

Old clothes, bread, cream and butter.

by Mann Kashdan

'So you would like a good laugh,' I ask.

She nods petulantly. The corners of her eyes are caked with sleep, and her hair rings her face in a tangle of brown. It is late afternoon. 'Tell me a story,' she demands, with a tight, brightness in her voice. 'Make it funny.'

She has been exanimate for nearly four days, in bed for a solid two. But the pair of books beside her, face down on the blankets with spines bent, belies her apparent inactivity. Sometime between this morning and now she has begun reading them both. Three others are stacked on the night table, pages dog-eared. An open notebook is covered in her nearly illegible scrawl. I have been with her long enough to know that dormancy is over; she will be up all night.

'Just get out of bed,' I reply. 'It looks like the fairies have been at your head. You should turn your clothes inside out. Put out a biscuit. Ring a bell. Buy a rooster; or a recording of it crowing. It will keep the sprites at bay.'

'I don't believe in fairies.' She closes her eyes.

'Get up or I leave,' I say.

'Again?' she replies. She knows it is an empty threat, issued, followed up on, rendered meaningless by my eventual return. But I cannot recant, so I stand. In response, she smiles, in mischief or malice, lifting her head, and I see more hair tangled in elf-locks.

'The Lord Above would not approve. Of your fairies, that is. The occult is an abomination in his eyes.'

'The Lord Above, in his infinite wisdom, created the fairies. He doth not loathe his own creations.'

She kicks her feet under the covers, waiting. I should leave, I think. But the books, the teasing, her smile - the evidence points to

one thing. She is tossing off the last of what she calls her vegetal state. Despite myself, I am looking forward to it. I sink back onto the covers.

'It is said that when the angels revolted, God shut tight the gates of Heaven; those angels within remained so; those in hell, consorting with Lucifer, became demons; one-third were trapped in-between, here in our world, and became the faerie.'

'What a start,' she declares, flatly. 'If I wanted a religious story, I would have just continued with these.' She indicates the books next to her.

'If you keep interrupting, I'll stop,' I say. 'Mother always started her bedtime stories this way, and since you're acting like a child, I thought it would be appropriate. Now, are you going to be quiet?'

'Yes sir.'

'Good. Besides, it's not really a religious story. And I swear,' indicating seriousness with a scowl, 'if you keep this up I'll turn this car right around.' She smiles crookedly and lies back against her pillow.

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When my mother would begin a story, a similar mischievous grin would spread across her face, redolent with the pixie charm she would soon bring to bear. In the more ancient lore, demoted angels stood radiant, majestic, mere steps below their cloud-bound colleagues. Over the years their stature diminished, from the nigh-angelic, to the dwarfish buffoons subject to the whims of Oberon, to the diminutive pixies populating Neverland. Unlike the angels, dedicated to purity and wholesomeness in God, or debasement and the evils of Satan, the earth-bound spent their days in mischief, engaged in the petty pastimes of stealing babies, waylaying travelers, extracting protection in the form of old clothes, bread, cream and butter.

Mother's stories carried this degeneration a step further. Her fairies were children, about our age, possessing no magic at all, save one or two unlikely abilities: Yo, a small child having uncanny skill with a yo-yo; Pan, with hypnotic powers in the playing of the violin;

Flip, a young girl with gymnastic ability bordering on the sublime. Yet these skills were all coupled with some physical handicap. Yo was blind. Pan was scarred horribly. Flip was mute.

Father disapproved. Grimm's should be good enough, he said once. They carried moral weight. Or Bible stories, like those he was raised on, the ones Mother knew well, when she could be bothered. But she would brush him off with a laugh. Of course her stories had morals: develop a skill, practice makes perfect, appearances are not everything; no one is unflawed. She would flash a goofy, childish grin and Father's stolid Baptist mien would dissolve into a smile.

Today, I watch as the woman in my bed giggles at the parental timbre in my voice and pulls the blankets up under her chin. I find that I can't help but smile at the child-like gesture.

