

Daniel PASTIRČÁK

A Little Girl from a Wild Rose Bush

I do not know who was the better storyteller, Hans Christian ANDERSEN or my grandfather, for stories used to come to my grandfather in the stable. When a story materialized, he would drop the udder and begin telling the tale, immersed in dreams with his eyes fixed on the wooden frame strewn with swallow nests. ANDERSEN died a long time ago, and my grandfather has also died; the stable became dilapidated and crumbled to pieces, and what remained was rebuilt into a garage. And fairy tales were lost too. They moved out from human dwellings, higher into the mountains, to old roads, to wild gardens, among ivy in cemetery walls, to deserted and unaffected places where the lost treasures of purity hide.

A story can be found in anything, and there was one in a wild rose bush. The bush grew near a path, and the path faded into a shrub behind an old viaduct. The bush modestly swathed its body of bark with a veil of leaves. In the windows of the shadows cast by the leaves, the ivory of the flower petals glowed. The petals of the flower made the shape of a little heart. In the midst of the petals, a big sun of red gold shone. It appeared to me that from behind the thorny gates an unknown fairy tale was peering at me. Thus, I listened until I heard its voice and saw its story.

There was a castle and behind the castle was a garden. The garden was full of flowers, the flowers were full of fragrance, and the fragrance was full of the quiet singing of birds. This singing was carried all the way to a distant cliff where the garden ended. Under the cliff, a chasm stretched out into the distance. The chasm was full of the sea, the sea was full of waves and foam, and the waves and foam were full of thunder that drowned out the garden birds' singing.

There, inside the rocky cliffs, in a cave that the tempestuous sea had hollowed out, lived a tiny, little, fair haired girl. She never saw

the castle or the nobility strolling amidst the flowers. She knew only wings of water, like those of an eagle, rearing up between the granite at the bottom of the chasm and wild trees in the deserted part of the garden. The only face she knew, old and wrinkled as a tobacco leaf, bent over her bed every morning. Today, this face was looking at her for the last time. The old woman, that had, for years, been protecting the girl's childhood innocence, was dying.

"You do not have anyone," she said when the girl brought her a glass of water and knelt next to her bed. "You are as alone as I am, as the rocks are, as the sea is. The friends who are coming today to hold my hand for the last time will become your guardians."

A white albatross flew in at dusk. From behind him, clothed in dazzling brilliance, an old man entered the cave. When he leaned over the bed, the girl saw the flowing clouds in him.

"Farewell, Seanlian, Brother of the Dawn," whispered the old woman. "Take my little girl under your protection."

The old man drew aside a fold of his robe and placed a small harp on the bed. It was a wondrous instrument. The strings were crystal clear and the sounding board glittered with reflections of all hues like a fragment of pearl.

"My gift will protect you, little girl," he said. "The songs in these strings possess power; in each human heart they awaken, even in the lost soul, a modicum of good."

Immediately following his departure, a black eagle flew into the middle of the cave, and another old man followed it in. This man's garment was made of leaves, branches, roots, field flowers, and wild grasses. When he leaned over the beloved face, the girl saw little wings of birds and creeping wild animals in the shadows under the leaves.

"Farewell, Draganur, Brother of the Mountains," whispered the old woman. "Please, become a father to my little girl," she added, breathing her last breath.

The old man put his rough palms on the little girl's slender shoulders and said, "From this moment on, whoever touches you with an evil thought will have her or his hands pierced by the sharpest thorns of my forest and, thus, through pain, be disarmed."

After he left, the girl covered the dead woman with a sheet. She lit the last candle, took the harp, and with two little teardrops on her face set off across the deserted garden.

On the other side of the garden, along the rocky coast, a forest, as unforgiving as the spikes of a sea urchin, flourished and was as dark



as the night during a new moon. In the midst of the forest, bandits encamped. Their ringleader could not fall asleep in the night; he heard wafts of music over and over again. Before midnight, he stood up and set off into the forest following the distant notes. He stopped where the forest ended. There, in front of him, a little girl was sitting in the grass, caressing phosphorescent strings with her tiny fingers.

Magic chords hovered in the night. In them rang painful bells of lonesome rains; the breath of the southern sky lit up with purgatory flames of dawn. In the flood of this music, the ringleader of the bandits saw clouds, infused with mysterious light, towering from the garden up to the heavens. Even the smokiest lamp can give out light; even the cruellest heart hides inside it a pure teardrop.

A kindly hand has touched everyone at least once and the moment is never forgotten. The heart of a bandit is not any different. In the midst of the clouds, the bandit saw a stairway and his mother slowly descending directly towards him. He heard her saying: "Where have you gone, my son? What have you done? Your hands are stained with the blood of innocents and your heart is as black as the burned out estates that you left behind. The pain makes me restless."

