

Tales From the Wyrð

Steps of Ash and Seedling

Allison Carr Waechter · September 25, 2018

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Revisiting the Robber Bridegroom

I N L I G H T O F # M E T O

Fairytales always fail us in the end. Let me rephrase that: popular fairytales, the ones hushed up and bleached of their truth like Hollywood scandals, will inevitably fail us, and with a smile.

I grew up with princesses raped and impregnated in their century-long sleep by the kind of prince who breaks more than a spell. I took my romantic cues from cinder girls beholden to abusive stepfamilies until fairy godmothers took pity on them. I swam with lovesick mermaids willing to forfeit their voices so they could dance on knives and sleep on cushions outside royal bedrooms like obedient canine bitches. I believed too early and for too long that wishing and doing were the same thing.

Red riding hoods cleaned and pressed of their menstrual blood, virginal hair so long and promising that a girl's very future could scale right up it, sanctimonious frogs overstepping

boundaries in the name of *you owe me*—these were the earliest tales I knew, painted in broad strokes for picture books or else breaking into song and dance onscreen. Their birds-and-bees origins stripped away, they were my beautiful but bad education.

Being the youngest in my family, my inheritance naturally consisted of hand-me-downs: too-tight dresses worn by my much slimmer sister, books she'd read, and toys she'd discarded in favor of more grown-up diversions. Among these effects was a small, antiquated book called *Household Stories by the Brothers Grimm*, adorned with macabrely gorgeous illustrations by Walter Crane. God, it was medieval. Something sinister tinged the already yellowing pages; sex sidled up and down the margins, coyly daring you to *go there* where context was absent. I was both fearful and fascinated. Here at last were Disney's delinquents.

Of them all, one particular tale seized and sang to me. It seemed more cautionary tale than fairy story; it had gore and a beating heart and my kind of wedding. As I grew older I misplaced it somewhere in the flotsam and jetsam of childhood, till the time came when remembering was a matter of life and death.

Not so long ago, as I was nearing the end of my twenties, I returned to the most vital lesson of my girlhood, that of the robber bridegroom. I pushed my way back to that house in the murky green (Tori Amos sings a line from *Black-Dove* in my head: *'in that tiny, kinda scary house by the woods, by the woods...*) and the goblin men who dismembered me there, taking what was mine under whatever pretense justified their actions, while my allies-in-waiting held back in the shadows. I swore to myself, to my former selves, never to forget again.

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Once upon a time a miller had a daughter, because of course he did. The poor are always cursed with daughters, right? Which is why they sell them to the first bidder who comes along, even if he's weird and the daughter's intuition tells her something is wrong, terribly wrong. She'll try to tell her father but he'll brush her off, because what does she know, her silly instincts and primal wisdom passed down through generations of mothers still fighting for her in her blood?

Her betrothed comes to call each week, and she lets down her guard a little more each time—but only a little. He's handsome in that roguish way most girls have a weakness for at some point; there's an air of mystery about him that heightens the already heady aroma of grown-up initiation. She's intrigued and maybe even a little in love, but the voice inside persists: *there's something terribly wrong*.

Her betrothed complains that she never visits him, that it's always he who makes the journey from his home deep in the forest and why should that be? After all, once they are married she will be mistress of his house. He insists that she visit the following Sunday, and assures her that he will sprinkle ashes along the path so she does not lose her way. Ashes.

Nope, says the voice. And so she stuffs her pockets with lentils and peas, and scatters them over the ash trail she is to follow. Eventually she comes to a solitary house in the heart of the wood, large enough but disquietingly gloomy. From inside a cage suspended above the entrance, a bird trills:

*“Turn back, turn back, thou pretty bride! Within this house thou must not bide, for here do evil things
betide!”*

Undeterred, the girl goes from room to room. The house is empty. When she reaches the cellar she is greeted by a very old woman seated by the hearth. She inquires about her bridegroom’s whereabouts.

Illustration by Walter Crane (1845-1915) for *Household Stories From The Collection Of The Brothers Grimm*, published in 1882

“Oh, you poor child,” says the old woman, *“where did you come from? You are in a murderer’s den.”*

You think you are a bride soon to be married, but it is death that you will be marrying. Look: see that large kettle of water over the fire? Once you are in your bridegroom's power he and his band of men will chop you to pieces without mercy, cook you, and eat you. If I do not show you compassion and save you, you are doomed."