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'So after the gates of Heaven were closed, those angels on earth realized they were trapped in a middle ground. Unlike their brethren in the skies or those under the earth, they found that they had no master, no higher purpose to serve.

'With this realization, the earth-bound angels began to fight among themselves. The weak gathered under the strong, and soon many warring kingdoms existed, battling for dominance over their neighbors, sapping their strength in meaningless conflict over territory.

'Over time, their power diminished. And over time, the formerly insignificant powers of humans grew. Industry and science outstripped magic. Eventually, the world of the faerie was driven into hiding. Some held to their previous forms, not unlike the gnomes and fairies we see today. Others took on the form of animals and other creatures of the woods. Their once immense abilities shrank and soon became all but ineffective. In short, they dwelt amongst humans in secret, their struggles invisible.

'But they continued to fight amongst themselves, their allegiance to higher power neglected, their impact on humanity unnoticed, and their glorious history forgotten.'

'I see we're creating a new mythology here,' she remarks, sitting up.

'If you don't like it, you can get out of bed.'

She pulls the blankets back up under her chin. 'Go on,' she says.

'Come on. Aren't you a bit old for this?'

'One is never too old for a good bedtime story.'

'It's the middle of the day.'

'One is never too old for a good bedtime story,' she repeats. Of course I know this is not true.

* * *

Mother told her stories only at night, displacing my brother or me onto a heap of blankets that would lie between our beds, a small price to pay for the magic she wove. In those days, she was a mercurial figure, her manic voice swooping from high and bright and fast with fantastic fervor, to a dull, stolid drone in a darkened room, a tired whisper from under unwashed sheets. These story nights were a boon, a sign of the brighter times; yet the more fantastical the story, the longer and deeper the silence between them. For my brother and me, these swings were a matter of fact, like the elliptical orbit of a comet. Unpredictable, and too often brief, the appearance of its glorious tail nevertheless lit up a night sky; in contrast, our father's cosmological stature was as dull, immovable, tiny and dim as the North Star. If we were on Earth, set here to witness and periodically wonder at her brilliance, he was just another celestial vassal, one in the throngs she held in thrall.

There were many fairies, many stories. Over time, Mother introduced new characters, inducting them into a fairy fellowship known as the Friends, dedicated to bringing justice to children everywhere. They would use their abilities to save innocents from fires set by evildoers, eke out daring rescues from various impossible traps. One November, they secured suffrage for children across the US, leading to a Democratic ouster of the Republican majority in the House, and a subsequent reduction in world hunger.

But these abilities diminished with time. The children seemed to grow older, their character less acutely noble, their enemies more

wily. Some of the newer Friends were killed off. We grew older as well, and to a certain extent our interest waned. Soon only Yo, Pan and Flip remained. By this time, I was almost old enough to realize that Mother told these stories most often after my brother and I heard raised voices from behind closed doors; that she always told them after she had forgotten to pick us up from school, after making some unaffordable, whimsical purchase, after leaving the stove on and setting fire to the kitchen, after she disappeared sometimes for days, reappearing with nothing more than 'having a good laugh' as explanation. I grew nearly old enough to notice too that Mother's quiet times were often less quiet than we thought; that our father, who we always thought distant, was more often than not sitting in the kitchen, awake until she slipped out of our room, or in through the back door, later and later at night. Without the eager innocence of my brother and me, happily trading dependability for brilliance, his lot was to watch and wait, head in his hands and helpless.

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'I suppose you're right, that I'm creating a new mythology. But it's not my mythology, really. As you can imagine, millennia having passed since their estrangement from God, with the decay of their powers, with years of living a twilight existence, some of these faerie kingdoms developed strange belief systems.

'In one kingdom, located in a wood just outside a small city, there lived a young faerie named Mac, short for MacGregor. Like all other faeries in his kingdom, he was raised in the Belief.

'In this Belief, the ultimate Good was the Kingdom. Now this was not their own small, insignificant kingdom, but an Ideal Kingdom, one from which they were banished long ago.'

