Once upon a time there were stories.
In those days, words belonged to no one. Stories were elements, natural phenomena which emerged without source or explanation.
In those days, stories lived. They wandered of their own will, found the listeners they wanted, listeners who would pass them on and keep them alive.
In those days, stories changed. They twisted and curled in infinite patterns, like smoke rising from a flame. It is as if the people who lived in them were dissatisfied. As if, with some desperate paroxysms of their souls, they tried to mould their own stories from within.
We are told they got what they wanted, but surely they were not happy. Surely there was more to them than what we are told.

Beginnings

I

In the sickly light of the morning Shahrazad surveyed her sleeping king.
The air in the room hung around her, heavy, warm and moist. Still her hands were cold and her throat was dry. Shahrayar, her husband, the king, lay entangled in layers of multi-coloured cloth. He slept, but did not rest. His brow was a mass of wrinkles. In a matter of moments, he would awake.

To her eyes, the room was empty but for the two of them, but somewhere within herself she could feel the presence of countless others. The women who had come and gone before her. The king’s wives. One of them lifted her head to look at Shahrazad. She had been the first of them, the unfaithful one, the one who had incited his hatred. There was a wilting sorrow in her eyes. She looked as if she was sorry.
Shahrazad looked away. She could do nothing for them now. Her eyes were red from famished sleep, her fingers raw from spinning her story. She leaned back against the wall, and held her breath, and waited.

II

Being digested was a revealing experience.

Somewhere amidst the odour that pressed against every inch of her, forcing itself in wherever it could, and the viscous, clinging substance she dared not identify, and the unyielding softness of the wolf’s insides, the girl found she had time to think.

What had led her here? Her own foolishness? The explanation was too simple. A belief in the goodness of others – surely that did not count as foolishness. A simple offer of unneeded directions. *Grandmother’s house is down the road, between two oak trees.* Was it far from here? *No, not far at all.* She could not see where she had gone wrong.

Besides, there was the matter of the air. The scents in the air that brushed the ends of her nerves, filled her soul with a warm fragrance, and the colours – the fine, delicate petals of the flowers which blurred together the farther away they were, thin needles of detail turning into careful daubs from an artist’s brush.

The wolf had been convincing. He was nearly as foul on the outside as he was on the inside, but the girl had wanted to listen to him anyway. His words lit up the beauty around her. The woods, so foreboding and full of shades before, changed before her eyes. The air was filled with the nuanced sweetness of birdsong.

Against the inner convulsions of the Wolf, the girl did not relent. She had learned something that day. She did not regret it.
III

Through the glass, the maiden was divinely beautiful.

He had seen no one like her before. The lines of her face were crisp, impossibly fine. Her skin was like paper. If he were to touch it, it would crumple beneath his hand, it would cleanly tear away. Her lips were a shock of blood in snow. Perfectly curved, plump as a ripe fruit. Her hair flowed in dark waves, arranged around her, covering her shoulders, kissing her hips. Her eyes were closed. Her hands were folded.

To break the glass case would be sacrilege. There was no way to do it without damaging her, this perfect, fragile princess. The glass preserved her as she was. It kept her from the taint of the world.

Besides, what if he were to open it, and find her as lifeless as she appeared? Perhaps the case preserved her, protected her from the grasp of death’s decaying fingers. No – she was best left as she was, left for wanderers in the woods to admire.

The sun had begun to tint the forest red, but still the prince stayed. He could not tear himself away from her. He could not look away.

Middles

I

The king had issued an edict.

His rage was like fire from a lightning bolt. Sudden, irrational, all-encompassing destruction. Except he was his own target. As he raged, his own flesh burnt; as he burnt, his rage flared.

He was to find himself a new wife. The blood of his last still stained his hands, but there was business that needed to be done. The business of correction. The business of revenge. The business of marriage.
A kingdom of women were at his disposal. A multitude of wives. He felt himself engulfed with an unquenchable hatred for them all.

It was to be a fair exchange. For a night of the honour of being the king’s wife, each woman would give up her life to him.

None of them wept when they were summoned, but they all knew. Hollow-eyed they endured the rituals of the wedding night, patient and silent.

Fuelled by his rage, Shahrayar burned slowly through his kingdom.

II

From the deepest, dankest part of the forest, the wolf emerged.

He basked in the sun-streaked fog of the morning. He stretched his heavy, rippling limbs. It was the peak of daybreak, the most glorious part of the day, and he was hungry.

Saccharine floral scents filled his nostrils, kindling in him a dull, buzzing irritation. Hunger pulled at his insides. He felt as if he was being eaten away by a beast from within.

His paws, large, unkempt and damp from the morning dew, thudded, one after the other, on the soft ground of the forest.

Soon he smelt it, what he was after. Or – did his senses deceive him? – something infinitely better.