The old woman hides the young girl behind a cask as footsteps shake the boards overhead.

"Be quiet as a mouse," she tells her. "Do not make a sound or move from this spot, or all will be over for you. Tonight when the robbers are asleep we will escape together, for I have long awaited this opportunity."

The robbers—murderers we must call them now, for there is honor even amongst thieves—enter the cellar, dragging a young woman with them. This woman begs for her life and this only excites them more. They jostle and taunt her, and finally force her to drink three goblets of wine: red, yellow, and white. This, we are told, causes her heart to break. The men strip her of her clothing, and while the devout Grimm brothers don't go into explicit detail, I think we can correctly guess what they each take turns doing to her dying body. They then chop her up, and order the old woman to prepare them a feast. One of the men attempts to get at a ring on the dead woman's finger, and in his frustration hacks the whole damn thing off. The finger jumps away and into the lap of the hiding girl. They make a fuss over searching for it, but the old woman tells them to sit down, that the finger isn't going anywhere. They don't notice the sleeping potion she slips into their wine.

Once the murderers have passed out, the two women lock arms and flee that house of horrors. (Though it's never specified, I like to think they paused long enough to free that helpful little bird as well.) As predicted, the ashes have blown off the path, but the peas and lentils have sprouted in the moonlight.

The young girl and old woman tell no one of what has happened, and on the morning of the wedding the bride is dressed and brought before her bridegroom and his "best" men. She actually goes through with the ceremony, and during the banquet everyone takes turns telling stories for amusement. When it's the young girl's turn she recounts a dream that unspools into the very events that transpired that ill-fated night. She assures her visibly uncomfortable bridegroom that *it was only a dream, my darling*. She smiles, and pulls the ringed finger out of her pocket for all to see—especially her father.

The groom and his men are put to death right then and there, which abruptly ends the tale. Except I include my own addendum. The old woman and young girl become ever-after sidekicks, and go on to pursue a life in lieu of knights in shining armor that apparently was of no interest to the Grimm brothers.

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The tale of the robber bridegroom, like many of its Bluebeard counterparts, is all about what it doesn't come right out and say:

That not all parents protect their daughters, either by choice or ineptitude. And so we become as changelings, and will never really be theirs again.

That every old woman was once a young girl, and likely passed through a hell of her own. Let us be grateful that the crone concludes the Goddess triad, that there is hope—and help—even in subterranean cellars.

That not all allies begin as such. That some stand by for years, complicit, defending the deeds of husbands, sons, brothers, fathers; that a lifetime of bad education may well take another to undo.

That all women are gifted with an inner voice, a bird that beats against the bars of its cage crying out to *run! run!* when there is danger, despite a world that is hellbent on silencing it.

That we can't always know for certain who means us well and who means to do us grievous harm, that sometimes the only way to find out is to put our trust in that trail of ashes—and maybe line our pockets with reinforcements.

That to be brave and clever isn't always possible when the moment demands it, that our courage and wits can absolutely fail us, or are no match for our assailants anyway. That sometimes we have no choice but to remain in those houses, those rooms, by force or stunted in fear, our bodies exposed and under threat but all the while determined to survive. That sometimes pieces are taken from us, and all we can do is grit our teeth and pray there will be enough to escape with.

I had to retrace my steps of ash and seedling back to that house, to that capable young girl and her better-than-a-fairy-godmother, because she is possible; to that bird still calling out from within. *Help me*, says the young girl. *Listen to me*, says the bird. *Let me help you*, says the old woman. There they are, waiting for me with the patience of folklore. They don't chide me or demand apologies, nor do they reaffirm what is already a fact: that certain men throughout my life have harmed me beyond repair or pardon. That while I entered their dens out of love, or work, or chance, or friendship, sometimes willing, sometimes unwitting, what they chose to do will never, ever, be my fault.

No, they are there to be useful, to be allies, without judgement or you-should-haves. They come armed with love and roofies to roofie the roofiers, inviting them with a smile to their own blood weddings.

When you and I are ready we too can lock arms and leave that house in the dark wood, that too many girls must venture into and fight their way out of. I am here, because I was there. And I will go back for you, whoever you are, again and again and again.

The End

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Bridegroom



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