'An anthropologist would no doubt trace this Belief back to the Closing of the Gates of Heaven,' she interrupts. 'An example of the decay of oral histories with time, like an eons-long game of Telephone.'

'Right. Shut up.

'All the faeries in this kingdom believed that the only way to return to the Kingdom was through the Church, a massive brick

building just outside the woods. Good faeries would be placed just inside the doors to that building after they died and would be spirited away to paradise.'

'I like how you use your voice to distinguish the little-k kingdom and the capital-K Kingdom. Very effective.'

'Bite me.'

'Now, like all young faeries in this kingdom, Mac was deathly afraid of the Church, which spat out smoke and made lots of roaring noises, all very appropriate for a Gateway of such significance.'

'Unlike all the other faeries, though, Mac could not avoid the Church, because he was the Crown Prince of the kingdom. That meant his father was King, and as King his role was to embody the Good, and as such one of his roles was decide who would be deemed worthy of the Kingdom and to accompany all those faerie bodies to the Church. Naturally he made Mac go with him each and every time. As Mac got older, he grew less afraid, but never completely lost the sense of unease with the Church.'

'An apostate in the making, no doubt.'

'No doubt. Stop interrupting.'

'Mac had three very close friends who were a deer and a frog. He shared his unease with them, but they would have none of it. What if the Church is evil, Mac asked. It can't be, said the frog. Why not? asked Mac. I don't believe it, replied the frog.'

'That's not a reason, Mac continued. Make an argument, not a statement of belief.'

'That is my argument, said the frog. I don't believe it.'

'What? What is that, argument through incredulity?'

'Very nice. Argument through incredulity. I like it. Finally something to laugh at.' She is toying with the sheets now. I deliberately ignore her the signs of incipient boredom.'

'Yes, Mac was very clever. Note also the irony that disbelief is used to justify belief.'

'Double points for you,' she deadpans.'

'In any case, Mach and his friends laughed, and Mac felt better. Eventually, they all enlisted in the faerie army and joined the king in

war against a rival kingdom. They won a glorious battle, but at the end of it, the king, a deer, a gnome and a frog lay slain.'

'Sad.'

'Yes. Quite tragic. We're getting to the good part now.

'Mac accompanied the bodies to the Church but could not bear to leave. He sat vigil until the next morning, despite the billowing smoke and roar of machinery. Late that day, he watched as a human walked out of the building carrying a small brown box. It slipped from his grasp and broke open on the ground.

'Out tumbled four small grey figurines. A king, a deer, a frog and a gnome.

'Mac was floored. His Belief crumbled. As if this weren't enough, he realized that he will be expected to return to the kingdom and assume the kingship left empty with his father's death. His role will be to decide what is right and wrong for all the faeries in the kingdom, and he wondered if he could do this, knowing that in the end all those who live their lives for him are doing so only to gain entrance to a building where ultimately they leave as a grey plastic lawn ornament.

'He continued to sit at the edge of the wood contemplating this, and when the sun set, he came to a decision. He would reveal the truth, that the Belief was a mistake, that the Church was just a factory, that there was no Kingdom, and that each faerie was his own arbiter of Good and Evil.

'But just as he got up, he felt a blow to the back of the head. It was a pretty heavy blow which caused bleeding into his brain, and he sank into unconsciousness. The next morning, Mac woke to find himself surrounded by loyal retainers. They were fighting in a ring around him and dragging him along the ground on a sledge. Mac raised his head to look around, and realized that two enemy kingdoms had banded together to attack his homeland. Heroically, the last of his brethren were now dying to protect his body as they pulled him to safety, and he feels a moment of hope. But just before he slipped back into unconsciousness, with his last thoughts, he realized that they are dragging him toward the Church.'

'Holy shit. I ask you for a laugh and this is what I get? An existential allegory? You have a crap sense of humor. There were more chuckles in this,' she continues, grabbing a book off the stack beside her and tossing it at me. Elie Wiesel, *Night*. Despite this, she is laughing for the first time in a week. I feel my own mood lighten in response.

'I thought it was funny. Hey, no one's forcing you to stay in bed. I got plenty of stories just like this one.'