He raised his snout and sniffed. He detected in the air a mingling of scents that sent the beast inside him into a frenzy. Wool, wicker, buttery human fare – he could ignore all of that, but they came with something much more delectable. It grew stronger as it approached. The warm, sharp smell of yielding, tender human flesh.

The girl came down the path, a shock of red in the green of the forest. She looked ahead of her without seeing. She swung her basket unknowingly, kicked at pebbles on the road, and tunelessly hummed to herself.
If he wished, the wolf could devour her right there. With a single lunge he could snap her neck with his jaws, and she would never have seen him.

But the wolf was civilized. The girl was a human, after all, and she deserved better than to die like the creatures that were the wolf’s natural prey. At the least, they both deserved an introduction. Her to her devourer. Him to the breaker of his fast.

Besides, the wolf enjoyed the chase, almost as much as he enjoyed its reward.

III

The prince’s reverie was interrupted by a dwarf.

It was morning. The prince had not slept. His eyes were rimmed with a purplish weariness. The cold had frozen his limbs and sunken through to his bones.

The dwarf snorted, and projected some yellowish-brown phlegm close to the prince’s feet. The prince looked at the creature abstractedly.

It was a stout entanglement of bristling brown hairs. Above its snub, bumpy nose were a pair of permanently narrowed eyes. Its skin resembled a covering of reddish scales.

How much will you give for her? it said.

The prince blinked through the fog of his enchantment. He did not understand what he was hearing.

The dwarf started to repeat itself, but wearied of the last words. How much will you give? it said. It walked over to the coffin and tapped on the glass, leaving cloudy streaks across the flawless surface. We found her in the woods. Stupid creature, but useful. Kept the house clean. Not now. No use to us dead now.
Something flared in the prince – was it hope or rage? The creature defiled the maiden with its words. Not simply with its words – with its presence. But it had made an offer, and the offer had hooked itself into the prince’s tongue.

*I would give anything for her,* said the prince. *I cannot live without looking upon her.*

They stood on either side of the coffin, the prince and the dwarf. Between them the maiden glowed in the early morning light. In the prince’s eyes was a look of burning desire; in the dwarf’s, a charred hunger.

After a while the dwarf grudgingly spoke. *You understand,* it said, *that she is cursed. She’s nothing more than a corpse. As useless to you as she is to me.*

*I understand,* said the prince. The words forced themselves out from him; he could say nothing else. *Please...*

The dwarf said nothing for a very long time, and looked the prince up and down with a slow, pitying smile.

I

Shahrazad thought over everything she had been taught about stories. Stories were webs. In the hands of a skilled storyteller, the web would grow sturdily, intricate and beautiful and masterfully arranged. Listeners would wander into it unaware. Soon they would begin to marvel, and soon they would be trapped, entangled in a web of words.

Days before her wedding to the king, she had begun her spinning.

She would have to be careful. The king would have to be hers from the moment she opened her mouth. And, in order to stay alive, she would have to break one of the rules at the heart of her craft. She would leave each tale unfinished, lead the king gently astray with the thread of a new story, a new intrigue. She would tell stories within stories within stories. Hers would be a story without end.
Shahrazad spent the night before their wedding in fitful unrest. Dreams of stories mingled with waking, and waking thoughts of stories seeped into her dreams. Again and again she felt her lungs faltering, her voice thinning, disappearing into an empty stream of air. She could not escape her silence, the silence which meant her death.

II

Grandmother was looking strange that day.
Surely, the week before, her hair had not stood out in rough tufts that covered her face and protruded from her collar and her sleeves. Surely there had been no famished, burning glint in her watery blue eyes.

*Grandmother, what large eyes you have.*

Surely the room had smelled of wilted flowers and dust. It hadn’t been clouded with this earthy, animal smell that clouded it now. Surely Grandmother’s ears had been fleshy and round, not pointed and thin and hollow as they were now.

*Grandmother, what large ears you have.*

And surely, on the wrinkled, benevolent face of the girl’s grandmother, there had been no fangs – yellowing, red-stained fangs that she curled her lips back to reveal.

*Grandmother, what large teeth you have.*

Of course the girl knew upon entering that she was face-to-face with the wolf. Of course she had not mistaken this massive, snarling beast for her sickly relative. She was neither blind nor stupid.

Perhaps it was her belief in the wolf’s continued benevolence. Or perhaps she knew she had already lost.

Either way, the wolf was that day doubly satisfied.
III

Outside of her case, the maiden did not look the same.

The dwarf, when the prince had reached a high enough price to assuage his greed, had pried open the coffin. It seemed to delight in the prince’s horror. It had thrust its squarish, squat fingers under the white dress of the maiden, and scooped her from the coffin as if handling a shovelful of dirt. Her head dangled back from her neck, her chin tilted to the sky, and her rich, dark hair had trailed upon the ground, into the muddy impressions of the dwarf’s feet. The dwarf had called to his companions and they had left with the coffin.

