

“The Pond: A Fairy Tale”

by

Esther Perisho

In a town so unknown that it did not have a name to speak of, there lived a young woodcutter. The woodcutter was very poor, and he was very displeased with this fact. However, it could be said that his poverty was partially his fault, for he was a lazy boy that spent more time dreaming than working. Any money he made was lost in the gambling circle, and when he lost money he would go home and sleep. In fact, he was so lazy that his parents had disowned him out of disgust when he was only sixteen. Despite his lack of work ethic, he did own a small hut, and every day he would leave his modest home to go to the forest, where he would work as much or as little as he liked. One day he took it upon himself to tread deeper in the forest than usual, and that is how this story begins.

The forest was beautiful. The Goddesses of Gnarl, who were in charge of the natural realm, had constructed this forest specially. Yes, the trees were broad and tall, the grass green and sparkling, the air crisp and sweet. Flowers glistened and animals pranced through the land. Standing still you could hear the forest sing to you, and there was not a more lovely song in the world. The beauty unnerved the inhabitants of the town, however, and for good reason. Just stepping through you could feel a pulse of magic boil up through the sole of your shoes and up through your head. The woodcutter, being rather dull in the head and hard in the sole, did not notice any of this. He kept walking, complaining to himself and the trees.

"What is a tree worth if it doesn't spout gold from its branches?" the young man would say.
"What are these animals if they cannot lead me to new treasures?"

It so happened that it was a misty day, and as you know, misty days are full of magic. The other woodcutters clung to their superstitions of the mist and stayed away from the forest, which was now more alive than ever, but the young woodcutter treaded on. He paused to stop under a large tree, and upon realizing it had good wood, began to work away at it. The tree proved to be thicker than he imagined, and before long he gave up.

"Ah, this hard work is not meant for me! I deserve to be bathing in gold, yet all I have to my name is this stupid axe!"

The man swung his axe into the tree with an angry slice, but instead the axe flew out of his hands. The axe never hit the ground. It remained suspended in the air. The young man scratched his head out of puzzlement, then reached out to grab his axe. It floated away from him and went deeper into the woods. The axe was his lively hood! He chased hopelessly after it.

Deeper and deeper the man went, his face getting scratched and bruised from the thorns and branches he ran into. All the while, the mist became thicker, until he felt he could reach out his hand and stuff some of it in his pocket. Finally he tore into a clearing and rubbed his eyes, for he did not believe what he was seeing.

The clearing was covered with moss that seemed to glow like gemstones, and the moss encircled a pond that shone an iridescent blue. The air was full of small, glowing insects that seemed to vanish when you looked at them directly. A thick mist crept from out of the pond and stuck lowly to the ground. The mist only seemed to float as high as the young man's ankle, and it coiled like snakes around the young man's feet.

It wasn't any of this that the young man was shocked to see. He had no heart for earthen beauty. Out on the pond there was a giant stone, caked with moss and kelp, and on that stone was the most beautiful girl the woodcutter had ever seen.

Her long blue hair clung to her shoulders and reached all the way down to her tiny feet. Her skin was pure white, without blemish or scar. Her eyes were large, and as beautiful as the pond itself. Her lips glistened and were red like rubies, and she ran her tongue over them when she saw the woodcutter standing there watching her. She waved a small hand and smiled at him, revealing small pointed canines of pure white.

"Hello, boy," the girl said.

The boy did not answer, yet remained still in his very spot. The girl let out a laugh. It was a pleasant yet bitter laugh that sent shivers down the woodcutter's spine. Yet her eyes did not show any antagonism, so the boy stepped forward to the edge of the pond, so he was only ten feet away.

"Who are you, fair maiden?" he called out to the Girl on the Pond.

"I am but a girl bound to this stone forever," the girl responded. She held up a slender wrist and he saw that a manacle with a obsidian chain kept her bound to the stone, and with only a few feet of chain between her and the rock. She could not get off the stone if she tried. "I have been here for quite some time, and so I have learned a great many things. I shall give you what you seek, if you wish it, boy."

The young man was outraged that this poor girl had been trapped for so long. How could someone treat her like this, he thought. Then he realized the last part of her speech and his greed got the better of him.

"What I seek? You mean you can grant wishes?" the woodcutter said, stupefied.

"Yes, my dear boy. I can tell from your eyes that there is something you want indeed, is there not? Wish for it, and it will come into being."

