears unformed lest a spoken dread should, like a spoken wish, prove true.

Still the child grew more blessed and every day the queen's love, mingled with her dread, became a greater burden. Stark awake she lay at night for fear of dreaming harm. That she should one day be the cause of the boy's destruction was too much for her to bear.

At last, as the year drew full circle, she called her huntsman to her.

— Huntsman, she said, there is a soul that longs to be free. Slay the creature that holds this soul captive. Do it this kindness for you are a good man and strong. There is no need to fear. Rather would it be a wicked thing to deny a soul in need.

But the poor huntsman protested and said his will would surely fail were he to look upon the life he had to take.

So with a glance the queen took from him his sight, saying she would bring the creature in and it would lead him to a place of its own choosing where he could do the deed.

The queen left him blinded there and went to her child.

— Child, said she, when next you see the huntsman take what he has to offer you and think not ill of me that I love you too well. And the child, being but a child, thought nothing of these words but went again to his play.

The queen then took a small box of juniper wood, and returned to the waiting huntsman. In silence she took his hand.

When they reached the deep of the forest she stopped and placed the box of juniper wood at his feet then drew his knife and placed it in his hand.

And so the huntsman took the life of the queen there in the deep of the wood with his soul frozen by her chill power and his eyes blinded by her own. But as soon as she fell dead his eyes were opened and he saw what he had done. He was stricken with fear. She lay pale on the cold ground, a band of scarlet across her throat. Beside her was the juniper box spilled open with its twenty golden guineas burning in the snow and a letter close by with his name upon it.

The huntsman began to wish he were blind again.

Trembling he read: *Cut out my heart and take it to the child. Do thou this thing lest the child die and my soul curse you forever.*

So he cut out the queen's heart and placed it in the box. Then he laid her body in a drift of snow and covered it from the sight of heaven.

Now this huntsman, who was merely male and frail and quite unable to cope with fairy tale, was most afraid, and on his way back he buried the heart deep in a hollow tree. Then, finding a linnet frozen on a bare dead bough, he put it in the box and carried it away to the castle.

The child danced with joy when he saw the huntsman entering the castle gate. He remembered the queen's words and called out gaily.

— Huntsman! Huntsman! What have you for me?

— A message from the queen, replied the huntsman. She is gone on a long journey but bids you know that her heart is always yours.

And what does she send me? Cried the child.

A gift said the huntsman and his eyes filled with tears, not for what he had done but for all that he had to give the hapless child was a poor dead bird.

Yet when the child opened the box out flew the linnet, singing into the clear winter air.

For a few days the child was content to play within the castle walls, amused by the lovely song of the bird at his side. But he soon grew pale and sad and looked always outside the walls to the snowy wood. And now the huntsman — who was, as you have seen, unfortified by faerie — felt his heart fail within in him and coming to the boy he knelt before him and offered him his sword.

— Kill me, he said, for I have done a wicked thing and deserve to die.

The child of course would not touch the sword.

At last in tears the huntsman got up from his knees and led the boy to the deep of the wood.

The snow was falling gently through the bare branches and there was silence on every side. Nothing stirred save the huntsman and the boy and above them the linnet, flying for all the world as if the snow were nothing more than petals tumbling from a tree in spring.

In a little while they came upon the drift of snow and the boy looked upon the queen and saw the heart shaped wound in her side. He cried with pity to see her so alone and cold and empty and would not come away and leave her so. He reached up and took the linnet from the branch where it was sitting and he placed it gently where his mother's heart should be. Then he covered the place with snow and rose to leave.

And as he did so — but it hardly needs telling. There is no death in faerie, or if there is, it is a small thing, a missed beat of wings in the breast. You know the rest.

The queen opened her eyes.

But the deception! The chicanery! Not only has she played false with death but the ugly dread, that too, is gone, melted magically and no clue left us, nothing to help us shift our own chill blocks, huntsman's knives and linnets being not at our disposal.

Still we must be happy for her. She laughed with joy to see her child with the huntsman and knew not how they came to be there all three within the dusk-filling wood. She knew only that the world had never been more beautiful

or full of love. And so she let them lead her home, and wondered what she must have dreamed to bring about such joy.

Thus all her years, which were the number of a linnet's feathers, the queen lived in her castle and loved all heaven's creatures as now she loved the boy, with the same unfeeling love.

The child was happy and grew up to conjure all that he desired from the darkness of the wood. And the huntsman, the poor mortal huntsman, learned to forget, almost, all that had happened. He continued to serve the queen, though was never quite at ease, wondering always when next he might find his eyeballs frozen in his head — at the very least.

And the heart? Yes, you have to ask about the heart but it can stay buried, bloodied in a hollow tree, or this is not a fairy tale.