Even the strongest knees shake before love that reveals its helplessness. And the bandit shook, too. "What should I do?" he whispered. "What should I do? How can I bring you peace again?"

"Look at this tiny little girl," she said. "She is the purest creature that ever walked on the Earth, but she is completely alone and does not have anyone. If you become her protector, you will purge your black heart in the pristine waters of her innocent soul." The words faded and the vision disappeared.

When the girl saw the thief's rough face suddenly emerge from the dark, the harp tumbled out of her hands. His eyes, however, were filled with so much tenderness, that in the next moment she recovered her trust. He took her to the camp and put her in a bed of warm pelts. She fell asleep immediately, but the captain could not. The music had died away, and once again, he was thinking as a bandit.

"Tomorrow I will send her to the king's court. Jewels offered by her will not be suspicious. Everyone will trust her eyes. Then she will find her eternal home at the bottom of the lake in the forest. Her lips will not be able to speak there. Whoever has no one will be missed by no one."

Early in the morning the ringleader woke the bandits. When he was unable to sleep late, no one else was allowed to either. Dragging them by their ears, he awakened them from their warm pelts. The bandits were rubbing their eyes with one hand and their red ears with the other, all the while muttering: "It is an honour for me, Sir, that my ear was touched by your venerable fingers." It is no wonder that such were the customs among them, since bandits are also merely humans. After they fed and groomed the ringleader, they brought the girl before him.

"Dear child," he said, placing his dirty hand on her golden hair. He immediately screamed in pain. Thousands of thorns had suddenly pierced his hand and it gushed with warm blood. "A witch!" he roared. He wanted to hit her with his other hand, but it was now attached to his body by the same thorny manacle.

The girl was stunned. Draganur had displayed his power. She nearly began to cry; away she must go, in order not to hurt the others. She took her harp and ran away. She ran long, and she ran far, as far as was possible through an inhospitable forest.

At the other end of the forest, there was a meadow. In the meadow, purple bluebells grew. Their ringing was quieter than the ringing church bells in the valley, which were calling the village people to a service. The little girl made her way to the church and sat down on a stone bench under the statue of a saint. She sat there until the sound of the organ ceased, and people began coming out of the church. They asked her: "Who are you, and whom are you looking for?"

She had not been looking for anyone; she was afraid of Draganur's power and so she replied: "I am looking for the most virtuous person, someone whose mind has never encountered a single wicked thought."

The people advised: "The most virtuous person lives at the edge

of the village, Hannah, a poor widow. She has been working her whole life. When she is done with her work, she goes and helps her neighbours; from what she has left, she helps other widows in the village.”

The door of the house at the edge of the village was open. When the girl walked through the door, a smiling face at the table greeted her. “Welcome, child! Whom are you looking for? Do you need any help?” Hannah stepped towards her.

The little girl replied: “I am glad I have found you. Please, I beg you, let me live with you, if only for a few days. I will be in your service in return for food and shelter.” The woman, faithful to her reputation, smiled kindly, and took the little girl to the attic room.

“Everyone respects me,” she murmured the next day, while she was assigning the work. “It is easy. The others think only of themselves, but I also think of other people. Hold on to this rule. And never boast, for a good person is praised by her or his good deeds.”

The misery in which the common people lived in the houses below the church on the hill caused the girl more pain than her own loneliness. Therefore, after completing her work in the house, she would go to the village. She helped out as much as she could, and in the evenings, she would play quiet songs to the weary people. In early evening, as dusk faded and the sounds of the day waned, her songs, a smoky offering, wafted past the roofs of the poor and lifted up to reach the stars that lit the night like candles. “You are a good woman,” the village people began saying to Hannah, “but your ward is even better.”

Their words stole Hannah’s sleep. She could not resist opening herself to the jealousy that knocked at the window of her mind. “Come, and let me braid your hair,” said Hannah to the girl one morning. When she reached into the girl’s hair, however, she howled in pain. Her hands, pierced by countless thorns, were bleeding. “I have seen through you,” yelled Hannah. “You are a fairy, a bewitching nymph. This is how you pay me back for my goodness? Get out of my house!” And so, everything returned once more to the way it had been prior to the little girl’s appearance.

“You really are the most virtuous one,” the village people affirmed Hannah. “How could she behave so shamelessly?” remarked those who used to talk about the little girl with the finest words.

“There was something bewitching even in the music. Often, I could not fall asleep and the worst things from my life flashed before my eyes,” grumbled an old soothsayer, who had always cared about the public’s opinion, since her living depended on it.

“Where will you go?” the wind asked, while wiping away the little tears of a child from her face.

“Where will you go?” the Sun asked and kissed her weary feet with his golden lips.

“I do not know,” answered the girl and she began playing a song that neither the wind nor the Sun had ever heard. It was a song about the heart; a song about the good that is not lost, but only slumbers in the human’s heart, about the evil that prevails like weeds in an untended garden.