The woodcutter knew what he wanted, for it was always something he longed for in his dreams. He knelt on his knees and pleaded,

"Please, fair maiden, I wish for a chest filled with gold and all the gems I can think of, all large and shining."

The girl did not smile at his wish, but her face was naturally devoid of emotion. She lifted her hand and pointed out to the forest, her blue hair writhing around her like snakes. Finally, she clapped her hands and then she relaxed.

"Go home," she said, "your wish has come true."

Still on his knees, the young man thanked her, then ran back home. Strangely, he did not get lost to the way back to his village, and he was thankful for this at least. He ran into his hut and sure enough, he saw a chest of wood, engraved with symbols he did not understand. He opened it and he nearly fainted with joy, for what he saw was more riches than he had ever seen in his entire life. He bathed in gold, just like he had wanted to for years.

He did not hesitate to brag about his good fortune with others, and soon more people set out to find the Pond too, yet all went home in disappointment. Meanwhile, the young man had a stately mansion built for himself, full of all the best things gold could buy. He dressed himself in fancy clothes and strutted about the town as if he were king himself.

The young noble realized that he should have a wife. All the rich men did, after all. He searched for one, and many were fair and kind, but none were good enough to tempt his tastes.

"I am a noble now, I do not need to marry a peasant," he said. So he went out into the forest again, this time with a new purpose. He found that it was not difficult to find the pond, and so he boldly walked up to the pond and once more he beheld the girl.

The girl was different somehow, though he could not find words to describe it. Her image was sharper, less delicate. She was closer to the shore than she had been before. She stood out in the lake, not three feet from her rock, the chain on her wrist chiming in the wind. Her blue eyes sparkled with recognition and she waved to him.

"I take it you have come for another wish?" the maiden asked calmly.

"Please, fair maiden, I wish to have a wife as beautiful as the morning sky and as gentle as the moon," the young man requested.

The girl again pointed her hand out to the forest, and then he saw that her fingernails were long and sharp like daggers. Her hair whirled about her and she clapped her hand once more.

"Go home. You shall see that your wish has been granted," the girl said.

The woodcutter did not this time bother himself to thank her and ran out into the forest back home. He again had no trouble and so when he got home he was still full of energy to see what awaited him.

To his wonder, a beautiful maiden stood outside his house. She was as lovely as the morning sky and her manner was as gentle as the moon. He fell in love with her, and the two were quite happy. Still, he loved himself more than anything. It was he that made all this good happen, after all! He lived in peace for a while, and enjoyed taking walks through the town. Mostly he enjoyed bragging about his good fortune, and so it was not long until the town thought ill of him.

"He's so vain," and "Why does he not share his fortune with us?" were some of the comments that circulated about him. Soon the young man became enraged with the jealous words of his town mates.

"How dare they speak ill of me," he would say, "when I am the richest person in town? I should have control over them!"

So the rich young man ran out to the forest again. He found the pond easier than he had before, even though he had put no effort into memorizing the way. Perhaps it was his greed that guided him.

He saw the girl standing on the pond, but she was very close to the shore now. The chain that bound her to the stone seemed to be much longer than it had originally. It brushed against the water in the breeze. Through the mist he could clearly see her eyes, and while they still shone blue, he saw that her eyes resembled a cat's more than a humans.

"You have come for another wish? My, have you not so much already?" the girl said.

"Don't be ridiculous! There is still so much more I need! Maiden, I wish to be king of this lowly place, so that I may rule strictly over my impudent subjects," the man said.

The girl did not respond with words, yet she did the same motions with her hands. When she was finished, she told him the same words that she had told him many times before. So he ran home again.

As he walked through the town, he saw that the villagers bowed before him and gave him praise. They led him to where his mansion was to be, yet in its place stood a castle of vast size. It had rooms made of ivory or gems or gold, and its towers glistened in the sun like crystal. It was

enough that a normal man would be shocked to see, yet for the greedy young man it was barely enough to quench his thirst. No sooner had he sat on his throne was he overcome with greed and a lust for power, and the riches he had received from the Girl on the Lake did not prove to be enough for him. So he burdened his new country with heavy tax and raided nearby kingdoms, all for new wealth to add to his coffers. Yet despite this, he gave his gold to no one, and so his kingdom became incredibly poor.