'Oh please, spare me.'

'There once was a famous bard in Denmark, who went by the name of Yorick.'

'I give up. Stop!' She is sitting up, smiling.

'You know that one? OK, here's another. It was a dark and stormy night.'

'Look, the blankets are off.' She finally swings her legs onto the floor and heads toward the bathroom. I pretend to look shocked, hurt.

'Fine. That's the last story I'm telling you.'

'Promise?'

* * *

I was eight when Mother told us the last story about the Friends; in it, they would die, ironically, saving the life of their nemesis. Yo was lured into a burning house by the recorded voice of a trapped child. Pan played that violin to no avail, done in by a team of deaf assassins. Flip, unable to call out, was shot down by a SWAT team convinced she was a terrorist. Mother told the tale in a dull voice, the lively product of her imagination belied by listlessness. My brother cried. They are just stories, I thought, but nevertheless there seemed a profound lesson in the demise of the Friends that I was too young to grasp.

A week later, Mother brought home a small brown box, containing a small figurine, the first of many. In it lay a dull, grey, winged lump. From that day on, the only fairy we knew was that one, seen keeping company with gnomes, frogs, or a small deer. The mythical

was relegated to the wastebin of kitsch and bad taste, just another of the ceramic figurines littering suburban lawns everywhere.

Mother's orbit settled into something resembling the planetary, stately and predictable, with mild seasons. Father went from helpless to hapless, no longer paying obeisance to some flighty, earth-borne angel but cohabiting in seeming harmony with a compliant, cooperative stranger.

Mother no longer told us stories of fairy children, talented but imperfect, naively fighting to right wrongs and protect the innocent. Instead she lectured, proselytized, asserted the reality of the Holy Ghost, insisted upon the Lord's will and Jesus' love. We should all strive for humility and meekness, for obedience without question: such is the perfection of angels. One such angel showed her the error of her ways, that her depression was the sin of sloth, that her frenetic energy reflected the sin of pride. Another angel, she later wrote, awaited her on the day she took her own life years later.

By that time, my brother and I held no illusions concerning the world of magic, of the otherworldly. The incandescence of the legendary lit not our nights. The legacy she left us lived two to a dusty box, a collection built over years, now unwanted, lost without a lawn.

In any case it seemed that what we inherited, those angels available to us, were those robbed first of their divinity, drained of their height, their dignity, their magic and finally their lives. The once-divine, noble creatures caught in that critical moment here in our world, the middle ground, along with everything else, assumed the lifeless grey of injection-molded resin.

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'You know, that horrible story explains one thing.'

'What's that?'

'Why you still have all those boxes of lawn figurines in storage. You think they're the corpses of angels.'

She tosses off this comment as she jumps in, then out of the shower, before sliding legs turned golden by afternoon light into faded jeans, before bouncing shirtless from the room, before leaving

me sitting on the bed alone. Of course she is right, that I have a shitty sense of humor, that the story was a clumsy attempt at allegory, that its revelations are neither universal nor surprising but rather personal and glum. Still, a rueful laugh is all I can manage, sitting in the room, head in my hands.

'Come on, I'm starving,' she says, reappearing suddenly, eyes aglow. 'Let's get a cocktail before we're supposed to meet up with Tom and Julie for dinner.' She is out of the room again nearly immediately.

I am left to drag myself off the bed, reserve already thawing, the concerns and resentment of the past few days steadily replaced by anticipation. I close the open books, careful to mark her pages, and glance down at her notebook. 'Jesus preaches humility,' she has written. 'So why does he talk about himself so much? What does it mean to gain power through weakness, or freedom through obedience?'

My father would know; Mother would laugh it off, or storm out of the room, depending on the medication. I can only shrug and smile. She has captured it, unknowingly, far better than I. In this case, like so many, the truth is not found in the middle of apparent opposites, but on both extremes simultaneously. The paradox, the irony, is worthy of at least silent laughter, and it twinkles briefly in my thoughts, as ephemeral as a crooked grin.