The young prince Abelar cried out, “What beautiful music!” and stopped his horse. The prince’s retinue accompanying him on the hunt stopped also. Abelar was still almost a child. He had been raised since birth by kind hearted monks in the forest monastery. Therefore, no evil thought had entered his young heart. When he saw the modest beauty of the girl, huddled in the midst of music, a sudden fire seized his heart. Abelar took the girl and brought her with him to the castle, the very same castle behind which stretched the garden, at the end of which was the cliff with the cave, in which the solitary candle must have long ago burned out.

The girl was dressed in brocade and began to experience life as a noble. Time passed and there was a wedding. “Conjugal love is the purest one,” the ladies of the court sang, while weaving white roses into a wreath.

The priest asked: “Do you promise to stay faithful until you die?”

“Yes, we do.”

The pipes on the chancel burst into jubilant song, and the girl became the queen. As usually happens, however, the king soon became troubled about royal matters. The neighbouring ruler invaded the king’s territory and gained control of the king’s ore mines, which were the richest in the whole country. “I am going to declare war,” stated the king.

“Do not do that,” advised the queen. “You are burning with anger. Turn your heart away from the fire of vengeance that prevails in it.” Her voice trembled with anguish. “We are rich, and human blood is more valuable than the ore mines.”

“You are naive,” he laughed. “If I listened to you, we would soon become beggars.” He resolved not to discuss matters of the kingdom with his wife any more, and so he deluded her. His heart become colder and slowly drifted away from her.

One night, when he embraced her, thorns pierced his hands. The blood was dripping on his robe, and he, unable to comprehend, kept looking from his hands to the queen and to his hands again.

"She is a witch," decided the royal counsellors. "In the interests of the kingdom, she must be burned to death." Abelar suffered, but still, he ordered her to be imprisoned. "I have made a mistake," he admitted. "The music infatuated me, but now I have to behave as a king and defend the interests of my nation." In spite of his reasoning, he was unable to sleep well.

One day, early in the morning, he saw an old man dressed in white setting the fires of dawn. He also thought he heard a voice saying, "She is innocent, and you are guilty." Somewhere in the distance he heard the soft tones of a harp. It was the same song that he had heard on the hunt many years ago. He rose from his bed and set off after the sound. Through a narrow stairway, he stepped underground. The music became stronger. The notes led him to the cell where his queen was confined. She sat facing the barred window, looking into Seanlian's face and playing her old song.

"Who are you?" asked the king, when she noticed that he was watching her. This was the one question he had not dared to ask her.

The girl lifted her faded eyes to him. "I do not know. I do not have a name. I was born inside the rocky cliffs. The old woman who raised me died, and her two friends gave me special gifts. This harp has the power to awaken goodness in the heart of even the most wicked person. The second gift, however, is my curse. The hands of anyone who touches me with an evil thought are pierced by thorns of the wild forests."

The colour left his face. He remembered everything that had been in his heart, when his own hands had been wounded by the thorns. "My queen," he said, his voice trembling. "Your purity has divided us. I have never loved anyone like you. My mind, however, is weak and sometimes the most sinister thoughts intrude. If we stay together, we will cause each other more suffering than joy." He took her to the courtyard, illuminated by moonlight. "Take horses, a carriage, as many clothes, and as much gold and jewellery as you want."

"No," she replied. "I came with nothing. I will leave with nothing." She turned around and did not look back, while he watched her disappear into the night fragrant with thyme.

Years later, the Sun beheld her on a different road. "Where will you go?" the Sun asked and caressed her body, pale as a petal of a wild rose.

“Nowhere,” the girl said. “I do not have a home in this world.” She lay down on the dried, summer grass and exhaled for the last time. Draganur, Brother of the Mountains, and Seanlian, Brother of the Dawn, were the only ones grieving at her meagre funeral. One of them put thorny wreaths on her small body; the other covered it with a veil embroidered with tiny, white flowers of light.

“I am delighted to see you again.” The Sun smiled at the wild rose bush that sprang up where her grave had been and poured a drop of fragrance into each of its white cups.

This was the very same bush in front of which I stopped to listen to this fairy tale.

Daniel PASTIRČÁK (1959) is a poet, prose-writer and essayist. He graduated with a degree in Protestant theology in Bratislava, Slovakia. He works as a preacher of the Free Evangelical church (*Bratská cirkev*). His book *Damian's River* (1993) was listed on the List of Honour of the International Board of Books for Youth. His other books are *Tehilim and Cintet*; *Christ in Brussels*. *Cintet* was honoured as the best Slovak book of the year for youth. He is also engaged in art and has exhibited in galleries in Slovakia and abroad. His email address is pastirco@isternet.sk.