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Spindle

H. Anne Stoj

Every year, ridiculous boys make their way through the wolf-dark woods seeking a crumbling cottage near a stream where willows hang down over the water brushing the surface. They might look different, but always handsome. Some have burnished hair of gold, others the crimson of sunsets, and still others the darkest midnight set to curl about their strong, lean shoulders. They always have lovely eyes, cobalt, verdigris, and russet, melted chocolate, or jade framed by heavy lashes. Their cheekbones are well sculpted, sometimes sharp, other times merely defined, as are their straight noses over mobile mouths that offer promises as they place their fingers against their elegant jaws. They come in velvet and leather, ermine and silk. Their boots crush over the grass and their fine, sleek horses crop the flowers so carefully tended about the cottage. Their voices are loud, merry, and filled with arrogance. After all, they've nothing to fear at the cottage door, which was painted green but now peels in strips. They left their childhood worries of witchy women in the woods behind them long ago, some two or three years.

They knock with their knuckles; rap with their closed fists, calling out a name that is answered to, but never claimed.

Gran, they cry, Gran, how do I find the rose tower?

This, of course, is when I open the door. Nothing more than an older woman, ugly to them as I'm not the lily-skinned maiden they desire. No samite or cloth of gold drapes about me. Plain wool, the color of dove feathers and my hair plaited and capped under the white wimple that reaches to my shoulders. They see me and they smile.

Ah, poor Gran, they say, poor Gran, let me start the fire again for you, let me fetch you a drink, let me...

And so they talk. Endlessly talk while I watch them fetch and carry or do whatever it is they think they must do for me. They have the chatter of magpies, these silly boys tromping through my cottage with their muddy high boots and swirling cloaks that catch on the hearth grate or get snagged in the door. Yet, I'm the one they feel pity for, however fleeting and false, as they complete their tasks.

Stupid boys, they help me to sit either before the fire they've now made in high summer or outside in the shade where I can watch their idiot horses graze my herbs and flowers to nothing more than nubs not even suitable to dig up. They touch my cheek with their rugged hands spangled with rings. They pat my shoulder or head as if I'm nothing more than one of their hounds.

But it always comes to the same thing.

Once they believe me to be comfortable, feeling cherished by their thoughtful thoughtlessness, they smile at me with their straight, even teeth and implore again.

Where, Gran, where is the rose tower?

For you see, I have my own part to play in this tableau.

And of course, I tell them the way to the rose tower.

What I don't tell them about are the briars with thorns as thick as a man's waist that almost seem to reach for living flesh once a body is close. I neglect to mention the coils of black-malachite vines that twist about the stones and have squeezed marble into nothing more than dust. And the roses, well, these pretty, ridiculous boys know about the roses, after all, it is the rose tower they seek. What they don't know is that the roses look like fat drops of blood waiting to spill and when they do, their scent is so powerful, so reekingly sweet, most become sick. And when they do, that's the time the vines and thorns close in. But that's what I don't say. They'll find it out soon enough.

I tell them instead about you. I give them the tale that's so well known to them that they could recite it back to me in their sleep, but this too is part of what must be done. I must tell; they must listen.

So I do.

You, their unknown darling, sleep in some horrid tower surrounded by creepers and brambles where bees drone thick in the summer sun. Even in the deepest winter, I say, the rose tower remains green and red. And these boys with their jeweled swords of silver and golden circlets on their brows nod and whisper how it's a magicked place. A real place with spells binding such a maiden with skin as white as snow, hair as black as a crow's wing, and lips red as-and at this part of the description they pause and look apologetic. The wrong girl, they always murmur to me. Perhaps it doesn't matter what girl is sleeping, or where, be it a coffin of melted sand or a rubble of stones, or who she is, as long as she sleeps in enchantment.

The rose tower's princess, I remind them, is tawny haired, fair as a magnolia blossom with the sweetest blush to her cheeks. They know her eyes will be the glimmering blue of heaven. Again they beg my pardon, and I listen to this apology with their mix up of women. They're nothing more than silly boys on quests looking for dragons to slay and other such things. They only want some girl to sit up after a chaste, or not so chaste, kiss is pressed to her sleeping lips. Her arms should wrap about them as she cries out, my own dearest love, or some other such romantic nonsense.

She will awaken, won't she, Gran? Should I kiss her ever so gently?

I agree with them, that yes, she will wake with the kiss of her true love. She will love them back with all of her heart. I let them believe what they want, for they will never love you they way they think they will. I see this and know it. They only lust for you, and it's not even you they want. They want the dreaming girl on a bed of satin with her brilliant hair in curls tumbling about a lacy pillow. They want the story that's so well known. How disappointed they'll be to see you, no matter how beautiful you are. They wish for a dream, or an ideal. And you, my dear, while dreaming fair, are made now from nightmares these silly boys haven't even thought of because they've never imagined what the penalty is for breaking a vow.

But they'll find that out on their own as well if they brave the guardians of your tower. If they win entrance.

They grow flushed while speaking to me of you, imagining your sleepy blue eyes open and wide as you press lips to theirs. And the spindle, Gran, they say, she holds the spindle still, doesn't she?