Years passed in this way. The young king grew into a very old one, but his love for power did not falter. If anything, it increased, adding to the suffering of his people. Yet the maiden had granted the king absolute power over his realm, and so nothing would change until the king's death.

And so it was a dreary day, choked with mist that the king discovered that he was getting to old to live much longer, and the thought terrified him to his old bones. Living to enjoy his wealth was all he wanted. To die was the ultimate horror. Then he remembered the girl. The girl that had granted him the wishes that made him like this. (Though the wishes were of my excellent design, he added.)

If she could do all this for me, the old king thought, then why not make me live forever?

So the old king left his castle for the first time in many years and set out alone to the forest with the pond. He had to stop many times, for he was very old and weary. Yet finally, he made it to the clearing. He did not see the girl, but he did see that the low mist was thick and cold. It swarmed around his ankles, sucking the warmth from his body. The old king ignored this and walked to the edge of the pond. He called out for the maiden to appear at the top of his trembling old voice until his body shook. She did not appear. He was about to give up hope when he heard the girl's voice.

"It has been awhile. I take it you have come for your final wish?" the voice said.

The king jumped back, startled when the girl appeared in front of him. She was at the very edge of the pool, so close that she could have reached her arm out to touch the old king. She smiled at him, revealing long sharp fangs that were white as snow. Her hair did not seem to gently float this time; rather it seemed to be alive as it thrashed about her violently. The shackle around her wrist was gone. The king was filled with trepidation, yet it was not enough to halt his need for a wish.

"Your wish?" the creature asked.

"I wish to live forever!" the king demanded.

The girl smiled and licked her lips.

"Is that truly what you want?"

"I am the king, and so you have no right to deny me. Grant me my wish or I shall have you slayed like all other who have defied me," the old king shouted.

The girl did not reply, but she held her hand out to him. Her long sharp fingernails glowed green and flickered as they moved closer to him.

"Very well. Come here." she said.

So the king came closer, and the girl cupped his trembling chin in her hand. She gazed into his eyes and the world about him seemed to go into a haze, with her eyes the only clear object.

"You shall live forever as you wished, but not as you think," the girl said.

And she chuckled.

The frightened king did not understand her words. Suddenly, he was frightened. He tried to run away. Instead, the mist wrapped around his feet and anchored him to the ground. It slowly crawled up his legs, up to his shoulders and around his throat.

"I was chained here by greed, and like me you too will be trapped here. You shall keep watch here, guarding and protecting this place until your eyes hurt, your skin pales, and your heart stops hoping. You will stay like this until a person will come and replace you; a person who's own greed matches your own. Perhaps it shall not be hard to do. As you can see, it does not take much to make a person want more than he needs. Just a box of gold."

The king uttered a cry of terror and struggled away, but the girl's nails stabbed into his chin, halting his movement, causing trickles of blood to ooze out of his skin and drop on the tendrils of mist that seemed to have solidified around him. It tugged him and dragged him closer to the water's edge, and soon he felt the water lapping at his heels.

"Please! Stop! I'll change my ways!" the king rasped, but the girl paid him no heed. She walked onto the shore, free for the very first time. She walked out into the forest, and as she did so she seemed to fade away, until there was nothing left of her at all.

The last sound he heard was her laugh.

With a final tug from the mist the king tripped and fell into the pond, where the water consumed him. Deeper he sunk, and suddenly his arm felt heavy. He saw that a chain had encircled it, and it would not release him despite his struggle. His lungs burning painfully, the king gasped, but only took in the chilling water and not air. The water that he had swallowed whirled about inside him, tearing spirit from body. It was agony, like a thousand daggers stabbing into one's heart. He prayed for death's embrace, and finally after so many moments, it came. As his body sunk, his spirit went up into the sky. He reached his arms out for heaven, feeling the sun on his face, forgetting the troubles of the world. And then the chain held him back.

Hundreds of years later, a little girl became lost in a forest during a berry hunt. Oh, how she wished to find her home! Trembling and crying, she suddenly heard a noise. She followed it and came upon a small clearing, and she could not believe her eyes. There was a beautiful pond. She gazed out to the center of the pond and she saw an old man sitting on a stone, his wrist chained to the rock. His clothes that had been once fine were withered and tattered, and the crown on his head was crooked and dull. His skin was grey and wrinkled. He lifted his old scraggly head up to her and smiled, revealing long pointed fangs.

"Good evening, young girl. I take it that you have a wish?"