Now, asleep in a patch of heather, the maiden looked different, but she was still beautiful.

If anything, there was something about her raw fragility, exposed as she was to the open air, that pulled at the prince with a greater force than her flawless otherworldliness had before.

The closeness of her was unbearable. The prince’s hand hovered over her face. He could feel her breathing faintly, so faintly that he felt he might have only imagined it. Summoning all his courage he brought himself to brush her cheek. It was cold to the touch.

His eyes, unwittingly, were drawn to her lips. They were blood red. Perfectly curved, plump as a ripe fruit. They drew the prince towards them with their silent siren song.

Endings

I

Shahrazad would not die that day.

She knew it as the king awoke. His eyelids lifted to reveal his eyes, dark and sharp and bold. His eyes locked with hers. Dark, anxious, brilliant.
She saw in his eyes no resolution, no peace for herself. She only saw a small shred of hope. In his eyes was a look of concession. A delicate, quivering truce, ready to shatter at the hint of a wrong word from her.

Shahrazad knew. That day – at least – she would not die.

* Each night, as the threads of her story drifted unfinished in the air, Shahrazad had the same dream.

Night after night after night her voice faltering, and the suffocating silence spreading in her lungs and through her throat.

For one thousand and one nights, she had the same dream.

* At the end of those nights, something in the king’s eyes changed.

On that morning he did not look at her. As always, he did not speak. He disentangled himself from the sheets, rose, and left.

Again, Shahrazad knew. She had wound her story around him, and he was hopelessly enraptured – not only with the web, but with its spinner. With a growing dread that cooled into resignation, she had felt it growing over their last few months together. Felt the web entwining itself around both of them, inextricably stitching herself to him, her soul to his.

For the sake of her sisters, her kingdom, she had stayed alive.

There was nothing left to do now. Nothing left but to endure her slow, protracted death.

II

Tearing fraying leathery skin. A fiercely struggling, earth-shaking howl of pain. Then the sudden assault of crisp cold air. The searing agony of daylight.

The girl felt hands pulling at her shoulders, pulling her free of the sucking, sticking fluids of the wolf’s insides.
She found herself lying in the grass. Her senses were raw, painfully fine. Too accustomed to the nothingness of moments ago. The grass felt like knives on her skin. She wrapped her cloak around herself, trying to escape from the chill of the morning.

Her thoughts were the remnants of a bonfire. They clustered together in a burnt, useless heap.

Someone was speaking to her, prodding her with gentle, futile reassurances. You’re all right, it said. You’re all right.

The girl recognized the voice. The woodcutter. She had met him before countless times on the path to her grandmother’s.

The wolf is dead, he said. There is nothing more to fear.

Dimly the girl caught a glimpse of something grey and massive beside her, something lifeless and torn.

She tried to remember her ruminations, the revelations she had had in the wolf’s insides. She found she could not recall them. They had disappeared, like dreams do, along with the daylight.

III

She remembered an apple.

The dwarves had warned her. Open the door to nobody. She had not disobeyed. An old woman certainly counted as nobody. An old beggar woman with a nest of white hair, her frame the shape of a hook. An old woman with nothing to offer but an apple.

After the apple, darkness and a swirling fog of fragments. Fragments of her life and of her dreams. The fog hovered above and within her head. Scenes appeared and disappeared before her eyes, dizzied her as they danced around in her mind.
She saw a sewing needle and a snow-covered windowsill, stained by three bright red drops of blood. She saw seven stumps overgrown with human hair. A huntsman, or a shadow of a huntsman, that stalked her steps. A blood-stained dagger. The hollowed-out carcass of a wild boar, divested of its lungs and liver.

Now she felt she was suffocating. A trembling, desperate pressure forced itself upon her lips. She could not find her hands. She could not push it away. Her words died in her throat, blocked at her lips.

She was wrenched, her soul screaming and clawing but her body silent, out of the fog and darkness of her sleep.

* 

As she opened her eyes, she saw the prince.

He was gazing at her with petrified wonder. She half-rose but found her voice had not come to life with the rest of her. Silence still paralyzed her. Who are you? she wanted to say. What has happened to me? Instead the prince, kneeling, took her hand in his. Slowly, he brought it to his lips, the lips which had shaken her from her sleep. Come with me, he said. Be mine.

Still she could say nothing. The silence, its cold, grasping hands pressing against her throat, spoke her consent against her desire.

Take me with you, it said. I am yours.

Coda

Once upon a time, there were stories, and there were the people who lived in those stories. They writhed in the grasp of fate and they twisted their stories from the inside.

Still they are not satisfied. Still they live on.
Word Count: 2998