Spindle. Oh, yes, the spindle that pricked ^{Stoj: Spindle} your dainty little hand. But it wasn't a spindle at all. When this happened your royal parents had every spinning wheel, every spindle and distaff, every tool to card wool and make it to thread destroyed and chopped to kindling. Such things were outlawed, declared evil, and the dung-robed priests of Christ were called to heal you.

How frightened your parents were to find you fallen on the floor with azure skirts rumpled about your body and molten hair washing copper waves across the stone. They cursed and wept and accused each other.

How could this happen? How can such a thing be, they moaned while rendering tears in their fine clothing in absolute despair against this horror done to you.

The Christ priests could do nothing. They mumbled their prayers and rattled their beads, which we used long before when the beads had been nothing more than rose petals and verbena. They chanted in whining voices as they lit candles of beeswax and incense from the east. When such devotions didn't help rouse you, they broke their skin with whips. It was the priests' hope their blood would make up for the single drop of yours that was plucked by a moon-kissed blade, small as a needle, sharp as pin, twisted with thread about it to catch what was spilled from your hand.

Spindle indeed.

Of course, this part the princes and knights with their burning hope and desire know like they knew themselves to be young and beautiful, pure and good. The next part, the part they are anxiously awaiting, is where they enter after talking to me. I can only watch them ride off on their horses with barding glittering in the sun. Fools, I mutter as they spur to your briar cradle filled with the knowledge they will be the one to wake you.

They've no idea, though, just how you ended up in this situation. They don't know how your exalted parents called to us, myself and my sisters of the wood. Your mother was heavy with you then, round and bloated like a hunter's moon. You were draining her strength from the inside out leaving her to do nothing more than swim in the linens of the king's bed. Her pain was great, to be greater still with your coming. Her cheeks sank into hollows. Her eyes lost their brightness. Her hair turned brittle and coarse without its luster.

Dreadfully ill, whispered the court while you distended her belly. Rumors flew on raven wings. Gossip rode on flames. She would not live many said and perhaps neither would the child causing her slow murder.

Your father fell into a black depression at this news. He couldn't bear to think of losing his wife, or child, or both. He prowled through the hallways raving and pulling his hair until the brothers of Christ suggested something sinister crept in your mother's royal blood and tampered with her as women were the weaker vessels. Had Eve not caused the fall of pristine Adam? At this, oh your father flew into a rage and banished them from his land. He packed them back to their Church in their robes of homespun and damned them to their Christian hell. In his fury, he cursed them and himself and fled into the woods.

You know the woods from your childhood. Vulpine dark shot through with sunlight. The bitter scents of pine and juniper perfumed with sweet basil and lavender. Crystal ponds with jewel colored fish hidden in cozy stands of poplar and birch. The very woods you were told to stay away from as devils roamed there.

You stayed away.

Your father did not.

Nor did he think of us as agents of the Hell the priests warned of. Not then, anyhow. That belief returned when he welcomed those faceless men back. But at the moment of his hurt and fear, he wanted us, the wise women, the wood women, the priestesses and prophetesses with their unbound hair and bare feet. Wolf women with their sharp eyes and fingers ready to help.

He begged us to step from the shadows. Tempted us with apples and honey. Railed at us for staying silent until he promised to give us whatever we should wish.

We discussed this, my sisters and I, for long moments as he paced through the shadows screaming his promises to us. We decided we would help him. From the darkness, we flowed and he fell to his knees praising not the Christian god, but older gods, for he knew we were not what we seemed to be. Not devils as you were eventually warned, but eternal creatures with wisdom and knowledge beyond mortal understanding. We agreed to his terms with ours spread before him. Our price, we had concluded, was to be recognized again, to be brought back into the realm where we belonged. We would have a priestess, though, we told him, of mortal flesh and blood. The priestess, we said, would be his daughter yet unborn.

He thanked us, praised us, and rushed us to his sickly wife where we eased her suffering and aided in your birth. Because of us, she did not die. Nor did you.

But he forgot his vow he made in our wolf woods. Once he saw you were alive and hale, that his wife weak but breathing, he dismissed us as nothing more than peasants. Back to the woods we went, for his dismissal didn't bother us. We felt sure he would remember, but as you know, he did not.

When it came time to recognize you before your people, we attended. Rather, we made the attempt to. As soon as we stepped onto the lands, as soon as we reached the grand sprawl of the manor house, we were turned away. A cry went up of witches, of demonesses, and other such things. We tried to respond, to tell them that your father had asked our help and it was our duty still to be sure that you, sweet child, were well and your mother too. The guards believed not a word and with swords drawn and fire in their eyes we were driven back to the woods.

Your father might have forgotten us, your mother never knew of his bargain, but we would not forget. We would have what we had been promised. You would be our priestess by our will alone. We would have preferred to teach you as you grew, to show you the wonders about you that would be yours, but the actions of your parents made this impossible. Instead, we had to render our justice for this misdoing with a deed.

Hence, the spindle.

Hence, your sleep.

And the tower with its briars and roses.

Now the silly boys come on the trail of legends and mystery hoping to find you. And perhaps they do, but they never return from your bower. We've made sure that such a thing will not happen. For you see, gentle Rosalind, you will not wake, not until your people recognize us once more.

And that could take forever.